

Between Gender and Race: Black Women's Struggle and Reclamation of the Body in the Works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker

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Abstract: The article explores the intersection of race, gender, and postcolonial identity in the works of Toni Morrison's and Alice Walker, particularly focusing on *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Beloved* (1987), and *The Color Purple* (1982). From the postcolonial feminist perspective, it will examine how the Black female body becomes an object of double oppression and resistance in the contexts of racism, patriarchy, and cultural dislocation. Building on the theories of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Franz Fanon, and bell hooks, the analysis demonstrates how both writers challenge Eurocentric norms and patriarchal structures by reclaiming narrative and linguistic authority. Morrison and Walker construct counter-discourses through fragmented narration, oral traditions, and female solidarity thereby transforming trauma into empowerment. It also investigates how these writers clearly express the psychological scars of colonial and patriarchal violence, and how Black women employ memory, storytelling, and community support to reconstruct identity. It also contributes to the growing discourse on postcolonial feminism, highlighting the resilience of Black womanhood as a force of cultural reclamation.

Keywords: Postcolonial Feminism, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Black Womanhood, Double Oppression, Narrative Resistance

1. Introduction

Postcolonial theory is an academic framework that examines the cultural, psychological, and social consequences of colonialism and imperialism on formerly colonized countries. The term postcolonial theory gained prominence in the late twentieth century. Edward Said laid the intellectual foundation of the field through his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), though he did not offer a fixed definition of the theory. His central concern was to expose how Western discourse constructs the East as inferior, exotic, irrational, and subordinate, hence worthy of legitimizing colonial domination. Other key figures associated with postcolonial thought include Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon. In *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, Pramod K. Nayar defines Postcolonial theory as "a method of interpreting, reading and critiquing the cultural practices of colonialism, where it proposes that the exercise of colonial power is also the exercise of racially determined powers of representation" (154).

Feminism is a political and social movement dedicated to achieving equality between men and women. The origins of feminism theory in literature can be traced to the late 18th and 19th centuries, with pioneers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Wolf and Margaret Fuller.

The twentieth century witnessed an important shift in literary and cultural studies as feminist and postcolonial theories converged to put forth the complex experiences of marginalized groups. Within this intersection, the Black female experience occupies a unique position of being doubly marginalized by race and gender. As bell hooks asserts in her *Ain't I a Woman* that "black folks then were far more likely to denounce women's liberation, seeing it as a white woman thing. As a consequence, black female individuals who

eagerly embraced the movement were often isolated and estranged from other black folks" (10). It implies the black women whose struggle has historically been eclipsed by mainstream (white) feminism. The paper titled "Between Gender and Race: Black Women's Struggle and Reclamation of the Body in the Works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker", seeks to uncover the relation between colonial history, racial identity, and gendered embodiment in the select works of these two seminal authors.

Both the writers Morrison and Walker centre the Black woman's voice in their narratives, portraying the psychological and the consequences of systemic violence. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* dissect the internalized racism and historical trauma that shape Black women's self-perception, while Walker's *The Color Purple* amplifies the resilience of Black women through community and sisterhood. These narratives collectively challenge the hegemony of white patriarchy and redefine what it means to be human within a racially stratified world.

Said in *Orientalism* examines that colonial power is maintained not only through political domination but also through cultural representation of representing the colonized as "the Other" (1). When this notion is applied to Black women, it exposes a dual process of othering: first by colonial whiteness and then by Black patriarchy. Through the frameworks of postcolonialism and Black feminism, this paper interprets the female body not merely as a site of victimhood but as a terrain of resistance, memory, and reclamation.

2. Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study integrates key contributions from postcolonial studies and Black feminist theory to understand how Morrison and Walker negotiate identity, voice, and liberation within oppressive sociocultural systems.

Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) is an important work in breaking down the psyche of the colonized. Colonialism has done much damage to the colonised, be it mentally or physically. In Fanon's work, he explores how this Eurocentric ideal has left a lasting mark, such that the Blacks have internalized this sense of inferiority. He also mentions the significance of interracial relationships. The Blacks seek white partners in what seems to be a way to bask in the superiority of the Whites. Fanon states in the opening of his third chapter:

"Out of the blackest part of my soul, through the zone of hachures, surges up this desire to be suddenly *white*. I want to be recognized not as *Black*, but as *White*. But – and this is the form of recognition that Hegel never described- who better than the white woman to bring this about? By loving me, she proves to me that I am worthy of a white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man" (45).

The effects of colonialism persist till today in certain manners and beauty standards are perceived with reference to the previously colonised societies.

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) is a foundational essay in postcolonial feminism. It gives a critique of Western intellectuals who, in their argument for the marginalized, ironically speak "for" them instead of the 'subaltern' getting to partake in the discourse. According to Nayar,

"Spivak's influential notion of the subaltern notes the power of both patriarchy and colonialism where the native woman, because of her location within these two structures, cannot enunciate and instead is always spoken for by intellectuals – a process Spivak is critical of because, as she argues, it is better to let the woman remain on the margins of the discourse rather than speaking on her behalf and thus consigning her deeper into the silence."(171)

This essay will aid in understanding the struggle of Black women to have their voices heard in a racist and sexist society.

bell hook's *Ain't I a Woman?* (1981) is an influential work in Black feminism which echoes the speech given by Sojourner Truth in the Women's Rights Convention held in 1851. This text by hooks comments on how early feminist movements has failed to reflect the experiences of their Black sisters. Not only are they excluded from a racial standpoint, but they are also oppressed under their male counterparts who adopt the white patriarchal framework. The text is an important piece in recognizing the unique situation of Black women as they are marginalised, both due to their race and their gender.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) depicts the Western representation of the East. He introduces the concept called 'Orient' (9) which is shaped by colonial power dynamics. He depicts the East as exotic and inferior, thereby justifying the need for dominance and control over them. His work remains influential in many academic disciplines. It is the milestone in laying the foundation of the popular theory called Postcolonial theory or Postcolonialism. It provides the study an ample idea on the power dynamics of Postcolonialism and Imperialism. Moreover, it gives the idea on how the natives of East are represented as the 'Other' (1) by the Whites.

The article by Emmanuel Simparinka titled, "Feminism in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*", describes the condition of Black women as they are sexually abused by their oppressors. The characters not only face sexual abuse but also receive physical violence, like in the case of Celie as she is frequently beaten by her father. This article will aid in examining the extent of suffering endured by black women as showcased in the works of Morrison and Walker.

Another article, "Colonisation and Oppression of women: A Postcolonial Feminist Study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" by Aisha Nasim and Saadia Saddique, explores the treatment of Black women under colonial rule. It is noted that they are seen as commodities rather than living, breathing humans. They are sexually assaulted and humiliated and treated without an ounce of respect as a fellow human being. The only comfort they receive is the help of some scarce number of White women who choose to help them in their time of need. This scant female solidarity could be the last push to keep enduring and resist in the face of innumerable adversities.

"Double Colonisation in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" by Manar M.R Rayyan and Kanan Aghasiyev, examines the chain of oppression experienced by Black women. It uses the idea of the 'other' in Edward Said's *Orientalism* on how Black women have been marginalised throughout history. These women are not only victims of colonialism but also are seen as lesser of the men in their own native communities.

The article by C.L. Shilaja titled, "Art of Storytelling and Role of Memory in the novels of Morrison's *Beloved* and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*", examines the art of storytelling in their own native communities to recount and to heal from past experiences. It makes use of their long-standing native tradition of oral storytelling as a means to not only heal but to challenge the language of the dominant culture by repurposing it to restore cultural identity and confront historical injustices.

3. Analysis and Discussion

The Black Female Body as a Site of Dual Oppression

The Black female body occupies a liminal and contested space within both racial and patriarchal hierarchies. As bell hooks rightfully said,

Unfortunately, our over-emphasis on the male as oppressor often obscures the fact that men too are victimized. To be an oppressor is dehumanizing and anti-human in nature, as it is to be a victim. Patriarchy forces

fathers to act as monsters, encourages husbands and lovers, to be rapists in disguise; it teaches our blood brothers to feel ashamed that they care for us, and denies all men the emotional life that would act as a humanizing, self-affirming force in their lives. (157-58)

It is not to say that Black men are not victims of colonialism but that they often turn that hatred onto women. Colonialism and patriarchal system work together to suppress Black women.

In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Pecola Breedlove's yearning for blue eyes shows the destructive internalization of Eurocentric ideals of beauty. Her body becomes the medium through which society's racialized and gendered violence manifests. When Pecola is raped by her father, Cholly, the act transcends personal violation -it symbolizes the compounded effects of racism, patriarchy, and generational trauma. Cholly's own humiliation by white men, who forced him into an act of sexual degradation in his youth, reemerges in his violence against his daughter. This tragic repetition gives what Franz Fanon terms in the introduction of his book *Black Skin, White Masks* as "internalization or rather epidermalization of this inferiority," (xi) where the oppressed turn the colonial gaze inward, perpetuating cycles of self-hatred and violence.

Similarly, in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), the body becomes a repository of historical suffering. Sethe's recollection of being whipped while pregnant and when she was abused by "two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up" (83), represents the commodification of Black women's reproductive capacity under slavery. Her body is both a source of life and a site of ownership, where motherhood itself is co-opted by the colonial system. When Sethe kills her infant to prevent re-enslavement, her act is simultaneously one of love and rebellion, defying the institution that denies her autonomy.

Walker extends this discourse in *The Color Purple* (1982), where Celie's abuse at the hands of her father and husband exposes the intimate reach of structural domination. Celie's husband, Albert, reduces her existence to racial and gendered stereotypes: "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (187). The repetition of oppressive descriptors emphasizes how Black women's worth is diminished by both racism and sexism. Yet, Walker transforms Celie's silence into strength, illustrating how the body, once controlled and shamed, becomes the locus of spiritual and creative awakening.

In each of these works, the Black female body reflects what hooks describes as a site of struggle, simultaneously subjected to social control and capable of agency. The corporeal violence endured by Morrison's and Walker's protagonists serves to reveal the broader historical matrix of domination, while their eventual reclamation of bodily and psychological autonomy symbolizes the reconstitution of selfhood beyond colonial paradigms.

Community, Female Friendship, and Resistance

While physical and psychological violence form the basis of oppression in Morrison's and Walker's narratives, it is through the creation of community and female solidarity that resistance takes shape. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's tragedy is a result of her community's internalized racism. Rather than protecting her, her peers and elders reproduce the very hierarchies imposed by white society towards her. The neighbourhood's gossip and condemnation of Pecola, with the tag "She carries some of the blame" (187) reflects what Fanon identifies as the colonized subject's complicity in perpetuating oppression. The absence of nurturing female relationships leads Pecola to complete mental disintegration, representing the social cost of alienation.

Conversely, in *Beloved*, Morrison depicts the transformative power of communal healing. Sethe's survival depends upon her daughter Denver and the collective support of the Black women in her neighbourhood. When these women unite to exorcise Beloved, their song becomes an act of communal resistance, a reenactment of oral and spiritual traditions rooted in African ancestry. The women's chant operates as both ritual and revolution, confronting the haunting legacy of slavery through collective empathy and action.

Similarly, *The Color Purple* shows the regenerative force of female friendship. Celie's relationships with Sofia, Shug Avery, and her sister Nettie catalyze her transformation from subjugation to self-realization. Shug's sensuality and independence awaken Celie's suppressed desires, teaching her that love, especially self-love, is an act of defiance against systems that thrive on shame. Sofia, through her physical and moral strength, embodies the courage to confront white authority, refusing to accept subservience.

Community, therefore, becomes both a metaphorical and literal space of recovery. Through sisterhood and shared narratives, Morrison's and Walker's characters transcend isolation and begin to reconstruct collective identity. This shift from silence to solidarity encapsulates postcolonial feminism's central tenet i.e. liberation is not achieved in solitude but through the mutual affirmation of marginalized voices.

Narrative Strategies and the Challenge to Colonial Discourse

Both Morrison and Walker employ narrative forms that subvert colonial linguistic and aesthetic standards. Their experimentation with voice, temporality, and syntax functions as a form of cultural and political resistance. Morrison's prose often rejects linear chronology, favoring cyclical and fragmented storytelling that mirrors the disjointed memory of trauma. In *Beloved*, the narrative oscillates between past and present, personal and collective consciousness. This structure disrupts Western rationalist modes of narration, reclaiming oral traditions as a valid form of historical knowledge. Morrison's stylistic choice resonates with Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* in which he gives the idea of "hybridity" where colonized subjects appropriate the master's language to tell their own stories.

Native oral traditions can be a powerful means to heal from the past. In *Beloved*, it is said that Sethe could not bring

herself to talk about her past experiences “because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost” (69). Morrison’s stylistic choice resonates with Bhabha’s idea of “hybridity,” where colonized subjects appropriate the master’s language to tell their own stories.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison intentionally manipulates language to expose and dismantle linguistic hierarchies. Pecola’s internal monologues, often rendered in ungrammatical English, challenge notions of linguistic propriety defined by white culture. The text *The Empire Writes Back*, thus performs what Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin term the “abrogation and appropriation” (37) of colonial language, transforming English into a medium for expressing marginalized realities.

Walker’s *The Color Purple* uses the epistolary form, letters written by Celie to God and later to her sister Nettie, as a narrative tool of empowerment. The act of writing allows Celie to articulate her trauma, gradually transforming prayer into dialogue and confession into self-definition. Her shift from addressing God to addressing Nettie marks a movement from spiritual dependence to human connection. Walker’s use of nonstandard dialect further democratizes language, validating the voices of the uneducated and oppressed.

These narrative techniques collectively dismantle the authority of colonial discourse. In all the three selected novels, the grammar or language used is not in standard English. Words like ‘pore’ (187) to mean ‘poor’ in *The Color Purple*, come together to challenge colonial discourse which has been representative of all those that it chose to represent, correctly or incorrectly. By privileging fragmented structures, oral idioms, and subjective temporality, both authors restore legitimacy to the epistemologies of the oppressed. The act of storytelling becomes synonymous with resistance, an ongoing process of remembering, reinterpreting, and reclaiming history from silenced perspectives.

4. Conclusion

The works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker exemplify the intersectional struggle of Black women to reclaim their bodies, voices, and histories from centuries of racial and gendered subjugation. Through their nuanced portrayals of oppression, both writers reveal how colonial ideologies persist in modern consciousness, shaping self-perception and interpersonal relationships. Yet, their fiction transcends despair, illuminating pathways toward healing through memory, community, and creative expression.

In Morrison’s and Walker’s narratives, the Black female body, once rendered invisible by dominant discourses, becomes a living archive of resistance. Their protagonists’ journeys from silence to articulation symbolize a broader cultural reclamation: the rewriting of history from the margins. By intertwining postcolonial and feminist perspectives, these authors challenge the epistemic violence of colonialism and redefine literary canons to include the multiplicity of Black womanhood.

Ultimately, Morrison and Walker transform trauma into testimony, silence into song. Their fiction stands as an

enduring reminder that liberation is both personal and collective, rooted in the ability to name one’s pain and to imagine beyond it. As long as the remnants of colonial patriarchy persist, their works remain vital maps for understanding and transcending the interlocking systems of domination that continue to shape the modern world.

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