

A Study of Dual Oppression against African American Women in Alice Walker's Selected Works

A. Ancy Liyana¹

¹*Research Scholar, Department of English,
School of Social Sciences and Languages
Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India.
Email: ancyliyana0997@gmail.com*

Dr. Anu Baisel²

²*Assistant Professor Senior, Department of English,
School of Social Sciences and Languages
Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India.
Email: anu.baisel@vit.ac.in*

ABSTRACT

Historically African American women have been treated as inferiors and slaves in society based on both their gender and race. Accordingly, Alice Walker illustrates how African American women struggle to survive in a racist and male-dominated society through her black female characters. Eventually, this research emphasizes the emancipation journey of Walker's female characters as they discover their identity and learn to empower themselves. In comparison to black men as well as white women, black women face various kinds of challenges. Indeed, they confront greater levels of gender discrimination than white women and also experience higher sexual assault and racial intolerance from a racist culture than black men. Hence, this study concentrates on black women's experiences with racial and sexual violence. Also provides insight into how Walker's black female protagonists rebel against stereotypes imposed on them by society in pursuit of independence and individuality.

Keywords: *African American women, patriarchal system, sexual violence, racial intolerance, liberation act.*

1. Introduction

Alice Walker is the most renowned and versatile writer. The majority of her works concern black people's suffering, especially those of African American women. Also, she frequently addresses racism and gender bias in her writings. Being an African American writer, Walker emphasizes the difficulties that blacks confront due to their race. She is well known for her award-winning novel *The Color purple*. Also, she outlines the struggles faced by the black women characters because of their color and identity as a woman. Above all, she used her writing as a powerful weapon to bring attention to black suffering and speak out against women's subjugation. Walker was also subjected to racial discrimination during her childhood. As a result, she firmly committed herself to fighting for black people's equality as well as women's liberation. This study focuses on select novels that address black women's oppression as well as the disparities between men and women, including *The Color Purple*, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, and *Meridian*. Especially, the issues like racism, hegemony, white supremacy, and sexism are explored in these novels.

Generally, black American women are compelled to live invisibly because of their skin color and gender. Their voices go ignored and unacknowledged in society. "They are treated as interchangeable and indistinguishable from each other, and in this sense, they are less "visible" compared to other groups" (Sesko Amanda K., 2010, p. 357). It does not mean that black women are completely invisible rather, their presence is obscure when compared to white women and black males. They are less recognizable because they are treated differently than others and are alienated due to their ethnicity and gender. To discover their true selves, they must overcome both racial and sexual discrimination. Such barriers are created in order to hold them back unnoticed in society. But black women contended with the sexual and racial injustice, empowering them to fight for their rights. They shattered the invisibility stereotypes and discovered their identity through their constant tireless revolutionary attitude.

Mohammad et al (2019) state that Walker's works generally center on the struggles of black women of both gender and racial backgrounds. Indeed, African American women are subjugated by black men and also the racial violence constructed by society. In spite of belonging to the same race, black men dominate black women and force them to take care of household chores and serve them as wives. "They were thought of as useless for anything else except bearing children and taking care of their families" (Kuharic, 2017, p. 15). Black women are treated brutally and are considered unproductive as they are used by men as a means of rearing children and taking care of their families. Besides, they were meant to stay submissive towards their husbands who never left them to pursue their dreams and discover their true selves. "Needless to say, black women, are under financial scarcity within the black community due to gender difference" (Chapagain, 2020, p. 116). Black people as a whole are considered poor, but African American women are particularly marginalized in their communities because of their status as women. This type of gender discrimination lowers their identity and worth in society. Whereas Walker contends that men dominate black women both psychologically and physically, which hinders their ability to become independent. It is difficult for black women to survive as they are oppressed by black men based on their gender while white men oppress them based on race. Therefore, this study aims to examine Alice Walker's portrayal of black

women as oppressed and racialized in her writing. Black American women end up in absolute chaos because of their mixed ethnic roots. Also, white landlords oppress black people by forcing them to strictly adhere to American culture. In such circumstances, African slaves were forced to abandon their ethnic and cultural roots. As black American women are regarded as slaves and inferiors, they become mentally and cognitively shattered. For this reason, they find it challenging to develop a sense of identity and culture. As a sharecropper's daughter and a black American who experienced racial intolerance, Walker could understand the anguish of black American women. Thus, she boldly stands up to such oppression against black American women and fights fiercely for her culture.

2. Prejudice Against African American women

Gender is distinct from sex, and patriarchal culture imposes gender roles on women and regards males as active while females as passive. Indeed, gender inequity is the base of all other injustices and oppressions. The dominance of men-controlled functions threatens women at distinct levels in various countries. Accordingly, a female's issues are influenced by her gender, religion, caste, ethnicity, and nationality. However, women, like men, seek their rights and respect, but the major issue of gender disparity is the foundation that severely hinders their identity. Levin (2002) affirms that black women face more racial and gender discrimination than white men, women, and black males. He also argues that cultural and class discrimination are the primary causes of widespread prejudice.

According to Howell (2015), male authors disregard the truth about women, they never acknowledged women as writers, rendering their writings worthless. Likewise, Walker also claims that male authors conceal or neglect the reality regarding African American women, causing them to be overlooked and misconstrued in male writers' works. Therefore, she believes that the genuine truth about black women's sufferings should be revealed so that the world may realize the awful situations that black women face. "She believes that their (male writer's) work is full of distortions of the truth because the Black-American woman was in most cases either ignored or misrepresented" (Pasi, 2013, p. 30). Pasi affirms that male writers, according to Walker, hide or ignore the truth about black American women, so they are ignored and misinterpreted in male writers' works. Waugh (2006) describes that according to Showalter female writers' works are not given much importance by male writers. As women were regarded as inferiors, their work was also not highly regarded. But Showalter believes that female writers' works express more about their personal experiences which will create awareness in society, as well as address their problems and sufferings.

Padhi (2015) states that in the black community, African American women are regarded as the weaker sex because of being a woman. Especially, walker through her work strongly attacks the social and domestic violence that is caused against black women and also raises her voice for the voiceless people. In her work *The Color Purple*, she describes how her black woman protagonist Celie undergoes racial discrimination also caught in the evil clutches of the patriarchal system. According to Showalter black women are seen as "the Other Woman, the silenced partner" (Showalter, 1989, p. 349). Generally, women are othered by the male-dominated society which is depicted through the black female character Celie in the novel *The*

Color Purple. She was pressured with both psychological and physical violence that has been enforced by her husband.

3. Celie's Lost Identity

“You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy” (Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 1). Celie, the main black female protagonist in Alice Walker's famous work *The Color Purple*, is portrayed as an unattractive black woman who has no right to education. Also, she was brutally raped and tormented by her father, and severely abused by her husband. Besides this, she worked hard as a servant as well as stayed as an obedient slave at her husband's house. The novel begins with Celie's father blackmailing her not to say anyone that he raped her. She was only allowed to tell God. Her father threatened to kill her mother if she overruled it. At the same time, he restricted her by keeping his true face from being exposed to the outside world, which could endanger his life. So, Celie was strictly confined to her father's blackmails and dominance. As a way of venting her shame and oppression, she obeyed him and wrote her sufferings to God. “I-aa I have always been a good girl” (Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 1). Celie ended up in a state of despair over her own identity as a result of the sexual abuse that was inflicted on her without her consent. She hoped one day her father will quit his aggression toward her, but everything remained the same. However, Celie thought that when her father married another woman, she would speak out against her husband's sexual aggression, but in contrast, she stayed muted as well. Subsequently, Celie got traumatized since she had no one to speak to stop his vicious actions toward her. Celie narrated her constant gender discrimination from her childhood:

She says All 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 ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. (Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 43).

Throughout her life, Celie had been stifled by patriarchal culture. Also, she claimed that struggling against male dominance has left her life meaningless. Also, Celie depicts God as follows: “He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted (Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 201). Eventually, Celie lost faith in God and portrayed him as a white domineering figure. She told Shug that because God is white and belongs to the men's society, she considered him a racist masculine who never heard her plight. “Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 199).

Celie used to cry out to God when she was distressed by her husband's sexual violence against her. When she lost her sister and children, she felt betrayed by God. So, she exclaimed, frustratedly stating that: “God might hear you. Let 'im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor black women the world would be a different place, I can tell you” (Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 200). She was furious with God, who seemed to her like the other males who never regarded black women to be human. She claimed that God did not hear her pleas and that her suffering was in vain since he is a white guy who ignored African American women's hardships. Rather, she praised the three black women Nettie, Shug, and Sofia as her life saviors, acknowledging the world's harshness in defiance of black women and opening her

eyes to trust her inner self. Similarly, they helped her in reconstructing her identity by deconstructing her ignorance, hopelessness, and fear. Although Celie expressed her love for her husband Harpo, he does not deserve her love because he raped and humiliated her. “He pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breasts” (Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 14). During their first day of marriage, he attacked and violently tormented her. Meanwhile, she does not receive love in return; instead, she endured hatred and insults. When her husband sexually harassed her, she was unable to fight back since she was not strong enough both mentally and physically to resist him.

“But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 18). For as long as Celie’s husband tortured her, she endured all his violence against her. She was not able to fight back against her husband's cruelty. In addition, she feared that he was more physically and emotionally powerful than her, making her feel inferior. To survive, she submitted her whole being to her husband's cruelty. “Women work. I’m a man” (Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 22). Moreover, Harpo doesn’t help Celie with her household work rather he proudly said that he is a man who is not supposed to do the works which are only meant for women. “They crack her skull and ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye” (Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 92). Sofia, a black woman character in the story, bravely refused to work as a Nanny for a white family, causing her immense suffering. Through this occurrence, Walker attempts to illustrate how the critical racial inequities that are inflicted against African American women by depicting the whites imprisoning and punishing Sofia for abiding by them. The punishment for a crime committed by a white person was unnoticed or fined. “For the same offense, black people— bound or free—would be imprisoned in the workhouse and put on the treadmill for up to twenty days” (Smalls, 2015).

Celie's heart was devastated when her mother died, and her sister Nettie was separated from her. Since she lost the individuals who loved her back, the hope she had in her life for love has been completely shattered. So, she was not able to fight back, and she doesn't have enough power to oppose male domination, therefore she expected someone to save her in escaping from the terrible behaviors that patriarchal society imposed on her. Unfortunately, Celie was unaware of her inner power, which has been silenced by the ongoing racial and gender disparities she has faced throughout her life. As Celie explained, racism cannot be eradicated in society since it was used by the patriarchy to enforce its dominance over women. Therefore, race plays a vital role in black identity and gender which has created a great impact on Celie’s life.

4. African American Women’s Artistic Talents

Alice Walker represents black women as powerful and courageous individuals who seek hard to better themselves and their families. “The image and portrait of the woman show that the woman is strong, beautiful, rich and intelligent, but these good qualities of the woman are viewed in the negative light” (Adedokun-Awojodu & Oladejo 106). Black women are shown as powerful, intelligent, and desirable images, yet society views these characteristics of women negatively. Therefore, Walker describes in her *book In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* the difficulties black women face as they attempt to survive. She specifically

mentions her mother, who worked gardening till dawn and spends her time taking care of her children by narrating her inspirational tale.

At the beginning of Walker's essay *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, she quotes Jean Toomer's writing about black American women's artistic talent. According to Toomer, men in society are aware of African American women's abilities, as a result, they were viewed as sex objects prone to serving males. Simultaneously, their richness in creative and spiritual abilities is rendered meaningless. Toomer used a metaphor to describe black American women as butterflies caught in evil honey. "They waited for a day when the unknown thing that was in them would be made known; but guessed, somehow in their darkness, that on the day of their revelation they would be long dead" (Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, p. 207). Black American women believed that their dreams would be realized one day, but they wouldn't live long enough to see them realized. In the past, black women dreamt of discovering their hidden talents, but they did not struggle hard to achieve their dreams on their own because of the dominance and offensive practices established by the patriarchal society.

Throughout history, black American women have suffered physical and emotional agony due to colonial and patriarchal systems, causing them to lose sight of their ambitions and capabilities. Toomer contends that African American mothers and grandmothers are not saints, but rather genuine artists whose true identities have been muzzled by white dominance. Walker also admires some outstanding black American women like Bessie Smith, Nina Simone, Billie Holiday, and Aretha Franklin, who discovered their own identities and heroically defied the cruel chain of slavery. Their daring lives paved the path for future generations. So, Walker explains that even if black American women are regarded as slaves, their souls retain power and vitality. To reclaim their power, black American women must break free from the harmful practices of society. So that they can realize their dream of becoming an artist.

5. Dual Oppression

The sole reason behind black American women's miseries is sexism and racism. Walker in her work *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* claims that the white men brutally hit her grandmother's causing them to die. While a black woman's soul longs to paint a watercolor, she was compelled to bake cookies. In fact, society constrained African American women to be ignorant and ruthlessly drove them to serve as housewives and prostitutes without regard for their well-being. Despite the racial bias perpetrated against them, black women felt terrified to speak out. "They did not have any freedom to paint, to sculpt or to expand their mind by any other artistic work" (Subapriya, 2020, p. 3). Black women were confined to exploring their creativity and artistic skills and talents. Society knew that black American women has their identities and artistic skills so, they suppressed those talents by projecting them as mere slaves. The irony is that reading, and writing is considered a criminal offense for black people. Walker defines a black woman had no authority over her body whereas the white men took complete control over her life and were tormented to death. Walker insists that society should emphasize gender equality and ethnic inclusiveness. So that the inhumane treatment in defiance of black women can be stopped.

Hollenberg (p. 2016) describes black women are burdened to carry motherhood as their sole job in society. Their artistic skills are unaccepted further sexually harassed and inhuman tortures are imposed on them by the patriarchal system. “When we have asked for love, we have been given children” (Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*, p. 211). Likewise, in walker’s essay *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* she expresses how African American women felt compelled to bear children. They longed for love but were forced to endure severe sexual abuse and bear the white masters' babies. Those children were exploited as slaves to help with domestic chores and plantation work. “Chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of one’s body by someone else and submission to the alien region” (Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*, p. 178). African American women were chained and lashed to death by the white landlords who took ownership of their bodies. Mohammad et al pointed out that “Black women are treated with brutality, losing their human rights and their disparity through the black American and white American men” (Mohammad, Mazlini, & Waham, 2019, p. 85). Likewise, Walker describes how black women experience racial discrimination adding that they were tortured to experience pain till their death. Furthermore, Walker expresses how African American women were prone to undergo sexual abuse and racial discrimination living in a white society. However, black men also stand as the main reason for black women’s oppression by dominating and physically violating them. “The dangers of being a black woman and the potential struggles and battles that will be faced not just because of their skin color, but because they are of the “weaker sex”” (Boone, 2017, p. 7). In addition to being suppressed based on their ethnicity, black women were also prejudiced against because they are considered inferior sexes. While black men and women experience discrimination based on race, black men express their anger toward whites by venting it on black women who are considered weaker in both their ethnicity and gender.

“The black women were considered like ‘mule’, and they became emotionless and hopeless in this world” (Alex, 2020, p. 456). Historically, black women were degraded as mules of society such kinds of humiliation and dominance made them lose their identity. Further, they had no emotions which were nulled by the patriarchal society and its evil practices. Suresh and Anuradha (2018) state that men use women as their property to hold all their rights over those who sexually violate and dominate them. Besides, women were meant to satisfy men’s pleasure and endure the brutality caused by them. Walker vehemently describes how black women’s creative talents were violently driven away from them as a consequence of being women and belonging to an inferior race. Walker in her essay *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* says that when black women try to explore their creativity they were suppressed to satisfy their husband’s and families needs. In this case, men were aware that African American women had artistic skills and creativity. They feared black women would discover their uniqueness and become superior or equal to them if they let them explore their creativity. So, men oppressed and pressured African American women to fulfill their dreams and care for their children to keep them under their control.

6. Sexual Violence Against African American Women

Male society's sexual aggression caused women to stay insecure about their intellect and body. Walker's major goal is to emancipate and liberate black American women.

She constantly encourages black American women to define their own identities while she also raises her voice against the injustice caused to them. Walker celebrates African American women's survival journey as it makes them stronger and more fearless. Both black men and women encounter racial prejudice, but black males' racial experience has a great negative impact on black American women where the diversity begins within their group.

Black women were treated brutally and only allowed to serve and please their white masters. "Women have considered an image of brutality, and they have regarded as the property of joy for men" (Suresh & Anuradha, 2018, p. 95). Men impose all rights on women and expect them to abide accordingly. African American women are expected to be submissive and invisible, which undermines their liberation. "Women who have grown up in an oppressive environment are often not even aware of the seriousness of the issue because they perceive it as a normal situation; they have grown accustomed to it" (Kuharic, 2017, p. 9). Male domination is one of the prime factors that affect black women's life. From their childhood, they are raised as an inferior gender by following society's stereotypical norms. In fact, obliged to respect and serve men which weakens them, and this has developed a lack of confidence in themselves. Meanwhile, society influenced black women from their childhood to be subordinate and care for their families and children. Living an inferior life led them to lose respect for themselves and become unaware of their own identity. Black American women never had the strength to confront such oppression because they were restrained by society to being pious and obedient to men.

7. Meridian's Revolutionary Acts

One of Walker's famous works *Meridian* is all about how a black woman protagonist named Meridian is forced to experience inequalities which finally leads her to find her identity and originality by combating the injustice. "She thought of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history, and of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member" (Walker, *Meridian*, p. 90). Meridian was forced into an early pregnancy also she wasn't particularly fond of the child she had because her interest was to fight for her people rather than being a mother. Through this process, she embraced her identity by realizing she is different from the stereotypical mother who submits to her husband's dominance. However, she fought for her community and strived to gain freedom for them. "Besides, revolution would not begin, do you think, with an act of murder—wars might begin in that way—but with teaching" (Walker, *Meridian*, p. 205). Meridian rebelliously broke the institutional prejudice that pervaded her town to a greater extent, and she also stood as a strong character who fought hard for the liberation of her black community in life. "Black Women needed to be simultaneously engaged in both the Black Liberation struggle and Women's Liberation" (Joseph, 1999, p. 81). Similarly, Joseph states that African American women should bravely fight against racism and strive for women's emancipation in order to be independent in society.

Alex (2020, p. 2020) illustrates on Walker's remarkable efforts and ideas regarding the miseries of black people are represented in her novel's main black protagonists. Walker's self-discovery is interwoven into Meridian's awareness of how she worked hard to accomplish her liberated livelihood. Meantime, Walker reinforces her views in her black characters, who were

first naive to society's discriminatory attitudes and accept all forms of oppression forced on them. Later, they grow aware of all such cruel deeds and become rebellious, ultimately fighting for their liberation. "In her unswerving dedication to nonviolence, her patience, and her careful respect for others, Meridian upholds the spiritual ideals of a human liberation movement" (Stein, p. 130). In these words, Stein implies that, despite living an oppressed life, Meridian discovered her individuality and involved herself deeply in the liberation act with a focus on obtaining her independence.

8. Conclusion

Through chosen novels by Walker, the current study examines the multi-level marginalization of black women in the dominant culture. Walker's prime objective is to focus on the racial injustice and oppression faced by black American women. Consequently, she vividly illustrates how her black female characters have always fought against all forms of oppression, which inspires other women in breaking down stereotypes and leading a free life. "But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me" (Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 41). In Walker's work *The Color Purple*, Celie, at last, separated herself from her husband's cruel oppression and began a new life. Initially, Celie was portrayed as a girl who relied on her husband, leading her broken and hopeless about her life. However, through her rebellious deeds, she eventually developed into a complete woman who discovered her real personality by breaking down his domineering acts. "Walker's garden is boundless, both spatially and metaphorically" (Bakshihamm, 2012, p. 30). In Walker's work *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* she describes how her mother discovered her sense of creativity in gardening and how Walker herself came to discover her talent as a writer. Despite being cruelly abused by patriarchal society and the slavery system, African American women maintained their creativity and spirituality and fought hard to achieve it by battling for their individuality in the end. The influence of patriarchy is evident in the black female characters' psyche. Whereas society should understand black American woman's uniqueness and encourage them to pursue their artistic skills. "All Walker's women are creators who realize their creativity through quilts, songs and gardens" (Majid, 2016, p. 215). Walker portrays the story of her ancestors who found their identity and creativity in the midst of such upheaval and injustice caused against them. At last, their success in discovering their identity empowered them to realize their power and value in society.

Finally, her well-known novel *Meridian* emphasizes how the major character, Meridian, stood unique as someone who refused to embrace the stereotypical black motherhood. Moreover, she doesn't wish to be held within the cage that society had built for her. Rather than being a submissive woman she defied preconceptions and established her uniqueness. Truman broke up with Meridian, claiming that she was unworthy of love and that she had abandoned her kid. As a result, Meridian also believed that she was unworthy of receiving affection from others. Later she realized, it was her way of finding her revolutionary life and individuality. Additionally, Meridian distinguished gender inequality when Truman rejected her for being a revolutionary woman. At last, when he requested Meridian to accept his love, she declined, saying her life had been changed and her only interest was to fight for the black community's equal rights.

Walker believed that if the black community is divided and oppressed, then they would be unable to fight for equal opportunities and rights against the white supremacist system. To achieve their dreams African Americans must, however, understand one another, and black men's brutality toward black women should be eliminated. Racial unity can never be expected until the discrimination between black men over black women is abolished. In the same way, Walker also believes that black men should understand black women and become their supporting pillars to successfully fight for their rights in the face of the racial system. Subsequently, this paper explores Walker's black female protagonist's transformation, evaluating the process by which they were oppressed and rejected in society and, eventually, how they recognize and achieve their true identity in the end. Moreover, Walker's black female characters construct their individuality through self-recognition and personal experience, both of which are significant in her works. In addition, black American women can attain their life's purpose by recognizing their identity and securing their independence.

Walker used her black female characters as examples of how, despite being repressed by the colonial and patriarchal systems, they worked hard to achieve their inner strength. To transform people's perceptions of race and black women as inferior, the relationships within that community must be extensively understood. Throughout their self-realization path, black American women face countless humiliations and oppressions. To be free of these horrid grips, black women must first embrace themselves by realizing their true talents, and identities and striving to achieve their dream. Thus, self-realization fosters a mutual relationship with both the black counterpart and society.

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