www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 3.019(IIJIF)

# Black is not the colour of womanhood: A study on the desexualisation of black women and consequent homebuilding anxieties amidst African American communities portrayed in the novels of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Bebe Moore Campbell

**Oly Roy**
Asst. Professor
Dept. of English
St. Xavier's College, Burdwan

## Abstract

The muted **subaltern** has always found a way to express her concerns through works of art. **Black women** have been no different and thus through art they collectively voiced their esoteric experience of being both black and female in a society that denied them not only their ethnic and human identity but also their sexuality and sexual expressiveness.

Although western societies in the general have allowed sexuality to be a regularised concept, black women in the **Antebellum America** have been consciously stripped of their womanhood and sexuality to the extent that in slavery, whites declared the "impossibility of raping black women" (Koritha Mitchell). This has in turn had a huge impact on the homebuilding capacity of early African American societies. Sociologically speaking, human societies have always evolved around the basic unit of the 'family'. The capacity to sustain a family or **'homebuilding'** essentially entails the regularisation of both **womanhood** as well as **motherhood**. Homebuilding Anxiety amidst African Americans with a history of chattel **slavery** was starkly a result of the disregard for black familial ties that whites harboured. As an extension of this racist temperament, black women had essentially been denied the right to have a **'feminine identity'.** A master could use a female slave as a breeder, forcibly getting her impregnated either by him or by other slaves. She was considered to be debased enough to enjoy the 'rape'. These practices made it impossible for black women to experience and express womanhood in any form. She also had the added burden of holding up an image of chastity so that she would not be considered readily lascivious. Practices such as rape and violence in chattel farms ensured that the slave's feelings for her partner were rendered irrelevant and the image of herself as a mother could never find emotional ground for anchorage.

Through a selection of texts based on the experience of black women, I will try to explain how their suppressed sexuality led to a disruption in their familial bonding. Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye' (1970) narrates through juxtaposition how Caucasian standards of beauty lead to the desexualisation of black women, thus killing off their dreams of liberal existence and familial prosperity. 'The Color Purple' (1982) by Alice Walker uses domestic violence and rape to illustrate the undermined sexuality of black women and subsequent incapacitation in homebuilding. Finally, through the character of Delotha , Bebe Moore Campbell in 'Your Blues Ain't Like Mine' (1992) highlights the perennial conundrum regarding choices between chastity and sexual expression that reigns the life of black females in a patriarchal and racist society.

Thus, novels featuring black women have time and again emphasised on how the **desexualisation and sexual anxiety of black** women have led to the poor homebuilding capacity of early **African American communities.**

www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 3.019(IIJIF)

# Black is Not the Colour of Womanhood: A study on the desexualisation of black women and consequent homebuilding anxieties amidst African American communities portrayed in the novels of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Bebe Moore Campbell

"Black girl magic is a rallying call of recognition. Embedded in the everyday magnificence that is so easy to miss because we're so mired in the struggle and what society says we are."

- Ava DuVernay (an American film director)

Simone Manuel's gold medal in swimming at the Rio Olympics, 2016 created history for African-Americans across the globe. Manuel used her golden moment and international platform to speak on the on-going social issues concerning racism that the USA grappled with. Commenting on the added burden that her racial origin invariably imposed on her, she said, "Coming into the race, I tried to take (the) weight of the black community off my shoulders. It's something I carry with me. I want to be an inspiration, but I would like there to be a day when it is not 'Simone, the black swimmer' "

Contemporary events such as these highlight the distance, if at all, traversed by social issues since their inception. Racial conflict in America did not resolve itself entirely with the end of the Civil War in 1865. Incidents like the Emmett Till murder case in 1955 showed how escaping death at the hands of slave masters did not necessarily mean escaping racial violence. With black women the experience of racial violence is more complicated and esoteric in terms of the fact that they were the triple victims of "racism, classism and sexism" (Barbara Smith).

Through art, the muted black subalterns found a way to collectively voice their experience of being both black and female in a society which denied them not only their ethnic and human identity, but also their sexuality and sexual expressiveness. Black women were ascribed peculiar derogatory images that were the legacy of long lived racism and sexism, and were thus doubly discredited.

Racial and discriminatory representations of the black womanhood which had roots in the Antebellum era evolved, according to Patricia Morton, around four central figures: 'the inept domestic servant" (the mammy), the matriarch who was portrayed as domineering, castrating and the cause of the black man's low self-esteem, the sex object (the Jezebel), and the tragic mulatto.

The bipolar conceptualization of Black and White womanhood assigned black women all the negative traits of disgrace as opposed to the 'true womanhood' of the White woman, such as piety, chastity, fragility, passionlessness and so on. Black women were perceived and pictured as primitive, lustful, seductive, physically strong, unwomanly and dirty, which placed them outside the enclave of delicacy, feminity, respectability and virtue.

The fractured and fragmented womanhood of the black woman, along with the desexualisation of her image rendered her feelings for her partner and children immaterial. She was seen either as a desexualised 'mammy' or a hyper-sexualised and debased sex object. Such images had a direct impact on the homebuilding capacity of African American communities as the basic unit of human society, 'the family', evolves largely around the regularization of womanhood and motherhood, both of which were denied to the black woman.

Through a selection of novels based on the experience of African American women, I will try to illustrate the effects of suppressed sexuality on the identity of black women as well as the homebuilding anxieties that such distortions of identity come to foster. The novels under study here are **'The Bluest Eye' (1970)** by **Toni Morrison, 'The Color Purple' (1982)** by **Alice Walker** and **'Your Blues Ain't Like Mine' (1992)** by **Bebe Moore Campbell.**

In '**The Bluest Eye**' (**1970**), **Toni Morrison** explores the effects of sexual frustration and sexual suppression through the characters of Pauline, the mother of the child protagonist Pecola and their neighbour Geraldine. Pauline's self-consciousness with the deformity in her leg initially inhibits her sexual expressiveness. Her marriage with Cholly helps her establish the woman within her, but Cholly turns out to be an undependable romantic, and their marriage seems to falter soon. Pauline retreats to the world of celluloid classics and dreams of Caucasian beauty, which she unwittingly passes on to her daughter Pecola. She struggles to come to terms with her own image. Unrealistic expectations of white beauty affect her sexuality and she finds herself retreating further into a world of quasi-religious fantasies. Her faith in her sexual identity is shaken and she cannot seem to fix her marriage. Thus, we find societal concerns with white standards of beauty operating as invisible instruments of racial oppression as they desexualize black women and make them question their natural image and beauty. All this proves to be a major disabling factor in her relationship with her husband, her children and her surroundings. Her home is unbuilt, and she refuses to acknowledge her own child in the presence of the white family she works for. Her image as the 'inept black servant', that is, the mammy overpowers her sexual as well as homebuilding potential. Her feminity collides with the enforced ideals of white feminity and beauty that surround her. Her family finally collapses into a dilapidated heap when her husband rapes their own child Pecola as an expression of outraged and frustrated sexuality, with the underlying complexities of self-realised inadequacy and tenderness.

As a corollary to Pauline's sexual frustration is Geraldine, a mulatto woman who is at constant conflict with her natural identity. In order to protect herself from the image of the 'tragic mulatto', a black woman whose comparatively lighter complexion was seen as a potential lure for white men, she abstains from an active sex life consciously, and calls herself 'colored' as opposed to 'black'. She takes respite in the primness of her household, trying desperately to replicate the so called delicate feminity of white women.

Both of these characters are classic instances of the crippling effect of desexualisation on the homebuilding capacity of African American communities. The image of the black woman in the American mind is that of either the desexualised mammy or the hyper sexualised libido-driven Jezebel. In slavery, the whites had declared the 'impossibility of raping a black woman' (Koritha Mitchell). A master could use a female slave as a breeder, forcibly impregnating her himself or by other slaves. She was considered debased enough to actually enjoy it. Such practices derived from the misconceptions of slave traders who mistook the traditions and customs of the African communities, and contrasted them with those of the Anglo Saxons, in spite of the vastly significant environmental and cultural differences. 'Polygamy' for them became a sign of hyper sexuality and sexual greed, the 'seminudity' of African women (due to hot climate) came to indicate lewdness. Such misconceptions, therefore, either stripped the black women of her natural sexuality or on being forced to escape such notions, she consciously suppressed her sexual expressiveness, thus marring her chances of establishing normalised familial ties in the society.

**Alice Walker**'s '**The Color Purple**'(**1982**) contrasts the characters of Celie and Shug to show how confidence in one's feminity and womanhood can have a positive impact on both the psychology of the woman as well as strengthen her familial ties. The oppression of black women is not limited to the onslaught of white supremacy, but extends to patriarchs of her own racial origin. Celie's childhood is fractured by sexual traumas brought about by her father figure. Such incidents render her incapable of establishing herself as a woman who can tie the fabric of her home together. Celie details the miseries of her life through several letters addressed to God. She consciously keeps her husband as a nameless figure, thus reinforcing the lack of emotional ties with him. Her sexuality is not recognised by her husband and she fails to acknowledge or embrace it herself. Her family is in shambles without the nurturing and consoling touch of a confident female figure. She is so desexualised that she fails to be both a wife and a mother (to her stepchildren).

Her husband's paramour Shug Avery on the other hand encapsulates the brilliantly dazzling prowess of confident womanhood. She is portrayed as a woman who is well aware of the nurturing potential of a feminine touch. She is a popular Blues singer whose interaction with males is not derailed by their views on her. She exudes love and beauty that comes with confidence and belief in oneself. Celie's nameless husband, too, is enamoured by her charms as she brings with her the probable potential of building a home and a family.

Celie's sexual awakening is guided by Shug as she encourages her to explore her feminity and womanhood. The theme of lesbianism is important in the novel as it feeds into Walker's concept of 'womanism', which preaches how women should stand together against the onslaught of oppressive heterosexual patriarchal relationships. Celie's frustrated self identity leads to her choice of exploring a relationship with a woman. She is scared of men as well as the archetypal societal constructs, and finds comfort and empowerment in her relationship with Shug. Celie's gradual transformation into a liberated, empowered, self-driven woman is initiated by her sexual self discovery and the ensuing confidence it entails. Thus, yet again

undeterred sexual expressiveness leads to a form of confidence in womanhood that is both healing and nurturing.

Finally, I would like to highlight how a black woman suffers the wrath of the society for being sexually expressive in her own right and how the concept of chastity is enforced on her in order to give validation to her single motherhood. **Bebe Moore Campbell** in '**Your Blues Ain't Like Mine**'(**1992**) characterises Delotha and her son Armstrong in the image of Emmett Till and his mother Mamie Bradley. Till was a fourteen year old African American boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after a white woman claimed to have been offended by him in her family's grocery store. Till became a testimony to the long history of violent persecution of African Americans in the USA and was posthumously hailed as an icon of the Civil Rights Movement.

Campbell, through her portrayal of Delotha in the novel helps the readers to recognise the black woman's burden. At a time when the cultural terrain was fraught with misconceptions regarding the readily lascivious nature of black women, Campbell allows Delotha's sexuality a narrative space in her novel. African American women were presumed to have an extraordinary capacity for withstanding pain, thus denying them the luxury of breakdowns and failures. Campbell highlights Delotha's image as highly humanitarian with the many complex failings of being a woman. She is emotional, sexually expressive and conscious of her position as a single mother in the society. In a society where black women have always been denied their sexual identity, Campbell's Delotha admits that she needs intimacy. Thus, the readers are made to sympathise with Delotha based on her pain of losing her son and not because of her being an embodiment of chaste selfless motherhood. Campbell, thereby, complicates Delotha's character and makes us question the notions of chastity that the society enforces on women, when Delotha concludes that she is responsible for her son's death because of her failure to relinquish her need for sexual companionships. The burden of the black woman does not restrict itself to resurrecting or protecting her sexual image. It brings into its fold the variable aspects of homebuilding anxiety, which is the palpable tension which emerges when black women, in particular, invest in homebuilding even while seeing the signs that it will not yield for them the respectability and safety that it should. With society's encouragement, Delotha blames herself for her son's death because she was estranged from her husband and allowed her son to live with other relatives. However, Armstrong is not killed because he did not live with happily wedded parents; responsibility should be placed on the society that paints blacks as sexual deviants to the point that a fourteen year old boy can be murdered for supposedly flirting with an older white woman. Nevertheless, Delotha believes that her family's living arrangements and her intimate relationships (her failed marriage and her new boyfriend) are to blame. Campbell, thus, illustrates how biased societal constructs regarding female sexuality amidst blacks acts as a restrictive force, both undermining black womanhood as well as questioning the exercise of free will in natural sexual expressiveness.

Pauline's frustrated dreams enforced by white ideals of beauty, Geraldine's self-conscious abstinence and suppression of natural sexual expressiveness, Celie's lack of

confidence in her womanhood, her sexual awakening with the help of a woman, Shug, and Delotha's overpowering guilt illustrate how white supremacy and patriarchal notions regarding the black woman's denigrated image have been responsible in convincing everyone that blacks bring hardships on themselves, thus disallowing black familial ties to find emotional anchorage. The violent sexual practices on black women in Chattel farms took the form of invisible apparatuses of oppression which claimed her image as a potential homemaker or even a mother.

The black woman's burden rightfully echoes the famous lines by Ralph Ellison in 'Invisible Man' when he says:
"I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me… When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me."

**Works Cited**

**Primary:**

Campbell, Bebe M. *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*. New York: Putnam, 1992. Print.
Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. London: Pan Books, 1990. Print.
Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. London: Women's Press, 1992. Print.

**Secondary:**

Borger, Mary. "Images of Self and Race in the Autobiographies of Black Women". *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature.* Ed. Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker and Beverly Guy – Sheftall, Garden City: Anchor, 1979. Print.
Dieke, Ikenna. *Critical Essays on Alice Walker.* London: Preager, 1999. Print.
Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage International, 1995. Print.
Harris, Trudier. "Reconnecting Fragments: Afro-American Folk Tradition in The Bluest Eye". *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. Ed. Nelliey. MC Kay. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co, 1988. Print.
Mitchell, Koritha. *Mamie Bradley's Unbearable Burden: Sexual and Aesthetic Politics in Bebe Moore Campbell's "Your Blues Ain't Like Mine"*. Cutting Down "The Wrath-Bearing Tree": The Politics Issue. Callaloo 31.4(2008): 1048-67. JSTOR. Web. 07 Mar. 2018.