An Exploration of Characteristics of Marxist Feminist Theory in Toni Morrison’s Novels, The Bluest Eye and Beloved

Irfan Mehmood* 1

1 Department of English Language & Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to explore the idea that women are exploited by gender discrimination and economic oppression by applying Marxist Feminist theory to the fictional works of Afro-American novelist, Toni Morison. According to the Marxist Feminist ideology the major reason of women subjugation is the lack of opportunities for them to earn and own properties and sources of production. Men subjugate women in all shades of life. In the present scenario, woman is a slave without salary in shape of mother, daughter, sister and wife. The research intends to be conducted on Toni Morrison’s, novels, “The Bluest Eye” and “Beloved”. The conservative Afro-American society does not allow their women to take active part in the society by getting higher education and by starting professional career. Karl Marx theories about society, economics and politics are collectively known as Marxism. Marxist Feminism focuses on the investigation and explanation of the ways in which women are oppressed through system of capitalism and patriarchy. According to Marxist Feminism, women’s liberation can only be achieved through a radical restructuring of the current capitalist system, in which much of women’s labor is uncompensated. The study will further examine the idea that patriarchy and capitalism are the main reasons behind all the suffering of Afro-American women. In most novels, Morrison follows Engel’s stance that economic instability and patriarchy are major causes of women’s oppression. Morrison suggests that women can enjoy the blessings of life by having equal opportunities of growth. Abstract should state briefly the purpose of the research, the principal results and major conclusions. References and non-standard or uncommon abbreviations should be avoided in the abstract. The number of words should not exceed 350.

Keywords: Marxist Feminism, Harlem Renaissance, Monogamy and Polygamy.

1. Introduction

This research will discover the possible presence of Marxist Feminism, in Toni Morrison’s novels, The Bluest Eye and Beloved. Marxist Feminism is a literary theory, which focuses on materialism and class struggle of women. Toni Morrison writes about the culture in which she lives and from which she neither emotionally nor consciously escapes.
The Marxist Feminist theory focuses on the weak economic position of women and spotlight man as a dominant capitalist. Engels (2004) writes “they (women) are despised and outcast in order that the unconditional supremacy of men or the female sex may be once more proclaimed as a fundamental law of society.” (p.35)

The researchers have found a lot of information regarding Marxist Feminism in works of numerous writers such as Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Angela Davis, who have depicted the theme of Marxist Feminism in their works. But the researchers have not found the similar information in Morrison’s novels. The difference between Toni Morrison and her contemporaries is that their focus was on the point that patriarchy is responsible for all the sufferings of women. While, Morrison does not only discuss the violence of patriarchy but also examines that how capitalism has emasculated the female members of Afro-American race. Faris (2013) writes, “women have traditionally been dehumanized by a male dominant society, which they call patriarchy; and that has been always better to be a man” (P. 205).

Walby (1990) states “Women may be participating in an institution but be subordinated within it, for instance they may be segregated into less powerful positions.” (p.12). Benson (1969) writes, “The need to keep women in home arises from two major aspects of present system. First the amount of unpaid labour performed by women is very large and very profitable to those who own the means of production” (p. 9) and second, “there is the problem of whether the economy can expand enough to put all women to work as a part of the normally employed labour force.” (p. 10)

According to Marxist ideology, women are kept deprived of property ownership, while men have gained more privileged position in the family due to their control on system and sources of production. This gave men the liberty to exploit women. In order to transfer the accumulated wealth to the next generation, men demand strict monogamy and fidelity from their wives whereas on the other hand they practice polygamy. Such men use money to exploit women, by accessing them in brothels and by searching helpless, poor and needy women in order to exploit such women by their miserable condition. Engel (2004) writes “Only when the women had brought about the transition to pairing marriage were the men able to introduce strict monogamy – though indeed only for women” (p. 28).

According to Angela Davis, Morrison’s narrative world is so rich with the phenomenon of Marxist Feminism that one may comment on Morrison’s fiction on several accounts. Davis (1983) writes “in the eyes of the slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all; the y were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force. They were ‘breeders’— animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers.” (p. 8)

1.1. Background
There are various types of feminism such as, Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Socialist Feminism, Cultural Feminism, Eco Feminism, and Black Feminism but according to Jennifer Wicke (1994) not a lot of work has been done on Marxist feminism, which is an important branch of feminism that focuses on explaining and investigating the idea in which women are oppressed through systems of capitalism and private property. Wicke (1994) states, “Materialist feminism...is less likely than social constructionism to be embarrassed by the occasional material importance of sex differences.” (p.758). According to Marxist feminism, the women can only be given equal status by achieving a radical restructuring of the current capitalist system of economy, in which women
are used as unpaid labour. Writers like, Toni Morrison have raised their voices against such practices through their novels.

According to Frederick Engels, the oppression of women is not eternal, rather it has been created at a specific time in history. During the age of ‘savagery’ and ‘barbarism’ women got a respectable and powerful position in social and domestic life. At that time, women had the right to own properties and household items. Women were respected and obeyed by everyone including their husbands but with the start of civilization man started suppressing women in all walks of life. Thus, the patriarchy established such social arrangements which resulted in subjugation of women in all social circles. Engels (2004) writes “three main epochs of social evolution - savagery, barbarism and civilisation. It was at this latter stage of social evolution that the division of labour and commodity exchange between individuals arising from it developed. Only at this stage was the subjugation of women fully manifested.” (P. 8)

Patriarchy has dominated the lives of present day women in both social and domestic circles owing to the fact of its control on sources of production. Income largely depends upon outdoor activities therefore men keep the revenue to themselves. On the other hand, the domestic activities assigned to women, who are kept unpaid and are not given the right of property ownership. In this way economy plays a vital role in determining the worth of individual. Since the selected novels of Toni Morrison may possibly present a real picture of the marginalized class of Afro-American women.

1.2. Problem statement
The most conspicuous aspect of this research is that Marxist Feminist ideology is not applied on Toni Morrison’s fictional work and there is a dire need to fill that gap. So, this study will introduce a new feature of Toni Morrison’s fictional work and it could also serve as a source for students to become familiar with the Afro-American culture and the atrocities done to the female members of Afro-American society by patriarchy and capitalism.

1.3. Objective

1. To determine the role of capitalism as one of the main reason for female character subjugation, oppression, and/or second-class status in society.
2. To investigate the struggle of female characters in Morrison’s novels, as somehow been urged to fully enter the public workforce to survive female oppression.
3. To find out the need for revolutionary structuring of property relations to change a social system where women are more likely to be exploited than men.
4. To analyse the female characters in Morrison’s novels, who are forced to remain inside their homes (the private sphere) to take care of families so that men can work.

1.4. Significance
The study will enable the students, teachers and literature lovers to closely analyse the possible presence of Marxist Feminist ideology in the novels of Toni Morrison and it will be a helpful document to review the past, present and future of Afro-American woman. Toni Morrison is amongst the best English novelist of Afro-American origin and lots of students will take interest in this study because the subject of this research will raise a sense of interest and feelings in its reader. The study of this research is also significant because the topic of the research is heart
touching and most relevant to the present day. This research will help those people and societies to reform their lives, who are victims of patriarchy and class discrimination.

1.5. Limitations
This research study will be an attempt to analyze the novels of Toni Morrison from the perspective of Marxist Feminist ideology and its internal as well as external criticism. The research report will be completed in an artistically and comprehensive way.

1.6. Research questions
1. How does the writer projected capitalism as one of the main reason for female character subjugation, oppression, and/or second-class status in society?
2. How do the female characters as somehow been urged to fully enter the public workforce to survive female oppression?
3. What role revolutionary structuring of property relations play to change a social system where women are more likely to be exploited than men?
4. How female characters in Morrison’s novels are forced to remain inside their homes (the private sphere) to take care of families so that men can work?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Marxism and Marxist Feminism
Karl Marx's theories about economics, society and politics are collectively known as Marxism. He has presented the idea that human societies are develop through class struggle. The conflict between the ruling classes who control the means of production and the working classes who enable these means by selling their labour in return for wages are the manifests in capitalism. “Forces of production and social relations -- two different sides of the development of the social individual-appear to capital as mere means and are merely means for it to produce on its limited foundation. In fact, however, they are the material conditions to blow this foundation sky high.” (Marx 1857, p.706). Both Karl Marx and Frederick Engels have presented revolutionary philosophy to bring social change and to improve the condition of general public. In Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels (1884) suggest the “Abolition of property in land application of all rents of land to public purposes” and the “Abolition of all right of inheritance” (p. 57). Therefore, “The aim of Marxism is to bring about a classless society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and change” (Berry 2012, p.156).

2.2 Frederick Engels Views about Marxist Feminism
Engels is considered as the founder of Marxist Feminist theory which focuses on the economic problems of women generally in society and particularly in domestic life. A. Pelz (1998) states “Engels was among the first to realize the importance of gender in human history” (p. 123). Fredrick Engels is regarded in the history of Marxism as a revolutionary figure, who highlighted the women as an oppressed section in a patriarchal society. In Sexual Politics, Millett (2000) states, “Engels’ the origin of the family private property and the state provided the most comprehensive account of patriarchal history and economy and the most radical” (p. 108).
2.3 Marxist Feminism in The Historical Perspective

According to the Frederick Engels, before the advent of civilization, woman enjoyed dignity and respect in social circles as well as in domestic life. Therefore, lives of women were far better in comparison to the present day life. In the period before civilization, women have rights and freedom equal to men. Engels (2004) writes “at a primitive stage when unrestricted sexual freedom prevailed within the tribe, every woman belonging equally to every man and every man to every woman” (P. 18). He further describes ancient gens tribe “There can be no poor and needy – the communistic household and the gens know their obligations towards the aged, the sick and those disabled in war. All are free and equal – including the women” (p. 98).

2.4 Postmodernism and Black Women

Postmodernist literary movement was stared in twentieth century. During this era many previous ideologies of social reality, independence of human mind, native realism and social practices have been rejected and new truths and realities have been presented by showing promises of improving the condition of class, race, gender and society. The Afro-American female writers like Toni Morrison, Angela Davis and Alice Walker have completely changed the status of woman in literature by presenting black feminism. “Black feminism is not white feminism in Blackface” (Lorde, 1984, p. 113) and that the power of their words has depicted a real picture of black woman “my heritage and the heritage of all other non-European women, and deny the real connections between all of us” (Lorde 1984, p.121).

2.5 Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was an intellectual and social artistic explosion that took place in Harlem, New York, in the early twentieth century. It is also known as the "New Negro Movement". James Weldon Johnson (2016) called this movement as "the most important event in the entire history of the Negro in the American Theater" (p. 931). In, The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois (1903) founded out that "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (p. 2).

2.6 The Exploitation Of Women In Works Of Afro-American Writers

There are many Afro-American writers who have contributed to highlight the sufferings of black American women in their writings. Some important works of these writers are mentioned below.

2.6.1 The Bluest Eye By Toni Morrison

The Bluest Eye, was the first novel written by Toni Morrison in which the violent manners of patriarchy are employed on a young girl Pecola. Her father, Cholly not only beats her but also rapes her. The blue and black eyes are symbolically presented for the class difference. Morrison (1979) writes, “Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. Here they said, this is beautiful and if you are on this day worthy you may have it” (p. 21).

2.6.2 Beloved By Toni Morrison

This novel is about the problems faced by Afro-American women during slavery and the period of immediately succeeding it. The slave women were treated even worse than an animal.
Sethe, an ex-slave, kills her own daughter in order to save her from going back to slavery. Watson (1997) states, “Sethe, like so many African women, committed love-murder because after being victimized by brutal rape and sex, these women felt that they had no choice” (p. 103).

2.6.3  Their Eyes Were Watching God By Zora Neale Hurston
This novel deals with problem of marriage. Hurston (2007) writes "So the white man throws down the load and tells the nigger man to pick it up. He picks it up because he has to, but he doesn’t tote it. He hand it to his women folks. The nigger woman is the mule of the world so far as you can see. She been praying for it to be different with you" (p. 19). Hurston highlights the oppression of black women by white male oppression. Bloom (2009) states “Nanny voices the history of oppression of many African American women. As a slave, Nanny experienced sexual exploitation by her master and physical abuse by her jealous mistress. She was forced to run away with her newborn daughter, Leafy” (p. 82)

2.6.4  Brown Girl, Brownstones by Paul Marshall
In this novel Paul Marshal has highlighted the suffering of black community especially problems faced by women. Coser (1995) writes "so unhappy about American society: this kind of almost blind absorption in the material" that results in "a kind of diminishing of life, of feeling" (p. 60). In Brown Girl, Brownstones, Marshall signifies the importance of finance in American society by narrating the story of Boyce family.

2.6.5  The Color Purple by Alice Walker
Alice walker is one of the most prominent writers of Afro-American literature. In Color Purple, she highlights the miseries of her own community by depicting her experiences in the novel. Walker (1982) writes “All this week I suffer. Grady and me feel so down he turn to reefer, I turn to prayer” (p.39).

3.  Research Methodology
3.1  Methodology
Research methodology is the scientific analysis of a work of art. This will be a non-empirical research, in which, textual analysis will be used as research method for analysis of Toni Morrison’s novels in terms of the exploitation of Afro-American women due to class conflict and patriarchy. The Textual Analysis approach advocated by Catherine Belsey (2005) is a significant research method, which I have planned to apply to my research study and I intend to employ Marxist Feminist theory formulated by Frederick Engels.

3.2  Marxist Feminist Theory By Frederick Engels
3.2.1  Framework Of Analysis
Fredrick Engels has presented the Marxist Feminist Theory in “The Origin of The Family, Private Property and The State”. In this book Engels has laid down all the guidelines of Marxist Feminism to find out the root cause of women’s suffering and also suggested the ways to empower the women as well.
3.2.2 Private Property
According to Fredrick Engels, private property has made the man powerful while women remain powerless due to dispossession of means of production. Including all income generated activities. Even in this age men control the lives of their family women.

3.2.3 Women Enslavement And Physical Punishment
The slavery of human beings is a condemnable act on all accounts. The Marxist Feminist theory critically evaluates the role of slave business and treatment of enslaved people. The curse of slavery is the dark aspect of the Afro-American community.

3.2.4 Monogamy And Polygamy
Frederick Engels clearly points out the flaws of men in terms of their practice of polygamy even after their marriage. While on the other hand they demand strict monogamy from their wives.

3. Conclusions
In a nutshell, the purpose of this research is to discover the essential points related to Marxist Feminism, as an idea, a belief and a movement. In this research, the possible presence of Marxist Feminism will be explored in the works of Toni Morrison, that can be put in contrast to the vast literature written on the theme of patriarchy. This research will explore the various forms of Marxist Feminism in terms of emotional, sexual and physical exploitation of women, as well as, in terms of race, class, gender, family and individual oppressions of women.

References


