

African culture, racism, slavery, freedom, and equality in the novels of Toni Morrison

Dr. J. Jayakumar ^{1*}

Abstract

African American literature tends to focus on themes of particular interest on Black people. The role of African Americans within the larger American society and issues such as African American culture, racism, religion, slavery, freedom, and equality. This focus began with the earliest African American writings, such as the slave narrative genre in the early 19th century, and continues through the work of many modern day authors. Another characteristic of African American literature is its strong tradition of incorporating oral poetry into itself. There are many examples of oral poetry in African American culture, including spirituals, African American gospel music, blues and rap. This oral poetry also shows up in the African American tradition of Christian sermons, which take use of deliberate repetition, cadence and alliteration. All of these examples of oral verse have made their way into African American literature. However, while these characteristics exist on many levels of African American literature, they are not the exclusive definition of the genre. In African literature the themes of Alienation and dispossession are widely accepted one, it should be noted that it emerges as natural consequences of the existential predicament both in intrinsic and extrinsic terms. In order to approach and analyze the treatment of alienation and consequential dispossession in African literature seems worthwhile to understand various nuances of the word alienation. A dictionary of literary terms defined as: "Alienation is the state of being alienated or estranged from something or somebody; it is a condition of the mind". Encyclopedia Britannica defines alienation as the state of feeling estranged or separated from ones milieu, work, and products of work or self. The English word 'Alienation' is derived from the Latin word 'Alienato'. Alienato is a noun which receives meaning from the verb 'alien are' which means to make a thing for others, to snatch, to avoid, to remove etc. In French language Alienate and alienation, are used in the same sense as the English words 'Alienate and Alienation. Anomie and Anomia are used as Synonyms of Alienation. The use of these words is considered modern. These words are Greek in origin the meaning of 'Anomia' is self – alienation and 'Anomie' is alienation from society. 'Anomia' is an indicator of personal disintegration of man from the society.

Keywords

Racism, Gender, Class Discrepancy and Feminism, Alienation, Disintegration, Nostalgia and Detachment and Attachment

¹ PG& Research Department of English, Government Arts College (Autonomous) Salem-636007-Tamilnadu

1. Introduction

According to the critic G.H. Nettler, "Anomia is personal disorganization, alienation is a psychological state of an individual and alienated in the person who has been estranged from, made unfriendly toward his society and the culture it carries" (23). Generally, Anomie, Anomia or Alienation are interchangeable, In English there are other words other than Alienation. They are Estrangement Isolation and separation. Different interpreters of alienation have given different definitions. According to the statement of the reviewer Arnold Kaufman, "To claim that a person is alienated to claim that his relation to something else has certain features which result in avoidable discontent or loss of satisfaction. The word alienation is used to convey the emotional tone of any individual which accompanies any upnormal behavior in which the man is compelled to act self destructively" (25).

Alienation from oneself is the more basic form of root-

lessness, which forms the subject of many psychological, sociological and philosophical studies. Alienation is a major theme of the human condition in the contemporary epoch. It is only natural that a pervasive phenomenon like alienation should leave such an indelible impact upon the contemporary literature. The theme of alienation and consequential dispossession has been variously dealt with in modern literature. The alienated protagonist is a recurrent figure in much of the twentieth century American and European fiction.

The artist as an alienated soul has been portrayed in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the Negro or Jew as an outsider in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Saul Bellow's *Herzog*; and the sensitive adolescent as an outsider in Salinger's *Catcher the Rye* and Albert Camus's *Meursault* are serious attempts to sketch the confusion, frustration, alienation, disintegration and estrangement of modern man. Alienation in its various forms has been dealt which in the existentialistic literature. Owing to histori-

cal and socio-cultural reasons, the African-English literature also, could and socio-cultural reasons, the African-English literature also, could not remain unaffected by it. Mariya Malcolm points out, "alienation or rootlessness is a very common theme in it" (45). Alienation serves as a basic theme and recurrent motif many African-English novels. The theme of alienation in certain works of the pre-independence era is found. D.F.Karka, for example tried his hand at the theme of rootlessness in his novel. *There Lay the City* (1942). The narrator in it typifies and alienates self. The same theme was taken up by Zeenut Futehally in her *Zohra* (1951). Zohra's lover, who happens to be no other than her husband's younger brother Hamid, is presented as a lonely figure, melancholy, and forever an outsider.

Chinua Achebe's novels are the foremost in emphasizing the loneliness of man. The gap between the generations is suggested in his *The Man of People*. Swans's father in it stands at distance both from his son's idealized world view and his mother's myth. *Things Fall Apart*, the central character simply walks away from his vanishing creation. Achebe's treatment of alienation in is more systematic. Owner of sweet business, Jordan has a son, Mali, Jordan's wife died of a brain tumour when Mali was still a child. Jordan tried to do very thing possible to give him proper education. But Mali arranges to go to America. He returns three years later with an American (half-Korean) wife and a scheme to market a 'novel-writing machine'. Jordan is ostracized by his community. He leaves Africa twice alienated for good. His loneliness and despair become all the more keen because of his memories of his wife's death and Mali's resentful treatment. Jordan's unhappy experiences are typical of Achebe's alienated characters. "All his novels are in varying degrees convey this sense of unhappy frustration" (46).

One may find theme of alienation in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not Child*. The novel is a powerful study of a Eurasian young man who sought to climb up and become a member of the white English community. He lingers, however, between the two worlds African and Western without belonging to the either, and finds himself a stranger to both. Ruby's English lover, Henry Winton, also suffers from loneliness Winton's marriage with an English lady does not improve the situation for long. Winton and Ruby represent two different aspects of alienation. In his case its effect is not so devastating; but in Ruby's it is a question of life and death.

The theme of alienation and dispossession of different classes of African society are Zora Neale Hurston's continuing themes. From the pattern that emerges from her novels we can deduce her message, i.e., as long as one has roots, one survives; and if one's roots are injured or lost, one dies spiritually. Norman's roots, in the *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, are scarred when he is evicted from his land, and he dies, but Ronnie's roots are in her children and therefore she lives. Helen of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mercy of the Mules and Men* also feel alienated and dispossessed.

Bernard Malamud is another African-English novelist who

deals with the theme of alienation and dispossession. Roy the protagonist in *The Fixer* is alienated from his social surroundings. He went to Cambridge and when he was returning to African after two years, he thought "he was coming back to an indifferent sky, an anonymous teeming of houses." There was nothing in the cracked, arid earth to suggest that he belonged to it. Malamud's another novel, *Too Long in the West*, tells the story of a young lady named Naadin, who stayed at Columbia University for three years. Ever since her childhood she had found her father's village, Madrid, oppressive with its loneliness. Her predicament gets worsened by her stay and education in America. Her mother knows it that "She'll never fit in", in African, because 'she's been too long in the west' (24), one of Naadin's suitors also tells her: "You won't fit in. You've joined the lost generation, out of place everywhere and acceptable nowhere. You'll always be an exile and an alien, a self-created foreigner, a refugee from yourself. You can't belong. You'll live in two worlds and fall between two stools" (55).

The themes of alienation and dispossession have been dealt with more persistently and unflinchingly by Flora Nwapa and Paule Marshall also. The alienated person is a stock figure in Flora Napa's novels. She deals with problems caused by a changing order. Her first novel, *Efuru*, projects the predicament of Efuru, the daughter of a rich man, a typical product of a public school, an executive in a mercantile firm. Most of her problems of a West-Educated boy returning to African and encountering in herself the conflict between the two set of values.

Nwapa's another novel called *Idu*, Raichal, the daughter of Renjua, flutter with the 'freedom of sex'. She seeks to divorce her husband, an IFS officer. Having left him, she comes back to her parents, alienated and utterly distraught. Her affair with Niel Berensen does not minimize her isolation in any way. She herself is not aware of her ambivalence. Raichal's problems, despite all her pronouncements, remain as they were. Her entire existence appears to be paradoxical. She craves for modernity and individual freedom, but is considered to be a 'hidebound, conventional, label conscious, caste riddled enigma' (26).

Paule Marshall is yet another brilliant novelist who has dealt theme of alienation in a systematic way. "No other Writer", it is said "is so much concerned with the life of young men and women in African cities as Paule Marshall" (49). In her novel *Brown Girl Brown Stone*, the readers have an exploration of the alienated human psyche in Angelina's self-examination. Hers is the story of a young, sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, whose extreme sensitivity is rendered in terms of immensurable human loneliness.

Paule Marshall's another novel *Daughters* captures the confusions and conflicts of another alienated person even more exhaustively. Replying to a questionnaire, she herself said that "of all my novels it is most rooted in experience" (50). The tension between the locale and the immigrant bird in the

novel involves issues of isolation and possible accommodation that one has to face in an alien world.

Marshall's Daughters character the spiritual odyssey of a world-weary character, a lean and hungry-looking journalist named Maria, in Africa. The novel is a tragic exploration of personal suffering, which is the consequence of the feverish sensitivity of this young intellectual who has lost her way in contemporary African. It explores the inner climate of youthful despair and is permeated by the existential angst. Her character is a strange mixture of pride and agony. As the novel tells us, "The habit of withdrawal had become too strong" in Maria, and she "grew more and wearier of contact" (62). The treatment of alienation and dispossession is a major thematic preoccupation with African-English novelists. Alienation or dispossession occupies a particularly important place in the works of the later novelists. Their protagonists are like Existentialist heroes, nomads alienated from nature and society.

Dispossession literally means loss of ownership. Dispossession when taken in literary and broader sense means loss of identity. Alienation is the result of loss of identity. The dispossessed personality's search for identity is common place theme in modern fiction. Man fails to perceive today the very purpose behind life and the relevance of his existence in a hostile world. Edmund Fuller remarks that in our age, "man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problem . . . a conviction of isolation, randomness, meaninglessness in his way of existence" (54).

In spite of unprecedented scientific and technological advancements, which have added immensely to his physical pleasures and comforts, the contemporary man is doomed to find himself in a tragic mess. The prevailing economic conditions culminating in the wretched poverty of the masses and the economic squeeze of the middle classes. All these have made increasing and often disturbing demands on the individual and contribute in their own ways to his rootlessness and dispossession. The present age has shrunk in spirit languishing in confusion, frustration, disintegration, disillusionment, meaninglessness and dispossession.

When the discuss is on the themes of alienation and dispossession in Toni Morrison's fiction, the readers are mainly concerned first, with man's alienation from society which is the most prevalent kind of alienation, and second, his alienation from his own self. A nonconformist is alienated from society by rebelling against it but a conformist is alienated from his own self by not following the voice of his conscience. It is this division of self which does not let a man live in peace.

Toni Morrison is a prolific writer she has written five novels and a collection of short stories. Her illustrious novel, *Song of Solomon*, appeared and earned name and fame for Morrison. Her second novel, *The Bluest Eye*, is published and acknowledged by the critics. Her third novel, *Jazz*. Her fourth novel, *Sula*, won Toni Morrison the prestigious African Letters Academy Award. After a gap of nearly ten years, Toni Morrison published her another highly resourceful novel,

Beloved, Toni Morrison has also published a collection of short stories in 1966.

Most of Toni Morrison's protagonists are alienated and dispossessed persons. In *Song of Solomon*, Macon is alienated from society and himself. In *The Bluest Eye*, Beola is alienated from ostentations, phony society of today. *Jazz*, dramatises Dorcas's alienation from her soul caused by a strong guilt consciousness. *Sula*, evokes alienation from the self, the victim Protagonist,

Toni Morrison's latest novel *Beloved*, is both a continuation of and departure' from her earlier novels. In the earlier novels of Toni Morrison was mainly preoccupied with the predicaments of her alienated and dispossessed protagonists in an apparently indifferent and hostile world. This predilection of Toni Morrison still persists in *Beloved*, but now her canvas has widened and the crises of an individual has been replaced by the socio-political crisis of the "City" and by implication of the whole humanity.

Her novels also present a variety of characters, almost a cross-section of post Independence African Society - ranging from a college principal to an immigrant African physicist; from a soldier to a young prostitute; from unemployed middle class youth and eve-teasers to a sex obsessed rustic servant; and from an old man searching for his lost youth to a middle-aged travelling salesman attached to his crippled daughter. Much of the strength of Toni Morrison's short stories lies in her deep insight into human reality and character.

The present research paper is undertaken to trace the different facets of alienation and dispossession in the fiction of African writers. The themes of alienation and dispossession are the dominant themes in their fiction. The novels of African novelists veer around the central themes of alienation and dispossession as they affect the individual's life, and shape the human destinies.

Most of the protagonists of African writers find themselves in the remarkable cul-de-sac from which there are no escape routes for them. Afflicted by a sense of traumatic dispossession and the corrosive influence of modernity, the contingencies of culture and social order, the heroes find themselves in a world of blighted hopes. It is, in one sense, a world of thwarted purposes, ruined hopes and more often than not, Heroes carry with them a sense of bleakness that does not allow them to actively participate in the diurnal business of life.

References

- [1] Edward, Moris: "African Novel Writing, New Pelican Guide to English Literature, Boris Ford (Ed), Penguin, Vol. 8.
- [2] Catherin, Therasa. "The Intellectual Between Tradition and Modernity in African scenario, cited in R.S. Pathank, "The African-English Novelists', Quest for Identity, Darnal ed., Exploration in Modern African-English Fiction, New York, Bahri, 1982,

- ^[3] Harold, Malcolm: "Dimensions of Realism in African-English Fiction", *African Journal of English Studies*, XXI 1988. P-155-159.