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Race and Oppression in Bessie Head's “The Collector of Treasure” And Kate Chopin's “Désirée's Baby”

“Racism has always been a divisive force separating black men and white men and sexism has been a force that unites the two groups.” (Hooks 99)

**-** Bell Hooks

Simone de Beauvoir states that women are constitutive of half of our humanity. Female is the major part of the human race that contributes to the progress of entire humanity. Beauvoir advocates that women must be given equal social, cultural and political rights. Women from the beginning to the present are claiming for agency, space, identity that should be given to them as a human without their claiming. For women, the male is always a part of the human and are never considered as other because they believe each gender contribute to the human whole. This is interesting to note the rights which are denied to female are enjoyed by the men of the society. “To live without the rights is a person without a soul”.(Jha 2) But women are living and suffering without these basic rights from birth.

According to white feminists, black women are not real women and that they had no experience that relates then to true womanhood. So, the Black feminists challenged not only patriarchy but also the notions of white feminists. The Post-Colonialism projects to dismantle the previously made theories on colonialism in which identity was based on nation, culture, and selfhood and try to reinvent/reimagine the identity as intercultural, contingent, plural. Bell hooks argued that Black women's lived experiences help in shaping the differences in the world view from those of privileged white women. Black understands the oppression more than anyone else. “Black feminism is both a parallel and counter-discourse to feminism.” (Tagore,123) It's a fundamental departure from Western feminism by the need to resist the phallocentric world but not to reject the world.

The Equality Act 2010 was implemented that says one cannot be discriminated on the basis of their race and origin. The Race Relation Act 1976 was replaced by the Equality Act 2010 setting new guidelines and rules for racial discrimination. The race is sixth among the nine protected characteristics of equality act namely: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation.

The struggle between Human rights and Racism has been in debate for a long time. Rosa Parks and Shirley Sherrod are the two women who tried to stand against the discrimination happen to them. They both have gone through the phase of being let down with their judgments and racist actions. Rosa Parks stand for herself in the bus where she was sitting in the ‘negro section’ and refused to give the seat to white men. Shirley Sherrod was attacked by media on her edited remarks that cost her job. Her fellow worker used her remarks that made her shown as a racist who is discriminating against whites. Rosa is an important voice of women in racial history who voiced her case.

Kimberlè Crenshaw in her essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique”, coined the term ‘intersectionality’ that talk about multiple oppression faced by black women across countries. Black women are not discriminated in different categories of ‘race’ and ‘sex’ but a combination of both race and sex. The problem is in the legal system that defined sexism as the injustices faced by all women but racism only by the black and other people of color. This framework renders Black women as invisible and without legal support.

There is a great distinction between how society views white and black women and how they are differentiated within the society. Does it raise the question that if Women are considered as passive and fragile then why black women are overloaded by heavy chores? Women as good mothers are supposed to stay at home and nurture their children then why black women are forced to do jobs? Black Female bodies are excluded from the Western Feminist concept of Beauty and femininity; they are most visible in the marginalized, sexualized form. For Example, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* stands for the white middle women who are entrapped within the house, their lives revolving within the four walls of the house. But this book ignored the great issue of Black women and targeted only particular sect of women. Alice Walker coined the term Womanism in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* that identifies not just black women but the entire humanity.She illustrates this by a metaphor of garden where two different flowers co-exist maintaining their cultural distinctiveness and integrity, similarly, two different races can co-exist together retaining their cultural distinctiveness and integrity.

Bessie head writings are more concerned with the women in Botswana Village. Her personal circumstances helped her to gain deep insight into the mind and experience of African women. The female characters are not presented as being either better or worse than their male counterparts. She portrays women as such because they are the upholder of all humanity. “The Collector of Treasure” catechizes the societal construct that made masculinity and made the male protagonist who defies the social norms and then establishes equal relations with women. Head being both an African and women necessitate the hypothesis of writing double as an African and women. Huma Ibramin observes in Head “exploration of the limitation of women's power’ marks a fundamental deviation from the simplest premise that ‘even the smallest power in the women's hand somehow advances the cause of feminism”. (Rafapa, 112)

Kate Chopin illustrates her own views in her fictions. She defines the roles played by men and women in society in a way that men are always seen as the oppressor and dominant while women as the oppressed and submissive. Chopin is considered to be one of the foremost Southern regionalist writers. She details the culture of Cajun and Creole in where she had lived during her childhood and marriage to show sexual and cultural subtleties. Chopin introduces the American Civil war and the period of slavery. “Désirée's Baby” is added in her collection *Bayou Folk* in 1894. “Désirée's Baby” is a story of women who undergo a sudden transformation of leaving her husband behind and moved from being a weak woman to a stronger and independent. In this story, she describes the superiority and inferiority of male and female and racial superiority throughout the story. Being a white, she writes about racism and with that she teaches a new form of feminism.

Both the texts are struggling with the notion of psychological violence and female characters with racial and gender oppression. The psychological violence can be exerted by describing female as unintelligent sexual object verbally, by isolating them from any contact outside and to make women dependent on men economically. In “Désirée's Baby”, she was emotionally and psychologically dependent on her husband, she is the most obedient and submissive wife. She has an undefined origin, was isolated as she has no one to share her feeling. In contrast, Dikeledi in “The Collector of Treasure”, being abused and beaten and then left by her husband, she never went out of her spirits. She was abandoned by her relatives who might have thought of her dependence on them economically, but she never loses hope and works hard to feed her children on her own.

The women's fate is generally equated with that of Eve's, hence are called to be Eve's daughters. The book of Genesis positions status of women below men. Eve’s lowliness is established in Genesis 3:16 when the Supreme power (God) discovers that she has tasted the forbidden fruit of knowledge. The line states the dictate of God as, “Unto the woman He said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow, thou shall bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”(Genesis 3:16) This single word, “rule”, powerfully demonstrates Eve’s position beneath Adam.

Carole Boyce Davies in “Some Notes on African feminism” cites Molara Ogundipe-Leslie: “Women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries of interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy”.(Sharma 29)Dikeledi never perceives herself under the burden of negative self-image. She was the sole survivor of her broken marriage and also skilled in a number of crafts. While the image of Désirée was fully dependent on how her husband perceives her, she notes about her marriage life, “When he frowned she trembled, but loved him” (Chopin 151) that significantly led to her demise.

The cult of true womanhood possesses four cardinal virtues, purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity. Only the privileged and middle-class white women are said of possessing these virtues while the black women are defined by other four controlling images. The first one is, ‘mammy’, aiming to make Black women as good mothers. It creates a subordinate relationship between black women and white male power. The second image is that of ‘Matriarchs’, that lead black women to be blamed for the success or failure of black children. The third image is that of ‘Welfare mother’. During the period of slavery, an image of breeder women is created as the welfare mother in Post World War II. Slave owners demanded black women to breed as their children will provide them with more labor and have a stable political economy. The last controlling image is that of ‘Jezebel’, whore or sexually aggressive women. Black women sexuality was always put under control as they are seen as sexually impulsive women.

The truly uncontrollable forces in nature are male lust and male aggression and now one more is added to it, sexist bestiality. Garesego Mokopi was the representative of phallogocentric society. He is the men who are described as ‘evil’, ‘dog’, who “imagines he was the only penis in the world and that there had to be a scramble for it.”(Head 42) Armand is shown as the master of not only the plantation slaves but also of his wife and child. He regards Désirée as his beautiful possession. His high status, large plantation, position as master over slaves as well as his wife inflated his pride. The plantation means, “being removed from the society.” Garesego is one of the victims of racial oppression, of the plantation. By being a captive of the plantation owner, he was greatly abused and being black was far beneath the whites. The attitude of white slave owners towards black slaves is revered back in the manner in which black men treat black women with the same abuse and oppression. This made black women more subjugated as their lives are not just affected by racial inequality but also governed by gender inequality. Paul is in vivid contrast to Garesego, he is called “Poem of tenderness.”(Head 44) He is a man who works for his family at both the emotional and physical level. He shuns all the customs of patriarchy and has the ability to change. It is through Paul's human empathy, Dikeledi was able to soothe herself from the miseries of life. Paul might have been named after St. Paul who is symbolic of charity and visionary hope.

Frantz Fanon once states, “I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth.” (Baisel 74) Désirée constantly compares her boy with the quadroon boy and questions her husband to which he replies, “It means, he answered lightly, that the child is not white; it means that you are not white.” (Chopin 154) “Désirée's Baby” shows black as a taboo that causes them to feel guilt and fear for their actions and identities. The story forces the condemnation of race that sees a person's race as more important to a person's self. The fact of Désirée and Armand's baby is black, nothing else has changed. Désirée is the same women who loved Armand and her child as same as before. But this mere fact causes Armand to reject his baby and stop loving his wife as being black they are beneath him. Désirée consequently rejects herself and her baby. Here, race defines how the skin of color illustrates one's social class and determines one's value and identity.

Désirée had no name at the beginning of her story which shows her lack of self. The name Désirée given by her foster mother meaning the reflection of other's desires, it has others desire imprint on it that leaves her identity blank. While Dikeledi, her name means ‘tears’, who is an extremely kind and good-hearted person, extending her love to all around her that seems to oppose in the end, by killing her own husband because of the subjugation and oppression he had done. The act of naming is an important theme in as it defines one's own self. It helps in female psychic growth to create an identity of their own.

The idea of sisterhood is most important for Black women as through this they can share their experiences and help challenge patriarchy. Head celebrates female bonding in her depiction of the relationship between Dikeledi and Kenelope. Even, Kenelope is ready to share her husband sexually with Dikeledi, here the man is the sexual object being shared by women for sexual pleasures. In prison too, she was acquainted with like-minded women who and the courage to fight back and regain control over their lives. But in “Désirée's Baby”, there is no such female bonding to which she can share her experience, even she questions her mother who just advise her to leave her home and come back to her.

Ellen Peel in “Semiotic Subversion in Désirée's Baby”, points to the parallel between two characters, Désirée and La Blanche. La Blanche that in literal terms means ‘whiteness of her skin’ but also refer to ‘blank’ recalling Désirée blankness of identity. Another parallel is when Désirée subconsciously compares her son with La Blanche's son. There is a possibility that Armand fathered the son of La Blanche. In an instance, when Désirée asks about her skin whiter than his own, he replied, “As white as La Blanche's.” (Chopin 154) Their sexual place is identical but social standing doesn't allow her to have connections with La Blanche socially. Désirée loses all values, virtues, sexual and economic protection that she had as the white female. She is pointing to the powerlessness of female within the household. When one human being gain access over the other than other person's life becomes limited and dependent. Frantz Fanon distinguishes between the upbringing of a white and a black child and the racial difference between them. The Whites are considered as an agent of society that defines laws according to which people are shaped and trained. When a black child meets a white child, her own color and identity become unacceptable to him and it is repressed there. The black child acceptance of his/her position as ‘the other’ lead to recognizing the importance and worth of whites and they try to disguise them.

Bessie Head not only shows the struggle of women but also offer solutions to them. In the end, all the women protagonists are released from physical and psychological trauma and regained a new identity. The castration of phallic power happened when Dikeledi asked Garesego to come home to discuss a child's fee, Garesego in reply calls her as ‘Mother’. His act of calling her Mother shows his play of calling her as a superior maternal figure and himself as the prodigal son returning home. In reply to his ‘Mother’, she opts for ‘Sir’, “Sir, I shall prepare everything as you have said. Dikeledi.” (Head 54) The preparation of food is equated with the preparation of killing. The cutting of Garesego's genitals is an act by oppressed women to free from phallocentric society and angst of women. Chopin, at the end of the story, brought Armand at the level of Désirée by revealing the secret of the origin of Armand is also a black who was born by the black woman.

Conclusion

Judith Butler argues that it is within women the power of transformation and transgression of the rules prescribed by society. In the patriarchal structure, it is men who describe the role of women as submissive and obedient. Like, both Dikeledi and Désirée are meant to follow. But if women do not fulfil the demands then they can challenge patriarchy and asks for an identity of their own which will make them docile in their own oppression. Their main motive should be to write a destiny of their own.

Michele Wallace writes,

“We exists as women who are black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one has done: we would have to fight the world.” (Combahee River Collective Statement)

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