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**VICTIMS OF PATRIARCHY: A STUDY OF SELECT MALE
CHARACTERS IN THE FICTION OF TONI MORRISON**

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Black Masculinity has always been a contentious topic in academic discussions especially with the multiple projections of the same in popular media. This fact strengthens the belief that “the Black body (continues to be) the primary site and surface for race and representation” (Jackson 1). While certain stereotypes have continued to survive since colonialism started and others found only in Black American texts, we can only conclude that ‘Blackness’ is often embedded in “a composite of other meanings, not one singular instance” (Jackson 3).

D. Bogle’s work on the topic of Black male stereotypes has been fundamental in identifying and naming some of them. He states that the black male portrayals were limited to five categories- Toms, Coons, Tragic mulatto, Mammy, and Buck. There has also been of plethora of protests regarding the fact that certain prototypes almost never find representation, “married, middle class, educated, spiritual Black men, who are goal-driven, employed, competent and non-criminal” (Jackson and Dangerfield 198). The issue is even more problematized when we come across Black women’s negative portrayals of their men in an unflinchingly candid manner.

According to [W.E.B} du Bois’ paradigm, to be “black” and a “man” is an American oxymoron. At the turn into the twentieth century, according to prevailing white standards, successful negotiation of masculinity in America rested upon material gain, unrestricted access to the public sphere, and unlimited acquisition of goods and land (Andrade). This might have been a problematic situation for Black men as the above-mentioned “goods and land” were never in their possession. Historically, even during the colonial period, an Afro American male would have had difficulty in fitting into the patriarchal mould so conveniently created by the colonizer. This inability to fit into the mould of patriarchy and the role of providers to families due to the lack of material possessions defer all their attempts to claim ‘masculinity’.

In the latter half of the last century, things changed rapidly, and ideas of black masculinity also underwent alterations. As 'masculinity' came to mean strength, aggressiveness, dominance over women, violence and other such aberrant behaviour, black masculinity traits were also shaped by a long heritage of enforced racial stereotypes. And ironically, the masculinity traits that qualified a black male became more vocal and more pronounced as one descended the socio-economic ladder.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, we find many Afro-American women shaking aside the chains of slavery and entering the literary arena. To them, it was definitely the images of black women that were of primary concern. They also created some realistic portrayals of their menfolk. At times, they wrote about rapes and violence, incest and roguish behaviour as this was very common in the economically backward Afro-American communities. These women writers were soon accused of sowing seeds of division within the Black community. Toni Morrison is one such writer who has been accused of "selling out", of turning back the clock of racial progress, of being a tool of white feminism, of being a black man-hater (Hernston 139). Even though it is true that we come across regressive male characters in her fiction, accusing her of male-bashing would be wrong. Most of her 'strong' female characters are portrayed as accepting their menfolk, not necessarily rejecting them in spite of their deviant behaviour.

Morrison's second novel *Sula* is primarily a celebration of female friendships. The female characters are also shown as more lively and successful compared to the male characters. The story is set in the midst of the black community living in Ohio, a place where racism was rampant. The menfolk in the novel are reduced to function merely as a supporting cast. The novel might be about the relationship between Nel and Sula, but it is also about how the absence of several men affects their life. There are lots of men here, but no fathers and husbands. One of the men who lives in the fringes of the community is Shadrack, an alcoholic, whose addiction is a direct result of certain traumatic experiences during the First World War. Since he returns shell-shocked from the battlefield, he is never taken seriously by the rest of the community, let alone idealised. Plum Peace is Eva's son who too returns wrecked from the battlefield. He is a character who spends his time, sleeping, stealing and doing drugs. Boyboy is Eva's absent husband.

After 5 years of a sad and disgruntled marriage, Boyboy took off. During the time they were together he was very much preoccupied with other women and not home much. He did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third. (32)

Ajax and Jude are the other two men in the novel who flirt with normalcy. Yet, they too come out as overgrown boys. As Sula comments, "Everyman I ever know left his children" (143). Jude is a man who lives by the rules of the community. He is married to Nel and still he sleeps with Sula. Jude, in fact, allows Sula to use him according to her whims. It is as if he is trying to win the heart of the 'masculine' black female since he finds it impossible to be the strong male as per the white scripts.

Ajax is on the other end of the scale, a man married to chaos. He develops an active interest in Sula only because he thought she would not be a threat to his freedom. He is attracted to her as she never sought her community's sanction to live the life she wanted. And in the end, when she turns 'feminine' for him, he takes off. Sula, in the end, realizes that "a lover [is] not a comrade and could never be- for a woman (120-21).

Sula is about a woman who is perennially attempting to establish her identity in a male dominated world. Unfortunately all the male characters in the novel are alienated either from

the mainstream of from their own women-centred communities. They are all ultimately left to remain as witnesses to the events happening in and around the community.

Jazz is perhaps the least controversial of Morrison's novels. Published in 1992, the novel focuses on the life of an Afro-American couple who live in Harlem during the renaissance of the 1920s. In Jazz, Morrison also lingers on the theme of beauty standards that prevailed at that time. Joe Trace, The husband of the protagonist has the Morrison brand on him. He is abandoned by his mother at birth, "left without a trace" (124), and all through his life, he struggles with identity and abandonment issues. It is as if he has a hole in his identity and he usually looks to women to perfect his identity. As a young man, Joe is given lessons in life by Henry Les Troy, someone who would act as his surrogate father,

Having a strong male figure like Les Troy in Joe's life causes him to focus even more on the feminine void left by his mother's absence (Mayberry 198). The crisis in the novel arises out of the adulterous affair fifty year old Joe has with the teenager Dorcas. The protagonist Violet is seen struggling with the traumatic incidents following this adulterous relationship. When Dorcas starts seeing another male, Joe kills her in a fit of jealousy, hunting her down just as he had hounded his absent, wild mother. In her despair, Violet stabs the corpse of Dorcas thereby bringing out her violent side.

Joe emerges as a balanced person on the exterior, though he reveals his weak, insecure self in the course of the narrative, "Violet takes better care of the parrot than she does me...she don't hardly talk and I ain't allowed near her" (49). Joe's dependency on her fuels her depressive state of mind.

Violet copes with Joe's incessant crying after Dorcas' murder and she emerges clearly as the stronger one in the relationship. In spite of her hideous behaviour at Dorcas' funeral, she forges a friendship with Alice, the dead girl's aunt and her best friend Felice. Morrison makes it very clear that the central characters are all victims of racism and that racism is the real cause of all problems in Afro- American lives.

Toni Morrison has attempted "alternate masculinities" in her various novels and some of her male characters are beyond redemption. In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks argues that "in patriarchal society, men are encouraged to channel frustrated aggression in the direction of those without power- women and children" (145).

Cholly Breedlove, in *The Bluest Eye*, is one such character who redirects his hatred from his oppressors, against whom he was powerless to someone he could oppress. Cholly was emasculated at the age of fourteen, during his first sexual experience. At the funeral of Aunt Jenny, he had slipped away with Darlene and while they were getting intimate, they were intimidated by two white men. The two teenagers were forced to make love in their presence and Cholly did his bit to make it a very painful experience for the young girl.

Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred for Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred towards the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him.... His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess- that hating them would have consumed him". (148-49)

Even though the African societies were essentially matriarchal, the arrival of white patriarchy sowed seeds of discontent within family structures. Patriarchy led the Black men to believe that they were superior to women and this made fathers act like monsters, husbands and lovers rape their partners, brothers feel ashamed for caring for their sisters and "denies all

men the emotional life that would act as a humanising, self-affirming force in their lives” (hooks 158).

Cholly Breedlove leaves his hometown, Georgia scared that he made the girl pregnant. The aberrant behaviour of Cholly does not end there. Pecola, the little tragic girl in the story, has a very peripheral role in her mother’s life and that is perhaps the reason why an insensitive father like Cholly could rape her. Cholly does not have any connection with his children and the children, in their turn are normally unaffected by his actions. There is a point in the narrative when Sammy, Pecola’s brother, asks his mother to kill Cholly. Cholly’s sensibility is so muddled up that when he sees his daughter standing in the kitchen, cleaning a frying pan, he is filled with “pity, rage and helplessness” (127). In a drunken state, he ends up raping his own daughter.

Laura B. Randolph in “The Crucial Relationship Like Father, Like Daughter” says that the father/ daughter relationship is “one of the most intricate of all human bonds...it will shape the value by which she will live” (152). Under normal conditions, a daughter learns about her acceptance in society from her father’s acceptance of herself. Pecola’s world is completely destroyed when her father rapes her.

Cholly also suffers from ‘scapegoat syndrome’, a special case of the displaced feelings syndrome, before he commits terrible deeds against members of his own family. Abandoned by his father and then by his mother, emasculated by the white hunters, Cholly unknowingly falls victim to the ‘scapegoat syndrome’. Through his characterisation, Toni Morrison writes about what Blacks, affected by white racism, are capable of doing to other members of their community.

The 2015 novel *God Help the Child*, shows an evolution in male characterization. Child abuse is one of the main themes in the novel and the narrative has at least 4 cases of abuse interwoven into it. At the heart of the novel is an Afro-American woman named Bride, a young, beautiful woman with “Sudanese black” skin. For this very reason, she was rejected by her mother, ironically named Sweetness. Bride’s father too was shocked to see the dark skin of his daughter, so shocked that he blamed his wife of infidelity and abandoned his family. Bride grows up facing rejection all her way and turning into an insecure bundle of nerves.

According to Lois Tyson, “Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive”. In *God Help the Child*, Toni Morrison does not make a clear demarcation between gender roles. If she had been the target of criticism regarding negative portrayal of Afro-American men, in this novel we find her making amends. Booker Starbern, the partner of Bride is very different from the normal male characters we find in Morrison’s novels. He is educated, balanced, a lover of books as his name suggests and also held a degree in Economics. In his undergraduate years, “he’d nibbled courses in several curricula, Psychology, Political Science, Humanities, and he’d taken multiple courses in African-American studies...”

Even as they start living together, Booker does not reveal much about himself. He does not speak about his brother Adam who was a victim of child abuse or about his estrangement from his family over a foundation in his brother’s name. And when Bride speaks about visiting an abuser who was just out of prison, without mentioning her role in the indictment of the innocent woman, Booker leaves her giving no explanation beyond, “You not the woman I want”. Because of this abandonment and because he had been idling away in Bride’s house while she was working, we may be led to feel that Booker lives up to the image of the lazy, insecure, arrogant Afro-American male. But soon the reader understands that the

novel is about the journey of self-discovery for both the characters. Unlike most of the other works of Toni Morrison, the story ends with the couple getting back together as mature individuals.

Gender based expectations preoccupy Morrison's writing,

I think people often say that African- American culture is matriarchal, because the women take on so much responsibility. But the thing I noticed is that women take on responsibility in the absence of men.

Even though the men in her novels are realistically portrayed, she never demonises men. Rather, some of them show a potential to learn and grow. She holds the belief that African men and women ought to complement each other, rather than compete with each other. There are struggles within her narratives, some of them extremely bitter. And then there are the gender conflicts which pass a negative commentary on the menfolk.

The women in Morrison's novels are far from being submissive. Seldom do they observe social codes and conventions. In fact, the seemingly strong women are portrayed as being weak when it comes to relationships with the opposite sex- Sula with Ajax, Violet with Joe and *Pride* with Booker. This proves that Toni Morrison was not driven by the need to show Black women as superior and their male counterparts as negative. In her works, she tried her best to delve deep into the seemingly rough exteriors of her women characters. Her works were indeed born out of what Seodial Deena writes about as "women of color had no alternative but to discover and define themselves through their writings in order to liberate themselves from oppression and to enlighten the world about their condition" (19).

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