

## Problematique of Race and Gender: A Retrospective Approach

**Bilal Ahmad Dar**

Ph.D Research Scholar

Department of English, A.M.U

### **Abstract:**

The menace of racism and gender discrimination is almost prevalent everywhere in the world, and the writers, particularly the novelists have highlighted these issues of hot-button nature in their novels. An ugly and hot-potato problematic of racism and gender disparity like many debatable issues has attracted much critical focus and debate from every intellectual, social, and critical quarter. The issues of racism and gender discrimination have been the subtext of many postcolonial narratives. Many famous postcolonial writers like Chinua Achebe, J.M Coetzee, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Wole Soyinka, Zohra Neal Hurston, Nuruddin Farah, and Michael Ondaatje have overtly dealt with the subjects of racism and gender disparity side by side in their respective works. Racism and gender disparity among humans has a very old and horrible history. The paper attempts to provide the historical overview of racial and gender discrimination. Further, the paper attempts to mention the writers who have contested these issues in their works.

**Key Words:** Menace, Discrimination, Prevalent, Hot-button, Issues, Gender disparity, Debatable, Racism, Discrimination, Subtexts, Postcolonial

Class, race, sexuality and all other categories by which we categorise and dismiss each other need to be excavated from the inside. [<sup>1</sup>]

Before giving the historical background and overview of the two much conflictive issues, it would be wise and pertinent to define the two terms separately in order to simplify them and also to show how the two terms are ideologically interrelated. ‘Racism’ in common parlance is defined as a haughty, disdainful, and prejudiced attitude and criminalising

---

[<sup>1</sup>] Dorothy Allison in *Screening Genders*. Eds. Krin Gabbard and William Luhr. P.37.

ideology on the part of one race, clan or tribe to loathe and revile the other race on the basis of colour etc. Ruth Benedict defines racism as:

Racism is the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to congenital inferiority and another group is destined to congenital superiority. It is the dogma that the hope of civilization depends upon eliminating some races and keeping others pure. It is the dogma that one race has carried progress with it throughout human history and can alone ensure future progress. It is a dogma rampant in the world today and which a few years ago were made into a principal basis of German polity. (98)

Racism is an offspring of the tangled interaction in a given society which is race-based and advocates prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. The ideology underpinning racist practices often includes the idea that humans can be categorised into distinct groups that are different in their social behaviour and inherent capabilities and that can be ranked as *undermensch* (inferior) or *ubermensch* (superior). Racist ideology can become implicit in many dimensions of social life and can be based on human notions associated with Xenophobia, Otherness, Separatism, hierarchical ordering, Supermacism, and related social processes. Racism therefore consists of ideologies and unjust practices that illegally justify or perpetuate uneven handling or treatment of groups or individuals based on the criteria of perceived racial or ethnic difference. Racism can take the form of social actions, practices like scapegoating, use of racial slurs and racial profiling, beliefs, or political system that consider different races to be ranked as essentially superior or inferior to each other, based on assumed shared inheritable traits, abilities or qualities. It also holds that members of different races should be treated differently. Some variants of racism include a belief in hierarchies of worth arising from biological differences between people. According to Clive Gifford:

Racism is based on the flawed belief that a person's character and abilities are determined by the racial group to which they are thought to belong, and that certain racial groups are inferior to others. To determine which racial group a person belongs to, racist people look purely at a person's physical appearance; not at what kind of personality, interests, or beliefs they have.

Racism doesn't focus on all aspects of physical appearance but mainly on skin colour and, sometimes, certain facial features. (06)

Racism is a social scourge. It is unjustifiably prevalent everywhere in the world. Clive Gifford in this connection says:

There are over six billion people living on Earth in more than 200 countries with thousands of different beliefs and elements of culture .Most people celebrate the difference between peoples because they add richness and diversity to life .Some use certain differences to single out groups as inferior and deserving of unfair treatment. Racism is one such way of singling people out. It has caused misery and suffering for millions. (6)

Gender inequality or discrimination which like racism is a much contested issue; is in concise terms defined as the inequality, injustice, violence, criminalization, and discrimination based on the consideration of sex. Some feminists like bell hooks [<sup>2</sup>], call gender discrimination as 'Sexism'. Gender discrimination or sexism is one of the ugliest and unjust practices through the agency of which women are criminalised. Women are discriminated and marginalised through different agencies. Marxist feminists believe that women are discriminated at present through the capitalistic and private structure of the society in which women labour is largely uncompensated. Women are not only the victims of economic exploitation but are also victims of many practices perpetuated by the male-dominated society. The patriarchal structure of society has strangled the creative instincts and emotions of women. The pages of history bear testimony to the fact how from the aeon times the patriarchal society has subjected women to many inhuman rituals and nonsense practices like female circumcision, sexual harassment, rape, bartering, polygamy etc. Women from the Third World countries like Africa and Somalia are more vulnerable to such inhuman rituals than the women of the First World. So many novelists from the Third-World countries like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Nuruddin Farah have divulged these dingy secrets of the Third World patriarchal societies.

---

[<sup>2</sup>] bell hooks is an acclaimed author who prefers her pen-name instead of real one and usually writes it in lower case

Racism and gender disparity (Sexism) are fundamentally related to each other. According to bell hooks, “Racism is fundamentally a feminist issue because it is so interconnected with sexist oppression. In the west, the philosophical foundations of racist and sexist ideology are similar.” (*Feminist Theory* 53) The view put forward by bell hooks is squarely fit and relevant because both ‘Racism’ and ‘Gender inequality’ share a common podium in the ideology of negative essentialism and physical violence. Racist attitude and ideology advocates the slogan of hate against other races. Racism moves with the often-asserted mission of demeaning, denigrating, and annihilating the other races. Similarly, the gender jingoism toes the same track and ideology of negative essentialism and physical sadism. So, it can be said that ‘Racism’ and ‘Gender discrimination’ are the two concomitantly lethal ideologies out to accomplish the mission of supremacy and chauvinism. Valerie Russell believes that, “the seeds which spawn the racist mentality also spawn the sexist mentality, though the results differ in both their historical manifestations and degree of oppression” (*Racism and Sexism* 01). Russell shows us the interrelatedness of sexism and racism by defining the two terms separately. Russell states that:

What is Racism? Any attitude, action or institutional structure which systematically subordinates a person or group because of their colour.

What is Sexism? Any attitude, action or institutional structure which systematically subordinates a person or group because of their sex. (*Racism and Sexism* 01)

This racism and the disparity based on sex have come a long way. These are not the recent and nascent ideological creations and social constructions. These are as old as the creation itself, from the mind of which these have spawned. Racism and gender discrimination have from the times immemorial looted humanity of peace and prosperity. Oscar Peterson, a black jazz pianist opines that, “Racism has been to human relationships what cancer has been to human existence. It is a disease that eats away at the very fabric of humanity itself” (qtd.in. Gifford, *Racism*, 6.). Racism and gender related issues have attracted the attention of every discipline since the very inception. On turning the unfortunate and cunning pages of history, one comes to know that the scourge of racism and gender

discrimination has always been there. The history of racism goes back to colonialism. According to Clive Gifford:

Racism has its roots in the age of European Colonialism, which began over 400 years ago. As Europeans discovered and claimed overseas lands as colonies, the belief grew that European Civilization was the greatest the world had ever known. Europeans thus felt justified in treating other peoples as inferior. From the 1500s and on, many European countries like France, Portugal, Spain, Holland, and Great Britain explored and claimed lands in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific as their own. Little attempt was made by the arriving colonists to understand the civilization, culture, and beliefs of the native peoples. Instead they were often thought of as savages, primitives, and, in some cases, no better than animals. As a result, the colonists assumed the right to take their lands, ruling them without agreement, and killing, mistreating, and enslaving millions of people. (*Racism*12)

No doubt, racism historically is linked with the European Colonialism, but racism proper, as an ideology of hate and sadism begins with the treatment of the Jews in Germany by the hands of the fascist autocrat Adolf Hitler. Adolf Hitler is known as one of the first racists who hated the Jewish race to the guts. He was so race conscious that he literally beheaded the Jews. He started the racial profiling of the Jews and made a racial cleansing. Adolf Hitler advocated the policy of anti-Semitism and *Judenhass* (Jew hatred). He was much hateful and unjust towards the Jewish race. His hatred and ill-treatment towards the Jews is trapped in the cunning and cruel pages of history by the name of the holocaust or Jewish pogrom in which he almost liquidated half of the Jewish race. This theme of *Judenhass* has been the subtext of many novels but, it has been more aptly and audaciously manipulated by the Canadian cartoonist and writer, Dave Sim in his eponymous novel *Judenhass* (2008). Adolf Hitler considered his own Aryan race as pure and superior and wanted to keep it undefiled from the contamination of other *undermensch* races like Jews and Roma that were in his account and estimation very inferior races fit only for scapegoating and slavery. The victims of racism along with the Jews are Negroes (black skinned people) who have been perpetually marginalised by the whites on the basis of their skin colour. The black

complexioned people have always been stereotyped as evil and villainous in nature. We have lot of narratives like Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Tar Baby* (1981), and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Mark Twain, *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1962) by Harper Lee, and *Imitation of Life* (1933) by Fannie Hurst in which the novelists have overtly shown to the readers how the black –skinned people are estimated and counted by the fair –skinned races. Jim Crow laws in Southern United States were one of the heinous racial laws buttressed by State through which racial segregation of blacks was enforced. Jim Crow Laws were established after the Reconstruction period. These Jim Crow Laws commissioned de jure racial segregation everywhere. This collection of laws institutionalized many economic, educational, and social disadvantages for blacks. *De jure* segregation or the segregation by law applied mainly to the Southern states while Northern segregation was mainly de facto. These laws mandated the segregation of public schools, and public transportation, and the segregation of restrooms, restaurants etc. The laws followed the 1800-1866 Black Codes, which had previously restricted the civil rights and civil liberties of African Americans .The worst and cruellest kind of racism was apartheid in the South Africa in which black people and the people from other racial groups were exploited from every angle and were coerced to live separately by the whites. This apartheid was a strategic and systemic agency of racial segregation and separateness. The Blacks in this system were othered and highly exploited. Under this, the rights and associations of blacks and other weak ethnic groups were curtailed and throttled. In reaction to this movement of apartheid, came Niagara Movement which was founded by social and political thinkers like W.E.B .Du Bois, Ida B.Wells, Paul Robeson Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King and William Monroe Trotter jointly. The Niagara Movement was a movement and call for the opposition of racial segregation and disenfranchisement, and it was opposed to the policies of accommodation and conciliation promoted by African-American leaders like Booker T.Washington. According to Zillah Eisenstein:

The voices of W.E.B.Du Bois,Ida B.Wells,Paul Robeson ,Malcolm X,and Martin Luther King put the painful life of racialized colour in view so that a more inclusive picture of humanity can be envisioned .They identify their own problematized colour and look 'elsewhere' to see people like themselves in Asia and Africa .They look at the slave trade to see the connections between

Black and Brown people in the US and Ghana ,Nigeria ,Sudan ,and so on.  
 Their site of racialized bodies spans the globe. (*Against Empire*114)

Apart from W.E.B.Du. Boise, William Trotter et.al, this case and issue of apartheid or racial segregation has also been raised by many novelists like Andre Brink in his famous novel, *An Act of Terror* (1991), J.M.Coetzee in his novel *Life &Times of Michael K* (1983), but Nadine Gordimer in her novels like *July's People* (1981) and *Burger's Daughter* (1979) proves to be much adroit, vocal and audacious in castigating and debunking this practice of othering and exploitation than the other novelists. Gordimer in these two novels so overtly divulged and debunked this inhuman and unjust practice of apartheid by the whites that both the novels were banned in South Africa, though the *Burger's Daughter* (1979) was later on unbanned.

As it has already been pointed out that Sexism or gender disparity like racism has always been present everywhere in the world, so it has like racism considered and stereotyped women as other and subordinate, and under this pretext oppressed and exploited them at every point. There has always been a kind of chauvinistic bias and inimical attitude against women on the part of men. Women have always been subjected to many cruel slaps by men everywhere in the world. Physical oppression like beating and sexual harassment etc has always been the lot of women bestowed to them by patriarchy. Patriarchy has always hegemonised women in order to satiate itself. Although every woman is vulnerable to the patriarchal imperia, but, as has already been said that the lives of the women, living in the Third World countries like Africa, Nigeria, and Somalia are much precarious and exposed to the sexist oppressions like rape, abduction, genital mutilation etc.The lives of the Third World women are really in the state of *Gehenna* (misery). Apart from being the victims of colonialism, they are made scapegoats by their own swinish patriarchal society, so we can say that the third world women are in double-bind. This position of being in double bind is in a phrase used by Kristen Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford called 'double-colonization' According to Kristen Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, "Double-colonization refers to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy." (qtd.in. In. *Beginning Postcolonialism*175).The worst kinds of oppression that are meted out to women in the third world countries, particularly in Africa, Somalia, and the



Middle East are female genital mutilation (FGM), and the system in which women are bartered in exchange of goods. This inhuman issue of genital mutilation has been raised by many novelists and social activists. Fran P. Hosken, an American writer, feminist, and social activist who is one of the most meticulous observers of the female oppression in the third-world countries, bases her whole discussion of female genital mutilation on the proposition: that the goal of this inhuman practice is “to mutilate the sexual pleasure and satisfaction of women” (qtd. in *Third World Women And The Politics Of Feminism* 57). Novelists like Alice Walker in her much acclaimed feminist novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), and the Somalian novelist, Nuruddin Farah on whose novels this proposed research is based, in his novels like, *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), and *Sardines* (1981) have emphatically raised this inhuman practice of female genital mutilation in order to internationalise the issue, so that the victims can be exonerated. Thus we can say that the women living in the third-world countries are subjected to the worst and inhuman experiences of life. These experiences and slaps have oppressed them to the greatest possible degree. Women of colour that is black women or the women of the third-world countries have always been susceptible to the sexist oppression and they have always been relegated to the position of subordination and servitude both by internal patriarchal system and the white sexist and racist supremacy. bell hooks who is one of the most ardent and audacious black feminists chronicles the position of black women as under:

As a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression. At the same time, we are the group that has not been socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor in that we are allowed no institutionalized “other” that we can exploit or oppress. (16)

Every kind of oppression, as we know is always resisted and questioned, so was the oppression of the Third –World women. The resistance against the oppression of the Third –World women started in 1970 with the formation of the ‘Third World Women's Alliance’ (TWWA). It was a radical organisation of the women of colour to end sexism, racism, and



imperialism. This alliance was founded in New York .It was one of the first groups that advocated intersectional approach to the oppression of women in 1970. The origin of this alliance lies in women's activism in Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee that was founded by a social activist Ella Baker at Shaw University. This committee was given further flip and support by a strong revolutionary and anti-racist Stokely Carmichael. In December 1968, Black women in SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) formed a Black women's liberation committee, but in 1970, the women decided to stretch their membership beyond SNCC and renamed their group the Black Women's Alliance. In the summer of 1970, the Black Women's Alliance joined with revolutionary Puerto Rican women activists to create the Third World Women's Alliance. The main focus of the Third World Women's Alliance was to unite women of colour in struggle against the triple demon of racism, imperialism, and sexism. The members of this alliance emphasised the ideological connections between capitalist exploitation, global imperialism, and oppression of the women of colour. They found a newspaper titled 'Triple Jeopardy' through which they advocated their main aims and voiced the different kinds of crimes to which the women of colour were consigned. This 'Third World Women's Alliance' was the direct offshoot of what is called as 'Black Feminism', the proponents of which were Alice Walker, belle hooks, Angela Davis, Kimberle Crenshaw, Mary Ann Weathers ,and Patricia Hill Collins. They addressed the issues of Black Women that were ignored by the European or Western feminism. Black feminism as a political and social tendency came into existence out of the black women's feelings of disillusionment with the civil rights and the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The foundational texts that chronicle the oppression of the black women and advocate the black feminist manifesto to resist this oppression are: *Ain't I a woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981), *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) written by belle hooks, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990) authored by one of the eminent feminists and social activists Patricia Hill Collins. Mary Ann Weathers who is considered as one of the most forceful and ardent advocates of black feminism wrote the famous text on black feminism titled *An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force* (1969). These feminists through their active participation in the struggle to end sexism or gender discrimination have succeeded to the larger extent. They are constantly and firmly fighting for the equal rights of every woman in general and

black women in particular. Black feminist movement has accomplished a feat in diminishing the oppression of black women. According to bell hooks:

Feminist movement has created profound positive changes in the lives of girls and boys, women and men, living in our society, in a political system of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. And even though trashing feminism has become common place, the reality remains: everyone has benefited from the cultural revolutions put in place by contemporary feminist movement. It has changed how we see work, how we work, and how we love.  
 (*Feminist Theory* xiv)

Hence, we can say that the discrimination based on race and gender has always been there and resistance against this discrimination has always been shown by the writers through their writings.

### Works Cited

- Benedict, Ruth. *Patterns of Culture*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1937. Print.
- Eisenstein, Zillah. *Against Empire: Feminism, Racism, and the West*. London: Zed Books, 2004. Print.
- . *Hatreds: Racialized and Sexualized Conflicts in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. London: Zed Books, 1996. Print.
- Glifford, Clive. *Racism*. China: Whitecap Books, 2006. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. New York: South End Press, 1999. Print
- Macleod, John. *Beginning Post Colonialism*. New Delhi: Viva Books Limited, 2010. Print.
- Mohanty, Russo, Torres, Eds. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. USA: Indiana University Press, 1991. Print.
- Rattansi, Ali. *Racism: A Very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 2007. Print.
- Russell, Valerie. 'Racism and sexism: A minority woman's point of view'. Pittsburgh: Web.