Introduction

The Black American Feminism in the Post-Modern Era

Manusmriti preaches, “Na Stri swatantram arhati”. It means woman is not eligible to be free as an absolute individual. She needs someone to depend on. Patriarchy defines woman and her role to limited areas in the domestic spheres as wife, mother and daughter whereas man acquires the place above her to control her and her activities in the role of father and husband. He is to earn and she is to cook. He works outside and earns and woman has to be dependent on him for emotional, physical, moral and socio-economic needs. As a safer way to control her, the rational being man plays a psychological trick over the emotional being woman preaching, “Yatra naryastu pujayante ramante tatra devata” (Women may be placed along the Goddesses). By that he has made her to sit silent without any motion. It is no lesser than curtailing her freedom. Patriarchy expects woman just to be an ‘angel of the house’.

Woman as a second (weaker) sex after man is only seen and used for sex. Her body has become the site for the male desires. Woman only as a sexual being is pushed into the world of silence, marginalised and denial. She is made to lose herself. “Female is a female by the virtue of a certain lack of qualities,” said Aristotle; “We should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness” (qt Beauvoir 15-16). God gave the secondary place to female by creating Eve, the first mother from the rib of Adam, the first father of human race. As said in the Paradise Lost, “God creates Eve from Adam's rib” (Milton 452). Such verdicts of womanhood by the patriarchy seem as the male strategy to secure his place as the superior being. Let’s keep aside the patriarchal verdict, physically and emotionally woman is as strong as man. Only woman has the capacity to bear,
rear and care children. Unlike man, woman can handle the house as well as her profession. She is the emotional support for the family. She is the one who is there behind every successful man but man is the only one who is the sole reason for the suppression of woman.

The centuries of oppression has made woman to think of the recognition of her real self. The act of discouraging the stereotypical images had been started by the woman herself by resisting the patriarchal dominance through raising the collective voice. The voice advocates for the rights of women based on sexual, social, economic, political and cultural equality. Feminism emerged as the political movement which demands the treatment of woman as a human being. The advancement of education and the raised awareness in woman has paved the way for expression through her writings in private journals, memoirs, autobiographies, poems, novels etc. by which she can question and undermine injustice. The movement has spread throughout the world.

Feminist engagements in black literature demonstrate the black women’s interests in particular. The early and evergreen feminist works have their influence over redefining and reestablishing the self of black woman. The first milestone in this attempt is by Mary Wollstonecraft who in England in 1786 wrote a short tract entitled *Tracts on the Education of Daughters* before she went on to write the well known book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. She proposed that the same type of education should be proposed to girls as boys and she also proposed that boys and girls should be educated together. She proposed the idea of co-educational schooling. After her it was Virginia Woolf whose essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1928) is considered as a major work in feminist criticism. She deplors over the question why there have been less number of feminist writers and finds
out that poverty and lack of privacy are the reasons. She says, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she has to write fiction” (Room 6).

Simone de Beauvoir’s book *The Second Sex* published in 1949 makes the overall argument that men have made women the ‘other’ in society by creating a false aura of mystery around her. She discusses how the myth of woman is created. Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* published in 1963 looked at the role of women particularly housewives in America and called the predicament of these women as “the problem that has no name”. Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* published in 1970 devotes long chapters to the attitudes towards women that pervade the works of prominent twentieth century authors such as D.H Lawrence, Henry Miller and Norman Mailer who were held in high regard by many critics for their daring and liberating depiction of women characters. Elaine Showalter in her essay *Feminist Criticism in Wilderness* defines and explores the development of women centred criticism which chiefly evaluated the women’s writing as an expression of women’s experiences. She coined the term ‘gynocriticism’ to describe literary criticism based on a feminist perspective.

Patricia Hill Collins in her book *Black Feminist Thought* published in 1990 sets out to explore the ideas and words of black feminist intellectuals like Angela Davis, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison. The book provides a synthetic overview of black feminist thought and its canon. bell hooks’ *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* published in 1984 is an embodiment of new vision towards black feminism. The blueprint of feminist movements that the book provides remains as provocative and relevant as ever. It embodies the hope that feminists can find a common language to spread the word and create a mass, global perspective. bell hooks’ another book *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* published in 1981 is a saga of black womanhood. It examines the
impact of sexism on black women during slavery, the devaluation of black womanhood, black male sexism, racism among feminist and black women’s involvement.

If language itself is in some ways male-oriented, can there be a language-oriented literature towards women? French feminists, Helene Cixous, Monique Witting, Luce Irigary, Chantal Chawaf and Julia Kristeva in the late 1970s and 80s focused their attention on language, analysing the way in which meaning is produced and concluded that it is a decidedly male realm which therefore only represents a world from the male point of view. They argued for the existence of an *ecriture feminine*, literally meaning women’s writing that allows for free play of meanings not bound by grammatical structures and is always in opposition to the center of power. For Cixous this kind of writing is associated with female physiology that women must write through their bodies, breaking away syntax and the logic of male languages. Julia Kristeva uses the term symbolic and semiotic to discuss two aspects of languages: the symbolic is associated with male authority, repression and control, while the semiotic suggests a looser, more random way of making connections in language of poetry and examines its operation in the work of specific poets. Feminists made an attempt towards literary theorising, blending semiotics, linguistics, psychoanalysis, political theory, sociology, aesthetics and political criticism. Feminists in the 1970s were keenly debating the compatibility or otherwise between feminism and Marxism, feminism and Freudian psychoanalysis theory.

Many black women writers like Alice Walker through her *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God*, Maya Angelou’s poems and her autobiography *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and others, poems by Sonia Snachez, Nikki
Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks and others have demonstrated the greater agony as well as the incredible courage and strength of black women in their works.

These feminist theories attempt a strong criticism against the false assumption of woman especially black woman. They yield the unfailing sharp critical insights into the literary texts themselves but more interestingly they have used the practice of feminist criticism as a key towards understanding the larger socio-political context -- contexts that not only have inequalities and hierarchies based on gender, but also class, race and so on.

Surprisingly the white feminist movement willingly or unwillingly has forgotten the unique and double-oppressed black woman. No group of women in the world has suffered such a degree of dehumanisation and oppression as that of black women. Unlike the other women of the world, black woman was forced to accept the system of slavery, white racial imperialism, classism and patriarchal dominance. One cannot deny the myth that the life of black woman is not only a bunch of her double-edged exploitations; rather it is the record of her inner strength and confidence to bounce back at the odds of life.

The slavery has tormented the physical and mental health of blacks. The slave was brought to America by the white master according to whom the black had no soul. The black woman is recognised as the ‘mule of the world’. Later pushing her into the world of slavery she is made to surrender her body like animal. The slavery has detached both the inner and outer worlds of the black women slaves. It detached two loving hearts of husband and wife, it departed the strong connection between mother and daughter and it affected the friendship of sisters. Children having no education faced the turmoil under the complex and
critical conditions. Rather slaves were supposed to keep their sufferings aside and strengthen their arms to serve everywhere at their masters.

The ultimate suffering of black woman is her molestation. She is the major victim of rapes by her masters. As Linda Bent expresses, “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs and suffering and mortifications peculiarly their own” (qt hooks 24). Even the black man who is supposed to share his feelings does not care and comfort her. He has labeled her as ‘ugly’. He relies more on white woman for his sexual satisfaction and vice versa. The man-woman relationship has become the love-hate relationship. Alice Walker opines that black women “have been handed the burdens that everyone else-everyone else refused to carry” (Walker 237).

The black woman is subjected to incessant messages about the white beauty standards. The internalization of white beauty ideals is the most damaging effect on her who because of her color, and curl and press hair style is denied the status by her own family, peers, neighbours and media. Such a denial results in the self-denial. The white skin, golden hair and blue eyes are the white beauty symbols. The black woman urges to possess these superior ideals in order to love and be loved. Amidst all this Black woman has realised her true worth and is now capable of controlling any kind of heinous oppression.

The black woman is endowed with the gift of writing to express her deep-rooted feelings of being humiliated. She takes up the pen as a weapon to echo the
whole world that she is no more ghettoised now. She proves that neither white nor black man can realise her inner strength. Through writing she explores herself that she deserves respect and recognition. Most of the emancipated writers have celebrated the self-emancipation of black woman in their works. They proved that even they are capable to feel and to think as a conscious human being. They challenge racism, classism and sexism. The black woman is lamented losing the sense of her me-ness. As a black woman she is not only exploited by her slave master but also by black male and white women. She is the slave of slaves. The black woman being racially and sexually oppressed faces a peculiar dilemma. As Lindsey notes that “a black woman is not just to be a black who happens to be a woman. For one discovers one’s sex sometimes before one discovers one’s racial classification” (85-89). Yet in such an oppressive condition her will to survive and come out of the predicament is noteworthy.

The triple folded otherness or the triple jeopardy under the joint system of racism, sexism and classism of black woman has helped her find to herself and realise that she is denied the position that she truly inherits. The condition of the black woman and the process of her self-evaluation are the kernel of the black women writers. The post-modern black woman writers since 1970 till today explore the fact that the oppressions of black women are crucial for her raised feminist consciousness. Many creative and committed black women writers have written the issues around black women as their major concern. Writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Paul Marshall, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Smith, Kate Millet and others have portrayed the drastic vision of reality and questioned the binary oppositions such as science and spirituality, life and death, black and
Slavery and Its Impact on Literature

The slavery was the most inhuman treatment of some human beings by the other human beings. Collins Dictionary defines the system of slavery in four different ways, Slavery is,

1. the state or condition of being a slave; a civil relationship whereby one person has absolute power over another and controls his life, liberty and fortune.
2. the subjection of a person to another person, esp. in being forced into work.
3. the condition of being subject to some influence or habit.
4. work done in harsh conditions for low pay. (ww.collinsdict 13)

The blacks had undergone the plague of various forms of slavery. Under the chattel slavery blacks were sold as property. The black had no rights and was expected to perform labor and sexual favors at the command of a slave master. The debt bondage of slavery enslaves black in turn of the debt that he owes. In order to pay the debt he had to obey to perform even the most difficult and filthy works. Surprisingly the debt would be inherited through the generations. The debt bondage is known as bonded labor, or peonage. Another most casual form of slavery is forced labor wherein a black is made a slave on the threat of violence. It is called an unfree labour. The whites labeled the blacks as savage and wild creatures who are without souls. This notion made the black women to give up
their bodies like animals to their white masters. The black woman was converted into “promiscuous and loose”. In order to maintain their dignity the whites labeled the black men as rapists and the black women as whores.

Though the abolition of slavery by law has reduced some sort of suffering of black women, it is noticeable that the black women are still shamelessly treated. The hammering effects of slavery have made the blacks to express and share it through writings. Such narratives by the slaves are known as slave narratives. The slave narratives are a reflection of the sole experiences of physical and psychological condition of ex-slaves. A slave narrator is the first-person who expresses his day to day personal experiences in words. Even in the ocean of the racial prejudice they wrote I-narratives in order to declare their literary, psychological, social and emotional independence. The most prominent among them are David Walker’s *Appeal* (1829), *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), Henry Highland Garnet’s *An Address to the Slaves of the United States* (1843), Sojourner Truth’s *Ain’t I a Woman?* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Frederick Douglass’s *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), *Independence Day Speech* (1852) and his third autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), Martin R. Delany’s *Condition, Elevation, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), Francis Ellen Watkins Harper’s *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854) and Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and many more.

These are the attempts to explore the nature of slavery, master-slave relationships, slaveholder’s brutality, the slave personality and consciousness, the slave family, the hierarchy in plantation, the cultural and religious life of slaves, survival techniques and the forms of slave resistance and strategies used by slaves
to escape. Today slave narratives are read as the documents that witness the racial and sexual struggle of the slaves to sustain and maintain their self-worth, moral, cultural integrity and humanity.

The Early Black American Writers:

Afro-American literature is a sub-category of American literature that includes works produced in the United States by writers of African descent and directly pertains to their experiences and viewpoints. Afro-American writers focus on the issues of racism, classism, sexism, equality and justice. Since the present study concentrates more on the racial issues, the term ‘blacks’ is used in the place of Afro-Americans.

It has superficially been recognised that black literature developed during the 18th and 19th centuries. But it has been sidelined by the mainstream literature. Many historical evidences prove that the art of literature bestowed on the Africans in America during the early period of enslavement is in oral form. The evidences of African art, folklore and culture prove that Africans were great storytellers even before their landing of the first slave ship in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619.

John Henrik Clarke, the pioneer of Afro-American studies opines in his essay “The Origin and Growth of Afro-American Literature” that the origin of Afro-American literature can be traced back to 14th century in Timbuktu. During the 1500s scholars like Felix Du Bois and Ahmed Baba were prominent during the height of the University of Sankore at Timbuktu which was the intellectual centre of Africans. Clarke firmly states that “the forefathers of the Africans who eventually became slaves in the United States once lived in a society where
university life was fairly common and scholars were beheld with reverence” (Clarke 14).

Along with being witty they were the people with patriotism, self pride, free thinking and courage. But the rich African culture was completely ruined by the Moroccans, the invaders over Timbuktu in 1592. When the Europeans arrived there, they saw this wrecked Africa and mistook the condition of Africa with the assumption that nothing worth had ever been existed in this land. This very interpretational misconception made the glorious African culture and rich tradition to lose its own identity and the same attempt of misinterpretation is continuing till today.

The early status of the Africans is not that bad as it was in the latter half of the 17th century. African slaves were also to be treated equally with the other slaves of Europe by their masters. But the latter half of the 17th century witnesses the discrimination between the black slaves and the white slaves. Only black servants were prohibited education. Even they were denied to speak in their indigenous mother-tongue. This was difficult for Africans to sustain their culture and history. Moreover, Virginia Law of 1662 declared that Africans should be the slaves for life. An African did not understand what was being communicated to him and was beaten for not responding to the strange utterances of the slave owners. In order to express their unsustainable things by their masters, Africans struggled to learn English.

Fortunately, the enslaved black servants had brought with them the genius of oral tradition which reflected indigenous culture and history. They verbally transmitted their tradition, culture and history to their children and to each other. This oral transmission of culture collectively expresses their emotions, experiences, hope, anger and resistance. Oral tradition consists of history, folktales,
poetry, spirituals, gospel music, blues and rap. These are the integral part of the early literature of the black people in America and of how they viewed themselves and others and how they amused themselves to survive in a hostile white society. Joel Chandler Harris’s *The First Nine Books of Black Folklore* is the earliest attempt to collect this oral literature. Factually this oral literature had a vibrant influence on the literature of the blacks and the oppressed black folks.

The earliest written literature of Afro-Americans started in the beginning of 18th century. The early Afro-American writers are Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheatley, Francis Harper, Jupiter Hammon, Harriet Wilson and others. Being slaves, these writers used to depend upon the generosity of their masters to get their works published. Lucy Terry is the oldest woman writer of Afro-Americans. Though her first poem *Bars Light* was written in 1746, it was published in 1855. Hence, the credit of being the first Afro-American woman writer and the second writer of Afro-American literature goes to Phillis Wheatley, who published her book *Poems on Various Subjects* in 1773. It is Wheatley who proved through her writing that even the most exploited slaves could create great literature. She proves that even blacks are born with an unusual talent like whites. Despite this success many white people who are being obsessed with the misconception that the black cannot write a good literature, found it hard to believe that a black woman could be so intelligent as to write poetry.

**A Rationale for the Study**

The present study of Toni Morrison is based on Morrison’s genuine concern for the black women. Her works are the embodiment of black life. What attract more for the black feminist study in the works of Morrison are her deep and true feminist concerns both as a black and woman. She has made the invisible black
woman visible. Her approaches to feminist issues are unique, original, deep and inspiring for her fellow writers.

Morrison portrays the socio-political, economic, cultural and psychological experiences of black woman in America. She celebrates their boldness, will for freedom, awareness, confidence and recognition of self through her characters. Some of her novels are based on real life stories. Her novels are the means to have a deep insight into slavery and its effects on black woman, racism, sexism, classism and the internalization of white standards. Her positive, simple as well as unique approach to the feminist issues with the simple language and techniques in a convincing way stands as the rationale for the present study “Toni Morrison as a Black Feminist Writer”. The purpose of the study covers four of her novels namely *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992).

Since special attention and the understanding of the condition and power of black woman are needed, the present study aims at analysing the feminist concerns and issues in the select novels of Morrison. Since Morrison herself is the most empowered and influential black woman in America, she has demonstrated more on the positive side of the black woman. She has discussed the exploitation and effect of being marginalized and gives a unique space for such exploitation. Because she uses them as the stepstone for black woman to prove herself as strong, modern, confident and independent. Most of Morrison’s black women characters reflect the image of ‘new woman’. The women feel that they are no more ghettoized and they have learnt their own ways to safeguard themselves, their offspring and their families. An ability to rear and manage the whole responsibility of the life is the inherent quality of black women. Such of their power is the
The present study has three chapters. To begin with the “Introduction” affirms that the black woman is not submissive rather she is capable. How woman has been treated and how the black woman is different from the white woman is examined. How feminist thoughts are expressed through literature by both the black and non-black feminist writers. An attempt is made to delineate white beauty ideals and the triple jeopardy of black woman. It provides a brief survey of the origin and development of Afro-American literature focusing on women writers. Then there is a survey of black American fiction and the impact of slavery on literature.

The First Chapter entitled “The Black American Feminism” is divided into three sub-sections.

1.1 A journey from the imposed innocence to the awareness of self of black women and the awakening of black feminism, is examined. Out of being marginalised and
stereotypical images how the black woman gains an awareness or consciousness is the major highlight of the chapter.

1.2 The difference between the black feminism and the other feminisms are discussed. It is true that the white feminism is responsible for the emergence of black feminism.

1.3 The third section is about the history of black woman’s literary expression especially the novel writers in America. An overview is made of the different stereotypical images of black women portrayed in the novels by the early novelists till to the contemporary writers like Toni Morrison. Morrison’s novels are the authentic contributions concerning the issue of black feminism.

The Second Chapter entitled “Toni Morrison’s Works” has five sections.

2.1 This section concentrates on the biographical sketch and literary achievements of Toni Morrison. It is a glimpse into Morrison’s successful journey as a black woman in America.


2.3 It is an attempt to study and analyze various ramifications of slavery. They are race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Morrison thinks these evils affect the black women more than anythings else.

2.4 This section throws light on the techniques of Morrison’s writing such as her use of language, narrative techniques and symbolism.
2.5 This section focuses on critical Reviews by various writers on Morrison’s works.

The Third Chapter is entitled, “Feminist Trends in Toni Morrison’s Fiction.” The major feminist spaces and relevant feminist issues in the select novels of Morrison are discussed. The chapter has five sections.

3.1 Man-Woman/Couple relationship is analysed.
3.2 The ever strong and ever effective mother and daughter relationship is discussed.
3.3 The impact and importance of female friendship is examined.
3.4 The self of the black women is analysed. For the purpose the study divides four novels into two groups of each two works. The oppressed self of the black woman is analysed in the novels of The Bluest Eye and Sula and the regained self is examined in the novels of Beloved and Jazz.
3.5 The black women’s double-edged suffering as a black and as a woman is discussed in this chapter.

The last part of the thesis is “Conclusion”. It provides the mode of feminist trends that have been analysed in the select novels. As a black and woman Morrison’s dealings with feminine issues that are relevant to all the ages are studied. As an intellectual-writer Morrison inspires the readers as well as fellow writers. She leaves the readers to have their own individual views about the feminist issues that she discusses threadbare. Being a postmodern writer she frees herself from all the bonding and shows the direction how the black woman should live according to the changing times. The overall study defines Morrison as a black feminist writer because she portrays the black women both as ‘ship and ship harbor.’
Therefore the present study makes a sincere effort to study the select works of Morrison and to analyse how they embody black feminism. The study takes up the help of thoughts and concepts by various critics and theorists -- both blacks and non-blacks -- such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Barbara Christian, Mary Daly, Angela Devise, Deborah MacDowells, Simone de Beauvoir and many more. The study expresses the findings relating to the topic in a straightforward style of narration and in a simple language. The study hopes this may assist the readers to understand the arguments made in the research. The works of Morrison create a distinct awareness among the whites and elites regarding the importance of black woman and black woman writer. Her portrayal of a black woman’s assertion of her personality is praiseworthy and unique. This kind of writings can inspire the other marginalized women to voice their ideas and feelings. The proper understanding of Morrison’s novels can bring a new and positive perspective about the black women. Her works are the instrumental to make them visible. They have the power to transform the black women.
References:


