



COMMODYING THE FEMALE SUBJECT: A MARXIST FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF SELECTED FICTIONS OF AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

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Abstract

The study focuses on the fetishistic socialization and commercialization of women and their laboring for the facilitation of men and the enhancement of financial assets. African American women were exploited by the whites as well as their own black men through their exposure to domestic violence and sexual abuse. The study selects three Afro-American novels, which are *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Color Purple*, and *The Bluest Eye*, and applies the Marxist feminist approach to these texts in order to highlight how Afro-American women are commodified in a society that is stricken with the miseries of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy. Domestic and commercial interests of androcentric patriarchal society seriously jeopardize the social and economic status the black women. Textual analysis of these three novels explores the consumerism of working-class women who suffer due to gender disparity and racial prejudices and their fetishistic use for man's hegemonic rule.

Keywords: *African-American, Women, Commodification, Marxist, Feminism*

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1.Introduction

Women's plight of subjugation continues unceasingly, especially in a capitalist society that is fraught with an unjust distribution of resources and an androcentric patriarchal economy. In the Marxian paradigm, this exploitation is denoted with commodification, which Karl Marx defines as "something that satisfies human need, whether such need derives from physical or mental cravings, satisfied through consumption or as a means of further production". By this, he means women have a social use-value as a commodity that is produced for others (Minnegal, 1997). Engels explains women's commodification historically and inspires succeeding theorists to base their concepts on the subject of material causal factors.

Roswitha Scholz explains women's commodification by relating it with the concept of value judgment. According to her, women's social adjustment depends solely on men's satisfaction just as a commodity, which represents a specific quantity of expenditure of human energy, depends for its social validity on the market" (Scholz, 2014).

This commodification of women inspires men to continue as well as promote their marginalization, which reduces their role to be a mere working agent for social and economic pursuits by men. Moreover, the rhetoric that develops in the process labels the female gender with undervalued attributes such as sensitivity, emotionality, timidity, and rational deficiencies promotes and establishes conceptual apparatuses of a patriarchal economy.

In connection with women's marginalization, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak classifies society into four sections which demonstrate the plight of exploitation of the female gender. She exposes the nexus among the three sections of capitalist society, including the dominant foreign group (international imperialist), national group (national imperialist), and indigenous or local group (regional imperialist), which expel the fourth section, which she terms as subaltern, from the main hierarchical structure of socio-economic dominance. She believes that in third-world countries, the three elite groups are actively collaborating to marginalize the subaltern which mainly includes women whose exploitation continues without redress. She writes "Women remain untenable in capitalist patriarchal society and their reification is conceptualized as an object of exchange of the gift". Sidonie Smith explains women's commodification through the theory of self-expression that has driven various strands, assuming that self-identity emerges from psychic interiority, located somewhere inside the narrating subject (Smith, 1995).

This marginalization doubles in a society such as African American, which is not only patriarchal but also racially divided. The African-American literature features as one

of its major themes the socio-economic conditions in the Afro-American community and the exploitation of black women who have constantly been a victim of patriarchal dominance and male chauvinism. This plight has been exposed by black women writers. Moreover, studies on their writings have also highlighted the black women's predicament in the racially divided capitalist patriarchal society. For example, Jane Kuenz highlights the destructive impact of social hierarchies and social invisibility in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. She thinks "Morrison examines the impact of this exclusion on individuals and on the community as a whole" (Kuenz, 1993).

Similarly, Donnelly Mary focuses, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, on challenges for black women being doubly marginalized in the African American which is fraught with racial patriarchy (Zeyneb, 2023).

Highlighting black women's plight as depicted in Zora Neale Hurston's *their Eyes Were Watching God*, Jenna Clayton writes that "[g]ender roles are a central part in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She says that women in a society like African American are expected merely to be submissive wives who should obey their husbands unconditionally. According to her, only this way the society grants them any security, especially when are lucky enough to secure rich husbands who can provide for them for their survival. On the other hand, men demonstrate their power and masculinity by controlling and dominating their women "and keeping them in line." She adds that the three marriages of Janie innocuously reflect her sense of insecurity in capitalist society. According to her, Jane's white husbands represent imperialism that infiltrates the cupidity of men, as both use her for their financial interests (Ondieki, 2008).

The present study is delimited to three Afro-American novels including *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. It focuses on the way black women are commodified and, in this connection, also traces out the elements of fetishistic socialization with the reflection of domestic violence, men's sexual assault and physical handling, and their commercialization for material pursuits. The research applies the Marxist feminist approach developed by combining Karl Marx's notion of commodity and Roswitha Scholz's concept of feminism. It uses textual analysis as a method, which is, according to Catherine Belsey, indispensable to research in cultural criticism, cultural history, and cultural studies, as well as any other discipline that focuses on texts or seeks to understand the inscription of culture in its artifacts". She thinks that there are aspects of this method that prevent a writer from pure subjectivism. Explaining the relation between the reader and the text says that the text per se engages with the readers in dialogue (Morley, 2003). This mutual relation is significant in constructing understanding of the theoretical or conceptual framework in the text.

2. Black Women's Commodification in *The Color Purple*

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* an epistolary novel that starts with a letter written by the protagonist, Celie, to God. The tone reflects her precarious situation at her parents' home. Her mother is sick and, especially, unable to serve her husband in terms of his matrimonial demands. Celie has the responsibility to take care of her mother and do the home chores as well. The epistolary form of the novel is significant here. Celie, finding no one on the earth to share her feelings with, seeks comfort in a mystic detachment in isolation and does her catharsis to God, appealing to Him to ease her miseries. Solicitation

Her invocations continue throughout the first half of the novel. Every chapter in this half begins with her prayer: "Dear God." The first clear evidence of her commodification by her male-dominated society is reflected in her stepfather's attempt to rape her. Her father who is sexually frustrated because of his wife's inability to satisfy her, turns to Celie and shouts "[y]ou going to do what your mammy wouldn't" (Walker 01). Her father has no respect for the sanctity of the relationship with his daughter and uses her as a commodity to fulfill his material and mean instinct. This incest by his father impregnates her and she gives birth to two babies that are adopted by a missionary married couple. Home which generally symbolizes security and shelter fails to provide Celie with any sense of safety. Moreover, when this first forum for socialization proves a nightmare for her, she is left utterly hopeless. Finding no hope in the world, she develops an immanent relationship with God, "You better not never tell nobody but God" (01). She realizes that society will exploit her predicament further and use her as a toy for their pleasure.

Her father uses her to the maximum and when he loses any charm left in her sells her to Mr. Albert. Mr. Albert has also materialistic interests associated with her. He, mainly, purchases her as a maid who can serve him and his children and run his house. Her father has already given Mr. Albert the impression that the former has sold her because he just wants to get rid of her. He advises Albert "[s]he isn't fresh Tho, but I spent you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don't need a fresh woman not how. You can do everything just like you want to she isn't going to make you feed it or clothe it" (09). This is how Celie starts the new chapter of her life as a spoiled commodity.

The sufferings Celie undergoes turn her into a sort of serious and mature lady at a very young age. Albert's previous wife had left four children behind her. The eldest boy, was twelve, proves to be another nightmare for Celie. He goes even to the extent of wounding her stepmother. Celie narrates this incident as "[h]e pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood runs all down tween by breasts. His daddy say Don't do that! But that is all he says" (Walker 13). All this treatment turns Celie into such a subaltern that she

is even afraid of uttering her husband's name for many years after marriage. However, she continues performing her responsibilities of doing domestic chores and caring for Albert's children despite their brutal treatment of her. The only source of solace for her is to appeal to God in isolation, which is reflected in her letters written to the Almighty.

The novel reveals that black women have no freedom whatsoever to make decisions in their lives. They marry under pressure. Either their parents arrange their marriages - and they also decide under social pressure – or women ultimately have to marry under social and economic pressure. In either case, they are compelled for their matrimonial relations.

The novel shows the commodification of black women through other characters as well. Albert's first wife Annie Julia was also the victim of social as well as domestic violence. She had also to work hard for her family. She also married Albert under pressure who exploited her to the maximum. After she had married, her family forgot her. So she lost her acceptance at her parents' home. As a result, she lost her value at her husband's home as well. The novelist writes, "she didn't have anything. Her family forgot about her once she married. Finally she starts to sleep with that man that shot her down. Albert beat her" (Walker 127). This loss of identity made her so feeble that she turned into a stoic. Her husband, finally finding her as a useless object, shot her to death. Such treatment of women by their patriarchy deprives them of their fundamental rights.

Nettie, who is Celie's younger sister, finds a chance to visit different tribes with missionaries. There, she comes to learn how women are compelled to live a life as subalterns. She highlights the treatment of these black ladies meticulously. For example, the men of the Olinka tribe men had complete control over their women and did not allow them to do anything contradictory to even very trivial tribal norms. Tashi's mother asserts the same viewpoint that "a girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something. Everything else is difficult for her" (162). Despite performing greater responsibilities than their men, these women are considered worthless without men.

Harpo's wife, Sofia, shares similar story with Celie and counts different men of her family who, she thinks, are responsible for the miserable lives of her family women. She tells her how all those women are compelled to live conditional lives. They have to live with unconditional surveillance. She says that "[a]ll my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child isn't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house" (42). Every male member of the family demonstrates his right to instruct women and observe their obedience. The women of Olinka tribes are bound to accept the choice of marriage decided by their ancestors. If they refuse, they are ostracized by the tribes.

Moreover, we come to know that one of Olivia's aunt becomes a trade commodity because "she was sold to the trader because she no longer fit into village life. This aunt refused to marry the man chosen for her" (166).

Similarly, Albert's first wife Annie Julia also underwent all the miseries that a typical black woman in that patriarchal system is expected to do. Albert moved away from home to chill out his life for many days leaving her and the children in starvation. He spent whatever he had for his own luxuries. Shug Avery, a character in the novel who is a singer, says "I used to keep Albert away from home for a week at the time. She'd come and beg him for money to buy groceries for the children" (Walker 127). Albert marries Celie, after Julia's death, simply because he needs a servant to run his house. His treatment of Celie demonstrates humiliation, exploitation, and violence. Her place in the family is just a commodity that can be used to the optimum for the vested interests of the family. Her father also advises her to work in good capacity. This also exposes the foundation of their relationship: "she can work like a man" (09). Her husband consumes her to the optimum both in domestic chores and in field work. Yet, all her hard work fails to earn her any security. She remains as precarious as always: "He wake up while I'm in the field. I have been chopping cotton three hours by the time he comes. We don't say anything to each other" (27).

Likewise, the element of commodification is also reflected in Harpo's treatment of the lady singer in the novel. The lady singer is no more than a commodity that is used to attract customers to the restaurant. Harpo, a young man, inaugurates his restaurant and contacts Shug Avery (Lillie) to sing there. In the beginning, the restaurant could not attract customers in good numbers, but after Avery's contract, the business started flourishing. Yet, Avery's contribution to promoting Harpo's business does not compensate her with any position. It is because Harpo is controlling the rubric. On the contrary, Harpo's wife Sofia is imprisoned with the indictment of a crime and works in jail as a prisoner. Harpo is not interested in spending money to get his wife released from jail. The jailer, who is a white man, exploits the black women to work for the whole day. Despite their hard work, these ladies are not provided with a square meal. "They put Sofia to work in the prison laundry. All day long from five to eight, she washed clothes. Dirty convict uniforms, nasty sheets, and blankets piled away over her head. Her face yellow and sickly, her fingers look like a fatty sausage" (Walker 93). This is how the supremacy of the patriarchy exploits women to the maximum, using them as commodities for their vested interests. What is more: such practices have grown prevalent as economic policies.

Similarly, we find that the black women of the Olinka tribes are also commodified by the white imperialists. These white Englishmen have captured a vast area of the land of Olinka tribes and are using this land for their rubber manufacturing industry. They have

hired black women to work in their industry for very low wages. Bell Hooks thinks that “of these systems, the one that we all learn the most about growing up is the system of patriarchy, even if we never know the word, because patriarchal gender roles are assigned to us as children and we are given continual guidance about the ways we can best fulfill these roles” (hooks 02).

The majority of black people of the Olinka tribe escaped due to excessive labor involved in the construction of the factory. But the women had to stay and face massive torture by the white Englishmen. The industry is earning more and more business for the white imperialists but destroying the living conditions of the natives. The waste of the factory is polluting water wells and poisonous gases are causing respiratory diseases and indigestion. The women were forced to live there because “among the Olinka, the husband has life and death power over the wife” (Joannou, 2000).

The patriarchal economy of the white imperialist has destroyed the business of the black woman whose husband has been lynched with evil-designed planning. Celie’s real father was lynched by the two white men who opened their store but could not succeed in their business. Her mother lost her senses. Moreover, the white men burnt her store as well. Moreover, Celie also fell, here, a victim of maltreatment and rape by a black servant. This is how in this novel, black women are completely commodified by the patriarchy that confiscates any rights of these women in the economy.

3. Black women used for fetishistic and material interests in *The Bluest Eye*

The story of the protagonist of Toni Morrison *The Bluest Eyes* significantly similar to that of the heroine of *The Color Purple*. Pecola Breedlove suffers from an equally intense predicament at home. She is assaulted sexually by her father who ultimately leaves her pregnant. Her father is a psychopath who is often drunk. In this drunken state, he sets his house on blazes. He too has been suffering from a trauma caused by sexual abuse by two white men in his adolescence, and it is this sense of depravity which has led him to finally commodify his own daughter for his fetishistic desire. Pecola was busy washing dishes in the kitchen when her father appeared drunk and “[t]he tenderness welled up in him, and he sank to his knees, his eyes on the foot of his daughter. He raised his hand and caught the foot in an upward stroke. Pecola lost her balance” (Morrison 128). Colley satisfies his sexual instincts to an abnormal degree and then after using her as a commodity, throws her away. He pays no heed to her screaming voice and trembling body lying on the floor. She “appeared to have fainted” (128).

However, in contrast to Celie who has developed an immanent connection with God to Whom she appeals in isolation to provide her ease, Pecola Breedlove perhaps thinks

that she may find comfort in socialization. Yet, her expectations soon shatter when she faces her exploitation through a young white man. The young white man persuades her by telling her that he will show her something beautiful in his house forces Pecola to step in his house and pulls her by arm. Then, he “threw a big black cat in her face. She sucked in her breath in fear and surprise and felt fur in her mouth. The cat clawed at her face and chest in an effort to right itself, then leaped nimbly to the floor” (Morrison 70).

The boy’s excitement to see her in acute pain reflects the stolidity of the patriarchal society, which has no respect for women’s feelings and which considers them just a source of their pleasure. The writer’s delineation of the situation mirrors this fetishistic socialization: “[t]he tears came fast and she held her face in her hand” (70). The protagonist’s sense of dependence for her survival subsumes Spivak’s concept of ‘subaltern and the popular’ which highlights the *otherness* of women in an androcentric society (Spivak,2010).

Pauline highlights how black women are commodified in a society that is, at a time, racial, capitalist, and patriarchal. Pauline’s husband, Colley, excessively drinks alcohol and never provides for his family. He escapes from his responsibilities and leaves them at the mercy of white imperialists. Pauline starts working as a maid in the house of a white family. The lady of the house forces her to leave her husband. She threatens her that otherwise, she will not pay her salary. Soon, Pauline is expelled from her job and deprived of her wages as well. “She did never give me the eleven dollars she owed me. The gas man had cut the gas off, and I couldn’t cook any. I really begged that woman for money” (Morrison 93).

Pecola Breedlove also feels compelled to work as a maid with such a meager salary which does not suffice for her survival. Her father has already escaped after burning her hut. She finds no refuge in a capitalist racial society and demands blue eyes as a symbol of beauty in her society.

4. Women used as a commodity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Their Eyes Were Watching God reflects what has gone before as well. Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* represents the oppressed and exploited class of Afro-American women. The birth of Janie is an anecdote resulting from the excessive sexual desire of a man who raped her seventeen-year-old mother and escaped. Jane’s illegitimate birth causes an identity crisis for her. Socially she is scorned at, especially by men. People poke fun at her and call her by derogative names.

Jane is living in a servant quarter room with her grandmother who is her caretaker mentor after her mother’s death. Her grandmother, named Nanny, trains her so that she

does not fall victim to men's fetishistic nature. She tells her, "Dat school teacher had done hid her in the de woods all night long, and he had done raped Mah baby and run on off just before day. She was only seventeen, and something' lakdat happen!" (Hurston 26). Once, when the old lady comes to know about Janie's kissing a white man named Johnny Taylor, she at once gets worried. She alarms her by saying that "Johnny Taylor using' yo' body to wipe his feet on" (17).

Worried about the future of her daughter in a patriarchal and racist society where women are doubly marginalized and commodified, the old lady immediately starts searching for a suitable match for her granddaughter. She accordingly prepares her: "Neither you can stand alone by yourself. De thought uh you being' kicked around from pillar to post is uh hurting' thing. Every tear you drop squeezes uh cup of blood outa Mah heart" (21). She also compares black women with mules that are used by men purely for their benefit. She also communicates her feelings and concerns with her daughter: "de nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see. Ah been praying' fuh it tuh be different with you" (19).

Jane's sufferings not only continue after her marriage but get multiplied. Her first husband, Logan Killicks, abuses and tortures her physically. He keeps her busy working in the fields with mules all the time. Jane tries her best to behave submissively for her survival. Yet, her being submissive proves to be ineffective in saving her from him. He abuses not only her but her parents and ancestors as well. However, she continues to be obedient. She tries her best to save her matrimonial life. "She wasn't even angry. Logan was accusing her of her mama, her grandmama, and her feelings, and she could not do a thing about any of it" (Hurston 43). This treatment reflects that marriage in that society means merely a relationship of master and slave, and even worse than this. A wife is supposed not only to shoulder the responsibilities at home but to serve as a machine of earning as well.

However, her second husband, Joe Stark restricts her to home. Yet, this restriction worsens her life further. Now, restricted at home she has none to share her feelings with. With her first husband, she had chances to do her catharsis while working in the fields. Now, here, she feels as if her society has ostracized her.

The novel conveys to us that black women in African-American society, despite working harder than their men, have no recognition in the mainstream economy. Most of these women earn for their men by doing tough blue-collar jobs. Their husbands feel carefree from their responsibilities to provide for their families. A black woman keeps on struggling to make her matrimonial life successful. So as long as she can earn, besides performing her home responsibilities, she can continue as a wife. Once she has failed to

support her family, she becomes socially as well as domestically valueless. Fredric James postulates the idea as, “[m]ass culture is another form of industrialized labor or work: it prepares the worker for the production line, and it mimics the processes of mechanized processes” (Douglas, 2006).

From colonization to the import of slaves in America and the West, black women face double marginalization in American society. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston demonstrates the androcentric economic thoughts of imperialists in a racially divided society. Janie’s sufferings stem from the frustration of the black men and the attitude of superiority of the white imperialist. Janie loses her dream of love as a wife and becomes a working tool for her husband Logan Killicks. He demands her assistance in the fields. He has also brought a mule for her. Janie’s grandmother had already her that the back women were treated as ‘yellow mules’ for laboring. Her husband’s instructions for her to work with a mule reminds her of her Nanny’s words. Killicks tells her that “Ah aims thus run two plows, and this man Ah’m talkin’ ‘bout is got uh mule all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle ‘im” (Hurston 36). The capitalist racial patriarchy consumes helpless black Janie whose eyes are watching God with an appeal to ease her in her miseries. Killicks’ intention reinforces the concept of the commodity being used for material pursuits instead of treating her as a wife. He needed working labour; he, therefore, marries the poverty-stricken black girl who supposedly will always remain submissive.

Janie’s elopement with Joe Stark does not lessen her difficulties of being a consuming tool for business purposes. Joe Stark a black businessman comes across Janie in the fields and creates a very beautiful picture in her mind using despicable words for white people and their racial prejudices. He also traps Janie by exaggerating her futuristic social and domestic position. After discussions, he comes to know about her humble background, which he exploits. Janie falls in his trap because she is a deprived and exploited girl and also because she wants to get rid of her first husband. His oily tongue wins her heart and marries him. Joe Stark runs a grocery store and needs someone to help him in his business. His intention is exposed when he orders Janie to handle the business in his absence. “Jody told her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening. She must look on herself as the bell-cow” (54-55). Soon, Joe Stark is elected as mayor of the town and he completely ignores his wife who once again succumbs to the imperialist patriarchy. She serves as a complete commodity and, thus, plays a role in the promotion of his business in the town.

5. Conclusion

The study reflects the way Afro-American women writers expose objectification of the black women who are used as commodities in a society that is stricken with the miseries of racism, patriarchy capitalism. Their fictions show exploitation, oppression, and double marginalization of the black women in their subject position. Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* delineates several female characters, such as Celie, Sofia, Annie Julia, Shug Avery, and Tashi, who are victims of fetishistic socialization and imperialist patriarchal supremacy. Toni Morrison also depicts the vulnerable conditions of black women and the cruel treatment with them in a society wherein these black women are doubly marginalized. *The Bluest Eye* highlights Pecola and Pauline's miserable condition and their socio-economic exploitation. Zora Neale Hurston's assertion of Janie's life shows the application of the hegemonic rule of men, both white and black, for his social and economic monopoly. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston unveils the double marginalization of black women in capitalist racial society. The Marxist feminist approach to these three fictions demonstrates an androcentric economy that uses black women as commodities and exploits them. It also substantiates the fetishistic socialization of black women through textual references to that androcentric capitalist patriarchy.

Similarly, *The Bluest Eye* reveals how badly a black girl, Pecola Breedlove, gets treated by white people who hire her services as a maid. The imperialist patriarchal society ensures the flourishing of its business and introduces policies exhibiting the supremacy of men, especially whites. This exploitation of black women for material benefits also exposes the ineligibility of black men for providing for their families. Not only the black men fail in supporting their families but they also do colossal harm as well. For example, the fathers of Celie and Pecola even burn the shelters of their families. Economic dependence on that imperialist androcentric financial system causes the usurpation of the working class, especially women. This has led to their commodification. The marginalization of women in racial society eradicates them from the mainstream socio-economic system.

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