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Taboo Breaking Women in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***Mr. Vijay Digambar Songire***SIES Graduate of School and Technology, Nerul, New Mumbai, (M.S.) India***Abstract**

Toni Morrison the Nobel prize winning woman novelist and Alice Walker, one of the significant voices in African American literature as well as a winner of the prestigious Pulitzer Prize are widely acclaimed for their authentic documentation of the lives of blacks in general and black women in particular. They both similarly portray the humiliation, exploitation and endless sufferings of the blacks in their novels. Both have portrayed the reality in the lives of black women in racist America. As Baskaran rightly assert about them: "Both Morrison and Walker have looked at the black woman from the insider's point of view and tried to discover what happened to her as she raised a family under ghetto conditions or as a day worker in some white woman's kitchen, or as she lived with a man struggling with his own sense of powerlessness, or as she looked into the mirror and tried to see beauty in full features and dark skins." (359) Both Morrison and Walker have depicted not only the victimization of black women in their novels but also they provide new pathways for black women to follow. The women portrayed in some of their novels are the taboo breakers. They break the traditions and social customs in the society, which limit their existence as well as strive hard for the establishment of their own identity. On the other hand, Arundhati Roy, the Booker Prize winner woman novelist in Indian writing in English too portrays humiliation and exploitation of the lower caste people as well as woman's taboo breaking attempt in her novels.. A 'taboo' is explained in Oxford dictionary as "a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing." In the novels like Morrison's *Sula* Walker's *The Color Purple* and Roy's *The God Of Small Things* there are social taboos related to women's roles as daughter, mother and wife and the women are supposed to follow these taboos. If they don't follow these social taboos they are ostracized and condemned. The attempt of this paper is to show how these three novelists are similar in their depiction of the taboo breaking women in the respected novels. They give voice to the voiceless in their novels.

Toni Morrison's *Sula* discusses the theme of gender discrimination. The protagonist of the novel *Sula*, an adolescent girl child, her mother Hannah and grandmother Eva, her close friend Nel are seen as the victim of male patriarchy. But among them Peace

women *Sula*, Hannah and Eva are the women who explore the idea of self expression and freedom of women in African American male dominated society.

Sula's home is dominated by her grandmother, Eva who is very firm and

determined woman. Both Hannah and Sula learn the love of maleness from their mother Eva. Eva is seen engaged with men and seeking pleasure in their company. As the novelist writes: “the Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. Eva, old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and laughter. The men wanted to see her lovely calf, that neat shoe, and watch the focusing that sometimes swept down out of the distances in her eyes.” (41) Sula’s mother Hannah earlier confirms to the tradition of marriage and child-bearing. Later she like her mother Eva ends the traditional behavior whenever she gets the change. After the death of her husband Rekus, she doesn’t remarry. Eva’s influence is clearly seen on Hannah. As Morrison writes: “Hannah simply refused to live without the attention of a man, and after Rekus’s death, had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of friends and neighbors. Her flirting was sweet, low and guileless. Without ever a pat of the hair, with no gesture whatsoever, she rippled with sex.” (42)

Sula too breaking the taboos of sexuality like Eva and Hannah doesn’t follow the social codes and conducts of the society. She enjoys sexual pleasure with men in the society. She has her own views about sex. As the novelist writes: “Love making seemed to her, at first, the creation of a special kind of joy. She thought she liked the sootiness of sex and its comedy...” (122) She wants to live life in her own way. She does not want to settle. She rejects the ideas of motherhood and lives a free life. She is

seen as a rebel. Sula is not ready to surrender herself to the social conduct of the working class black community. She becomes a liberated woman in the novel. As Parker writes: “If Sula had any sense she’d go some where and sing or get into show business, implying that her “strangeness” her “lawlessness” can only be sanctioned in a world like the theater” (253) The black community does not accept her attempt of becoming a defiant woman. Sula is seen as a woman who tries to form her own identity. She is interested neither in being beautiful nor becoming a mother. As Nana Banyiwah-Horne asserts about Sula succinctly: “Sula is a pariah whose values are often the polar opposites society. She becomes a pariah precisely. She rejects those values that aim at uniformity and stifle the self.”(31) Even she doesn’t hesitate to sleep with her best friend Nel’s husband Jude. Sula creates a new dimension of sexuality for women which are totally free from gender norms and set ideology. As Devika Rani observes of Sula as: “Bottom’s attempt to perceive Sula as a man’s lover is negated by Sula who strongly believes in sexual equality.”(60) When she is asked by her mother to get married she defiantly says: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.” (92) In this respect Kavita Arya rightly asserts: “Sula hates the traditional norms of feminine respectability like family, marriage, children, parental care, sexual mores and the concept of steady job. She hates to see a woman only as wife, mother and daughter.”(xiii) Undoubtedly, the novel is successful in the attempt to challenge the existed societal norms. As K. Sumana rightly observes:

“*Sula* opens up new literally and critical option not only for the study of the text by African – American women, but for African-American literary study more generally. The novel certainly helps to set as new agenda for black women’s social and narrative possibilities.”(67)

So in *Sula* Morrison depicts women who break all the social taboos which control women’s behavior. Thus Eva, Hannah and Sula break the set norms in the society and behave in their own way as well as become the representatives of black women who are exploited, humiliated and subjugated for ages in African American society due to racism, sexism and classism.

Sula presents a new model for African – American women. It concerns with the fallings and affairs of women and the roles they assumed through the portrayal of the characters Sula and Nel. Morrison not only exposes the oppressive economic as well as social system in America but also shows the brave attempt of black women breaking set taboos and conventions of the community.

Walker’s *The Color Purple* too depicts the black women who break the social taboos set by the male patriarchy. Walker has shown victimization of women due to race, gender and class in this novel. The novel pens the suffering and humiliation of an adolescent black girl child Celie due to the evils of male patriarchy. At the age of twelve only she is raped and impregnated by her father, Alphonso and later she is forcefully gets married with Albert who exploits her. However, later the women like Sofia and Shug come into Celie’s life and change her conceptions about life..Sofia,

Shug are the women who break the taboos set for women in the society. Sofia’s husband Harpo tries to dominate Sofia but she protests against him and leaves the home and Shug too lives life in her own way being a Blues singer. These are the women portrayed by Walker who reject the ideas of ideal daughter, careful mother and obedient wife. They want to live life in their own way. Sofia is also a woman who doesn’t want to live life under the dominance of her husband Harpo. She wants freedom and in Harpo’s company it is impossible for her to achieve. Therefore, she takes a brave decision to leave Harpo. Even she doesn’t hesitate to protest against the white mayor who slaps her when she rejects his offer of being his maid. Sofia is not like Celie who remains silent. She too slaps the mayor. In the novel it is Sofia who inspires Celie towards self-realization. Shug is also a woman like Sofia, a blue singer. Shug Avery is Albert’s mistress. Her role in the novel is very significant because of her relationship with Celie. In the company of Sofia and Shug Celie becomes confident and ready to defy the domination of her husband, Albert. Shug helps Celie to find out her identity, as a woman .It is Shug who teaches Celie about her body. With the understanding of her own body Celie’s self-realization takes place. Mukul Sengupta comments on Shug and Celie’s relationship: “The ecstasy that Celie receives from Shug in their erotic relationship is tender and caring and above all creative, not devastating like her experience of rape by her stepfather or her husband Albert.” (191) The process of her awakening from darkness to light, from death to survival starts from Shug who

transforms Celie's life. Her relationship with Shug is very important which helps Celie in identity formation. In the novel later Celie emerges as a woman who does not hesitate to break the social codes and norms in the society. Celie's physical union with Shug is given very boldly by Walker. As she writes: "Ugh! All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose... I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me." (75) With understanding her own body, Celie develops her confidence. Daniel Ross comments on this Celie are awakening process: "After her initial revulsion Celie sees in succession three things: the hair that shielded her vagina from view, her black lips, and finally her feminine beauty, symbolized as a rose." (71) Gradually Celie becomes aggressive and ready to resist the male domination of her husband, Albert. Celie changes her habit of sewing in the profession which is the most symbolic thing showing her attempt for identity formation. She engaged herself with the sewing business and tries to develop her position in the society which is actually a taboo for black women but Celie is successful to break this taboo. She sews pants with Sofia also. Their attempt is to become independent in the patriarchal set up of the society. At the end of the novel Celie is seen very happy and independent with her all her close ones Sofia, Nettie and Shug. Thus in *The Color Purple* Celie, Sofia and Shug are the women who defy male domination and break the social taboo which considers women as dependent and mere objects of male desire.

In the same way the protagonist Ammu of Arundhati Roy's *The God Of Small Things*

, a divorcee with two children is exploited and humiliated due to the patriarchal system in the society. As a woman she is treated as a subhuman and second sex. Her humiliation takes terrible forms when she returns to Ayemenam as divorcee. After her return to Ayemenam, no one consoles her but treats badly. Every one humiliates her calling her as divorcee. Chacko, her brother is portrayed as a man who dominates everyone in the house. He ill-treats Ammu and denies her share in the ancestral property saying: "My house, my pineapples, my pickle." (225) She is portrayed as a woman who lives a solitary life with her two children after her husband's death. Later she gets attracted towards one lower caste male, Velutha. Since she is from upper caste their love relationship is not accepted not only by their family but also by the society. Therefore Ammu is exploited and humiliated later. The most notable thing that Roy has highlighted in the novel is Ammu's acceptance of Velutha as her lover. Both Ammu and Velutha the two unwanted and neglected individuals begin to love each other and enjoy a short happy life. Since they have no plans, no future all they could do stick to the small things. As Roy narrates:

Even later, on the thirteen nights that followed this one, instinctively they stuck to the Small Things. The Big Things ever lurked inside. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things (338).

She shares her body with her. In loving Velutha as untouchable, she does not think of the social barriers. Ammu, being a woman cannot suppress her biological

needs. In this respect G. D. Barche rightly points out: "She (Ammu) disobeyed the social laws of love but obeyed the instinctual laws 'Swadhrama' by sharing the body with Velutha, an untouchable." (43) So here Ammu becomes a taboo breaker woman who breaks all the social restraints of the society. Her act is against the existed norms. Thus Morrison's Sula, Walker's Celie, Shug, Sofia and Roy's Ammu are the taboo breaking women who raise their voice against the set ideology which limit the existence of women. All these taboo breaking women in Morrison, Walker and

Roy's novels give voice to the voiceless and become the representatives of all women who are oppressed, humiliated and marginalized by the ill forces like racism, sexism, classism and the patriarchy in the society.

Conclusion:

Thus Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Arundhati Roy have done a successful attempt in their novels to show the women who break the age-old ideologies in the society and strive hard for their own survival.

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