

## **Rape, Incest and Paedophilia in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita***

**Ruqayya Bahar**  
Research Scholar,  
Department of English,  
Aligarh Muslim University,  
Aligarh, India.

**Article History:** Submitted-29/07/2021, Revised-19/08/2021, Accepted-21/08/2021, Published-31/08/2021.

### **Abstract:**

Throughout her life, a woman is silenced by the changing male authority over her. Whether a girl of thirteen or a woman at thirty, men including her own father and husband can abuse and silence her, validating it by accusing the very woman of bringing such vicious fate upon herself. Here, the so-called “safe” home can be an even more dangerous place for her. This paper seeks to analyse two such works, *The Color Purple* by the American feminist writer Alice Walker and *Lolita* by the Russian American novelist Vladimir Nabokov. Surviving a living hell with their incestuous fathers, both the female protagonists face a near similar fate. Packed with parallel themes of rape, incest, paedophilia, and broken homes to mention a few, this paper seeks to analyse these two much-contested works where women are muted by having no say in a patriarchal domain.

**Keywords:** Home, incest, control, rape, paedophilia, silence.

Throughout her life, a woman is silenced by the changing male authority over her. Whether a girl of thirteen or a woman at thirty, men including her own father and husband can abuse and silence her, validating it by accusing the very woman of bringing such vicious fate upon herself. Here, the so-called “safe” home can be an even more dangerous place for her. This paper seeks to analyse two such works, *The Color Purple* by the American feminist writer Alice Walker and *Lolita* by the Russian American novelist Vladimir Nabokov. Packed with parallel themes of rape, incest, paedophilia, and broken homes to mention a few, this paper seeks to examine these two much-contested works where women are muted by having no say in a patriarchal domain. Surviving a living hell with their incestuous fathers, both the female protagonists face a near similar fate. *Lolita* is left under the care of her lascivious stepfather who is seduced by her beauty and even validates his actions in the name of love, Celie's

experience is even more horrific where she is subjected to rape and physical assault, being constantly called ugly, incompatible and unworthy of any affection. Rape, incest and abuse are therefore the focal issues discussed in both the works whereby the patriarchal culture controls the female bodies and existence, stimulating objectification and silence.

Rape and incest narratives have been historically dominated by patriarchal discourses. The initial lines of the novel *Lolita* itself set the tone for the rest of the novel where the female protagonist is to face a dominant male father figure for years to come. "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul", the repetition of the word 'my' evidently echoes authority where the stepfather has already subsumed Lolita as his object of desire and control (Nabokov ch. 1). On the other hand, in *The Color Purple*, Walker very craftily starts with Celie's father Alphonso's words, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy", expressive of Alphonso's dominance over Celie (Walker 1).

In most of her works as well as in the epistolary novel *The Color Purple*, Walker centres round the subject of dual repression of black women in the American society. She argues that black women initially experience racial segregation by the American or white community and later a second level of repression from the men of their own race. These men, therefore, impose a dual standard of racism against black women. The novel mirrors Walker's attitude towards a positive and productive life, despite facing the toughest of challenges. Her protagonist triumphs over the hardest challenges she ever had to face in life and gets through with everything, forgiving the ones who wronged her (B. Williams 107). For Nabokov's eponymous heroine, on the other hand, death serves as the only respite from her torment. She flees her abusive stepfather in an attempt to start a new life but fails miserably. Incested in her childhood, Lolita can neither forget nor forgive, and she refuses to return to Humbert. Ever since her early teens, she suffers for no fault of her own where death comes to her rescue at last.

Walker introduces us to a young Celie, betrayed by life and consequences, writing letters to God. This young woman endures what is by all means only abuse and misery. Her purpose behind writing these letters to God is clear, and to quote Celie's father, before he rapes her, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'll kill your mammy" (Walker 1). Given her current hopelessness and misery, God is her only support, the only one she can tell about her miserable existence. Here, at her home, she is left without any love and support from both of her parents (B. Williams 107). Where the rape of a daughter by her own father is significantly disturbing, the issue has more symbolic or rather a more common perception held against

women in the patriarchal viewpoint. Once raped, she is now rendered “used goods”, someone who is not worth any care in this world. Celie, therefore, loses her trust in society, in humanity and in her own family and home, all at once (108). Walker in the very initial pages itself expose the harsh treatment of men against women, whether belonging to their own family or outside. To such men as Celie’s father, women are mere use and dispose units, only to be used for furnishing their lust and desires. Celie in the story is a mere replacement of her sick mother. Once her mother dies, Alphonso replaces her with a younger woman and later starts seeking Nettie, Celie’s younger sister for pleasure. (108).

There are three prominent patriarchal figures in the novel namely Celie’s father Alphonso, her husband Albert and her God. In her very first letter to God, Celie acquaints us to her Pa, the first patriarchal figure in the novel, who not just robs Celie of her selfhood and respect but also attempts to silence her by commanding her “to shut up and git used to it”, inferring that there is no chance for her to get out of this abusive relationship (Roshnavand 26, Walker). The second figure of her husband is just as dominating where Celie is married off to Albert without even seeking her consent. In this marriage, she is brutally raped and beaten by her husband who is disgusted by Celie’s physical appearance. Here, the patriarchal position of the male phallus is the ultimate source of power and authority, something that deems women inferior and demands to be envied and desired by women (Roshnavand 26). It is evident in two instances. Firstly, when Celie’s dad threatens her to keep shut or it “would kill your mammy” and later on when she is beaten by Albert and he justifies it by saying that wives are supposed to be beaten occasionally (Walker 1). Finally, her picture of God is that of a patriarch, who is “big and old and tall and graybearded and white” (201). Having been assaulted by her own father as a child and subsequently by her husband, Celie directly associates wisdom, authority and power with manliness and comes to recognize God as one supreme man intently looking like the ones who control and manipulate her (Roshnavand 32).

Walker also sheds light on the jezebel stereotype levied against black women in white American society. According to this stereotypical belief, black women are inherently or naturally, “promiscuous, loose, immoral, sexually aggressive, and lacking sexual restraint.” The white slave owners used this very generalization or stereotypical representation of black women as a means to justify/legitimize their control over the minds and bodies of black women slaves, reducing them to mere sex objects. Alphonso is in fact, playing the jezebel card on Celie, blaming her for all her misfortunes saying she is “evil an up to no good” and therefore “a bad influence on my other girls” (Walker 9). On that account, Alphonso legitimizes the rape and harassment by presenting Celie as the embodiment of this very jezebel generalization who

very much lured him into it, as well as enjoyed the assault. Defaming Celie, he successfully acquits himself from the offence since the assault as well as the resulted pregnancy are credited to Celie's "intrinsic moral defects" only (Roshnavand 27).

Alphonso also threatens Celie of a strained mother-daughter relationship since Celie is the sexual opponent of her mother. This misogynist scheme did work and somehow resulted in a bitter relationship, disrupting any possibility of love and bonding between the two women (27). He even gets her married to a much older Albert who initially wants to marry Nettie, whom Alphonso apparently wants to keep for himself, since she is still quite young and fresh to be reaped by somebody else. Celie who is no longer a virgin is therefore easily given away to this new man. This instance makes it quite evident how Alphonso seeks mere physical advantage from his daughters and once they are 'unfit' for further abuse, they may be passed on to the next man (Padhi 2).

Celie's life in her own home had been a living hell and her new life after marriage turns out to be just as traumatizing. The description of her marital rape by Albert is just as dehumanizing. Walker highlights how within the domestic space of home, fathers and husbands are situated as ruling figures (Colebrook 105). With justified beating and torment, her entire existence is controlled by men but on the other hand, one cannot possibly neglect women's submission to such controlling patriarchal attitude. They are mostly dependent on the family members who might as well be their own abusers but instead of stepping out for confrontation and legal action they choose to remain voiceless because the fear of getting rebuked instead of the actual culprit is too strong.

Some women even give in and believe they have brought such fate upon themselves for their own mistakes. This is a quite typical tendency of a rape victim to blame herself for her adversity. Celie also blames herself for her recurrent rapes. She feels shame and disgrace as a woman. Hereafter, she confides in God to purify, cleanse, and purge herself from the degenerate shame and remorse of her rape and all the more of a resulted incest (Roshnavand 32). However, these personal confessions to God highlight Celie's personal and inner longing for a sympathetic presence in her life. Despite her misery, there is no one she can reach out to, no one who sympathizes with her, urging her to keep shut for good. Where *Lolita* in Nabokov's novel was eventually given a chance to escape from her oppressor, Celie couldn't find help from anyone around because they were all in some way or the other playing roles of her oppressors including her God.

Given her deconstructive mindset, Walker quite explicitly attacks the fixed conventional boundaries in her works. It is quite natural for people to believe that the rape of an American black woman is caused by a white American man where it often goes unnoticed that black women are equally vulnerable in their black community. Walker outrageously challenges this notion expounding how such an assault by a member of one's own community can be additionally disturbing (20).

It would be wrong, however, to limit Walker's intent of writing this novel just for the cause of the particular race or women belonging to a single race. She is not just addressing black women, but women across races and boundaries, she intends to portray how a rape victim can resist and endure the trauma, rise above her denoted status in a patriarchal world and transform into a wholly individualized self yet again. The rape though by no means is justified, it only acts as a catalyst and transforms Celie into a self-assertive liberated woman by the end (21). This dark poor uneducated Celie becomes a symbol of inspiration and hope to many others who have met a similar fate.

The dominant patriarchal ideology however still disregards male responsibility in a rape instance holding the woman accountable for such an action (20). This chauvinistic attitude denies female space thereby weighing down the person in question i.e. the victim under cultural/ social pressures where she can no longer identify with her past "untainted" self (21).

There is likewise a typical societal misperception about rape that it is the fault of the victim usually a woman who welcomes or incites men by her provocative clothes or conduct or because she ventures outside her previously allocated limitation. It, therefore, becomes quite easy for a man to lay the entire blame trap on a woman who in the eyes of the society, is a sinner, a miscreant who deserves no mercy. This is quite evident in Nabokov's magnum opus *Lolita*. Written in confessional mode, several parts of the novel are spent specifying Humbert's horde methods for convincing the twelve-year-old Dolores Haze otherwise known as Lolita, into complete silence and alienation from society working out his way of raping her for several years.

Lolita's story is recounted in a manner such accounts have been told for ages: in the expressions of men and according to Humbert, "it was she who seduced me" (Miller; Nabokov ch. 29). With a parallel theme of incest as in Walker's *The Color Purple*, Nabokov's *Lolita* is an account of absolute obsession and uncontrollable lust of a thirty-seven-year-old Humbert for a much younger twelve-year-old Lolita who happens to be his stepdaughter. While Humbert is not Lolita's biological father, Alphonso on the other hand is and it only shows how even blood relations do not matter. The male lust is so strong in both the novels that the men

victimize the closest possible female figures, the ones most easily accessible to them. Humbert marries Lolita's mother in order to ensure close proximity to her. Alphonso adopts a similar approach where he rapes his own daughter at home without giving two thoughts about the fact that he is raping the very daughter he raised all these years. Paedophilia is therefore inseparably part of both the stories and along these lines, it is worth mentioning that both the works have stayed provocative for ages.

*Lolita* is a first-person confessional account written in prison chronicling the protagonist's severe obsession with young girls, his control and consequent loss of the stepdaughter Lolita whom he acquires through marriage and the eventual murder of her abductor Clare Quilty.

He starts by saying "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul" (Nabokov ch.1). Further, he states his earlier love for Annabel. He reincarnates his former lover in Lolita and only manages to get over his past by embodying the late Annabel into his new love interest, Lolita. Along these lines, he denies Lolita an existence of her own. Here, Lolita is the 'signifier' whose meaning is always dependent upon the 'signified' that is Annabel. Lolita's existence for Humbert, as a result, is indebted to Annabel's prior existence in his life. But to look at it with a post- Saussurean outlook, one sees how meaning is always contested on the play of a number of signifiers, "in language there are only differences." So, in order for the signifier 'Lolita' to acquire meaning, if any, she must not and possibly cannot have a meaning in itself. She is, therefore, nothing but a rebirth or reincarnation of Annabel where a signified 'Lolita' cannot be achieved. Humbert while reincarnating Annabel into Lolita however seeks to blur the distinctions between the two, eliminating the differences fusing the two distinct 'Annabel' and 'Lolita' together as one. Here he seeks to recreate a perfect Annabel out of Lolita, as he says, "everything they shared made one of them" (Schweighauser 256; Nabokov ch. 10). The story progresses further on these lines and Humbert's expectations out of his 'nymphet'.

At the very first sight of Lolita, Humbert realizes his newly developed lust for her and starts devising his plan to marry her mother Charlotte in order to stay close to her. However, once Charlotte realizes his real intent behind the marriage, she confronts him for his paedophilic temperament. She is determined to expose him but unfortunately gets run over by a car and dies. Hereafter, Humbert being Lolita's stepfather becomes her only respite.

Lolita's stance like most of the girls can be understood in terms of male privilege in a family unit where a girl from a very young age is convinced of her father's predominance.

This could be due to social or economic reasons and sometimes because of the simple fact that men are the masters of every household (Beauvoir 395). Similarly, Lolita is taught to bow before this patriarchal figure of her stepfather Humbert.

Both Lolita and the stepfather, Humbert share an unnatural relationship throughout the course of the novel. Where the unknowing, uneducated at first loves this thirty-seven-year-old man with a sentimental crush, Lolita's stance can still be justified for the absence of parental guidance, she is a mere child who has been left without the protection of a mother and the only one she has is this lusty father of hers whose intentions she might not be well aware of. This attractive much older man on the other hand desires her in an explicitly obsessive way, calling it love (Lingeswaran 153). Humbert wants to dominate every aspect of Lolita's life both as a patriarchal father figure as well as a domineering lover. He has absolute authority over her whereas she is frail before him (153). Moreover, Humbert through his language in the novel successfully entices his audience and succeeds in presenting himself as an off-tracked pitiful paedophile. He successfully convinces the audience of his impeding normalcy claiming that his perversion is but a sickness. With this contention, he excuses himself from any blame, as already implied that he is unable to control his sickness. The earlier trauma of being his first love Annabel accounts for his current disorder. A large portion of the initial pages is dedicated to relating his present condition to his previous involvement with Annabel and this is used later when he sees Lolita for the first time. The memory of Annabel draws him towards her. This assertion adds to his paedophilia which he says, he cannot either fight or control (Griffiths 91).

As it turns out to be, Humbert quite persuasively convinces the readers of his paedophilic behaviour, he believes it is completely normal to have an intimate relationship with children given that he is sexually aroused around them and such traits are beyond his restraint (L C.A. Williams 47). Lolita the very name through which he asserts Dolores Haze's body and psyche convinces the reader of his triumph over her entire existence. In fact, the ending syllable 'ta' in the given nickname is somehow fashioned by him to regulate her with a dental stop (Griffiths 89). Then he subtly seduces Lolita, tempting her to confide in him. He controls her conduct through sex as well as other material things, giving her little freedom to do what she wants as long as it keeps her under his complete control away from any other presence (L C.A. Williams 47). Above all, he emotionally manipulates her to keep her solely for his pleasure. Eventually, Humbert loses his so-called 'nymphet' just like he lost Annabel and the cause of Lolita's death to a large extent is Humbert himself.

"Lolita moaned and coughed and shivered in my embrace", says Humbert in one of the instances from the novel when Lolita builds up a fever (Nabokov ch. 12). Rather than a

medical consultation, Humbert concludes that it is his warm embrace she needs most (Smith). There could have been a lot of passion and lust in the relationship but eventually, Humbert does realize that there had been no attachment or mutual affection for one another (L C.A. Williams 52). While he claims his love for Lolita knows no boundaries, Lolita never reciprocates this love he has for her whether real or infatuated. Humbert, by and large, fails to focus on the young girl he holds hostage and her actual needs as a kid, acknowledging it at last when it is already too late to make any amends.

Additionally, the readers only discern Lolita through Humbert's one-sided narrative, therefore it becomes quite easy for one to see Lolita as a sexually promiscuous child (54). While Humbert accuses Lolita to be the one who first lured him into developing this incestuous relationship, the child sexual abuse specialist Gail Hornor maintains that an overtly sexualized behaviour is the most striking indicator of a troubled child particularly the one who has been abused sexually. Nabokov choosing the name Dolores which means pain or torment in Spanish can be no coincidence either. The very name corresponds to the fate of this poor unfortunate nymphet. The Iranian writer Azar Nafisi too outlines the young girl's trial by maintaining that "the desperate truth about Lolita's story is not the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man, but the confiscation of one individual by another" (56).

While Humbert claims he loves Lolita, for her abductor Clare Quilty she is a merely a hollow fancy. For him, Lolita is but an object to serve him as long as he deems necessary. This man, a child pornographer is a representation of Humbert's former self, his former nympholepsy and self-centeredness. Not being able to come to terms with his previous existence of a child predator, Humbert kills Quilty (Lingeswaran161). Considering Freud's theory of projection, he is, therefore, an obvious projection of Humbert's former self which Humbert refuses to acknowledge any longer (161).

Additionally, it must be noticed that Lolita willingly wants to live the rest of her life with Quilty who has no affection for her and not with Humbert who asserts to be frantically in love with her. To put simply, it is because of the unwanted and unreasonable intimacy he tries to keep with Lolita that she is compelled to take this harsh decision (Grogan 235). She is literally on a threshold where she chooses the life of a child pornographic actor rather than living with Humbert. Humbert thus in every sense denies Lolita the existence of a poor young girl of her age (235).

Lolita is not just a mere teenager; she is by all accounts an illustration of Nabokov's artistic imagination. Here in the novel, she is the ideal, the most desired work of a creator. The



creator here is Humbert, he crafts a Lolita who is not just an ordinary young girl but a skilfully moulded creation of his mental faculty. She has no existence outside this given space. This is another motivation behind why Humbert calls her 'Carmen' where the Latin word 'Carmen' stands for creation itself (Lingeswaran 184). Lolita however only remains limited to Humbert's fancy itself; she has no freedom of her own. She is the most beautiful 'thing' he ever crafted. She is solely meant for his pleasure and it takes quite a while for him to learn that Lolita is, in fact, no fancy of his but an actual young woman.

The first part of the book is flooded with Humbert's passion for Lolita, his desire to be near her, yet in the later part ends up losing his nymphet. On finding her married to a man, living her life without him albeit still miserably, he comes to realize that she is not his mere fancy, she is an actual young woman. A woman with the existence of her own. As a result, he is flooded with guilt and remorse of having robbed Lolita not only of her childhood but the dignity and honour of a woman (185). She is no longer his Carmen or Lolita as he calls her, but Mrs Richardson Schiller. Her appearance has changed too as she now resembles her dead mother. Humbert recalling Charlotte when he sees Lolita towards the end of the novel can be seen in two respects, first, she actually looks like her mother, more mature and womanlike and second, she has a lifeless appearance recalling the dead Charlotte, nearing her demise (186).

The last few pages of the book are loaded with self-guilt and accountability for denying Lolita her childhood and life. Nonetheless, it is too late now and nothing can be changed about it. He finds Lolita on her deathbed, she won't be the same girl anymore, won't live with him any longer, doomed to go to her last resting place in labour (186).

Few feminists including the eminent scholar Susan Brownmiller maintain that a crime as dreadful as rape is bound to happen, it is biologically unavoidable and along these lines completely normal given a man's ability to rape and a woman's parallel helplessness (Roshnavand 22). The responsibility therefore again somehow falls on the woman who got herself raped. Contrarily, Carine M. Mardorossian, dismissed Brownmiller's vindication of a man's raping tendency and a woman's inborn rapability, given that such ghettoization of rape and assault incorrectly exhibits that the offence originates from "normative rather than deviant identities." She thereby sustains that rape is not an incorrigible consequence of the two contrasting biological tendencies but the faltered position of a man being superior, legitimizing his predominance over women (23).

To conclude, it is clear that if one spends a lifetime engrossing the fact that any kind of violence being perpetrated upon a woman's body is self-earned and called for, be it the kind of clothes she chooses to wear or the kind of attitude she has towards her male

counterparts, quite possibly one will not notice either Celie or Lolita's morality (Miller). Both works highlight the complexity of paedophilia and incestuous father-daughter relationships and in real life call for a collective effort where home is the primary unit to initiate this change from.

### Works Cited:

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 2010.

Colebrook, Claire. *Gender*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Griffiths, Clara. *The Writing of Taboo in Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita and Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. 2018. University of Lyon, Dissertation. *Scd-resnum*, [https://scd-resnum.univ-lyon3.fr/out/memoires/langues/2018\\_griffiths\\_c.pdf](https://scd-resnum.univ-lyon3.fr/out/memoires/langues/2018_griffiths_c.pdf).

Grogan, Christine. *The Wound and the Voiceless: The Insidious Trauma of Father-Daughter Incest in Six American Texts*. 2011. University of South Florida, Dissertation. *Scholar Commons*, <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/3129/>.

Lingeswaran, V. *Reading Select Novels of Thomas Pynchon, John Fowles and Vladimir Nabokov as Metafictions*. 2014. University of Madras, Dissertation. *Shodhganga*, <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/228560>.

Miller, E. Ce. "I Re-Read 'Lolita' In The Age Of #MeToo & It Was Even Worse Than I Remembered". *Bustle*, 27 Jun 2018, <https://www.bustle.com/p/i-re-read-lolita-in-the-age-of-metoo-im-no-longer-standing-for-its-overt-misogyny-9567151>. Accessed 29 May. 2021.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. Penguin, 2011. Kindle file.

Padhi, Prasanta Kumar. "A Study of Celie's Emancipation in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2015, pp. 1-5. [http://www.ijhssi.org/papers/v4\(2\)/Version-1/A04210105.pdf](http://www.ijhssi.org/papers/v4(2)/Version-1/A04210105.pdf). Accessed 20 Apr. 2021.

Roshnavand, Farshid Nowrouzi. "Rape as Catalyst to Epistolary Discourse and Womanist Bonding: Alice Walker's Reconstructive Strategy in *The Color Purple*." *Logos and Littera: Journal of Interdisciplinary Approaches to Text*, vol. 5, no.3, 2019, pp. 19-42. *Researchgate*, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331821117\\_RAPE\\_AS\\_CATALYST\\_TO\\_EPISTO](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331821117_RAPE_AS_CATALYST_TO_EPISTO)

LARY\_DISCOURSE\_AND\_WOMANIST\_BONDING\_ALICE\_WALKER'S\_RECONSTRUCTIVE\_STRATEGY\_IN\_THE\_COLOR\_PURPLE. Accessed 23 Apr. 2021.

Schweighauser, Philipp. "Discursive Killings: Intertextuality, Aestheticization, and Death in Nabokov's "Lolita"." *American Studies*, vol.44, no.2, 1999, pp. 255- 267. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41157458>. Accessed 18 May. 2021.

Smith, Zachary Snowdon. "Reading 'Lolita' in the West." *Quillette*, 26 Jan. 2019, <https://quillette.com/2019/01/26/reading-lolita-in-the-west/>. Accessed 2 May. 2021.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Pocket Books, 1985.

Williams, Betsy. "The Power of Women's Solidarity: A Study of Alice Walker's The Color Purple." *Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, vol.2, no.4, 2017, pp. 105-117. *IJRDO*, <https://www.ijrdo.org/index.php/sshr/article/download/695/644/>. Accessed 8 Apr. 2021.

Williams, Lucia C. A. "Still Intrigued with Lolita: Nabokov's Visionary Work on Child Sexual Abuse." *The Nabokovian*, 2016, [https://thenabokovian.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/NABOKV-L-0027757\\_\\_\\_Williams\\_2016\\_StillIntriguedWithLol\\_Lolita.pdf](https://thenabokovian.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/NABOKV-L-0027757___Williams_2016_StillIntriguedWithLol_Lolita.pdf). Accessed 8 May. 2021.