



**Voices Against Silence: Patriarchal Critique and Female Resilience in
Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

Ruksar Saifi

Department of English,

Dyal Singh College,

University of Delhi.

rukhsarsaifi0820@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n3.4>

Abstract:

This study provides a feminist critique of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) by analysing their portrayals of interaction with patriarchal society as well as their representation of female resilience through nonlinear, multidimensional processes. In examining African American literature within the framework of its cultural and social histories, these writers depict patriarchy as a multidimensional phenomenon and understand its operation through cultural practices, including domesticity, sexuality, religion, slavery, and racial capitalism. By using Black feminist theory, trauma theory, and feminist narratology as theoretical frameworks for our analysis of the texts, we assert that African American women's literature presents female resilience not simply as survival or triumph; rather, it is created through painful processes of the body (i.e., remembering and narrating) and as a result of collectivism. Walker emphasizes spiritual enlightenment, exploration of sexuality, and sisterhood; while Morrison emphasizes historical trauma, grief over motherhood, and community memory to assert ethical mandates. Using comparative analyses, we will demonstrate how African American women's literature redefines resistance from merely surviving to continually reclaiming humanity from patriarchal and racial violence.

Keywords: patriarchy, female resilience, trauma, black feminism, voice, memory, African American literature.

Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) are essential works within African American women's literature both for their literary quality and because of the bravado with which they examine the power systems that have constructed and impacted Black women's lives throughout history. While these two novels take place in the contemporary period at the end of the twentieth century, they are both deeply imbedded within a historical context. The novels also examine how patriarchy, racism, and multiple forms of exploitation are interrelated factors that have always caused Black women to experience violence and erasure (Collins 22-24). Both of these books depict women who exist on the edges of societal and historical awareness; they chart their inner states, moral development, and resistance as they are denied agency. The patriarchy in both works is more than the predominance of male authority in family or interpersonal relations. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) will be remembered as seminal texts in African American women's literature; not only because they are excellent literary works but also because they depict honestly the power relations that determine the lives of Black women. The books were written toward the end of the twentieth century, but they share a massive historical legacy and represent the interconnected belief systems of patriarchy/racism/exploitation that have historically made Black women vulnerable to violence and erasure. Both female-centred novels depict women who live outside mainstream social and historical realities, showing the interiority and morality of these characters as well as how they resist through an environment of lack of power. The patriarchy depicted in both novels exists beyond simply being a greater number of males than females in homes or personal relationships but has also been

institutionalized within social institutions such as marriage and religion; moreover, it is deeply entrenched through cultural customs and racial hierarchies. For example, in *The Color Purple*, patriarchal oppression is shown within the private realm of the family (e.g., where women experience rape, forced marriage, and mental subjugation). Patriarchal systems in *Beloved* are deeply connected to slavery because black women's bodies were owned and controlled by men and society. Spoiling children for their physical labor was at the heart of this system. By situating women's pain in these preceding historical contexts (Collins 30), Walker and Morrison proactively resist the simplistic narrative that attributes women's pain to individual meanness and instead depict patriarchy as a historical and systemic issue. In addition, the novels undermine stereotypes that bind the lives of black women to a victimization narrative. Rather than providing passive accounts of their lack of response against oppression, Walker and Morrison define resistance as an active, conflicted, and frequently painful experience. The female resilience in both these works, is not expressed through immediate empowerment or just a triumph. Instead, female resilience is a process of telling, remembering, healing and interacting. Through Celie's development from silence to finding her voice in *The Color Purple*, and Sethe's struggle to find a way to live with her traumatic history in *Beloved*, we see that resiliency is a process that isn't linear nor complete, but one filled with setbacks, an ambivalence of morals, and emotional fragility. Each reflects how costly it is to survive in patriarchal cultures. The paper will argue that through a comparative analysis of *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*, we can achieve a more complex understanding of how literature by African American women challenges patriarchy and defines resistance. While Walker focuses on elements of spiritual awareness, sexual self-exploration, and womanist relational support as forms of healing, Morrison

employs themes of historical trauma, maternal grief, and community memory as ethical imperatives that must continually be acknowledged. The comparative reading reveals that although resilience manifests itself narratively in different ways depending on the historical context, it is always based on the desire for voice, community, and ethical testimony.

Theoretical framework: black feminism, trauma theory, feminist narratology

Black feminist theory provides the basis for this study; that of Patricia Hill Collins and her ideas on the way Black women's lives are constructed through the interaction of multiple systems of oppression which thereby call for different ways of knowing. Espousing that Black women's knowing is developed through experience, interaction and push back, Collins positions narrative as a central source of empowerment (Collins 251-255). The Black feminist theoretical framework is critical to understanding the lives of Celie and Sethe since their narratives offer alternate representations than the ones provided by historical and literary texts. Trauma theory also offers another avenue to examine Morrison's use of narrative forms. The analyses of rape narratives done by Wendy S. Hesford reveal the ethical problems associated with the representation of trauma (especially sexual violence) (Hesford 196-201). Hesford's finding that trauma narratives tend not to offer a linear timeline or closure features a fragmentation of form; they often repeat, fragment and remain silent (Hesford 198-203). In the novel *Beloved*, act as both figurative manifestations of unresolved historical trauma and also elude forgetting. Another element of feminist narratology can be used as the lens through which to view how the various forms of writing (e.g., letters, oral testimonies, sermons, fragmented memories) resist patriarchal authority by giving credibility to women's voices, and providing access to their own subjective realities. Narration in both novels works to create an element of

transformation, allowing for the reconceptualization of a woman's identity through the use of language rather than merely providing an account of events. This paper will explore both novels through the lens of black feminist criticism and trauma studies, examining how the act of telling a story can serve as a political and ethical act. Walker and Morrison utilize letters, speech, sermons, and memory in their texts to centre on women's narratives and to challenge the dominant patriarchal structure of how knowledge is created (i.e., the silencing of black women's experiences). Therefore, both novels demonstrate that healing and resistance are collective rather than individual endeavours and that both are culturally shaped by the intersection of history and community. The paper demonstrates how both *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* have redefined the notion of resistance as being more about reclaiming one's sense of self after experiencing gender and racial violence than about seeking revenge on those who oppressed you. By engaging critically with systems of patriarchy while simultaneously exploring their own complex connections to female resilience, Walker and Morrison are both writers within a long line of authors who believe that Black women can endure, remember, and envision a world where they will no longer endure oppression.

Patriarchal violence, religion and silencing in *The Color Purple*

Patriarchy, as depicted in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, manifests itself in acts of sexual and domestic violence. Prior to her marriage to Mister, Celie is raped by her stepfather, and this rape establishes the legacy of domestic violence she will encounter in her marriage. As a result, the violence that Celie encounters throughout the novel occurs within the context of a society that normalizes violence against the bodies of Black women as sites for labour production and reproduction, but not for freedom. In addition, Celie's abuser explicitly

demands her silence, which is held to be her primary means of surviving as a Black female victim of domestic violence. This view is reflected in feminist critiques of enforced silence as a means for women to survive in a patriarchal society. Religion has played an integral role in the enforced silence of women in patriarchal societies. Celie's early letters to God illustrate her internalization of a patriarchal conception of God, which she perceives as white, male, and distant from her (Walker 1-5). This concept of God is thus both non-redemptive in addition to reinforcing passivity and submission. Walker overturns this view of God, by gradually developing Celie (the main character) from a person whose spirituality is based on hierarchical submission, to a person who experiences pleasure through embodiment (Walker 175-181). Olakunle George's interpretation of Walker's global feminist perspective illustrates how Walker critiques the way Western patriarchy defines religion, through an adoption of a spiritual viewpoint that is based on inclusivity and celebrates life (George 358-362). Walker's treatment of marriage as an institution describes a legally sanctioned and culturally supported way that men dominate women. Celie, is treated as property, being transferred from one man to another with no voice in the process, and is expected to endure with no complaints (Walker 9-15). Walker demonstrates that patriarchal power is maintained not only through violence, but also through the day-to-day normalization of women's subordinate place in society.

Slavery, ownership and gendered oppression in *Beloved*

In *Beloved*, patriarchal rule has a strong connection to the slavery of race. This system negatively exploits the female reproductive function through violence/abuse and challenges their maternal role. Sethe's experience of trauma is created by this system where her identity as a mother is perpetually threatened by a force (school teacher) working to

destroy her motherhood (Morrison 18-25). The ability of the schoolteacher to create scientific categories for enslaved women further dehumanizes them, reducing them to being biological creations. Morrison uses a narrative style that attempts to minimize sensational or explicit descriptions on rape and physical punishment to demonstrate the limits of representation (Morrison 35-40). In Hesford's words, this refusal to efface trauma and the ethical implications of trauma to represent what happened reflects the sense of the ghost of *Beloved* returning from the repressed, wherein a traumatic reality continuously and impulsively exhibits itself, without resolution (Hesford 196-200). In contrast, Sethe's act of infanticide is one of the most argued in the novel and does not provide a moralistic resolution, rather it forces the reader to consider the horrendous choices that the combination of patriarchal power with slave labour creates (Morrison 163-166). Sethe's actions are therefore revealed to be both the maternal love described in the novel and a result of systemic violence.

Women's Resilience through Their Voices and Stories

Both of these novels demonstrate how resilience starts with finding your voice, but that is a long and bumpy road and not necessarily an empowering event. In *The Color Purple* Celie's voice when she begins writing, is solely her own; she uses writing as an expression of pain, fear and resignation due to the effects of sexual abuse and being silenced. Through the act of writing, Celie grows from a victim/sufferer to a self-advocating individual capable of standing up for herself, expressing herself as she learns more about herself and what she stands for, and envisioning different ways of living. Celie's evolving narrative voice is an indication of her increasing level of agency; she develops from a passive experiential sufferer to an active self-advocate (Walker 175-206). Shug Avery's role is

essential in this process because she validates Celie's experiences and supports her to vocalize her long-held emotions; Celie's voice transitions from one of survival to the emergence of a self (Walker 110-122). In *Beloved*, voices are not sequential or confession-based; they are fragmented, recursive, and have a communal aspect, as opposed to being sequential or confession-based. Sethe's memories do not emerge directly, as they are influenced by shame, sorrow, and the psycho-cultural legacy of slavery; rather, they emerge through repetition, silence, and the body. Morrison contends that such a fragmented story does not mean that resilience is absent but that trauma has prevented resilience from being exhibited. Sethe's narrative emerges solely as a result of her engagement with others - Caroline's listening, Paul D's painful experiences, and ultimately the intervention of a community. Morrison demonstrates that healing occurs through relationships and through others' recognition of suffering. Therefore, *Beloved* redefines voice as an ethical, relational act of memory and survival (Morrison 308-321).

Body, Sexuality, and Spiritual Resistance

Walker presents an alternative representation of female sexuality as a radical challenge to the patriarchal ideologies which have historically defined, restricted, and exploited the female bodies of black women. In the book *The Color Purple*, Celie's sexuality is intrinsically tied to violence, oppression, and shame which alienate her completely from her own body. Celie's patriarchal marriage utilizes her sexual being as a tool, taking away her pleasure, agency, and ability to define herself. Meeting Shug Avery initiates for Celie a momentous change away from this patriarchal ideology; one that seeks to redefine intimacy as relationship rather than domination (Walker 75-95). Through the recognition provided by Shug, the embrace of sexual desire is also embraced as a means for self-

exploration, restoration and rekindling one's spirit. Walker explicitly connects the experience of erotic pleasure with self-regard; the joy of being in one's body is seen as an act of resistance against systems of oppression that have historically robbed Black females of control over their own bodies. According to Dorothea Buehler's comments, Walker's focus on experiencing pleasure with one's body represents a profound break from the traditional narrative of black female sexual identities because those identities were represented only within constructs of exploitation, surveillance or moral condemnation (Buehler 430-433). Celie celebrates her sexuality as a moment of liberation, both personally and spiritually. In contrast, while the figure of *Beloved* presents the body primarily as a place of accumulated historical trauma rather than immediate pleasure, the presence of Sethe's scarred back (compared to a "chokecherry tree") is both a physical representation and metaphor for her physical and emotional pain (Morrison 20). Morrison specifically uses the body as a means of showing how slavery and its effects live on within us even after they are over — there is still memory of pain held in our bodies. The experience of sex in *Beloved* carries the themes of force, loss, and fear; there isn't much opportunity for straightforward intimacy. However, Morrison does not suggest that bodily healing does not exist; rather she shows that through the interactions of care, touch, and ritual, healing is possible. Through Baby Suggs' speeches in the Clearing, Morrison wants to remind ex-slaves to love their hands, mouths, and hearts - essentially all parts of their bodies that they were taught to hate while enslaved (Morrison 103-105). Thus, there are opportunities for reclaiming dignity and communal memory through the physical act of loving your body (embodiment), and this can be done independent from the experiences of

being reduced to property. Ultimately, Morrison recasts bodily healing from an erasure of pain to ethical remembrance and compassion.

Community, Memory, and Collective Healing

Ultimately, these novels illustrate that the true strength of women lies not in fleeting individual acts of bravery, but rather in the collective, communal support of one another in a number of ways. *The Color Purple* tells the story of how Celie's emotional, economic, and spiritual independence can only be achieved within a framework of supportive, validating, and protective relationships among other women. The relationships Celie has with Shug Avery, Sofia, and Nettie create alternative models of being a woman, departing from conventional expectations of being silent, submissive, and merely existing to provide for their male counterparts (Walker 210-235). By providing a woman-centred community to counteract the isolation caused by domestic violence and male oppression, this once abused woman can now create a new vision for her future - free of suffering. Sisterhood within *The Color Purple* not only provides emotional comfort, but is also a political statement that encourages collective non-cooperation with male ideologies, through the sharing of labour, performance art, and caring for one another. Walker's view of community clearly supports and empowers women, emphasizing communities as a means to promote, ensure and prolong joy, liberation and the ability to survive over time. *Beloved* illustrates how trauma and mental fragmentation can be compounded and deepened by a lack of community. Sethe is isolated due to her flight from slavery and the infanticide, rendering her susceptible to the overwhelming weight of Beloved's presence (Morrison 250-280). The haunting presence of Beloved is amplified by the lack of sound or connection with the community, which significantly increases her power over Sethe.

The community's lack of connection with Sethe is, in large part, the result of the fear, moral judgment, and unresolved collective trauma that all serve to illustrate that collective abandonment can exacerbate the suffering of one person. Once the community begins to reconnect with Sethe and come together to address their shared past that has been collectively buried, they begin to heal. The act of intervention performed by the women in the community represents a moral obligation to make the individual suffering of Sethe a part of the collective memory of their community. Morrison asserts that historical trauma cannot be resolved through individual amnesia but rather through the collective acknowledgment of the shared history to preclude its recurrence (Morrison 302-321).

Comparative Discussion

While Walker's *The Color Purple* presents a favourably-directional plot towards reconciliation, creative fulfillment and happiness, Morrison's *Beloved* purposely deflects a plot resolution by focusing on ethical memory rather than on resolution (Walker 286; Morrison 324).

The novels diverge in narrative strategies in a prominent way. Walker's use of an epistolary structure for Celie's letters shows a transformation from fear to confidence in her self-identity as Celie learns to express herself in the long run. That structural transition in letters parallels the psychological release Celie experiences and reveals narrative as a means of self-definition based on Black feminist identity. Collins points out (Collins 30-33) that the knowledge experience by Black women is produced by actual lived experience and articulation; therefore, Celie's voice, once recovered, is a political and not simply a personal act of resistance (Collins 30-33). So, Walker conceives resilience as an ongoing

reclamation of power via language, economic independence, female solidarity, and spiritual reorientation. At the same time, Morrison purposefully creates a disjointed narrative timeline through techniques such as multiple viewpoints, memory flashes, and a supernatural subject (*Beloved*). Sethe's own memories constantly intrude on the present and thus hinder the story from following its usual sequential format. According to Trauma Theory, the disjointed nature of experience is often associated with the lack of an appropriate form in which to express traumatic experiences. This is also the reason why traumatic memories are typically recalled through recurring experiences, as opposed to orderly memory (Hesford, 196-200). As a result, the fragmented narrative structure of Morrison's book does not signify an incomplete narrative; rather, it formally represents the psychological effects of social trauma within history while illustrating the ethical impossibility of forgetting slavery.

There are two major textual moments, that highlight the differences between these two texts. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's confrontation with Mister at the dinner table represents her transition from silence (forced) to public speech and allows her to not just reject patriarchal authority but to redefine her future based on her independence (emotionally and financially) (Walker 204-206). On the other hand, in *Beloved*, Sethe's experience with the embodied *Beloved* does not liberate her, but rather forces her to relive all the memories she was trying to block out. Even though the community is able to drive *Beloved* away, Morrison does not give the reader a sense of her character reaching emotional closure; instead, Morrison expresses through the paradox that *Beloved* is both forgotten and unforgettable (Morrison 323-324). As a result of these two endings being so dissimilar, they depict different ways to interpret "resilience": Walker is suggesting through sustained

communal support healing can be achieved; while Morrison is requiring that although acts have occurred to recover, the effects of historical trauma have an ethical obligation to remain (in some respect) present.

Black feminist theory offers additional clarification as to why these differing narrative choices are important. Walker makes visible the womanist relationships among Celie, Shug Avery, Nettie and Sofia to illustrate how groups of females provide alternative methods of power that can help to break down patriarchal domination. While Morrison also talks about community, her understanding of community is based upon responsibility to others, rather than empowerment. When the women come together to exorcise *Beloved*, they do not erase the pain that Sethe has experienced; rather, they are acknowledging that pain as part of their collective past and their need to remember it together. Thus, Walker envisions community as a place of individual change and transformation, while Morrison views community as the guardian of the collective historical memory.

For instance, rather than just providing those who have experienced trauma with a resolution of catharsis or closure, *Beloved* presents an ethical argument about the significance of everyone acknowledging their suffering, even if it is painful and partial (Morrison 323). In both novels, therefore, resilience should not be understood as one definitive moment of survival but rather as a series of historically determined moments that continually change as a result of many people's different experiences of gender violence, racial oppression, and collective memory. Through both Black feminist criticism and trauma theory, Walker's work focuses on rebuilding the self after patriarchy, while Morrison argues for the need to continue witnessing the legacies of slavery instead of

achieving one final reconciliation. The value of both texts lies in their shared appeal to depict resilient women and also in providing dichotomous, yet, complementary, literary frameworks for considering how Black women negotiate survival, identity and historical justice.

Conclusion

Storytelling becomes a space of resistance for women, enabling them to reclaim their subjectivity through transforming their private pain into a public knowledge. Walker's celebration of self-creation, erotic liberation and spiritual transformation testify to the potential of healing and happiness; Morrison's call for ethical remembering testifies to the necessity of confronting the past, but not necessarily closing the past. Therefore, *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* together re-imagine the space of resistance as a collective struggle for dignity, self-definition, and accountability, rather than as a means of overcoming domination or transcendence over the past. Thus, both novels illustrate that resilience is both incomplete and collectively ongoing, because it is a collective reclaiming of humanity in the wake of oppression. Alice Walker and Toni Morrison illustrate how patriarchy operates as a massive and persistent system intended to strip black women of their humanness through long-standing actions of violence, erasure, and marginalization. Walker and Morrison show us that patriarchy is more than just individual acts of violence done to women; it exists in larger social, religious, and institutional systems that create an ambiance of normalized suffering for women and deny them all personal agency over their bodies, voices, and narrative. Instead of being defined by these systems solely in terms of trauma, Walker and Morrison re-imagine resilience as a moral endeavour that is embedded in their voices, memories, bodies, and communities. Both novels challenge dominant literary

traditions that have historically marginalized black women and have used black women's experiences in a secondary role; this challenge is accomplished through the narratives of black women.

Works Cited:

Buehler, Dorothea. "Below the Surface: Female Sexuality in Gloria Naylor's "Bailey's Cafe". *Amerikastudien*, vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 425–448, 2011.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought*. Routledge, 2009.

George, Olakunle. "Alice Walker's Africa: Globalization and Fiction". *Comparative Literature*, vol. 53, no. 4, pp. 354–372, 2001.

Hameed, Othman Rashid and Wan Farah Wani Wan Fakhruddin, "Realizing Feminist Identity in Toni Morrison's *"Beloved"* and Alice Walker's *"The Color Purple"*: a Womanist Perspective". *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, vol. 13 no 1, 2023, pp. 712-728.

Hesford, Wendy S. "Reading Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and Trauma of Representation". *College English*, vol. 62, no. 2, 1999, pp. 192–221.

Kara, Gökçen, "Breaking Free: Revealing Emotional Liberation in *"The Color Purple"* and "The Bluest Eye": a Journey of Ethnic Women through Conversations with God". *Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi*, vol. 10 no. 5, 2023, pp. 1275-1286.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Plume, 1987.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Harcourt, 1982.