Chapter 3: Heritage in contemporary Black Literature

Amongst all Heritages, Heritage of man is an important aspect which focuses of all literature. Therefore, the theme of Heritage and Human Identity in African American society appears to be inexhaustible and can be observed in the infinite variety and amazing diversity. An overview of African American women’s writings shows that the portrayal of ancestral Heritage is a common characteristic of their work. The depiction of ancestral Heritage establishes a thematic bonding in the works of the black writers. Among the outstanding African American women writers, in addition to are Alice Walker are Toni Morrison, Paul Marshall, Claudia Tate, Gloria Naylor, Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks and so on. However, Walker towers above them all. The delineation of ancestral Heritage in Alice Walker’s novels is deadl y affected by the factors like slavery, poverty, and colors, discrimination, identity. In addition to this, the place of her women in the society, and the forces that subordinate them appear as the major factors in determining the man-woman relationships in her fiction.

That is why; keeping in view the above and the place of black women in American society should explore and analyze the place of ancestral Heritage in Morrison’s novels. In her fiction ancestral Heritage is found in two prominent variations: by birth, and by tradition. The first section of this chapter deals with the exploration of Heritage in contemporary black writers, whereas the subsequent section is devoted to the analysis of Human Identity.

The Bluest Eye novel presents a prominent ancestral Heritage. This Heritage is on the anvils of birth and culture. Cholly and Pauline
Breedlove are husband and wife. The beginning of their married life is quite charming, enthusiastic, and full of love for each other. Pauline is a country girl knowing little about the cultured ways of city life. She has a lame foot, but in spite of her physical disability and backwardness Cholly intensely feels for her.

The beginning of this relationship is full of gratitude and gratefulness. Both, husband and wife reciprocate each other's love. Cholly is a genial and bounteous, careful and faithful husband to Pauline. The relationship of husband and wife between Cholly and Pauline begins with energy and enthusiasm. Cholly works in a steel-mill at Lorain, Ohio; and Pauline is a housewife. Poverty leads them towards a struggle for survival, but they are happy. N. K. Ghosh is correct in his assessment that, they have accepted their poverty and ugliness as a part of their fate. She loses her front tooth, and seems ugly. However, it makes no difference to their relationship.

Then they migrate to the North in search of better jobs. Here they live among the white people. However, Pauline is not accustomed to live with them.

It is not that there are only white people, there are blacks too. But they are mean and malicious like the whites. Therefore, in that closely contemptuous atmosphere, Pauline begins to feel laden with aloneness. Usually she anticipates healing support from her husband. The narrator tells us: Cholly begins to ignore her. So the happy and healthy relationship between them starts deteriorating. She feels deplorably derelict at this stage.

Thus, it is sheer obvious that Cholly is ignoring her. Cholly's brutal behavior with his wife is perhaps due to his frustration with the society. On another side, she is being avoided by her husband, Pauline lives in loneliness. In her solitude movies inspire her to look beautiful. She decides to buy cosmetics and beautiful clothes. When she demands
money, Cholly refuses her. Then a quarrel is followed by hatred. In order to materialize her dreamy desires, Pauline decides to go to work. Her most of earnings are spent on clothes and erratic purchases. Cholly is not pleased with her purchases, and thereby warns her not to be a spendthrift on them. Now, the quarrels continue as indispensable routine order. The quarrels between Cholly and Pauline remind us the similar scenes from the earlier black novel such as, Bigger’s battered relationship with his wife Bessie in Wright’s *Native Son* (1940).

She ignores the day to day needs of the household for the sake of his drinks. His relationship with his wife and children is so deteriorated that one day in a fit of anger, the rented home where they live he burns, and put his family outdoors. He has crossed all the limits. The husband and wife even severely fight with each other and beat. Perhaps, for Pauline these quarrels are the ways of establishing her own identity. She gets zest from them.

However, it is a surprise that Pauline is not ready to give up her husband. It may be that fighting with husband becomes her psychological requirement. In no way she can avoid it. She endures unhappy married life throughout. Enduring unhappy married life is mostly related to the Hindu society. We always apply the *Karma* theory to such life patterns amongst Hindus. Though the *Karma* theory is limited to the Hindu society, we may endeavor to apply the same theory to the black society too.

On the other hand, Cholly embraces the addiction of liquor. One day under the influence of liquor, as said earlier, he even rapes his daughter. It seems that his all behavior is a reaction to his tattered and battered relationship with his wife. Cholly’s quarrels with his wife, his addiction of liquor, and raping of his own daughter, are all his unsuccessful attempts to establish his sense of self. His attempts to prove his exel compel him to behave maliciously, which consequently leads him towards the distortion of his relationship with his wife.
There is yet another dimension to this barbarously broken husband-wife relationship. Since the blacks are dominated by the white standards of beauty, they have unconsciously accepted these norms of beauty. Deep down in their hearts they believe that they are ugly. Wilfred Samuels suggests that because of their self-imposed cloak of ugliness Cholly and Pauline, like Pecola, are ripe succumbs of every glance, every billboard, every movie, that offers external definition. They too are victimized by the look. It is their own look that has played tantrums. Since they are convinced of their ugliness, they hate themselves. And if they hate themselves, how can they love others. So, we find upon close analysis that Pauline and Cholly’s self-images directly affect their relationship with each other.

Unlike Breedloves, there is a soothing stability in the husband-wife relations of the MacTeers. Despite their struggle for survival, they are optimistic and hardworking. They have stability in their family relationship. In contrast with Breedloves, MacTeers have generosity and sympathy not only for the family, but for their neighbors also. It is evident from their act of providing shelter to Pecola when Cholly burns their rented house. Where Breedloves behave bitterly within their own family, MacTeers maintain solidarity even outside the family.

Until recently black women found themselves on the periphery of the male dominated American society. They were dominated not only by the whites but also by the black males. Black women struggled against their triple oppression by the racial, sexual and class prejudices African American literature portrayed them as fully debased creatures, evil castrates and immoral beings. They were also treated only as sex commodities. Thus, their status in American society was subordinate, directionless, faceless, subservient and devoid of identity. While the black women writers came to know that they had little chance of assimilate in the mainstream, they determined to establish their rejected Identity and
their Heritage. A plethora of black women writers came out on the American literary scene. Through their writings they challenged the discrimination of the manly perspective. They strove against their suppression through their novels. The outstanding African American women writers in this galaxy include, Nella Larsen, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Ann Petry, Claudia Tate, Gloria Naylor and Maya Angelou.

Having had a long and perilous journey, African-American fiction established its sole purpose of upliftmen of the black Heritage. In 1982 Shadows Uplifted (1892) was the first black novel written by Francis E. W. Harper. Since then the African American writers never stopped to look back. A host of writers contributed to the enrichment of the black literature. The foundation of this writing was no doubt the grief and the pain inherent in American society. Many black writers, men or women, gave outlet to their strain, pangs and pain through their writings. However, Morrison claims a distinctive place among them. To understand her achievement fully as a novelist, we must peep into the past, and appreciate African-American literary tradition. This tradition can be traced back to Phillis Wheatley, the first black woman who published her poems in 1870. Thereafter, a plethora of talented black writers emerged and established their present stage of self-definition and self-assertion.

The women novelists like Francis Harper, Jessie Fauset (1884-1961), Nella Larsen (1893-1963) and Ann Petry (1908) were the early exponents of African American literature. All these writers struggled through their writings for the same intend. In 1892Harper in her Iola LeRoy sues for the justice for African-Americans. At the same time she intends to change the negative image of a Negroin the white minds. Likewise, Jessie Fauset in her novel The Chinaberry Tree (1931) wants to improve the impact most white people have about black people Ann Petry and Nella Larsentoo made continue the culture of the black women writers who wanted to pass for the white. All these writers gave their precious contribution to the development of black literature, specifically, by
presenting the black women's pitiable plight. Nevertheless, it cannot be
denied, as Patrick Bjork suggests, since 19th century, black writers were
writing almost exclusively whiting audiences.⁶

However, Zora Neale Hurston was an exception to this tradition. Black people commonly sought Heritage, identity, and emotional support in their own oral, musical, and visual expressions and narratives. Hurston seriously studied black folklore and folk tradition. Her writing chalked a new way for the black women writer in African American literature. By the mid-seventies many writers came into focus. They delved deep into the oppressive sources such as sexism, racism, and classism in the American society, and brought them into their writings.

The other writers are Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Claudia Tate, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Paul Marshall, and so on. Walker's writing not only shows significant influences of many of these writers, but she has also influenced many of the contemporary writers like Toni Cade Bambara, Gayle Jones etc. Like the black literature African American folklore forms the foundation of Morrison's fiction. Furthermore, like Zora Neale Hurston, Morrison explores the beautiful patterns of black folk speech. Nevertheless, this thesis is proposed to explore, and analyze the Heritage and Human Identity in the novels of Alice Walker.

Heritage is a term, formed by something inherits from history, past and ancestor. And the word Identity is defined as the condition or fact of being related nexus or incorporation. Connection by blood or birth, Heritage. A specific sort of connection existing between people concerned to or having dealings with each other. One of the best creations of man is the relation or relationship between mother, father, sister, son, daughter, husband, wife and in-laws. These relations along with several others form a society. Society implies a group of people maintaining ancestral Heritage. Hence, it is the product of human Identity.⁷ The origin and very identity of the society is closely related to the human Heritage. Creed,
race, color, culture, identity, religion, power, and language are some of the important factors, which play their roles in maintaining or straining Identity and Heritage.

As it is said in the Bible, ‘God has created man in his own icon.’ It might be with the expectation, that man should become the protector and benefactor of all animals and nature. But man failed God’s propositions and posed himself as the master of all animals and nature; and began to treat them as he wished and wanted. The sovereignty over beasts and nature could not satisfy him. So he started to enslave the powerless human beings. He dehumanized and equated them with animals or rather made them his property. How accursed was that system! The history of mankind has examples in abundance, of the inhumanly human relationships between people all over the world. Blacks were battered in Europe and America, Jews were jeered in Christian countries, and Dalits were discarded in India. Particularly, the place of Negro in America and the state of untouchables in India are very much akin in many respects. Both of them were caught in the cycles of the inferiority complex and self-hatred for a long time. Both suffered from a suppressed, oppressed and depressed life. In order to imprison them in the shackles of slavery, the whites manipulated the basis of the Bible through the whole machinery of church. As John Hope writes, they got to use the church as an agency for maintaining the institution of slavery. Ministers were motivated to instruct the slaves along the lines of servility and obedience. On the other hand, the Indian high-castes sought the help of Vedas and Manusmriti. These scriptures advocated the classification of society into the Chaturvarna. The three varnas Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas, as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar writes, agreed to beat down the Shudra. The inhuman treatment of the Shudras by the Tryavarnikas was in accordance with the Manu’s Laws It consequently distorted the human Heritage. Is it not the man himself who is responsible for this tattering and battering of human identity and Heritage.
The white Protestant Britishers were probably the first settlers of America. The later arrivals differed from them in many respects. Among them were the black Africans. On one hand, they were clearly distinguishable from the others by their black skin, and on the other hand, they came involuntarily in the chains and suffered the cruelties of slavery. These African Americans struggled a lot to produce their character and culture in the hostile atmosphere of America. Thus, they established their identity and the place within the society. In spite of all the harassment and the unfair treatment directed at them, they made many important contributions to the American cultural life.

The Africans were black, spoke different language, and had different culture. The striking contrast between the white Europeans and the black Africans was that the former came to America in search of greater individual opportunity, whereas the later came involuntarily, bound in chains, and served as slaves to the white.

The white European masters regarded themselves superior in every respect to the black Africans. The blacks were inferior in relationship to the white masters. It was the same relationship as that of a man's relation with his animals. The white masters treated their slaves like their animals, as the assets of their property.

Similarly, the Romans and Greeks enslaved the blacks, and made them work in the houses and on fields. Mohammedan also invaded Africa, and seized a lot of Negro men and women. They enslaved, and sold them in other countries. Thus, the slave trade began. Moslems shipped them off to Arabia, Persia, or other countries. American landowners were in great need of labors for their plantations of tobacco, cotton, indigo, and sugar. Therefore, to satisfy their needs, the slaves were brought to America from Africa on a large scale. The slave trade proved itself of the great economic profits. John Hope writes that by the middle of the fifteenth century,
Europeans were selling in their home markets many African commodities, among them were nuts, fruit, olive oil, gold, and Negro slaves. Within a very few years, the slave trade became an accepted and profitable part of European commerce.\(^9\)

Many of the European countries involved themselves in the export-import of the slaves. Thus, a large number of Negro men, women and children were captured and sent to Europe. The captives had to undergo a very humiliating and degrading procedure of inspection. The slaves were carried to the coast, bound in chains like animals. They were stark naked. After the close scrutiny, they were loaded on the ships like cattle. For the black slaves, white masters were the devils. They had even heard, and believed that these white devils liked to eat the Africans.

The slaveholders treated the slaves with utmost cruelty. If in any case, the slaves did not obey them, or failed to do what was expected from them, they would harshly beat them, and whip upon their naked bodies. The worst thing was that the slaveholders found religious sanction\(^10\) for their cruelty and inhumanly behavior with the slaves. When Queen Elizabeth, in 1952 came to know that one of her subjects, John Hawkins, was involved in slave trade. She lost her temper, and commented that he would have to pay a high price for dealing in human lives. However, when she saw a copy of his benefit sheet, her ethnic indignation became soft, and then she herself became one of the members of the corporation.

American slave system was unique in the human history. Slave bearing was regarded as a social status. To have slaves meant to have wealth. So, by holding more slaves people displayed their luxuries and affluence. American slave system had three main features

Colour discrimination was yet another psychological weapon used by the racist AmericansColour discrimination not only killed the self-
respect of the blacks, but also generated self-hatred in them. In this regard, Denise Heinze rightly remarks:

Idealized beauty has the power...to psychically splinter an entire race identity, and to imprison all human beings in static and stagnant relationships.

White skin was the standard of ideal beauty. The racist Americans forced the blacks to accept it. However, this false standard of beauty played tantrum in the black lives. The blacks believed in the superiority of the white skin colour. Even Morrison could not get rid of it. In short, it is evident, how forcefully the white concept of beauty might have been thrust upon the blacks. In the racist America, white colour of the body became a necessary requirement to be respected in the society. White became a synonym for beauty, superiority, and intelligence. Black was associated with all the negative qualities such as, ugliness, inferiority, foolishness, evils, and brutalities, etc.

However, the blacks unconsciously accepted the white standards of beauty as a conviction, and began to despise themselves.

Thus, in the racist atmosphere of America, the black man’s image was projected with every possible negative quality. Press, magazines, and books presented him as a vulgar, superstitious, stupid, lazy, liar, thief, and drunkard person. They described him with the phrases such as: barbarian, Negro-ruffian, African-Annie, colourdcannible, coon, darkie etc. In this way, he became a stereotype of a criminal along with these attributes and his black colour.

Therefore, It was quite natural that blacks have seen light skin as an avenue to greater equality. May be, this belief of the blacks greatly harmed them than their exploitation by the whites.
In fact, American society structured itself in three strata based solely on the colour of the skin. The upper stratum was of the whites, mulattos in the middle, and the blacks belonged to the lower one. They were close to the whites by their skin colour. So, they enjoyed displaying their superiority over the blacks. It is a surprise that in the Negro world, the blacks themselves cut typical jokes at each other.

This shows that the blacks had accepted their degradation. Nevertheless, the scenario of the present race relations in America today has changed. The slavery is abolished, and the blacks have become a part of the American society. Now they have the power of vote. They have equal opportunities and facilities for their progress. Americans talk about equality. Though it is so, is it not the politics of dominance that till today no Negro could become the president of America? Perhaps, it may be because of the politics of the colour dominance. Almost all the black writers have dealt with the theme of colour discrimination, and its dehumanizing effects on the black community. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to peep into the ancestral past and its impact on the blacks.

American society was divided into two sections because of the dominant racial hatred, colour discrimination, cultural difference etc. These two sections are: the whites and the blacks, the masters and the slaves. The blacks belonged to a class, which was of the suppressed, oppressed, and depressed people. One of the reasons behind the predicament of the blacks may be their inferior economic status. Perhaps, T. S. Eliot is right when he says that in the society all ills are fundamentally economic.

Moreover, in the Negro world, as we see, poverty and ugliness go hand in hand. Why the blacks are treated so inhumanly? Why the blacks treat each other so abnormally? Why the human relationships in the black society are so precarious? These are some of the questions directly
related to the economic status of the blacks. In this connection, Roberta Rubenstein appropriately observes:

The history of American Negro has always been presented with the pictures of dehumanization, degradation, and depression.

However, Prof. Willis Boughton’s opinion appears to be one sided. The truth is that, the entire history of the blacks is full of the examples of white atrocities. The blacks were brought to the American land neither to give them superior culture, nor to lighten their skin colour. The Americans had brought them only to do their domestic as well as field work. While toiling hard for their white masters, the blacks have reaped some benefits accidentally, that was all. In short, the African race was dominated in the religio cultural clash with the American society. As a matter of fact, the Africans had their own rich cultural heritage. Twentieth century black writers like Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Gloria Naylor, Gwendolyn Brooks, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison etc. dealt with the cultural realities of the blacks through their writings. They regenerated black culture through their memories, oral narratives, work songs, follores, and stories told by the ancestors.\textsuperscript{12}
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