

## CHAPTER IV

### FEMALE OPPRESSION

It is interesting to recall Hernton's observation on black men. Like other people who have been colonized and oppressed at one time or another, their "experiences" of oppression "have not deterred them from being oppressors themselves" (7-8). Stephen Henderson is of the opinion that during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements the sensitive and intelligent black women were forced... "to reexamine their own positions vis-a-vis the men and to conclude that they were the victims not only of racial injustice but of a sexual arrogance tantamount to dual colonialism - one from without, the other from within the Black community" (XXJII).

Black Women novelists, particularly, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison examine this phenomenon of "double colonialism" in their novels. Mem and other women characters in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* are cruelly victimized by their men. They neither have control on their own lives, nor freedom to choose much compared to white women's innumerable choices in life. Mem is a "slave of a slave." The myth of "bad black woman" and supremacist theory of "white-is-right" undermines Mem, Margaret and Josie's chances of leading a normal or happy life. In spite of the eradication of slavery, "slavocracy" does exist and mars the lives of countless black women. The narratives of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison are testimony to the fact that black women

remain the most neglected persona in white America. The tragedies of black women are very personal, real and bleak. Be it Margaret Copeland or Josie, Meridian or Celie, they all fight the many-headed monster of racism as well against sexism, ignorance and despair.

Black women's oppression is discernible in <sup>Third</sup> *The Life of Grange Copeland* as Margaret and Mem Copeland's oppression is, as Williams notes, an "assault upon black women's reproductive and nurturing functions" (30). Both the novelists portray black women's oppression as "a multidimensional assault." In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison depicts how black women's self-esteem is undermined by the use of alien aesthetic criteria to assess black women's beauty and worth. Further, there is an assault upon black women's independent right to choose and maintain positive, fulfilling and productive relationships. In Alice Walker's novels *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian* and *The Color Purple*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Tar Baby* white males, black males, and white females are the agents of this oppression of black women.

In a patriarchal, classist, white society, black women have hardly any choice to lead a fulfilled life. They, in order to survive, resort to strategies within their reach. Alice Walker's and Toni Morrison's novels put the religious faith in their heroines to fight multidimensional oppression. Their novels are termed "religious narratives" by Delores Williams as these artists metaphorically use religious language, religious practices and religious issues to help the effective resolution

of the plots. Williams believes that black women's novels are a narrative metaphor. They mirror the faith, hopes, values, tragedies, failures and celebrations of an oppressed community. The novels by Morrison and Walker as the female narratives reflect all these characteristics.

Walker describes the experiences of black women's oppression in her three novels. The prolonged violence, both physical and psychological reduce Mem Copeland to a "punching bag" for Brownfield. She as well as her daughters are victimized by her own husband. Along with Brownfield's deterioration in life and failure to acquire any power in white society, Mem's life is turned into a blazing inferno of sexual oppression and overpowering sense of guilt. Even her self-respect has been utterly bruised as she has been compelled to stop telling "proper" by her once affectionate husband Brownfield. Her oppression reaches its zenith as she grows ugly and is compelled to burn her only precious possession-boots. She struggles single handedly through pregnancies and gives birth to her babies in cold, damp rooms. More often than not, Brownfield was too evil and drunk to go for a midwife. Thus, once beautiful Mem Copeland becomes a scapegoat of her husband. Under his 'foul accusations' Mem 'wilted' and "accepted him in total passivity and blankness, like a church" (TTLGC 54). In the concentric circle of oppression black women suffer the most in the narratives of Walker and Morrison.

Walker visualises as she tells Washington: "the experiences of black women as a series of movements from a woman totally

victimized by society and by men to a growing, developing woman whose consciousness allows her to have some control over her life" (212). Mem and Margaret are representative of such oppressed women who carry the burdens heaped upon them by society and by family. Racial and sexual oppression destroy their bodies and spirit. Brownfield oppresses even his young daughters, as he infiltrates the fear of God in them. They succumb to his terror, inch by inch, day-by-day.

The sexual and racial oppression changes Mem's mildness into stupor, her stupor into 'horror', desolation and at last, 'hatred'. Like a mother figure Mem is endowed with a typical sensibility. She, like Pilate, wants to safeguard her children. But she was weak, "totally without view, without a sky" (TTLGC 59). Because of her 'culture of Survival' she fights back with Brownfield. He enjoys her desolation. Nonetheless he is annoyed when Mem despises him. Because it is "out of her hatred she fought him with words, never with blows, and always for the children" (TTLGC 59). This reveals Mem's feminine sensibility. The mother as a life giving, rearing force tries to destroy those elements which defy her efforts to prevail.

As Brownfield is oppressed by the white racist society for his being black, he in turn afflicts Mem for the "perfection of white women." At the social level Mem is oppressed by the whim of the white men. "She was forced to move from one sharecropper's cabin to another, ... without warning or explanation" (TTLGC 58-59). Thus, she had to fight multilayered oppression with regard to white master's domain on which her family's subsistence

depended. In addition her own husband ill-treats her for submissiveness, better knowledge and compassionateness. Above everything else, she hates to leave "a home she'd already made and fixed up with her own hands" (TTLGC 59).

Mem is manhandled for her good efforts to find better housing. Brownfield's pride is hurt because he fails to find a decent house when he tries for one. Although woman as mother is eulogized, her body entraps her in a circle of pain and anguish. Brownfield not only oppresses Mem but also waits eagerly for the "swelling of the womb," so that he can bring her "trapped self" back to towness she has never imagined. The study provides an insight in the psychology of black men. They themselves being oppressed at the hands of white masters become vengeance seeking on their own women. Unfortunately, Brownfield broods and plans to bring 'down' his wife. Then he will place her once more in a shack. Such a gesture on the part of Brownfield reveals the all pervasive nature of oppression of black women. For Mem her relationship with her family is of great concern. Whereas Brownfield is on the sly. Like Cholly Breedlove he fails to see "beyond his emotion." In the longer run and wider perspective the oppressor is trapped in his own snare.

Mem's utter physical helplessness adds to the grimness of her oppression at the hands of her husband. Even then what matters most in the drama of human survival is Mem's will to survive and revive. In the rough weather, at J.L.'s barn house she determines to get well. get work again and leave Brownfield.

Thus, her spirit to survive 'against odds--physical and psychological in sexist, racist and classist society predominates.

Black women are oppressed, be~~th~~<sup>in</sup> in the Deep South or in big cities. Even the deacons in the novel, preach in the church, to "love the neighbour" do beat their wives to death when they cannot feed them. Thus, women all around are <sup>an</sup> easy prey to male oppression. In many instances the men murder their wives and children under the pressure of an "unseen force." It obviously reveals the double oppression of Black women in white society. The poignancy of Margaret's double oppression is deeply felt:

Misery had wakened her, and he (Grange) ~~had~~ not ~~needed~~ to tell her she had married not into ecstasy, but into dread. Not into freedom, but into bondage; not into perpetual love, but into, deepening despair. And he did not have to tell her who was behind their misery-she knew and then he did not-for someone, something did stand, behind his cruelty to her (he made himself believe), pushing him on to desert her, and driving her down to the purgation of suicide for herself and murder for her bastard child (TTLGC 176).

Black women's lived experiences, as narrated in *The Bluest Eye* reveal their multilayered oppression. Pauline Breedlove and her daughter Pecola's narratives provide an intling of the

assaults on their psychological and physical well-being. Pauline Breedlove is oppressed as her self-esteem is greatly undermined in racist society. Worst of all, Anglo-American standards of feminine beauty prevail among the black as well as white community. The norms regarding female beauty operate in the most harrowing fashion as blacks are far too removed from their own homeland, culture and their standards of beauty. As William Greer observes: "The Negro woman's black face, African features, and kinky hair are physical attributes which place her far from the American ideal of beauty, and make her, with reference to the American ideal ugly" (52).

Pauline Breedlove, as she watches cinema, is introduced to another idea of physical beauty along with the idea of romantic love. The germination of such an idea of outward beauty in the mind of Pauline Breedlove sows the seeds of oppression, which as Morrison calls, are "the most destructive-ideas" in the history of human thought. The outcome of such hideous ideas (that of physical beauty and romantic love) is disillusionment. Pauline suffers immensely as she equates physical beauty with virtue, besides "she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self contempt by the heap" (TBE 97). The world of the silver screen is mistaken for real one and Pauline is oppressed as she tries to impose all those ideas and ideals of external features of beautiful white woman in her day-to-day life. She fails to appreciate her self-worth. The dominant culture's aesthetic falls heavily upon black women like Pauline who are vulnerable in alien northern ghetto.

The worst damage is done to black women as they internalize the white standards of physical beauty. Economically and socially Breedlove family is an easy prey to multiple oppression as Cholly Breedlove is put 'outdoors'. The worst hit target of this oppression is their young daughter Pecola. "Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique." (TBE 34). The oppression of the Breedlove family in the classist, racist society is all the more poignant as even the black community does not care for Pecola. The tragedy of young Pecola is grim. "No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly" (TBE 34). Thus as an outcome we perceive the byzantine cruelty of blacks towards a black family and psychological oppression of Pauline and Pecola. Pecola amidst the quarrels of her parents conceals herself underneath the mantle of her ugliness. ... "veiled, eclipsed - ... of her mas!" (TBE 35). As Grier notes:

When the feeling of ugliness is reinforced by the rejection of family and society, the growing girl develops a feeling not only of being undesirable and unwanted but also of being mutilated- of having been fashioned by Nature in an ill-favored manner (52).

Pauline is assaulted and oppressed by the white and western standards of physical beauty. She in turn disseminates the seed of self-hatred in her own daughter. Thus, the physical and psychological oppression of black women begins at the cradle and



continues onwards. Pauline thinks of her newly born daughter, Pecola as "A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly" (TBE 100). Thus, Pecola inherits a sense of lesser being from her mother. This psychological and physical oppression numbs her as:

... the first measure of a child's worth is made by her mother, and if: ... (the) mother feels that she herself is a creature of little worth, this daughter (Pecola) ... represents her scorned self (Grier 40).

Pecola is never grounded in facing the hard reality of black existence. Pauline hardly considers Pecola worthy of any affection as she considers Fisher girl. Hence in time of distress Pecola often wishes, "Please, God, please make me disappear." The root of her distress is that she is oppressed by the idea of her ugliness. It haunts her as she experiences a total negation by the black society. "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (TBE 39). Thus, the trauma of Pecola's double oppression benumbs the reader. Pecola's oppression at the societal as well as the family level proves the thesis that oppressed women resort to God, or the idea of God, Church, religion, go insane or get annihilated emotionally and at times physically.

The oppression of black women is well portrayed by Walter as well as Morrison. But in Morrison's narratives it is more

often psychic violence. The brutality experienced by her female characters is not a single act but the systematic denial of the most longed for emotion of love. Pauline Breedlove is oppressed by all and one including her husband Cholly. Though she is addressed continuously as Mrs. Breedlove, she does not either receive from or extend love to her children or husband. Much like men of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* she is beaten by her husband. Instead of expressing their vehemence on those who perpetrate their oppression, black men use their wives who will allow them to vent out their anger on them and make them feel 'men'. Thus, black women's oppression takes double edge in the novels of Waller and Morrison.

Pecola's oppression at the hands of her parents is most ironical and tragic. As both her parents are oppressed by racist, sexist and classist norms, they fail to nurture Pecola. Her oppression reaches its apex when Pauline, out of a "deep well of self-hatred and psychic pain" Wade (77) gives Pecola the fullest measure of her misery. She beats her and leaches her "fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly's mother ... fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life" (TBE 102). Thus, Pecola is the epitome of the oppressed heroines who is reduced from a person to an object at the hands of a female, her own mother, then another female; Maureen Peel her class-mate and the sophisticated Geraldine.

Pecola once again is humiliated, oppressed by Cholly, her father who loves her, but rapes her. Morrison's depth of

perception haunts us as Davis tells "The displacement of male humiliation on to the only person left that a black man can 'own' is the black woman" (350). One would recall Beauvoir's remarks that women in a patriarchal society is "the inessential who never goes back to being the essential. ... the absolute other, without reciprocity." (159). The black woman as the 'other' is the perfect scapegoat. In the black community of Lorain, Ohio, Pecola's oppression becomes triad because not only the white and black male, but even the black women of the community never sympathize with Pecola's fate of tragedy, when she goes mad.

Alice Walker's second novel, *Meridian* depicts black women as victims of racial as well as sexual oppression. Mrs. Hill, though a privileged woman in her training, speech, manner, and possession of 'things' and leisure is oppressed by the institution of motherhood.

As the novel unfolds, we discern the female oppression of woman on the basis of her sex. The freak show of the dead body of Marilene O'Shay suggests the victimization of female even after her death. Marilene's lifeless body is "preserved in Life-Like Condition". It is carried around in a trailer by her husband and put on display for the paying public. The absurdity and hypocrisy of patriarchal society is satirized as the oppression of women is laid bare.

The episodes of "The Wild Child," the legend of "Louvainie" and the story of magnolia tree named as Sojourner reveal feminine sensibility of the novelist as she discerns all pervading female

oppression in society. Byerman notes: "In every case, the female character or image is mutilated and destroyed for expressing the truth of her own being. Failure to become simply an object leads inevitably to destruction" (148).

Meridian's mother experiences oppression as she tells that motherhood is like "being buried alive, walled away from one's own life, brick by brick" (M 41). Mrs. Hill had "no interest in children" and as Gloria Wade observes, "having seen the darkness that the halo of motherhood conceals" she has no desire for the cultural accolades the role generates (66). Walter expresses in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* that countless black women were suppressed under the codes of racial and sexist oppression. Even Mrs. Hill's oppression amounts to a "Spiritual Wasting". Her creativity needs an outlet, but in a patriarchal, sexist-institutionalized existence, it remains "unused and unwanted". She tries to use her talents by making paper flowers and prayer pillows from tiny scrap of cloth. Similarly Lena called Magdalene and First Corinthians in *Song of Solomon* make velvet rose petals and flowers. They remain in their father Macon II's house, under patriarchal yoke and their sap dries completely. Likewise under the oppressive system of marriage and motherhood Mrs. Hill's oppression is complete.

Ever since her pregnancy Mrs. Hill feels "an uncomfortable prelude to a life of emptiness." Then onwards she experiences "her personal life" as "over" (M 39). Her personality is completely in jeopardy as the oppression under the halo of

motherhood is bleak. She is not allowed even to resent her existence. So her rage assumes unique form, in maternal chores. Her oppression is so rarefied that:

In the ironing of her children's clothes she expended all the energy she should have put into openly loving them. Her children were spotless wherever they went. In their stiff, almost inflexible garments, they were enclosed in the starch of her anger, and had to keep their distance to avoid providing the soggy wrinkles of contact that would cause distress (M 73).

Instead of ~~living~~ living a full life Mrs. Hill is reduced to a world of male believe. For Mrs. Hill, motherhood meant "becoming distracted from herself" (M 40).

Mrs. Hill passes on to her daughter, Meridian a sense of guilt for having "shattered her emerging self" (M 41). Desai and Waller portray the psychological oppression of their heroines. Women in Indian as well as black American societies are valued only in relation to the men in their lives. With the birth of their children, their predicament becomes all the more precarious as that stage demands a giving up of their personal life, start without their independence. In the chapter "The Happy Mother" Waller describes young Meridian's experience of motherhood as "Slavery".

In patriarchal society which prefers male values, Meridian

is "afraid of men". Sex for her is "not pleasure, but a sanctuary" (M 55). She is sexually exploited since she was twelve by Dexter, the "half white" owner of the funeral home. She is maltreated and oppressed by her young husband Eddie in a subtle way. Eddie breaks their marriage, expecting Meridian to haul the burden of motherhood. His cool manner and the lack of affection towards his son were calculative. This too reveals the oppressive nature of patriarchal, sexist society. Meridian remains merely a scapegoat for the burdens which men refuse to share with women.

In spite of "a sense of guilt" Meridian goes beyond the traditional scope of the black mother and participates in the Civil Rights Movement. Though thwarted in her quest by her own mother and constricting ideal of motherhood she goes beyond the restrictive norms of motherhood, as a physical state. She broadens the meaning of motherhood "to those who create, nurture and save life" as Christian remarks, "in social and psychological as well as physical terms" (242).

In *The Third Life* also Walker focuses on mothers and reveals the oppression inflicted on them. Margaret and Jim are annihilated outrageously, as the black and the white societies oppress these women by ideology and imposition of incredible burden of motherhood.

Physical, sexual and psychological oppression of women is once again touched upon by Walker in her classic novel *The Color Purple*. Celie, the female protagonist is constantly reminded that she is skinny, black and ugly. Thus, she is oppressed by lowering

her self worth. She is considered of no value except as a 'workhorse' to clean her husband's house, work in his fields and care for her stepchildren. Even her (Celie's) own stepfather rapes her before Celie's marriage. The father selects a husband for her so that he can molest her younger sister, Nettie. Celie succeeds in saving her sister from molestation, though she herself is victimized repeatedly. She fails to avoid her own marriage to Albert, who beats her constantly.

Celie is denied any right to choose and maintain positive, fulfilling, and productive relationships. Psychologically, Celie is oppressed in Albert's house, in spite of her good housekeeping and nurturing of her step children. She is denied her right to keep any relationship with her younger sister Nettie. Even Nettie's letters addressed to Celie get purloined by Albert. Celie passes her days in an emotional vacuum. All the while Celie is oppressed by black men.

Celie's oppression can be seen in its reversal. During slavery slave mothers were forced to forsake their children by white masters. In the context of Celie's emotional oppression, Celie has been forced to abandon her children by her own stepfather, a black man. As Barbara Christian notes: "In all of Walker's novels violence is inflicted upon black mothers and children precisely because they are powerless in black and white society, have little control over their lives, and are clearly not valued (246). Hence oppression of women at all levels, as discussed earlier, is a major theme in the writings of black women novelists. What emerges from Walker's narratives is that.

she insists. Like her counterparts, that women be valued for themselves and not reduced to a function, a thing. The plea, as we discern in the women novelists, is that freedom, a sense of living with exhilaration cannot exist unless women, whether girls or women, mothers, wives or daughters, are free to pursue this freedom, without being oppressed physically, psychologically or emotionally.

Feminine sensibility of the protagonist Celie takes the better of herself in *The Color Purple*. Though not appreciated by her husband, Albert she forms a love relationship with Shug Avery. Thus, Celie's female bonding serves as a bulwark against her multiple oppression in Albert's house. This relationship of Celie enhances her positive attitude towards herself. Once again like Waller's thesis of repressed creativity of black women which needs an outlet, Celie's creativity blossoms when Shug helps her to discover and concretize her creative potential. Celie excels in making folksy pants with floral designs, which prove practical for men and women. She designs the pattern of the pants and establishes her own business. Eventually, Celie gains economic independence, which helps her tremendously to overcome her psychic oppression. Then onwards, even when her husband calls her dumb, her self-confidence does not shake.

Celie's character is most optimistic and liberating among the black heroines. She achieves a sense of self accomplishment and oneness with nature and universe. This metamorphosis is attained by her heuristic outlook and change of consciousness



within and without in regard to the meaning of fundamental values handed down to black women.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie, while conversing with Shug, reassesses her religious values. This reexamination revolves around notions of God, men and Church. Celie's re-viewing reveals that her image of "God as man" had limited her perception of the connectedness of all reality. She was so busy thinking about God, she had never truly noticed anything God has made. "Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?) Not the little wildflowers ..." (TCP 179). Even Celie's earlier idea of God reflects patriarchal regulation and perpetuation of male myth and white supremacy. Thus, in the sphere of personal belief and faith, Celie was oppressed by white God who looked, "big and old and tall and graybearded and white" (TCP 177). To such an image Shug responds vehemently that it is created by white folks. Thus, Celie represents the black women who tried to reassess their religious belief. Celie is illuminated by Shug who affirms that "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself ..." (TCP 177). Similarly, Shug enlightens Celie that God is not confined within the man made gender bias: she proclaims that "God ain't he or a she, but a It" (TCP 177). Shug reinstitutes faith and firm belief of Celie and liberates her from racist white male God concept. It is an all pervading sense of exhilaration which takes her closer to God. It does not "look like nothing. ... It ain't something you can look at apart from

anything ... Everything that is or even was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it. ... My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people" (TCP 178).

Thus, spiritual faith of black women is reinstituted by Shug in all-pervading reality. Men assault inner thoughts of women and limit their horizon. To counter this Shug advises Celie to get man off her eyeball.

With this peculiar sensibility Shug helps Celie to overcome oppression of white and black male dominated society. Black women suffered untold miseries and woes for centuries. With the new knowledge Celie feels liberated. Even her belief of church undergoes a radical transformation. With Shug she is convinced that church is not a place to find God. Rather, church is a place where people come to 'share. God because: "Any God I (Shug) ever felt in Church I brought in with me ... the other folks did too" (TCP 176).

Walker, in *The Color Purple* elevates her women characters to the height of 'sovereignty'. Celie is initially, oppressed. Like Walker's other women protagonists. But gradually she overcomes her oppression by love of self which invigorates her to break the chains of enslavement. The women in *The Color Purple* as Parler-Smith notes "change their own worlds, time and black men ..." (479).

This change of consciousness is an important reality for Celie as her new understanding of men's limitations gives her

from male oppression, physical as well as psychological. After several years of suffering Albert's beatings, Celie finally takes over her life and destiny. Her departure with Shug removes forever her husband's power to interfere with her relationships.

Although Walker explores female oppression at the hands of white and black men she does not overlook oppression of women by women. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* Margaret and Mom Copeland suffer immensely as Grange and Brownfield turn to Josie. Josie proves to be the one who oppresses these women. Even Meridian does not get any respite, as women including her mother criticise her for deserting her son and attending Saxon college.

Among Morrison's heroines Pecola is oppressed by her own mother Pauline, who dotes on Fisher girl, while she despises Pecola, reducing her to an object to vent out her pent up anger. The hideous economic, socio-political oppression of black women is reflected most poignantly in the treatment of the daughter at the hands of her own mother in *The Bluest Eye*. The scathing irony of such oppression of black women is seen when instead of comforting Pecola who gets frightened, embarrassed and burnt, Pauline comforts white Fisher girl, in the presence of her friends Frieda and Claudia. In *Sula* Nel Wright is oppressed by Helene, her own mother, never allowing any freedom of choice to her young daughter. The women of the Bottom community criticise Sula's adventurous spirit and consider her despicable as a black woman. Thus, we perceive the distrust, the subtle hatred, the jealousy of black women which come alive in the novels of Walker

and Morrison. These writers also depict the multiple pain suffered by black women at the hands of black men. The most redeeming characteristic of feminine sensibility is female camaraderie or female bonding. In *The Color Purple* Celie never forgoes her friendship with Sofia, Mary Agnes and Nettie, even when she develops a new and meaningful relationship with Shug - who gives her, as Williams asserts "the freedom to discover and nurture her talents" (68). The women in the novel share each other's pain, sorrow, laughter, and dreams. They applaud each other's achievements and come to each other's rescue. They are sisters in body as well as in spirit and the spirit cannot be broken.

For their regeneration, black women fight the many dimensions of their oppression. They are informed by women's experiences of transcendence, of faith, of ritual and of God. When Celie's husband exploits her nurturing capacities and beats her she assumes a defiant attitude that involves transcendence. Celie says, "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man" (TCP 30). To sustain herself Celie, like Pilate of *Song of Solomon*, prays while the later sings. Besides Celie writes letters to God, which reflects the constrictions and pressures under which she lives her day-to-day life. Shug and Celie also share their understanding of their experiences of God. This sharing reflects their bonding. Feminine sensibility, liberates Celie's mind from the domination of 'man-consciousness'. She gains a more profound understanding of God's

relation to her and to the world.

The survival and regenerative strategies used by heroines in the novels of Waller and Morrison are supported by women's religious practices. These narratives reveal that these religious expressions are not all Christian. Still these religious practices sustain black women's efforts to oppose the many facets of oppression. The *Color Purple* enhances our insight into the nature of black women's oppression, while it also suggests means of restructuring morality, spirituality, and aesthetics to overcome their oppression.

Female oppression is typically masculine in *Song of Solomon*. It is reflected in Macon's treatment of his family members as he "kept each member of his family awlward with fear" (SOS 10). Especially Ruth, Macon Dead II's wife becomes a target of her husband's hatred and it "glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her" (SOS 10). Whereas his hatred assumes different modulation with his two daughters in whom he feels a sort of disappointment and it "sifted down on them like ash." The male oppression proves cataclysmic on Lena and Corinthians. Their buttery complexions are dulled and the lilt of their girlish voices is choked out. The assault on the self-esteem of female members of Macon's family by the head of family-Macon Dead-is so acute that he crushes their grace and wit completely.

Morrison's novels depict consistently that the male has the power, social status, economical security and a male voice. So men pronounces judgements on the female and perpetuates female

oppression. In Song of Solomon Ruth's progress, exhilaration, joy and emotional life as well as self-worth are severely stunted.

In the bourgeois world of Macon Dead, Ruth is made to 'feel small' by Macon and is reduced to a laughing stock in the family. Psychologically, Ruth is oppressed, so much so that she hardly has an access to joy. Macon always looks for an opportunity to bludgeon Ruth psychologically whenever she tries to show any individuality or initiative.

Ruth's oppression is total, as she is neither respected, nor loved by Macon, Len and Corinthians. She is oppressed emotionally as well as psychologically. In Macon's cold world, Ruth naturally turns to tend 'gold fish', 'rhododendron' and such ephemeral life. The sexist male mores restricts her life and she is not allowed any freedom to live a full life. Hence she sees meaning in death. Her attitude is such that she is 'jealous of death'. The psychic oppression nudges her to tend dahlias, geraniums and imperial tulips, because these "little lives did die" (SOS 64). Due to such severe oppression, she is living death in life. Morrison touches the deepest core of female existence and discerns the roots of female oppression. As an outcome of such horrid oppression Ruth "was fierce in the presence of death, heroic even, as she was at no other time" (SOS 64). Macon has taken to the western notion of love, hence his life is permeated with "possession, distortion, and corruption." Ruth is not only oppressed but also stifled in her own house. Here is as Morrison tells Tate "a slaughter without the blood" (123).

Another aspect of female oppression which emerges in Song of Solomon is the jealousy of Macon for Ruth's affection for her father Dr. Foster. Emotionally, a fulfilling marital relationship between Ruth and Macon does not exist. Hence Ruth cherishes her father as he is the fountain-head of emotional strength and care for Ruth. He is the only person in Ruth's dismal life who 'cares' whether and 'how' she lives. Ruth's oppression at the hands of her husband is double edged as he suspects Ruth of incestuous relation with her father and son. But his extramarital relations are exempted from any censorship whatsoever. Thus, the male dominated institution of marriage oppresses women. Like Walter, Morrison too exposes the hypocrisy of institutionalized systems of marriage and motherhood which abuse and exploit women by and large.

Sexual oppression of black women at the hands of black men is overtly portrayed in Ruth's terrible encounters with Macon. Ever since her quarrel with her husband, Ruth's life is horribly lonely and colourless. The torture of such a life is so acute that she thinks she would die. Since the age of twenty, Ruth leads a life untouched by a man. Thus, she is denied the joy experienced by a woman as she is rejected sexually by Macon. Ruth is oppressed when Macon resorts to barbaric means to get rid of her only 'triumph' in Millman. Ruth's oppression is acute and intense:

...the baby became nauseated by the half ounce of castor oil Macon made her drink, then a hot pot recently emptied of scalding

water on which she sat. then a soapy enema, a  
bitting needle (she inserted only the tip,  
squatting in the bathroom, crying, afraid of  
the man who paced outside the door), and  
finally, when he punched her stomach .... she  
ran to South side looking for Pilate (SOS  
131).

Thus, Ruth is one of the most oppressed wives and mothers  
among the black fictional heroines. The sexist nature of  
oppression makes Ruth fragile, small. She is oppressed to such a  
degree that like "the Indian, she ... resigned to her fate and  
holding fast to tiny irrelevant defiances" (SOS 153). Her  
exploitation makes her demure.

The outcome of Ruth's multilayered oppression results in her  
inability to mother her daughters into normal girls who will take  
male/female relationship in its proper stride. The pathos seems  
all the more grim as Ruth fails her daughters as despondency  
reigns her existence because of male oppression. Her oppression  
results in an unfavourable outcome in the managing of her home.  
Her cooking is always terrible, her Christmas trees are ugly,  
unifestive. Above all, no one feels contented or comforted in  
the house. She is not the presiding person or the lively lady in  
Macon's house, and the human warmth and joy freeze under the  
patriarchal yoke of Macon. Magdeline called Lena and first  
Corinthians feel imprisoned: her son Miltman and her husband  
Macon feel surrounded by sterility. Thus, female oppression has  
far reaching, destructive consequences in Song of Solomon.



like her mother. First Corinthians' oppression is also due to social, historical and patriarchal forces beyond her control. She leads an empty existence for forty-two years in Macon Dead's house. It is only when she obtains a job of a maid that she feels relieved from the crushing, oppressive and stifling world of male dominated household. At that juncture, she breathes freely, as she has a responsibility which she never had at home before. At the place of work she becomes as Harris notes "THE MAID not somebody's mother or sister or wife" (12).

Even though Corinthians has received a degree after spending three years at a college, it hardly opens any new direction for her. She is totally unfit for any useful work of the world. Thus, even the so called higher education pattern based on the patriarchal value oriented world does not pave a new path of self reliance or self confidence for the black woman, Corinthians.

Another aspect of Corinthians' oppression is revealed as she lives in a world which is regulated by men, "they wanted wives who would sacrifice themselves and appreciate the hard work and sacrifice of their husband" (SOS 189), and Corinthians is a little too elegant to fall in that category. She is oppressed by false morals and filial feelings to such a degree that her very personality is crushed.

It is Henry Porter who makes her realize that she is not a grown-up woman, even at forty-four, unafraid of her daddy. He wants a grown-up woman, not a 'doll baby'. Instantaneously she

that he didn't even have to earn or deserve.

seemed to him natural (SOS 77).

This situation highlights the emotional oppression underwent by countless women of the world. As mothers, they are worshipped but never allowed to feel or experience the emotion of love, in a world ridden with the patriarchal measuring rod. Yet, women's weakest and strongest aspect is their love for their children. "Women are foolish" as Pilate says, but of all "mothers are the most foolish of all" (SOS 94). Especially, when someone 'don't like' their children, they get 'hurt and nervous'. Pilate transforms her world the way it suits her, whereas Ruth is victimized in the world of Macon Dead, an impregnable patriarch. Even Hagar expresses a similar sentiment that Pilate is an exception otherwise, "Every Woman's not as strong as she is" (SOS 95).

Ruth is relieved of her suppression by Pilate's arrival in the town. Thus, to the oppressed woman, Pilate is the harbinger of hope for a better life. She not only gives a new lease of life to Ruth but also saves the future of the Dead family by saving Millman.

Ruth does acknowledge that she could not have braved the crisis but for Pilate. "She saved my life. And yours, Macon she saved yours too. She watched you like you were her own." (SOS 125). It is a world where women are maltreated at the hands of husbands but get new lease of life and hope through women. Thus, women bonding is vital for the female sustenance.

Circe is another memorable black woman in Song of Solomon.. She seems primordial, weird, but above all prey to oppression in the racist culture. On the first encounter with her, Milkman remembers his childhood dreams of witches but with a difference. For her whole life, which seems an eternity to Milkman, she has been waiting for a white family. She is wasted away physically.

Her wasted away frame does bear the stamp of oppressive nature of her world. The only redeeming feature is her "strong, mellifluous voice of a twenty years old girl" from her toothless mouth (SOS 243). She is the one who survives in spite of the killing nature of her world. It is ironical that Miss Butler, the white mistress cannot bring herself to think that Circe too is a human being. Actually the way Circe lived and worked was so hateful to her mistress that she committed a suicide to keep away from doing the work. She had no help, no money, and she couldn't imagine life without all that paraphernalia with which <sup>they</sup> were so accustomed. They wallowed in wealth. They were dipped in luxury. But the beautiful chandelier made in Italy for the Butlers augurs their downfall and for Circe it proves a real nuisance. The hateful exercise every two months to climb on a ladder and clean it with white muslin proves too much for Circe.

The masters loved it, but Circe finds it hateful, for it they 'stole', 'lied', and 'killed'. All the members of the Butler family die, only Circe survives along with the dogs in the end. It is a comment on the oppressive nature of the societal system

which would go to any extent to satisfy the whims of the wealthy masters at the cost of poor, innocent, black women. But, it seems, there does exist the law of retribution in the Morrisonian world of *Song of Solomon*.

The oppression of black women seems to be catastrophic for the sexist, racist society. As Morrison perceives: "There's a special kind of domestic perception that has its own violence in writings by black women not bloody violence, but violence nonetheless" (Tate 123).

The plight of Millman's great grandmother Ryna is less celebrated than his great grandfather Solomon's flight to his native land, Africa. Solomon flew off leaving his wife Ryna with eighteen children. So the original folkloric example of flight as a successful survival response to oppression illustrates the psychological destruction of a woman who deeply loved a man.

In the vistas of Indian women's novels, Anita Desai is in the forefront in depicting the oppression of Indian women in joint family, as revealed in the case of Monisha in *Voices in the City*. Even if women in her novels live independently, they undergo torturous experiences. The case in point is Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*. Desai probes into the depth of female consciousness and records the emotional as well as the psychological oppression suffered by countless Indian women like black American women.

The powerlessness of Mira ~~Masi~~ in *Clear Light of Day*

alongwith her multifarious oppression brings out the hidden realities of female existence in traditional Hindu homes. The pathos is too deep to be lamented. Be it Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain* or Maya in *Cry the Peacock*, young or old, rich or hand to mouth, all these female characters throb with life. They all intensely want to live their lives as they perceive their lives, as the most wonderful. Yet their only desire to live fully is not fulfilled. They all smoulder under oppression of varying natures. Desai's heroines exist, but are helpless, because of so called traditional, male oriented set up in the society. They become preys of politics par excellence within their own household, at times the check mate is either their own mothers-in-law, or sisters-in-law. Besides, the male chauvinist attitude of their husbands does not allow any consideration to their wives.

The oppression of Monisha has several facets. One of them is oppression by her female relations at her in-laws' house. She leads a servile existence within the rigid confines of a traditional Hindu family which chokes her emotionally. The assault on her self-esteem is felt palpably as the women at Monisha's in-laws' house discuss her organs and the reasons why she could not have a child. She has been so brutally oppressed by the bunch of women at her in-laws' that she does not dare to utter a word of resistance to such a callous discussion about her personal concerns. The shock comes to her life "a burst of wild feathers, released full" (VITC 113) in her space. She feels aghast at the mention of her insides: her ovaries, her tubes, all her "recesses moist with blood, washed in blood, laid open- laid bare to their scrutiny" (VITC 113).

Monisha, a sensitive, educated, highly intelligent woman feels suffocated as she is not permitted to be herself. She is allowed no privacy, away from the aunts and uncles, the cousins and nieces and nephews. As discussed in the third chapter in this thesis, she does not experience a sense of self-worth, recognition or freedom for self-determination. Thus, she is psychologically oppressed. To Monisha's refined sensibility, the day-to-day mundane existence oppresses her beyond words. The trifling activities of routine hardly enhances her joy of living a fruitful life. In such a family as Jiban's, Monisha feels: "a life cannot be lived—a life dedicated to nothing ... (VITC 122). The humdrum life lived by countless Bengali women receives a severe criticism in Monisha's thoughts. The many faceted oppression of these women comes alive as Monisha broods over the:

generations of Bengali women hidden behind  
the barred windows of half-dark rooms,  
spending centuries in washing clothes,  
kneading dough and murmuring aloud verse,  
from the Bhagavad-Gita and the Ramayana, in  
the dim light of sooty lamps (VITC 120).

The oppression of these women sends a chill through the spine as these women spent their lives:

"In Waiting for nothing, waiting on men self  
centred and indifferent and hungry and  
demanding and critical, waiting for death and  
dying misunderstood, always behind bars,  
those terrifying black bars that shut us (women)

in the old houses, in the old City" (VITC 120).

Thus, the oppression of Hindu women in traditional, patriarchal society as depicted in *Voices in the City* is all pervasive.

Monisha's diary records her thoughts as well as feelings and oppression. Worst of all she has been accused of theft. The psychological oppression experienced by Monisha finds vent thus:

These pettiest of people, they regard me as meaner than they. They think me a thief. To be regarded so low by men and women themselves so low, it is to be laid on a level lower than the common earth ... (VITC 136).

We feel the torture and assault on Monisha's self-esteem, she is trapped in the joint family where her voice is completely stifled. The mother-in-law has no compunction and shouts from the other end of the balcony, indirectly indicating that it is Monisha who has stolen Jiban's money. The elder woman, instead of showing compassion, accuses Monisha. Thus, Monisha's self-esteem is continuously assaulted under one or the other pretext. Her brother and sister, Nirode and Amla are never given any peaceful moments with Monisha in the big house by her in-laws. She is at the mercy of her in-laws in all matters. Monisha's in-laws allow her to receive a letter from her sister Amla with a condescending attitude. It seems the young women are censored at their in-laws' where neither freedom of relationships, nor some free time for their own fulfilment is allowed. Thus, in Desai's novels, like those of Morrison and Walker one perceives oppression of women

which is not violent, nonetheless violates human senses.

Monisha's oppression takes such a rueful turn when she compares herself with her younger sister Amia:

I grow smaller everyday, shrink and lose more and more of my weight, my appurtenances, the symbols of my existence that used to establish me in the eyes of this world. I am already too small to be regarded much by anyone. I will be invisible yet (VITC 139).

This statement of Monisha reveals her injured self-esteem. The tragedy seems too grim as she notes that, "I do not like a woman who keeps a diary" (VITC 140). This also provides an insight into her overt as well as covert oppression which culminates in her suicide. And in India due to multilayered oppression, countless women commit suicide, in spite of the apparent progress and comparatively more freedom given to women. Monisha is a victim of the oppressive system as well as at the interpersonal level with other women like her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. Hers is a lonely existence, cut off from the familiar ethos, disinterested husband and denied of any outlet for her literary pursuits or creativity.

Nanda Kaul's character in *Fire on the Mountain* once again reveals female oppression at more than one levels. She has undergone psychological oppression as her infidel husband carried on an affair with Miss David, the mathematics teacher. The patriarchal societal set up does not consider any lapses on the



part of men serious enough to be reprimanded. Nanda Kaul catered to the needs of guests, friends, children and husband religiously throughout her life. She has been battered by the traditional system where the wife is overburdened by multifarious duties and obligations. Nanda Kaul had no respite from her long life of duty and sacrifice. She longs for some peace of mind, but she never gets it in "that busy house where doors were never shut, and feet flew, or tramped, without ceasing" (FOTM 23).

As a wife of the Vice-Chancellor she had to entertain teachers and their families. She had no freedom to choose relationships. In the busy and crowded world of her family she was stifled. Likewise she was oppressed in the small world of her household as the "many rooms of the house had always been full.... there was a shortage of privacy that vexed her" (FOTM 29). She has suffered acutely "from the nimety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess" (FOTM 30). Nanda Kaul fights the battle of life single handed. For her the care of others was a habit. She is oppressed to the ultimate limit. When she realizes that, such a habit does pinch her, she finds it fate. "It had been a vocation that one day went dull and drought-struck as though its life-spring had dried up" (FOTM 30). This accurately gives us an idea of subtle oppression of Indian women in their own household. She has undergone trauma of rearing a huge family of many sons and daughters. Due to such a past, she wishes for none of the children to come or stay at Carignano. Peace is her only pursuit there. "So, " the thought of them sickened as a box of sweets might sicken" (FOTM 31).

Apart from psychological oppression, Nanda Kaul suffers humiliation as a female because of her husband's life long affair with Miss David. The woman has to fight oppression at more than one levels. She neither receives emotional sustenance from such a husband nor is lauded for performing her varied duties as a wife, a mother and a housekeeper, all in one. She is not respected by her husband. Her husband had not "loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen." He does only enough to keep her quiet as he indulges in extra marital relationship. Though her husband insists on her being always clad in silks and jewels, it cannot replace the satisfaction of a life worth lived with harmony and companionship, full of affection. It was all fate, in order to escape from frustration, Nanda Kaul creates fantasies for Raka so that she can sleep. Those lies were tranquilizer pills for this protagonist.

Juxtaposing Nanda Kaul's oppression alongwith her grand daughter Tara's, one discerns the malaise of male psyche. In precise details we read a lot as Desai portrays Raka's 'tortured childhood' along with her mother's pathetic and battered existence.

Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse-harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her

bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream, of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. Under her feet, in the dark, Rala felt that flat, wet jelly of her mother's being squelching and quivering, so that she didn't know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it. Ahead of her, no longer on the ground but at some distance now, her mother was crying (FOTM 71-72).

The oppression of women in its trail brings children mutilated in spirit and mind like Rala and Pecola.

Among all the oppressed women the most tragic and touching is Ila Das. Her predicament suggests the helplessness of a poor and altogether powerless woman. She is the "third side of the high-strung triangle" of three crazy women, as known by the people, who encounter them in that remote mountain valley. Her ludicrous physiognomy and jittery voice becomes the target of high jinks of school boys as she prods along the road to meet her friend Nanda Kaul. With humane sympathy Desai has created a lively character of a small, brittle Ila Das who is used to the jeering mob all her life, as she has undergone the taunts and derision from one and all.

Ila Das's oppression gets under way with the death of her father. The three brothers of Ila Das were as dissolute sons as in a story. They squandered all their father's wealth. The two clever, thrifty and hard-working sisters Rima and Ila do not receive a penny of it. These two devoted daughters take the responsibility of their old mother, rotting in bed with a broken hip that would not mend. The oppression of the two sisters and their mother was so severe that the sons not only ruined the family but also "pestered their mother and two sisters ... for the last of the jewellery" (FOTM 124). Thus, the women of Das family are left without their own roof over their heads. The bleakness of the situation also throws light on the grim oppression of the female in Hindu society.

Ila Das's dismissal from her lecturer's job also shows the victimization of female in patriarchal, corrupt society. The circumstances trap Ila Das so grimly that even at the retirement age she has to go from pillar to post, to earn the bare minimum to keep her body and soul together. Her struggle for survival continues and she triumphs as she completes a course in social service. With the rubber-stamped document Ila Das becomes a qualified social worker with bright prospects of pension, provident fund and medical aid which appears like "pieces of gold" to half starved and totally shattered Ila Das. Anita Desai has created the character of Ila Das with all the subtle layers of oppression which crush the helpless woman, in spite of her good intentions and hardest efforts to survive in an oppressed society. The novelist satirizes the ways of the society and

social justice meted out to its helpless, oppressed women.

In her career as a welfare officer at the foot of the Himalayan village, Ila Das encounters several horrible cases of ignorance on the part of women and ribaldry on the part of selfish men. She also realizes that in the name of so called religion, it is the men in the society who perpetuate labours and oppress women with age old customs and phony practices. In rural India women desire to change, but their men thwart this awakening of female consciousness. Ila Das is finally raped because she tries to stop a child marriage in her village. Till the end Ila Das struggles to survive with self-respect, gloating with "absurd pride in being her father's daughter, ... she had not asked (for anybody's favour whatsoever) had not begged ..." (FOTM 141). Although the zest and warmth for life has died out of her long ago, her self-esteem is as often assaulted. When Ila Das realises how her training, education, sincerity and upbringing make her handicap and oppress her in a world where to be a practical person is more important.

Thus, like black American novelists Waller and Morrison, Desai and Sahgal too have portrayed oppression of women in their fiction. Though it is in a different culture and setting, the horror of female oppression is as bleak in India as in the black American set up.

Though not a protagonist, Aunt Mira's character in *Clear Light of Day* is one of Desai's most memorable, pathetic portrayals of women caught in the complex web of Indian society.

ly and large, women in Hindu society is perceived in relation to a male. Aunt Mira is a destitute as she is a widow. The grim reality of a widow's dismal life is reflected in Aunt Mira's routine life at her in-laws' house. She is denied any self-esteem whatsoever, as she is considered the cause of her husband's early death when he was in England for studies. Her in-laws proclaimed, "it was her unfortunate horoscope that had brought it about" (CLOD 103). From the time she became a widow, at the age of fifteen, she was virgin and has lived with her husband's family as a 'maid of all work'. Desai reveals the oppression of women at the hands of women in patriarchal set up in Hindu society. The blind belief in horoscope leads to utter harassment of Aunt Mira as her despicable in-laws make her pay for her guilt. "Guiltily, she scrubbed and washed and cooked for them. At night she massaged her mother-in-law's legs and nursed wakeful babies and stitched trousseaux for her sisters-in-law." (CLOD 103).

Though she was younger to Bim's mother but in her servile existence at her in-laws she aged young. She grew "shabbier and slinnier and seedier with the years" (CLOD 104). There was no sustenance or relationship which would sustain Aunt Mira in her most helpless situation. Her very existence becomes a burden to her. Those whom she served and sustained, were glad when she was no longer of any use to them. They were too happy when she was invited by Bim's mother to live with her family. They even said that it was "good riddance" when Aunt Mira was summoned by Mrs. Das to look after Raba, the retarded son.

At every turn and stile, Aunt Mira is a prey to oppression

in her large family. The danger of her sexual oppression was in the offing but for her aging, white hair and bald head. That saved her from "being used by her brothers-in-law who would have put the widow to a different use had she been more appetising" (CLOD 108). This obviously reveals the vulnerability of women in male dominated society. Aunt Mira was not allowed any freedom to retain any personal relationship with her relatives on the side of her parents. On the contrary, her self-esteem was assaulted at every juncture. Her bawdy brothers-in-law made loud jokes, enough for her to overhear. "There was laughter, till they grew bored. She stayed with them so long that she became boring." Neither any outlet for her creativity, nor any interesting vocation to make her worth visible was sought for Aunt Mira. The unbearable household... "suspected her of being a parasite. It was time she was turned out. She was turned out. Another household could find some use for her: cracked pot, torn rag, pickled bone" (CLOD 108). Hence we can definitely say that a widow in Hindu Society is the most neglected, oppressed and exploited creature, at the hands of men, women, children and probably even servants.

Such an oppressed aunt finds refuge in the Das household. She cares, sustains and nurtures Dim, Raja, Tara and Baba. Her oneness with the growing children makes her feel happy for a while, she seems to be like a tree. She is not soft or scented or sensual, but is like "an ancient tree in which they (the Das children) adhered" (CLOD 111). Mira Masi becomes the centre of the world for the growing children. "she fed them with her own nutrients, she reared them in her own shade, she was the support

on which they leaned as they grew." Here is the redemptive feature of motherhood. The archetypal image of the mother is reviled. It is Bim who retains the traits of MiraMas1 and in turn sustains the old, derelict aunt. She sees the pathos, oppression and helplessness of MiraMas1.

It is Bim who as an intelligent, responsible woman sees beyond the present worries and problems. She does not allow either the ossified social structure or the patriarchal measuring rod to compel her into accepting or cowering to the set role for a woman as studied in the previous chapter. She defies the oppression of a woman, be she a wife or a mother, rich or poor. She not only succeeds in shouldering the responsibility of Baba and Aunt Mira, but her very life acquires a heroic dimension in her symbolic motherhood. Her economic independence, her will to remain single, in order to live her own life as she chooses, reflect the regenerative spirit in Bim. She pursues a career. Her refusal to play the conventional role of sex-object and of a submissive wife projects her as a truly liberated woman. Although Bim too passes through various phases but she depends upon her own resources. Her resolve to overcome several impediments bestows strength to Bim's character. An upright, self-righteous Bim is one of the most positive portrayals of modern Indian woman in Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, who successfully defies the female oppression.

The inner drama of female protagonists in Desai's novels assumes a slightly different slant in Nayanlara Sahgal's novels.



The political consciousness and subtle oppression at bureaucratic level in the capital of the country is laid bare with heightened sensitivity. We often see that women, though qualified, efficient and sincere do not get the highest posts or power in the corrupt political set up. Rich Like Us depicts Sonali's oppression on the basis of gender. Highly intelligent, law abiding IAS officer, Sonali Ranade is victimized under the emergency regime. During the period, corruption becomes the rule and following the rules and regulations do not remain the norm. Her demotion and transfer comes to her as a shock. She is shaken and feels as if she is physically assaulted. Her oppression is of a different nature. She is magnanimous to resign and refuses to be humiliated by accepting a junior post. Her sister Kiran, too has no sympathy or pride for Sonali who is sick with hepatitis, simultaneously with her demotion. She thinks Sonali can beg for favours. If she has no high ranking office, Kiran hardly cares for her sister's bruised self-esteem. This reveals that women with ideals and principles are buffeted in the decadent society where moral values are at stake.

In such a helpless condition, Sonali's chain of thoughts reverts to countless number of women, oppressed due to in-laws' greed or hunger of phony male owners and managers of brick lines. The illiterate women struggle to win the bread for the family, cook and feed the family and also become the target of male and female oppression in a society where cruelty to the 'other' is more of a rule than an exception.

Sahgal has entwined the myths of the Mahabharat and the

Ramayana and the manifestations of women in the patriarchal set up which take a toll of women more often than not. Sonali's victimization, juxtaposed with countless, vulnerable women, reveals the change in the mode of female oppression at different levels in the society and indicates how in modern times female oppression takes new turns and forms.

Rose, though an English woman, is portrayed with deep understanding. She is an Indian in spirit, bubbling with the mill of humanity for the poor, helpless, oppressed masses. She asks several uncomfortable questions to her step son Dev. Good for nothing son of Mona and Ram rises suddenly in favour with the administration since the proclamation of emergency. Rose is almost reduced to a helpless creature, neither a widow nor a wife after Ram's stroke. She is oppressed because of her helplessness. As far as her monetary needs are concerned, she is at the mercy of Dev. He forges Ram's signature and draws money from Rose and Ram's bank account. The hocus-pocus of Dev tantalizes even the normal lawyers and editors of newspapers. The responsible manager of the bank finds himself unable to take any action against the forgery designed by Dev, as he was given a preferential treatment by the corrupt administration. Rose is so oppressed that she seeks Sonali's help to consult a lawyer to solve the riddle. The situation reaches its climax as Rose instead of getting her lawful share of the money is murdered by Dev's hired hands. Her belief or prophecy, that only the poor and vulnerable women of the lower strata become easy victims of male oppression proves defunct. Rose's cool blooded murder unravels many faceted

victimization of women in a country gone awry.

Mona and Rose, two wives of Ram, at different times in their lives become an easy prey to male oppression. Ram selects Rose as his wife, though he <sup>is</sup> married with Mona, a Hindu wife. As a result Mona feels wronged. Likewise once more, when Ram feels enticed by Marcella, Rose experiences anguish and rage like Mona. The Marcella affair of Ram lasted for four months. During that period Rose undergoes such turmoil and oppression, that "she was, old <sup>an</sup> experienced in suffering" (RLS 105), and Mona's tears freeze in Rose's eyes.

In the backdrop of the Quit India movement and the ghastly practice of Sati Nayanata Sahgal brings several strands of female oppression in the fabric of Rich Like Us. It culminates in the assault on Rose's self-esteem when she hears Dev, a dunce, who has backed away from her, ... turns and runs in his childhood and says, ... 'she was my father's keep, so why shouldn't I control her account?' or 'she nearly killed my mother' or 'she lorded it over the house, bossed the show when it was my mother's house" (RLS 243). Thus, female oppression has myriad forms and colours. Gradually, Rose feels lonely in her battle of life. Even Sonali feels lonely and sorry for Rose on whom she has fastened her faith as she seems to her "young and questing" and keeps "the courage of laughter" (RLS 223).

We realise the power, strength and the art of women novelists of two different cultures and the truth of their heuristic ideas which bridge the apparent differences in the two

different types of societal set up. We can posit it that <sup>there</sup> are several seminal themes related to women and their life long experiences which can bring them closer, in an affinity of sisterhood. Porbably the patriarchal system operated in such a fashion that the fictional heroines of the novelists studied in the thesis find themselves on the fringes of the male and the female world. This results in their alienation. It can be recounted as a universal malaise in urban, industrialised, fractured world torn asunder between sexual politics and power hungry patriarchy.

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