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African American Predicament and Dalit Consciousness: A Comparative Discourse on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* and Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* and *The Taming of Women*

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative discourse on two significant trajectories of marginal literatures: African American and Dalit. Marginalized literatures across cultures serve as powerful instruments of resistance, memory, and identity formation. African American literature in the United States and Dalit literature in India emerge from distinct historical conditions, yet both articulate parallel experiences of oppression, dehumanization, and struggle for selfhood. This paper undertakes a comparative study of Toni Morrison's Beloved and The Bluest Eye and Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* and *The Taming of Women* to examine how racial and caste-based subjugation shapes consciousness, gendered suffering, and resistance. Drawing upon postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and intersectional feminism, the study argues that Morrison and Sivakami foreground the body, memory, and voice as sites of both oppression and emancipation. While Morrison addresses the enduring psychological trauma of slavery and racism, Sivakami exposes the entrenched brutality of caste patriarchy. Despite cultural differences, both writers converge in presenting women as bearers of collective trauma and agents of transformative consciousness. This comparative study highlights shared mechanisms of marginalization and distinct cultural articulations of trauma, self-perception, and liberation.

Keywords: African American literature, Dalit literature, race, resistance, oppression

Introduction

Literature from oppressed communities often functions as both testimonial archive and political intervention. African American literature and Dalit literature articulate experiences rooted in centuries of systemic violence, exclusion, and dehumanization. The former emerges from the historical legacies of chattel slavery, segregation, and ongoing racial discrimination in the United States, while the latter arises from India's caste system—a complex social hierarchy entrenched in religious and cultural orthodoxy that subordinates Dalits (formerly "untouchables"). Though based on differing social formations, both traditions engage questions of identity, humanness, and resistance. This paper conducts a comparative discourse on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* and Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* and *The Taming of Women*, foregrounding how these texts exemplify the African American predicament and Dalit consciousness.

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Historical and Socio-Cultural Contexts

The African American predicament is deeply rooted in the legacy of slavery, racial segregation, and systemic racism in the United States. Slavery did not end with emancipation; its psychological scars persist across generations. African American literature often grapples with inherited trauma, racialized violence, and the struggle for dignity in a society structured by white supremacy. Toni Morrison situates her narratives within this historical continuum. She rejects linear history and instead emphasizes memory, haunting, and collective pain. Her fiction reconstructs African American history from within, foregrounding experiences erased or distorted in mainstream discourse. Morrison's works engage these historical residues by exploring how racial oppression inhabits memory, psychic life, and community.

Dalit consciousness arises from centuries of caste-based discrimination sanctioned through religious texts and social customs in India. Dalits faced untouchability, exclusion from public spaces, and exploitation in labour hierarchies (Guru, 2009). Dalit literature—principally in regional Indian languages—became a vehicle for articulating humiliation, asserting dignity, and contesting caste hierarchies. Dalits, historically positioned outside the fourfold Hindu caste system, have endured centuries of social exclusion, humiliation, and violence. Caste operates as a rigid structure that governs access to education, land, labour, and even bodily integrity. Dalit women face a double burden: caste oppression compounded by patriarchy. Sivakami, a Tamil Dalit writer, expands this discourse by cantering gendered experiences within Dalit communities, illustrating how caste and patriarchy intersect.

Narratives of Oppression: Morrison and Sivakami

In *Beloved*, Morrison dramatizes the haunting afterlife of slavery through Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman who kills her daughter to spare her from bondage. The eponymous ghost, Beloved, symbolizes the inescapable presence of historical trauma—memory that "will not let us go" (Morrison, 1987). Morrison posits that slavery's violence persists in psychological and communal life even after its formal end.

Sethe's fragmented identity and the community's tentative attempts at healing emphasize how racial trauma functions not merely as past event but as living inheritance. Paul D's recollections of being dehumanized in "the tobacco tin" reveal how the body itself becomes repository of violence. Memory in *Beloved* thus performs dual work: it unveils the atrocities of slavery and insists on reclaiming the humanity that oppressive systems sought to erase.

The Bluest Eye explores the internalization of racial standards of beauty. Pecola Breedlove's obsession with blue eyes, a marker of white beauty, reflects the psychological colonization of self-worth (Morrison, 1970). Morrison exposes how racist beauty norms become tools of self-denigration, particularly for Black girls.

Pecola's narrative illustrates how societal devaluation of Blackness penetrates individual psyche, producing self-hatred and psychosis. Morrison's technique—shifting narrative voices and fragmentary structure—evokes the disintegration of identity under racial hegemony. The novel thus becomes a critique of the cultural forces that regulate bodies and desires along racial lines.

Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* depicts Thangam, a Dalit woman subjected to sexual exploitation by an upper-caste landlord, exposing the violent intersections of caste and gender hierarchies. The novel also engages intra-community dynamics, critiquing patriarchal norms within Dalit leadership. Through Kathamuthu—a Dalit leader reluctant to incorporate women's issues—Sivakami highlights the tension between universalist feminist claims and community-specific struggles.

Sivakami situates caste oppression within everyday life, demonstrating how systemic discrimination shapes social interaction, economic dependency, and gendered violence. Her realist narrative style foregrounds the material conditions of marginalization, resisting romanticization and foregrounding agency within struggle.

In *The Taming of Women*, Sivakami further interrogates patriarchal authority and social conditioning. Dalit women characters navigate caste subjugation and male dominance, complicating simplistic binaries of oppressor and oppressed. The novel's title ironically evokes social expectations of conformity—women "tamed" by both caste and gender norms.

Sivakami's work amplifies Dalit women's voices, challenging structures that marginalize them within and beyond community boundaries. Her narrative rejects victimization; instead, it foregrounds conscious resistance and the redefinition of self beyond imposed hierarchies.

Themes of Identity, Trauma, and Resistance

Both Morrison and Sivakami depict identity as socially mediated and deeply troubled by systemic injustice. For Morrison, Black identity in *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* is fractured by historical trauma and cultural devaluation. Pecola's desire for blue eyes signifies racial self-alienation, while Sethe's struggle to narrate her past reveals the difficulty of reconstructing selfhood from fragmented memory.

In Sivakami's novels, identity is contested within overlapping structures of caste and gender. Dalit women negotiate external violence and internal community pressures, resulting in multifaceted identities that resist monolithic representation. Their consciousness evolves through confrontation with both structural oppression and internalized norms.

Morrison's use of memory as narrative catalyst emphasizes how trauma is neither discrete nor individual. It is collective, haunting spaces and relationships. The theory of haunting in *Beloved* aligns with postcolonial critiques of historical erasure; traumatic memory persists as a reminder of violence that dominant history seeks to bury.

In Sivakami's work, the violence of caste is omnipresent but not supernatural. The trauma is rooted in socioeconomic exploitation and gendered violence, producing psychological and

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bodily effects that characters must articulate and resist. Memory here is political: recalling humiliation becomes an act of making injustice visible.

Resistance in both literatures emerges not only as protest against external dominance, but also through internal transformations of self-perception and collective solidarity. Morrison's characters attempt to reclaim humanity through storytelling; community rituals and shared histories become sites of healing.

Sivakami's protagonists engage in political action and personal defiance. Thangam's assertion of dignity and the questioning of patriarchal authority within the Dalit movement reflect an evolving consciousness that refuses totalizing definitions of identity and agency.

Morrison foregrounds Black women's experiences as distinct from those of Black men and white women. Sethe's maternal trauma and Pecola's victimization reveal how racial and gendered violence compound. Morrison's focus on interiority exposes the emotional landscapes of women whose bodies and desires are regulated by intersecting inequalities.

In Sivakami's narratives, Dalit women face "double oppression"—first as caste subjects and second as women in patriarchal systems. By cantering Dalit women's voices, Sivakami destabilizes narratives that marginalize gender within caste studies. Her critique extends to male allies who fail to integrate women's issues into broader struggles against caste.

Literary Strategies

Morrison and Sivakami employ different literary strategies to represent marginal lives.

- **Morrison's use of non-linear time**, symbolic language, and multiple perspectives disrupts dominant narrative forms, inviting readers to inhabit the interiority of characters shaped by historical violence.
- **Sivakami's realist style** offers direct engagement with social structures, using clear narratives that foreground everyday life and political engagement. Her prose emphasizes material conditions and cultural specificity.

Despite stylistic divergences, both authors amplify voices otherwise excluded from literary canons and reclaim narrative authority.

Comparative Insights

While rooted in distinct socio-historical contexts, the African American and Dalit experiences share key features:

1. **Systemic Exclusion**: Racial and caste systems structure inequality and dehumanization.
2. **Psychological Impact**: Oppression inflects self-perception and communal relations.
3. **Gendered Violence**: Women occupy complex positions at the intersection of race/caste and patriarchy.
4. **Resistance and Self-Formation**: Characters evolve through resistance and narrative reclamation.

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However, differences also emerge. Racial oppression in the United States is codified through legal and social segregation, whereas caste oppression in India intertwines with religious and cultural structures. Morrison's narratives dwell in memory's haunting spaces, while Sivakami anchors consciousness in concrete socio-political conditions. These differences underscore how specific histories shape modes of literary representation.

Conclusion

This comparative study shows that African American and Dalit literatures perform vital work in presenting marginalized experiences as central to understanding social injustice. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* and Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* and *The Taming of Women* illuminate how oppression operates in overlapping structures of race, caste, and gender. They also demonstrate how literature becomes a space of resistance, identity reconstruction, and collective awakening. By juxtaposing these texts, this paper contributes to transnational dialogues on oppression, memory, and agency, illustrating that while historical formations of marginalization differ, the quest for dignity and self-definition resonates across communities.

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