Deanship of Graduate Studies
Al-Quds University

Feminist Narratives by Walker and Morrison and Their Analysis of Women’s Resistance to Patriarchy

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M.A. Thesis

Jerusalem – Palestine

2025/1447

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A thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Global Studies -American Studies Track- at Al-Quds University

2025/1447

Al-Quds University
Deanship of Graduate Studies
American Studies Program

Thesis Approval

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Jerusalem – Palestine

2025/1447

Dedication

To my dearest daughters, Joanne, Lilia, and Sidra,

whose light has always preceded the light of the sun.

I carry you in every thought, every word, and every page of this work.

Your love has been my light,and the strength to complete this journey comes from my longing for you.I miss you more than words can tell.

This thesis is for you, with all my heart.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis submitted for the degree of Master, is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this study (or any part of the same) has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Signed:

Eyad Ghassan Hussein Hreiz

29/08/2025

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Beverly Voloshin, for her invaluable guidance, encouragement, and unwavering support throughout the course of this research.

I am also profoundly thankful to Dr. Sarita Cannon, whose mentorship, encouragement, and thoughtful feedback have been equally instrumental to the development of this work.

To both of these remarkable scholars, I owe more than words can convey — for their light has always preceded the light of the moon, guiding me with wisdom, clarity, and compassion along this academic path.

I also wish to thank the faculty and staff of the Department of American Studies at Al-Quds Bard College for their dedication to scholarship and for providing me with the intellectual environment that made this work possible.

Finally, I owe my greatest debt of gratitude to my family, and especially to my beloved daughters Joanne, Lilia, and Sidra, whose love, patience, and light have inspired me every step of the way.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the feminist narratives of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, focusing on their representations of women's resistance to patriarchal structures in *The Color Purple* (1982) and *Beloved* (1987). Both authors foreground the experiences of African American women whose voices have historically been silenced, offering literary spaces where memory, trauma, and survival converge as acts of defiance.

Drawing on feminist and womanist theoretical frameworks, the study analyzes how Walker and Morrison reconstruct narratives of oppression through storytelling, maternal bonds, spirituality, and communal resilience. The research situates the novels within the broader historical and cultural contexts of slavery, segregation, and Black feminist thought, emphasizing the ways in which literature functions as both testimony and resistance.

Through comparative close readings, the thesis demonstrates that Walker and Morrison challenge dominant historical discourses by presenting Black women not as passive victims, but as agents of cultural transformation. Their works reveal how personal survival and collective memory become intertwined in the ongoing struggle against patriarchy and racial oppression.

Ultimately, this study argues that Walker and Morrison extend the boundaries of American literature by redefining feminist resistance through the lens of African American womanhood. In doing so, they not only reclaim silenced histories but also affirm the enduring power of narrative as a form of liberation.

Keywords: Alice Walker; Toni Morrison; patriarchy; oppression; resistance; Black feminism; female agency; empowerment; intersectionality; African American women's literature.

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Personal Rationale & Background

My interest in the works of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison grew from a fascination with how literature can both preserve cultural memory and inspire social transformation. Reading *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* for the first time revealed to me how stories of personal resilience are deeply connected to histories of communal survival. I chose this subject not only to celebrate their artistry but also to investigate how their narratives of resistance engage with ongoing debates in feminist thought, African American literary traditions, and the politics of representation.

Black women's literature occupies a unique position in American letters, articulating histories of oppression while imagining new possibilities for liberation. In this context, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison stand out as two of the most influential voices. Walker's fiction often emphasizes personal transformation and community healing, while Morrison foregrounds the intergenerational scars of historical trauma. By placing their works in dialogue, this thesis examines how each author constructs a vision of resistance that is both culturally rooted and artistically distinct.

The narratives of Walker and Morrison are inseparable from the historical realities ofslavery, segregation, and systemic racism — a backdrop examined in depth in Chapter 3. Both writers craft complex portrayals of Black women who confront, subvert, and reimagine the conditions that seek to limit them. Their fiction challenges dominant narratives that erase or distort Black women's lives, expanding the scope of feminist discourse to include emotional, spiritual, and communal dimensions of resistance.

1.2 Research Problem & Rationale

Although there is substantial scholarship on feminism and African American literature, the specific role of Black women writers such as Walker and Morrison in shaping feminist resistance has not been fully explored — particularly in terms of how their works intertwine race, gender, and literary form. Mainstream feminist criticism has often focused on the experiences of white, middle-class women, overlooking the layered forms of resistance found in *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*.

This study addresses that gap by comparing how Walker and Morrison portray women's resistance through different yet complementary lenses. Walker's work foregrounds personal growth, relational bonds, and healing as pathways to empowerment, while Morrison situates resistance within the legacies of history, memory, and cultural survival. Considering both authors together reveal a spectrum of Black feminist resistance — from intimate acts of self-definition to collective remembrance and survival.

The analysis is grounded in womanist theory, Black feminist thought, and intersectionality, centering Black women's experiences as primary rather than peripheral. By highlighting the interplay between thematic content and literary form, this study demonstrates how both authors use storytelling not only as an artistic practice but also as a means of survival, resistance, and envisioning freedom.

1.3 Research Questions

Primary Research Question:

- How do Alice Walker and Toni Morrison portray women's resistance to patriarchy in *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*, and what feminist strategies do their characters employ to reclaim identity, agency, and autonomy?

Sub-Questions:

1. In what ways do race, gender, and class intersect to shape the forms of oppression experienced by the female protagonists?
2. How do Walker's and Morrison's literary techniques — such as narrative structure, symbolism, and voice — enhance their feminist themes?
3. How is motherhood represented as both vulnerability and empowerment, and how does it function as a tool for resistance?
4. What role does community and female solidarity play in resistance and healing?
5. How do historical memory (in Morrison's work) and spiritual/emotional healing (in Walker's) contribute to defiance against patriarchal and racial domination?
6. In what ways do Walker's womanist framework and Morrison's historical trauma lens reflect broader ideological approaches within Black feminist thought?

These questions guide a comparative analysis that moves beyond general feminist readings to engage deeply with intersectionality, womanism, and historical consciousness.

1.4 Theoretical Overview

This thesis draws on three key frameworks: Black feminist thought, womanist theory, and intersectionality. These perspectives center the lived realities of Black women and emphasize how multiple systems of oppression operate simultaneously. While Chapter 2 offers a detailed discussion of these traditions and their primary scholars, their relevance here lies in shaping the critical lens through which Walker's *The Color Purple* and Morrison's *Beloved* are read.

Black feminist thought, articulated most influentially by Patricia Hill Collins, insists on the centrality of Black women's voices and theorizes the interconnected oppressions of race, gender, and class(Collins, 2000, pp. 9–11). Morrison herself critiqued the women's liberation movement for its frequent neglect of race and class, remarking that *"What do black women feel about Women's Lib? Distrust. It is white, therefore suspect… They don't want to be used again to help somebody gain power—a power that is carefully kept out of their hands"* (Morrison, 1971). For this reason, Morrison's work is more productively situated within Black feminist thought, which provides the conceptual space to engage her nuanced explorations of race, gender, history, and survival.

Womanism, first named by Alice Walker and later expanded by scholars such as LayliMaparyan(2012, p. 35), broadens feminist discourse to embrace community, spirituality, and holistic survival. Intersectionality, a term coined by KimberléCrenshaw(1989, p. 140, 149), offers a framework for understanding how overlapping identities generate distinct modes of oppression as well as strategies of resistance. While these frameworks are not identical—and sometimes generate productive tensions—they collectively illuminate the complex ways Walker's and Morrison's characters resist patriarchal and racial domination.

1.5 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, focusing on close textual analysis of *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*. Each novel is examined individually before being compared, allowing for a nuanced understanding of each author's strategies. Attention is paid to character development, narrative form, and symbolism, as well as to thematic elements such as motherhood, community, historical memory, and healing.

The comparative stage of analysis identifies points of convergence and divergence between Walker's womanist approach and Morrison's engagement with historical trauma. This method respects the distinctiveness of each author's vision while drawing out shared commitments to portraying Black women's agency and resilience.

Scope and Limitations: This study focuses exclusively on *The Color Purple* (1982) and *Beloved* (1987) because both novels engage deeply with themes of motherhood, trauma, and resistance, and have had significant impact on both literary and feminist discourse. While other works by Walker and Morrison are important, they are beyond the scope of this analysis. The emphasis here is on literary representation rather than direct activism, though the narratives inevitably speak to broader struggles for social justice.

1.6 Thesis Structure

- **Chapter 1:** Introduction — Establishes research context, problem, rationale, questions, and methodological approach.
- **Chapter 2:** Literature Review — Examines existing scholarship on Walker, Morrison, Black feminism, womanism, and literary resistance.
- **Chapter 3:** Historical and Cultural Context — Outlines the overlapping systems of oppression facing Black women in America, with attention to the gaps in mainstream feminist discourse.
- **Chapter 4:** Alice Walker's Representation of Women's Resistance — Analyzes *The Color Purple* with a focus on personal transformation, community bonds, and narrative strategies.
- **Chapter 5:** Toni Morrison's Representation of Women's Resistance — Examines *Beloved*, exploring themes of historical trauma, motherhood, and non-linear narrative.
- **Chapter 6:** Comparative Analysis — Juxtaposes the authors' approaches, highlighting shared themes and stylistic differences.
- **Chapter 7:** Conclusion and Implications — Summarizes findings, considers broader feminist implications, and suggests areas for further research.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Existing Scholarship

Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have significantly shaped African American literature and feminist thought, drawing sustained attention from scholars in literary studies, African American studies, feminism, and cultural theory. Their works are often studied for their innovative narrative structures, their integration of history and politics, and their focus on Black women's lived experiences. This section surveys the existing scholarship on both authors' portrayals of feminist resistance, highlighting the thematic concerns, critical approaches, and scholarly debates that inform current understandings.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) is widely regarded as a landmark in Black feminist literature. Much of the critical discussion of Walker's writing is framed through her concept of womanism, a term she introduced in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) to describe a feminism that centers the survival and wholeness of the entire Black community—women and men. Scholars often note how Celie's journey from silence and abuse to self-awareness and independence reflects this womanist vision. Barbara Christian (1985) argues that Walker links personal healing to political resistance, framing individual transformation as a form of social change (p. 52). In *The Color Purple*, love, friendship, and storytelling—especially in the form of Celie's letters—serve as tools of survival and resistance. Walker's womanism, emphasizing community support, strong interpersonal bonds, and the affirmation of Black women's lived realities, positions the novel as feminist both in theme and in its epistolary form, which privileges intimate, self-defined expression over externally imposed narratives.

Similarly, Toni Morrison’s work—especially *Beloved* (1987)—has been extensively examined for its engagement with history, trauma, and cultural memory. Critics such as Deborah McDowell (1989) and Toni Cade Bambara have analyzed how Morrison’s non-linear structures, shifting perspectives, and incorporation of supernatural elements disrupt dominant historical narratives and give voice to the silenced. McDowell (1989), interprets *Beloved*’s fragmented chronology as a formal embodiment of the psychic dislocation produced by slavery(p. 81). Scholars also focus on Morrison’s exploration of motherhood under slavery, especially the fraught love that drives Sethe’s most controversial choice, and how this reflects the impossible moral terrain faced by Black mothers in bondage. Andrea O’Reilly (2004, p. 84) reads Sethe’s actions as a radical, if tragic, assertion of maternal agency within an inhuman system.

Although both Walker and Morrison are firmly established as central figures in Black and feminist literature,yet much of the scholarship on their work has developed separately. *The Color Purple* is often discussed in terms of sisterhood, healing, and community, while *Beloved* is frequently examined through themes of memory, trauma, and slavery’s lasting impact. Even though these concerns overlap, their works are not often studied side by side. Reading them together shows how each writer offers a distinct vision of resistance—Walker through the strength of relationships and Morrison through the power of remembering history.

2.2 Thematic Patterns in Previous Research

Existing feminist criticism on Walker and Morrison consistently returns to three interlinked thematic patterns:

1. **Resistance through voice and storytelling**
2. **Motherhood and maternal agency as complex, ambivalent forces**
3. **Community, spirituality, and healing as foundations for liberation**

1. Resistance through Voice and Storytelling

One of the most common ideas in feminist studies of *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* is that finding and using one’s voice is a powerful way to resist oppression. Being silenced has long been a way to control and erase Black women, so both Walker and Morrison use storytelling as a political act—one that helps their characters recover a sense of self or that reveals hidden histories.

In *The Color Purple*, the main character Celie tells her story through letters. At first, her writing shows how unsure and ashamed she feels. But as the story goes on, she becomes more confident and expressive. Celie’s writing helps her take control of her own story and break free from the roles men and society have forced on her.

In *Beloved*, Morrison uses a very different style—fragmented and from many points of view—to reflect the deep confusion and trauma caused by slavery. The story isn't told in a straight line; instead, it mirrors the broken memories and emotional pain of the characters. The ghost character, Beloved, symbolizes the past that refuses to stay buried. Linda Krumholz argues that Morrison's style breaks traditional storytelling rules on purpose—to reveal what's missing or hidden in American history(Krumholz, 1992, p. 402). Further, Krumholz maintains that Morrison's prose intentionally breaks conventional narrative to expose absences in official history and give voice to Black women's emotional experiences (Krumholz, 1992, p. 397). This way, Morrison gives space for the inner lives of Black women to be seen and heard.

2. Motherhood and Maternal Agency

Another major theme in feminist studies of Walker and Morrison is how they portray motherhood—not as something soft or idealized, but as something full of struggle, strength, and hard choices. For both writers, being a mother is deeply connected to survival, independence, and resistance, especially under the harsh systems of racism and sexism.

In *The Color Purple*, part of Celie's growth comes from becoming a mother figure—not just to her sister's kids, but also to herself, learning how to care for and value who she is. Another character, Sofia, shows fierce maternal strength by standing up for her children, even when she's punished harshly by the legal system. Further,instead of focusing only on the bond between mother and child, Walker ties it to community support and personal growth.

Morrison's view of motherhood in *Beloved* is even more painful and complicated. Sethe's choice to kill her daughter rather than let her be taken back into slavery is one of the most powerful—and debated—moments in African American literature. Scholar Andrea O'Reilly explains that this act has to be seen in the context of slavery, where Black mothers were often not allowed to raise or protect their children. Instead of judging Sethe by today's values, many feminist critics see her as showing a radical kind of strength in a world that gave her no real options. Her love becomes an extreme, heartbreaking form of resistance(O'Reilly, 2004, pp. 82–85).

3. Community, Spirituality, and Healing

A third key theme in feminist studies of Walker and Morrison is the role of community and spirituality in helping Black women resist and heal. Many scholars point out how both authors show the power of female relationships and spiritual practices in helping women survive and grow stronger.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie's deep bonds with women like Shug Avery and her sister Nettie give her the love and support she needs to escape male control and find her voice. Moreover, Walker's idea of freedom isn't just about independence—it's about connection, forgiveness, and spiritual self-awareness.

Similarly, in *Beloved*, it's the community of women that helps Sethe finally begin to heal. Only when the women come together to drive out the ghost of Beloved does Sethe start to reclaim herself. Baby Suggs, another key figure in the novel, brings people together through spiritual gatherings where she teaches self-love and emotional healing. Barbara Christian points out that for Morrison, spirituality isn't about strict religion—it's a healing force that helps people reconnect with their past and with each other.

These recurring themes—finding one's voice, the complexities of motherhood, and the power of community and spirituality—are central to understanding Walker's and Morrison's feminist messages. They show that resistance isn't just about fighting back—it's also about telling your story, loving deeply, remembering the past, and growing through connection and care.

2.3 Points of Debate and Scholarly Disagreements

Despite widespread recognition of Walker and Morrison's contributions, critical interpretations diverge in three main areas:

1. The Feminist Controversy Around *The Color Purple*

One of the continuing discussions around Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is whether the novel strengthens feminist ideas or unintentionally harms the image of Black men and family life. The portrayal of male characters—especially Mister (Albert)—as abusive, emotionally distant, or weak seems to echo negative stereotypes. The novel is offering a more hopeful perspective, since Mister's eventual growth and reconciliation with Celie suggests that men, too, can change and be part of a more equal future. From this point of view, the book is less about condemning men and more about exposing systems of oppression while showing the possibility of healing and transformation.

This tension raises a larger question within feminist writing: when patriarchy within the Black community is criticized, does it help to bring liberation, or does it risk repeating racist patterns of thought? Walker's idea of womanism seeks a balance by emphasizing shared healing and survival, suggesting that resistance is not only about calling out injustice but also about creating spaces for reconciliation and growth. Opinions still differ, but the novel continues to invite readers to reflect on how struggles within families and communities can also become opportunities for change.

2. Sethe's Infanticide: Act of Resistance or Irredeemable Violence?

One of the most debated parts of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is the moment when Sethe kills her daughter to stop her from being taken back into slavery. Scholars strongly disagree on how to interpret this act—some see it as a tragic form of resistance, while others view it as morally troubling.

Sethe's actions are emotionally intense, they leave the reader unsure of how to feel. The novel pulls the reader into Sethe's pain and then challenges them to sympathize with a disturbing choice, making it hard to take a clear moral stance.

Andrea O'Reilly (2004) says it's essential to understand Sethe's decision in the context of slavery—a system where Black mothers had no power to protect or keep their children. O'Reilly sees Sethe's act as an extreme form of love and political resistance, shaped by a cruel and dehumanizing system. Further, Morrison isn't endorsing infanticide; instead, she's showing just how awful the choices were for enslaved mothers (p. 162).

This touches on a bigger question in literature: should stories about trauma comfort the readers or challenge them? Some think Morrison's refusal to clearly judge Sethe is a flaw; others see it as a powerful way to make readers think more deeply. While most scholars agree that Sethe's choice is at the heart of the book's feminist message, they still see its meaning in very different ways.

3. Political Function of Literary Form: Style vs. Substance

Another major debate around Walker and Morrison focuses on their writing style and literary techniques. Critics disagree on whether the way they tell their stories—like Walker's use of letters or Morrison's use of magical realism and non-linear timelines—helps or hurts the political messages in their books.

For example, the fragmented structure of *Beloved* reflects the broken identities of enslaved people, so the form and the message are deeply connected. Linda Krumholz (1992) adds that Morrison's use of internal thoughts and different points of view challenges traditional, one-sided versions of history (p. 396). But not everyone agrees. Some critics argue that these creative techniques can make the story harder to follow and may take attention away from the urgent political issues.

As for Walker, her use of first-person letters in *The Color Purple* has been both celebrated and critiqued. On one hand, the epistolary form allows readers to follow Celie's growth through her own words, making her transformation deeply personal and emotionally powerful. On the other hand, this focus on individual development risks narrowing the story, potentially drawing attention away from the wider political and communal struggles faced by Black women.

These arguments raise an important question for feminist literary critics: how should writers balance powerful political messages with creative storytelling? Some believe that Morrison and Walker use style to deepen their messages. Others think their literary choices may weaken or distract from those messages.

2.4 Gaps in the Literature

While scholarship on Walker and Morrison is extensive, comparative studies remain limited. Most analyses isolate each author, employing distinct theoretical frameworks, which can obscure their shared thematic and political concerns. This separation also hinders recognition of how their differing approaches—Walker's womanist healing and Morrison's historical trauma lens—articulate complementary strategies of resistance.

Further, while critics have discussed the role of community in each novel, they have rarely integrated male allies into these analyses. In *The Color Purple*, characters like Mister evolve into supportive figures; in *Beloved*, Paul D challenges Sethe while also offering a vision of life beyond her trauma. Including these roles expands the definition of feminist resistance beyond exclusively female networks, enriching comparative insights into how both authors embed men within women-centered liberation narratives.

Finally, emotional and spiritual dimensions of resistance are often treated as secondary to political or historical readings. Yet Baby Suggs' call to self-love in *Beloved* and Celie's spiritual awakening in *The Color Purple* demonstrate that healing and survival are deeply interwoven with personal transformation. Addressing these dimensions comparatively will show how both authors resist oppression not only through explicit political confrontation but also through the reclamation of inner life.

2.5 Theoretical Lens for Analysis

Scholars have approached the works of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison through several overlapping critical frameworks, most notably Black feminism, womanism, and intersectionality. Each framework offers a distinct but complementary perspective on how the protagonists of *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* resist systems of racial and gender oppression. Together, they provide a conceptual basis for later comparative analysis in Chapters 5 and 6.

Black Feminism

Black feminist thought, as developed by theorists such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Angela Davis, emphasizes that African American women face interlocking oppressions of race, gender, and class, and that these cannot be understood in isolation. In literary studies, this perspective foregrounds the ways Black women characters negotiate survival, self-definition, and agency in contexts shaped by both sexism and racism(Collins, 2000, pp. 9–11). Critics applying this lens to *Beloved* often point to Sethe's struggles as inseparable from the historical trauma of slavery and the constraints placed on Black motherhood. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's oppression—rooted in racialized poverty, sexual abuse, and patriarchal control—demonstrates similar intersections. Viewing both works through Black feminism allows scholars to trace how resistance operates simultaneously on personal and collective levels, an approach essential for the side-by-side readings undertaken in this thesis.

Womanism

Coined by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), womanism expands feminist discourse to include the cultural, spiritual, and communal dimensions of Black women's lives. She highlights how womanism values wholeness, interdependence, and healing, framing personal empowerment as inseparable from community well-being.
While womanism is explicitly associated with Walker, scholars have noted its resonance in Morrison's fiction as well. Celie's transformation in *The Color Purple*—fostered through sustaining female relationships and spiritual self-realization—exemplifies womanist ideals. Similarly, in *Beloved*, acts of nurturing and the intergenerational transmission of memory serve as communal strategies for survival. Positioning womanism alongside Morrison's work underscores the shared emphasis on connection and care, even as their narrative methods differ.

Intersectionality

Introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality examines how multiple axes of oppression—such as race, gender, and class—mutually construct disadvantage(p. 140). In literary analysis, this approach is used to show that characters' struggles cannot be reduced to a single category of identity.
In *Beloved*, Sethe's experiences are shaped not only by enslavement and motherhood but also by the compounded vulnerabilities of being both Black and female in a slaveholding society. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's exploitation is informed by her position as a poor Black woman in the rural American South. Intersectional readings demonstrate that both authors' representations of resistance emerge from complex, layered oppressions—a key comparative point that this thesis will develop in its analytical chapters.

By surveying these three frameworks in the scholarship, this section establishes the theoretical foundation for comparing Walker's and Morrison's approaches to feminist resistance. Black feminism situates both authors within a tradition of centering Black women's voices; womanism highlights the role of love, spirituality, and community; and intersectionality ensures that the interplay of race, gender, and class remains central to the analysis. Importantly, Morrison critiqued the women's liberation movement for centering the concerns of white, middle-class women and for its failure to address race and class as integral to women's experiences. For this reason, her work is more productively situated within Black feminist thought, which more fully accounts for the intersecting oppressions that shape Black women’s lives. This multi-lens approach not only reflects current critical practice but also supports the thesis’s aim of examining how two distinct narrative visions articulate converging strategies of resistance.

Chapter Three

Historical and Social Context

3.1 The Historical Oppression of Black Women

Black women in the United States have faced a uniquely compounded form of oppression, shaped by both racial and gender discrimination. Unlike White women, who historically centered their activism on gender equality, or Black men, who focused primarily on racial justice, Black women were—and remain—forced to fight both battles at once. This intertwined struggle stretches from the era of slavery through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement, and into the present day, leaving a deep imprint on the literature of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

Slavery: The Foundation of Oppression

From 1619 to 1865, enslaved Black women endured a system of unrelenting physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. They worked in the fields under brutal conditions and in domestic spaces under constant surveillance. Enslavers treated them not as human beings but as property—laborers and breeders whose children, by law, inherited their enslaved status. Sexual violence was a persistent reality, with no legal recourse or social protection. This exploitation was reinforced by the Jezebel stereotype, which portrayed Black women as hypersexual and immoral, a fiction that allowed White society to justify abuse and deny them the protections extended to White women.

The reproductive oppression of slavery—forcing women to bear children for profit—echoes through Morrison's *Beloved*, where Sethe's desperate act of infanticide is rooted in her refusal to let her child be claimed by the system that once claimed her.

The generational trauma embedded in such histories is not simply background for Morrison’s novel; it is the moral and emotional engine that drives it.

From Emancipation to Jim Crow: Gendered Racism Persists

The end of slavery in 1865 did not dismantle the structures that oppressed Black women. During Reconstruction, White supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan targeted Black communities with violence, using sexual assault against women as a weapon of terror and control. Freed Black women were denied the legal protections routinely granted to White women, leaving them doubly vulnerable.

As Reconstruction gave way to the Jim Crow era, segregation and discriminatory laws confined Black women to the lowest rungs of the labor market, most often in domestic service for White families. Here the Mammy stereotype—depicting them as loyal, nurturing caretakers—functioned to normalize economic exploitation and emotional neglect of their own families. Morrison’s Baby Suggs embodies the psychic toll of such exploitation: once a preacher and spiritual leader, she retreats into contemplation of colors after the devastating loss of her faith in humanity. Her withdrawal, symbolic of a survival mechanism, leaves Sethe without the community’s emotional anchor, showing how systemic oppression fractures not only individuals but the networks that sustain them.

The Civil Rights Movement and the Birth of Black Feminism

The Civil Rights Movement (1950s–1970s) aimed for racial equality, but Black women were often marginalized within it. While Black men were usually seen as the leaders of the movement, Black women were important behind-the-scenes workers, helping to organize, plan, and lead. As a result of this, Black feminism came about because Black women were being left out and ignored. In the 1970s, groups like the Combahee River Collective spoke out, saying that mainstream feminism, led by White women, didn't focus on the unique challenges Black women faced. Thinkers like Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the idea of "intersectionality," which explains how race, gender, and class combine to shape the experiences of Black women. She pointed out that Black women face both racism and sexism at the same time, but their struggles are often ignored because feminist movements focus on white women, and civil rights movements focus on Black men (Crenshaw, 1989, p.140). This overlap affects areas like jobs, where courts sometimes failed to recognize discrimination against Black women because it didn’t fit into just one category. As Crenshaw explains, *"Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated."*(Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).Her work highlights the need to look at how different forms of discrimination intersect to fully understand oppression.

3.2 Morrison’s View on Feminism and Black Gender Dynamics

Toni Morrison’s 1971 *New York Times* essay, “What the Black Woman Thinks About Women’s Lib,” provides an invaluable lens for reading her fiction. She criticized the women’s liberation movement, led predominantly by White middle-class women, for failing to include Black women’s voices or struggles. “Not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything,” she wrote, emphasizing that Black women had no societal privileges to fall back on (Morrison, 1971).

Morrison’s reflections also confront the strained yet enduring bonds between Black men and women. While acknowledging that some Black men displaced their own pain and frustration onto Black women, she framed these conflicts as part of a shared, historically imposed wound rather than a fundamental opposition. In *Beloved*, this dynamic surfaces in Paul D—a man hardened by enslavement and imprisonment, yet capable of offering Sethe the affirmation, “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.”(Morrison, 1987, p. 521). This is Morrison’s vision: not an erasure of pain, but a possibility of mutual healing.

By embedding such historical realities into their narratives, both Morrison and Walker transform literature into a site of resistance, memory, and reimagined futures. Their characters’ personal struggles mirror the historical arc of Black women’s endurance, carrying forward the legacies of survival forged in the crucible of oppression.Continuing Legacies of Oppression and the Limits of Mainstream Feminism even with landmark legal victories in civil rights and gender equality, the weight of history continues to press on the lives of Black women in the United States. Today, disproportionate incarceration rates, persistent wage gaps, and restrictions on reproductive autonomy reflect a lingering injustice. The “Strong Black Woman” stereotype—an expectation of unyielding resilience and selflessness—further masks their struggles, framing vulnerability as weakness and discouraging support.

Movements such as #MeToo, founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke, have amplified conversations about sexual violence, yet the experiences of Black women remain underrepresented in mainstream feminist discourse. Burke’s work underscores a recurring pattern: the spaces that claim to speak for all women often center those whose race or class grants them greater visibility. Walker and Morrison’s fiction directly engages with these contradictions, portraying characters who shoulder the long memory of oppression while resisting erasure in both personal and collective histories (Burke, 2006).

This persistence of inequality has roots in the early feminist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. The first wave of feminism—stretching from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s—focused largely on women’s suffrage and legal rights. Iconic moments like the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention produced the *Declaration of Sentiments*, proclaiming that “all men and women are created equal.” Frederick Douglass’s presence at the convention as a staunch ally illustrated the potential for cross-racial solidarity. Yet such solidarity was often fractured. Leading White suffragists, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, sometimes expressed openly racist views, prioritizing White women's enfranchisement over the struggles of women like Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells, whose advocacy addressed both racism and sexism simultaneously.

The passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920 marked a formal victory for women's suffrage, but many Black women in the South remained effectively disenfranchised for decades due to Jim Crow laws. Morrison's historical sensibility in *Beloved* mirrors this reality: even after emancipation, freedom existed more in law than in lived experience, especially for those whose gender compounded their vulnerability.

The second wave of feminism, emerging in the 1960s and lasting into the 1980s, shifted focus to reproductive rights, workplace equality, and sexual liberation. While these were vital issues, the movement's leadership—predominantly middle-class White women—rarely accounted for the intersecting oppressions faced by Black women. Calls to dismantle the "traditional" family structure often ignored how Black families had already been fragmented by systemic racism, economic precarity, and mass incarceration. This oversight mirrored earlier exclusions and deepened the need for a separate Black feminist framework. In *The Color Purple*, Walker pushes against this marginalization by showing how Celie's economic and personal empowerment is inseparable from the survival strategies of her community.

The third wave of feminism, beginning in the 1990s, attempted to address these earlier blind spots by embracing diversity and the concept of intersectionality. Thinkers like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Patricia Hill Collins pressed mainstream feminism to grapple with issues ranging from police violence to the criminalization of Black motherhood. Yet even in this more inclusive climate, disparities remained: higher maternal mortality rates for Black women, the disproportionate impact of punitive school policies on Black girls, and enduring wage inequities all signaled that the promises of inclusion often fell short in practice.

This history of exclusion from mainstream feminism not only explains the emergence of Black feminism but also informs the literary strategies of Walker and Morrison. Both write into the spaces mainstream movements have left vacant, using fiction to assert that the liberation of Black women requires confronting the full weight of race, gender, and class together. In their novels, the intimate is always political, and the personal triumphs of their characters reverberate against the backdrop of a history that has yet to fully release its grip.

3.3 Womanism and Its Distinction from Mainstream Feminism

Mainstream feminism’s inability to address the compounded oppressions faced by Black women led to the development of new conceptual frameworks—one of the most influential being womanism. Coined by Alice Walker in her 1982 collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, the term describes someone “similar to, but broader and deeper than, a feminist.” Walker’s (1983) metaphor—“A womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender”suggests that while womanism encompasses feminist principles, it extends beyond them to embrace race, class, culture, spirituality, and community well-being as inseparable from gender equality.

Walker defines a womanist as “a Black feminist or feminist of color” committed to the survival and wholeness of the entire Black community—men, women, and children alike. This vision stems from a long history in which Black women have acted as caretakers, leaders, and cultural guardians under the dual weight of racism and sexism. In celebrating Black women’s resilience, creativity, and capacity to sustain family and community bonds despite multiple oppressions, womanism avoids separating the struggle for gender justice from the struggle for racial and cultural survival.

Unlike early mainstream feminism, which often treated gender oppression as an isolated problem, womanism insists that oppression is experienced at the intersections of gender, race, and class. This is why womanist thought is inherently community-centered, valuing collective uplift as much as individual empowerment. It also preserves the spiritual and cultural dimensions of Black women’s resistance—storytelling, folklore, and faith traditions—elements often ignored in secular, Eurocentric feminist discourse.

Importantly, womanism rejects strict gender binaries in the fight for justice. While radical feminist currents sometimes positioned men primarily as oppressors, Walker’s framework emphasizes solidarity, recognizing that Black men, too, are harmed by white supremacy and can be allies in dismantling patriarchy. Womanism’s grounding in lived experience also sets it apart: it addresses the daily realities of economic survival, racial violence, and family responsibility that define many working-class Black women’s lives, alongside broader structural reform.

The influence of womanism on literature and activism has been profound. Authors such as Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde have drawn upon its principles, creating narratives that foreground Black women’s strength, interconnectedness, and independence in ways that challenge both patriarchal and mainstream feminist paradigms. In Morrison’s *Beloved*, acts of nurturing, the preservation of ancestral memory, and the rebuilding of community in the aftermath of slavery align closely with womanist ideals, even though Morrison herself did not use the label.

In activism, womanist thought has shaped initiatives like the reproductive justice movement, which links reproductive freedom to broader social conditions, and the Black Lives Matter movement[1], led largely by Black women and deeply invested in both racial and gender justice. As a theoretical lens, womanism bridges historical memory, cultural identity, and social change, offering a vision of liberation that is as attentive to the spiritual and cultural fabric of a people as it is to their political and economic rights.

By embedding womanism within this historical and feminist context, we can see more clearly how Walker and Morrison articulate resistance not as an individual act of defiance, but as an ongoing, collective, and culturally rooted practice. This approach will prove central to the comparative analysis in later chapters, where both authors' works reveal the transformative power of connection, care, and community healing.

3.4 The Role of Literature in Resistance

Literature has long been a means of resistance, giving voice to the marginalized and offering a counter-narrative to dominant cultural stories. For Black women writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, it becomes more than artistic expression—it is a political and cultural act. Their works do not simply tell stories; they intervene in history, confront systems of oppression, and create spaces for imagining new possibilities. Feminist literature, in particular, has been essential in challenging patriarchy, giving women the language to articulate their struggles and the courage to imagine futures free from gendered constraints. In the hands of Walker and Morrison, literature becomes a site where personal histories intertwine with collective memory, and where the emotional realities of Black womanhood are explored with unflinching honesty.

One of the most powerful ways this resistance takes shape is in the dismantling of patriarchal ideologies. Through fiction, both authors reveal how gender oppression is woven into the social, cultural, and institutional fabric of life. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), for instance, critiques the Eurocentric beauty standards that warp Black girls' self-perception. In the cruel words of Pauline Breedlove— "She be lucky if it don't live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking" (p. 189). We see how internalized racism leads a mother to reject her own child. Such moments are not isolated acts of cruelty but are symptomatic of a system that prizes whiteness and devalues Blackness, even within the intimate space of family. Similarly, Walker's *The Color Purple* tracks Celie's transformation from a silenced, abused girl into a self-possessed woman, challenging traditional gender roles and affirming that self-definition is itself a radical act.

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[1] The *Black Lives Matter* movement was founded in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin. It seeks to challenge police violence and systemic racism against Black communities.

Resistance also emerges in the reclamation of Black women's voices and histories—voices long silenced or distorted by both mainstream feminism and the historical record. Morrison's *Beloved* fuses historical realism with the supernatural to tell the story of slavery's trauma, using oral storytelling traditions to preserve memory and assert the validity of Black women's experiences. The novel's haunting refrain, "This is not a story to pass on," insists that the past must be remembered, however painful, if healing is to occur. This oral tradition recalls earlier works such as Harriet Jacobs' (1861) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which exposed the unique sexual exploitation endured by enslaved women, and the fearless journalism of Ida B. Wells, who declared, "The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them." These acts of truth-telling—whether in memoir, reportage, or fiction—are part of a continuous thread of literary resistance stretching across generations.

This literature also reflects and embodies intersectional identities. Walker's articulation of womanism— "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender"—signals a commitment to the full spectrum of Black women's experiences, rooted in community, culture, and spirituality. Such a perspective can also be seen in Zora Neale Hurston's (1937)*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, where the protagonist Janie navigates love, independence, and social expectation within the context of Black southern life. "There are years that ask questions and years that answer," (p. 53). Wherein the rhythms of a self-discovery shaped by both personal and communal histories.

Beyond individual empowerment, the literature of Walker, Morrison, and their foremothers fosters collective action. By portraying shared struggles, these works cultivate solidarity and inspire activism. The *Color Purple* and *Beloved* do not simply depict domestic abuse, racial oppression, and economic injustice; they provoke readers to question and resist these realities in their own contexts. In this way, literature functions as both mirror and catalyst—it reflects lived oppression and calls forth the will to dismantle it.

The history of Black women's struggles and the evolution of feminist thought illuminate the political depth of these narratives. When we read Walker's and Morrison's works through the lens of womanism and intersectionality, their fiction emerges not merely as storytelling, but as cultural testimony and an enduring blueprint for resistance. In the chapters that follow, this framework will guide our close analysis of how both authors craft narratives that resist erasure, affirm Black womanhood, and imagine a future grounded in justice and collective survival.

Chapter Four

Alice Walker's Representation of Women's Resistance

4.1 Overview of Walker's Feminist Vision

Introduction

This chapter argues that in *The Color Purple,* Alice Walker presents a new way of understanding resistance for Black women through her concept of womanism. Instead of portraying resistance as a single dramatic act, Walker frames it as a sustained process: growing emotionally, finding spiritual peace, becoming financially independent, and relying on a strong network of other women.

Walker's writing exposes the difficult realities Black women face, while also celebrating their resilience and capacity for change. She challenges sexism, racism, and injustice, showing how Black women endure and overcome these barriers. Her narratives place their voices and lived experiences at the center of the struggle for justice and equality.

Unlike traditional feminism, Walker's vision focuses specifically on the lives of Black women. She argues that true freedom involves more than individual rights—it must also encompass family, community, and spirituality. This holistic view, known as womanism, distinguishes her from mainstream feminist thought and offers a more inclusive approach to liberation. This section examines Walker's vision by outlining its central themes, then turning to how these ideas operate in *The Color Purple*.

Womanism: A More Inclusive Feminism

As defined in Chapter 3, Walker describes a womanist as a Black feminist or feminist of color “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1983). Unlike mainstream feminism, which often centered White, middle-class women’s experiences, womanism acknowledges that race, gender, and class intersect to shape the lives of Black women.

The term emerged in response to the exclusion of Black women from the mainstream feminist movement—particularly during the second wave of the 1960s and 70s, which largely reflected the concerns of White, middle-class women. Walker’s metaphor, “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (Walker, 1983), signals that womanism builds on feminism but extends further, embedding cultural identity, emotional well-being, and communal responsibility into the struggle for justice.

Scholars like LayliMaparyan have expanded Walker’s vision. In *The Womanist Idea* (2012), Maparyan describes womanism as a spiritually grounded way of life rooted in healing, connection, and transformation. It seeks justice while fostering love and wholeness—addressing gender inequality alongside racism, economic oppression, and spiritual well-being (p. 14). This theoretical grounding is vividly embodied in Celie’s arc: her self-worth is rebuilt through community and love, aligning with Maparyan’s emphasis on spiritual and emotional restoration as foundations for liberation.

Key elements of womanism in Walker’s work include:

- **Emphasis on Community and Sisterhood:** Strong friendships between women help them reclaim power in male-dominated contexts. In *The Color Purple*, Celie’s bond with Shug Avery helps her discover self-love, while Sofia’s fearlessness starkly contrasts with Celie’s early passivity, modeling self-respect and independence.
- **Rejection of Hierarchical Power Structures:** Womanism addresses all forms of oppression—racism, sexism, and classism. Celie’s defiance of Mister is not only personal but also a refusal to accept the layered subjugations Black women face.
- **Spiritual and Cultural Rootedness:** Guided by Shug— “God is inside you and inside everybody else” (Walker, 1982, p.165)—Celie redefines spirituality on her own terms, finding inner strength and freedom outside the rigid doctrines that once constrained her.

Depiction of Women’s Resistance in Walker’s Works

Walker’s womanist lens reveals multiple modes of resistance, from subtle acts of defiance to transformative change.

- **Breaking Silence and Finding Voice:** At the novel's start, Celie lives under compounded racism and sexism, her silence reinforced by abuse and internalized worthlessness. Through relationships with women like Shug, she learns she deserves love, respect, and choice. When she declares, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook… But I'm here" (Walker, 1982, p.175), she rejects the labels imposed on her and affirms her existence. This marks the pivot from submission to self-assertion that culminates in her independence and confidence.
- **Reclaiming Sexual and Emotional Autonomy:** Sofia openly rejects unwanted intimacy— "I just don't want to be bothered" (Walker, 1982, p.61)—challenging the expectation that women must acquiesce to male desire. Her stance emboldens others to assert control over their bodies. Similarly, Celie's relationship with Shug redefines her sense of sexuality and femininity, moving from passive endurance to active self-definition. In both cases, Walker challenges prescriptive gender roles, illustrating that women can author their own identities.

4.2 Analysis of *The Color Purple*

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* presents a reimagined vision of resistance for Black women, expressed through the framework of womanism. Rather than depicting resistance as a single act of rebellion, Walker shows it as an evolving journey — one that involves emotional growth, spiritual fulfillment, economic independence, and the sustaining power of female solidarity. Her writing illuminates the systemic hardships Black women face while also foregrounding their resilience, turning their voices and lives into the center of the struggle for justice and equality.

Unlike much of mainstream feminism, which historically centered White, middle-class women's experiences, Walker's womanist perspective grows out of the specific realities of Black women's lives. For her, freedom is not only about individual rights but also about the flourishing of family, community, and spiritual well-being.

Walker's formulation of womanism directly responds to the exclusion of Black women from the dominant feminist movement, especially during the second wave of the 1960s and 70s. While that movement concentrated on gender equality in the workplace, reproductive rights, and sexual liberation, it often overlooked how race and class compounded women's oppression. Walker's oft-cited metaphor — "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (Walker, 1983) — captures this expansion: womanism incorporates feminism but adds the deeper cultural, emotional, and communal dimensions central to Black women's survival and resistance.

Furthermore, Celie's transformation in *The Color Purple*: her self-worth is rebuilt not solely through defiance of male authority, but through the nurturing of community, the reclamation of her own voice, and the discovery of a sustaining spiritual vision.

Womanism’s reach has since extended into theology, activism, and global feminist movements. It has also resonated with Indigenous, Latinx, and queer communities of color facing similarly intersecting oppressions. Across these contexts, womanism functions as both theory and practice — a living framework for resilience across generations.

This broader vision of liberation shapes the world of *The Color Purple*, where resistance is not defined by isolated acts but by the reclamation of voice, body, and spirit. Celie’s journey from voicelessness to self-affirmation exemplifies this arc. At the start of the novel, she is trapped in a cycle of sexual and emotional abuse, first by her stepfather and then by Mister. Her letters to God, such as “I am fourteen years old… Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (Walker, 1982, p. 8), reveal both her innocence and her isolation. She is physically silenced by violence and psychologically silenced by internalized oppression.

The turning point begins when Celie discovers that Mister has hidden letters from her sister Nettie, proof that Nettie is alive and has been reaching out. This rediscovery of connection marks the first breach in Celie’s enforced silence. Her declaration, “I don’t write to God no more, I write to you” (Walker, 1982, p. 163), signals a shift in authority: she is no longer speaking into the void but directing her words toward a real, reciprocal relationship. The supportive presence of Shug Avery amplifies this change. Shug’s counsel — “You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a’tall” (Walker, 1982, p. 167) — helps Celie stop viewing herself through a patriarchal lens.

Sofia’s example provides another model of defiance. Sofia’s fearlessness starkly contrasts with Celie’s early passivity; she refuses to accept male domination, telling Harpo, “All my life I had to fight” (Walker, 1982, p. 42). Even after enduring brutal punishment for standing up to a White mayor’s wife, Sofia’s refusal to surrender her dignity becomes a source of inspiration for Celie. Nettie’s letters, meanwhile, broaden Celie’s awareness beyond her own life, revealing the global dimensions of women’s oppression and reinforcing the idea that her suffering is not a personal flaw but part of a systemic injustice.

Celie’s growing sense of self culminates in her confrontation with Mister, a scene that embodies Walker’s womanist vision of self-definition and liberation. This moment is not simply an angry outburst but the flowering of years of internal growth, solidarity, and self-love. When Celie leaves Mister and establishes her own business, she achieves economic independence alongside emotional freedom — a dual liberation central to womanist thought.

A critical aspect of Celie’s transformation is her reclaiming of sexual and emotional autonomy. Initially, she experiences sexuality only as violence, a theme established earlier in her life story and deepened through her evolving relationship with Shug.

Through Shug, Celie learns to view intimacy as an act of mutual respect and pleasure rather than domination. This reframing turns sexuality into a source of empowerment, aligning with Walker's broader project of redefining womanhood on one's own terms.

By the novel's end, Celie writes not to God but to "everything," an expansive gesture that signals spiritual freedom and reconciliation with the world. Her journey mirrors the womanist commitment to personal wholeness, community uplift, and intersectional justice. Through Celie, Walker shows that resistance is sustained not by a single act of defiance, but by the ongoing process of self-discovery, solidarity, and love — forces strong enough to dismantle both the external structures of oppression and the internalized narratives that uphold them.

Walker's Literary Techniques

Alice Walker uses a range of literary strategies in *The Color Purple* to portray Celie's journey and explore themes of struggle, resilience, and liberation. Among the most significant are her narrative structure, the epistolary format, and her use of symbolism—each not only shaping the novel's style but also embodying its womanist vision.

4.3 Narrative Structure, Critical Perspectives, and Literary Debate

The novel's epistolary form—told primarily through Celie's letters—serves as both a narrative technique and a symbolic act of resistance. Barbara Christian argues that Walker's focus on southern Black women reflects their history of survival, which fosters a capacity to resist and confront harsh realities. The private, letter-based narrative allows Celie's voice to grow stronger over time, charting her shift from isolation to empowerment. For Christian, this choice of structure amplifies the resilience and transformative potential of Black women's lives, centering their voices in a literary space from which they have long been excluded (Christian, 1985, p. 52 - 53).

Moreover, In *The Color Purple*, male characters such as Mister and Celie's stepfather are often portrayed through acts of violence and control. Because the story is told almost entirely through Celie's letters, these perspectives highlight the intensity of her suffering and allow readers to experience her trauma in a direct and personal way. At the same time, the intimacy of the epistolary form can create a limited view of men, since their actions are filtered mainly through Celie's pain and fears. This makes the narrative both powerful in its emotional impact and selective in how it represents gender relations, raising questions about how individual voices shape the way we see broader social realities.

Patricia Hill Collins offers a more reconciliatory reading in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), arguing that Walker's womanism uses character arcs, particularly Mister's transformation, to demonstrate that individuals can change when harmful systems are dismantled. The gradual shift in Mister's portrayal—rendered through changes in Celie's tone and language toward him—shows how narrative perspective can chart relational healing (p. 157). This aligns with Collins's emphasis on womanism as a framework for reconciliation as well as resistance.

Similarly, Trudier Harris reads the novel's symbolism—especially in the recurring imagery of sewing, gardening, and color—as a way of depicting both the wounds of oppression and the possibilities for renewal. For Harris, these motifs work in tandem with the letter format to illustrate cycles of harm and recovery: Celie's quilt-making and her eventual appreciation of the color purple mark her reclaiming of beauty, agency, and joy (Harris, 1984, p. 157).

By connecting critical perspectives to Walker's literary techniques, we see how *The Color Purple* operates on multiple levels: the epistolary voice fosters intimacy and tracks transformation; symbolism enriches themes of healing and self-definition; and the narrative structure itself reflects a womanist commitment to centering marginalized voices while still leaving room for shared redemption.

Epistolary Format

In *The Color Purple*, the epistolary format is more than a storytelling device—it becomes a central means for Alice Walker to chart Celie's inner life and gradual empowerment. Writing letters allows Celie to narrate her own experience directly, without an intermediary voice, creating an intimate connection between character and reader. Through this first-person lens, her struggles, fears, and hopes are rendered with immediacy and authenticity.

At the novel's opening, Celie writes only to God, a choice that reflects both her isolation and sense of powerlessness. These letters are quiet pleas for recognition, underscoring her belief that no one in her tangible life will listen or care for her. Addressing an unseen God reinforces her conviction that she is unworthy of love or human connection, and the confessional tone deepens the reader's awareness of her entrapment.

As the narrative progresses and Celie begins corresponding with her sister Nettie, the tone and content of the letters shift. Her words become less hesitant and more assured, signaling a growing capacity to articulate her own desires and beliefs. For instance, when she writes, "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children" (Walker, 1982, p. 182), the contrast with her earlier letters is striking. No longer a monologue of pain, her writing becomes an affirmation of connection and possibility.

The movement from addressing God to writing to Nettie is a symbolic step toward reclaiming her agency—she now directs her story to someone who genuinely sees and values her. Through the letters, the reader witnesses Celie's transformation in stages; her language grows stronger, her reflections more confident, and her vision for her life more expansive. This progression illustrates how Walker uses the epistolary form not only to depict a private journey but also to situate Celie's growth within a broader womanist emphasis on self-definition, relational bonds, and resistance to silencing.

Symbolism

Walker layers *The Color Purple* with symbols that echo its central concerns of identity, resilience, and self-affirmation. Chief among them is the color purple itself, which embodies beauty, joy, and the spiritual necessity of recognizing life's gifts. When Shug remarks, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (Walker, 1982, p. 166), she reframes beauty as an act of resistance—urging Celie to reclaim the ability to take pleasure in the world despite her history of pain. For Celie, learning to see the color purple becomes a measure of her emotional rebirth.

Another potent symbol is Celie's sewing and her eventual pants-making business. Initially a domestic obligation, sewing evolves into a site of creativity, income, and personal agency. Her choice to design pants—traditionally male attire—signals a deliberate break from imposed gender roles. The act moves beyond livelihood; it becomes a declaration of independence, reflecting Walker's womanist assertion that economic autonomy is integral to liberation.

Nettie's letters serve as yet another layered symbol. Hidden by Mister to sever the sisters' connection, they stand for the systemic silencing of women's voices. Their eventual discovery reconnects Celie not only to Nettie but to a broader awareness of the world and her place in it. The letters carry knowledge, love, and affirmation—key resources in Celie's emergence as a self-possessed woman.

Through these symbols, Walker embeds her narrative in a texture of meanings that extend beyond Celie's personal arc. Each symbol—whether a color, a craft, or a written page—illuminates how Black women carve out joy, community, and resistance under oppressive conditions.

Female Solidarity and Empowerment

Throughout the novel, Walker crafts a compelling vision of female solidarity as a transformative force. Relationships among women—whether bound by family, friendship, or shared experience—create spaces of safety and mutual growth. Celie's bond with Nettie anchors this theme. Despite long physical separation, their love and respect endure, communicated through letters that offer affirmation and expand

Celie’s understanding of herself. Nettie’s accounts of life in Africa further inspire Celie, illustrating cross-cultural resilience and the sustaining power of women’s networks.

Squeak’s development offers another dimension to this solidarity. Introduced as a seemingly minor character, she initially conforms to expectations in her relationship with Harpo. Over time, however, she asserts her individuality, beginning with the simple but significant act of singing publicly. This moment signals her shift from dependency to self-expression, embodying the idea that empowerment often begins with small, deliberate acts.

Celie’s economic independence, achieved through her sewing business, is likewise rooted in women’s support. Shug and Sofia encourage her to see herself beyond domestic roles, reinforcing the womanist belief that financial autonomy and self-definition are interlinked. By the novel’s end, Celie’s self-sufficiency represents both personal triumph and a collective victory for the community of women who nurtured her growth.

Even in shared labor, such as fieldwork, women’s cooperation becomes a quiet form of resistance. Their collective endurance under harsh conditions affirms that unity can counteract systemic oppression. Walker’s portrayal makes clear that empowerment is rarely a solitary achievement—it flourishes in the context of shared struggle, mutual care, and collective resistance.

4.4 Representation of Black Men in *The Color Purple*

Alice Walker’s portrayal of Black men in *The Color Purple* is complicated and often debated. At first glance, characters like Mister and Celie’s stepfather seem to represent male power and control, hurting women, ignoring their voices, and trying to maintain traditional hierarchies. Early in the novel, Celie notes, “He beat me like he beat the children” (Walker, 1982, p. 27), a matter-of-fact observation that reflects how normalized violence is in her life.

However, Walker does not simply present these men as irredeemable. She frames their actions within the broader context of oppressive systems and cultural pressures that have shaped them, aligning with Patricia Hill Collins’s view that both Black men and women are affected—though differently—by racism, poverty, and patriarchy.

Mister’s story is central to this complexity. At the start, he is harsh and controlling: “Wives is like children. You have to let ’em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating” (Walker, 1982, p. 38). His words reveal how deeply he has internalized patriarchal dominance. Yet by the end of the story, he begins to regret his past behavior and makes gradual, imperfect changes. As he starts to respect Celie as her own person, Mister’s transformation embodies a key womanist belief—that healing and change are possible when oppressive systems are dismantled and replaced with mutual respect and care.

Harpo’s journey reinforces this idea. Torn between his love for Sofia and the pressure to “be a man” by controlling her, Harpo admits, “I try to beat her,” revealing how he initially believes violence will grant him authority, just as he has seen modeled by other men. Yet this attempt fails, becoming a turning point. Over time, Harpo embraces a gentler, more cooperative masculinity. Even when he says, “I want her to do what I say, like you do for Pa,” (p. 59) it is clear he is still learning—unlearning harmful expectations in a process consistent with bell hooks’s call for reimagining masculinity as rooted in love and connection rather than dominance.

Through these male characters, *The Color Purple* critiques patriarchy while also revealing the social and historical forces that sustain it. The cycles of harm in the novel can be traced to cultural silence, generational trauma, and systemic inequality rather than to inherent cruelty. By showing that men are capable of growth through reflection, empathy, and connection with others, the novel portrays them not as permanent adversaries but as individuals who can become allies in the struggle for freedom.

In this sense, *The Color Purple* offers a powerful vision: lasting change requires the participation of both women and men in the work of healing and liberation. Walker’s womanist perspective emphasizes that freedom is a collective process, grounded in mutual respect, emotional openness, and the rejection of all forms of domination.

In conclusion, Walker’s vision of women’s resistance in The Color Purple is framed through the lens of womanism, emphasizing self-definition, spirituality, and the sustaining power of female solidarity. Yet where Walker highlights the transformative possibilities of community and individual rebirth, Toni Morrison turns her focus to the haunting legacies of slavery and the trauma carried by Black women. The next chapter explores how Morrison’s Beloved dramatizes this struggle, presenting resistance not only as survival in the present but as an unending confrontation with history, memory, and loss.

Chapter Five

Toni Morrison’s Representation of Women’s Resistance

5.1 Morrison’s Approach to Feminist Narratives

Introduction

Toni Morrison is one of the most important and influential writers in American literature, known for her deep exploration of Black womanhood, history, and resilience. Her works go beyond simply recounting the struggles of Black women; they expose the ways in which racism and sexism have shaped their lives over time. Morrison’s writing brings attention to the histories and experiences that have often been ignored or erased, highlighting both the pain and the strength of Black women. By weaving together history, memory, and personal narratives, she not only gives a voice to those who were silenced but also celebrates the power of Black women in reclaiming their identities and shaping their own futures. Through her novels, she challenges readers to confront racial and gender injustices while also recognizing the resilience and agency of those who have fought against oppression.

History and Feminist Resistance

One of the most powerful aspects of Morrison’s storytelling is how she brings forgotten histories back into the spotlight. In *Beloved* (1987), she brings to life the painful legacy of slavery through Sethe, a former enslaved woman whose back bears scars in the shape of a chokecherry tree—a living emblem of her suffering and resilience under slavery. By focusing on Sethe’s story, Morrison pushes back against the way history has often erased the suffering of Black women, especially the specific kinds of violence they faced. Early in the novel, Morrison (1987) writes, “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom” (p. 4), showing that even the places where Black women lived were steeped in the trauma of history. The house itself becomes a symbol of how pain and memory live on— “spiteful” because it holds the unresolved grief of the baby Sethe lost, and “venom” because that grief poisons the lives of those who remain. The feeling in the house can also be read as the reproach Sethe experiences for violating the ultimate taboo of killing her own child. The act is unspeakable, and this unspeakability is precisely why the past does not return as a story that can be told but as a seemingly living being. In this way, Morrison makes trauma not only active and present, but also embodied in a ghost that forces Sethe to confront what she cannot articulate.

Morrison doesn't just add to history—she rewrites it. In her essay *The Site of Memory*, she reflects, “Ifwriting is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic” (Morrison, 1986, p 92). For her, storytelling is a way to take back power, especially for people whose experiences have been twisted or erased by official histories. Sethe's story is a perfect example: her painful memories push back against the polished, feel-good versions of American history by putting the harsh realities of slavery front and center.

Her work also quietly challenges the way history has been traditionally told, especially from a male-centered perspective. She lifts up women's voices and experiences, making them central to the story. Through the act of bearing witness, her characters turn their personal pain into shared memory, creating a form of feminist resistance that recognizes trauma without letting it completely define what it means to be a Black woman.

Trauma and the Psychological Impact of Oppression

Morrison's stories focus on the deep struggles of Black women and how pain and trauma are passed down through generations. Her characters carry the weight of history, from the lasting impact of slavery (*Beloved*) to the effects of racism and beauty standards (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970) to the journey of finding identity and connecting with their roots (*Song of Solomon*, 1977). In her books, trauma is not just an idea—it is a lived experience that shapes who people are, how they relate to others, and their mental health.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows how racism and society's narrow ideas of beauty deeply harm Black women. The main character, Pecola Breedlove, believes that only White features are beautiful, leading her to hate herself and eventually suffer a mental breakdown. Through Pecola's story, Morrison reveals how racism and sexism work together to strip Black women of self-worth and identity.

Similarly, in *Beloved*, Sethe's trauma manifests in her intense need to protect her children. She takes the extreme step of killing her own daughter rather than letting her be forced back into slavery.Sethe states, “My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is” (Morrison, 1987, p. 390). This act makes readers face the brutal reality of slavery and the impossible moral terrain enslaved Black women were forced to navigate.

Resilience and the Strength of Black Women

Even though Morrison's stories are filled with pain and trauma, they also highlight the resilience of Black women. Her characters, despite their struggles, find ways to survive, take control of their lives, and live with dignity and courage. They are not just helpless victims—instead, they resist the unjust systems that try to hold them down. For example, in *Sula* (1973), the title character refuses to follow society's expectations for women. She chooses independence over marriage or motherhood, defining herself on her own terms despite her community's disapproval.

Similarly, *Beloved* ends with a focus on identity and healing. Sethe, who has carried deep pain for most of her life, finds comfort and support from the women around her. Morrison shows that healing from both personal and historical trauma is not something one can do alone—it happens through community and shared strength. As Baby Suggs teaches, "Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face" (Morrison, 1987, p. 170). This affirmation of Black womanhood underscores the power of community and self-love in overcoming the wounds of the past.

Morrison's feminist storytelling connects history, pain, and strength. She gives voice to Black women who have been silenced in the past, challenging dominant narratives about them. Through works like *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Sula*, she compels readers to face the truths of Black womanhood, revealing both their suffering and their extraordinary resilience. Her feminist vision is not solely about enduring hardship—it is about survival, self-definition, and the sustaining force of community. Among these works, *Beloved* stands out as a profoundly emotional account of resistance and memory. Through Sethe's struggle against racism and gender roles, Morrison explores motherhood as both a source of strength and a burden of remembrance. In the next section, I will examine how *Beloved* embodies these ideas, showing how Morrison blends history with the resilience of Black women.

5.2 Analysis of *Beloved*

Sethe's Resistance Against Slavery & Gender Roles

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is a powerful novel about the enduring pain of slavery, especially for Black women. The story follows Sethe, a woman who was once enslaved and whose back bears scars in the shape of a chokecherry tree—a living emblem of her suffering and resilience under slavery's brutality. As Sethe's life unfolds, Morrison shows the compounded struggles Black women face under both racism and sexism. Even in the face of relentless trauma, Sethe refuses to let the world break her. Her journey is about survival, fierce maternal love, and the constant fight to retain her humanity.

One of the most striking ways Sethe resists oppression is through her deep love for and protection of her children. She refuses to allow them to be taken back into slavery, even making the devastating decision to end her daughter's life rather than see her condemned to the same suffering she endured. Morrison frames this act not as moral failure but as a form of resistance born from the racial-sexual terror of slavery. Sethe's own words— "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (Morrison, 1987, p. 313)—show the impossible choice she faced, where death seemed the only escape from a life in bondage. Orlando Patterson's (1982) idea of "social death" helps explain the act: slavery systematically stripped the enslaved of their family rights, leaving maternal bonds fragile and always at risk (p. 263) In that light, Sethe's decision, however extreme, becomes a desperate assertion of agency in a world designed to erase it.

Morrison also confronts the sexual violence central to slavery, showing how enslaved women's bodies became sites of control and exploitation. Sethe's escape from Sweet Home while heavily pregnant is more than an act of survival—it is a deliberate reclaiming of her body and future. She refuses to allow her child to be born into slavery, insisting, "All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me" (Morrison, 1987, p. 32). This rejection of a system that commodifies Black motherhood resists the dehumanization that demanded enslaved women nurture other people's children while being denied the right to care for their own.

Her defiance extends to rejecting the narrow gender roles of her time. Unlike the idealized image of White womanhood in the 19th century—delicate, passive, dependent—Black women under slavery were never granted such fragility. Morrison portrays Sethe as both emotionally and physically strong, refusing to conform to submissive ideals. Paul D's discomfort with this strength is clear in his remark, "Your love is too thick" (Morrison, 1987, p. 314), and in his judgment that "This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw" (p. 314). Morrison invites readers to see that such strength is not excessive but necessary for survival in the face of relentless violence.

Slavery's dehumanization of Black motherhood is made painfully clear in Sethe's memories. Children were property, not kin; women were breeding stock, not mothers. One of Sethe's most haunting recollections is the theft of her breast milk— "Held me down and took it" (Morrison, 1987, p. 32)—a physical violation that also robs her of the right to nurture her child. This cruelty is part of an intergenerational trauma: Sethe's own mother was hanged before she could truly know her. Her fierce determination to protect her children is rooted in that early loss, a refusal to let history repeat itself.

In contrast to Sethe's violent and desperate form of resistance, Baby Suggs offers a vision of healing grounded in community. In the Clearing, she urges the formerly enslaved to love their bodies and reclaim their humanity: "In this here place, we flesh;

flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass" (Morrison, 1987, p. 170). Yet after the community's resentment of her generous feast, Baby Suggs retreats into a quiet contemplation of color, withdrawing from her role as a spiritual guide. This absence deprives Sethe of a vital anchor, leaving her more vulnerable to the consuming presence of Beloved.

Sethe's relationship with her surviving daughter, Denver, shows how trauma can lead to both protection and isolation. Sethe's fierce need to shield Denver from harm cuts them off from the world, stunting Denver's independence. The turning point comes when Denver decides "to step off the edge of the world" (Morrison, 1987, p. 450) and seek help from the community. Her outreach begins the process of reintegration, demonstrating Morrison's belief that healing from such deep wounds requires collective support. With the women's help and Paul D's careful companionship, Sethe begins to imagine a life beyond the shadows of her past.

Beloved's return makes the cost of motherhood under slavery even more complex. Often described as magical realism—though Morrison herself rejected the term, framing it instead as an extension of African American oral storytelling traditions—Beloved's haunting embodies the persistence of historical trauma. Sethe becomes consumed by guilt, devoting herself entirely to Beloved in a way that drains her rather than heals her. Only when the women of the community join together to exorcise Beloved does Sethe begin to break free. Morrison makes clear that the past cannot be erased, but survival depends on finding a way to live with it.

In *Beloved*, motherhood is both a profound act of love and a defiant rejection of slavery's commodification of Black life. Sethe's infanticide is a tragic but fierce refusal to let her child be owned; Baby Suggs builds strength through self-love and community; Denver bridges isolation and reconnection. Together, they embody Morrison's vision of Black women's resistance—painful, complex, and deeply rooted in survival.

5.3 Ghosts and Memories as Symbols of Oppression & Survival

In *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison uses ghosts and memories to show how the trauma of slavery never truly fades. Often described as magical realism—though Morrison herself rejected that label, framing these supernatural elements as an extension of African American oral storytelling traditions—the ghostly and uncanny events in the novel are not simply "spooky" effects. They represent the deep emotional and psychological wounds left by enslavement. Morrison makes it clear that the past cannot be left behind: both literal and symbolic hauntings continue to shape the lives of her characters. Sethe, Paul D, and Denver each carry painful memories that refuse to disappear, proving that true survival is not only about escaping slavery but also about facing and integrating the lasting impact of trauma.

Beloved, the ghostly figure at 124 Bluestone Road, is perhaps the clearest embodiment of the past's hold on the present. She is both the spirit of Sethe's murdered daughter and a living symbol of the buried pain of slavery—especially the suffering of enslaved women and children. Morrison warns, "Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (p. 68), reminding readers that Beloved's return is not a happy reunion but an unhealed wound made flesh. Her presence drains Sethe— "Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (p. 474)—until Sethe is left with little strength for herself or her other child. Beloved thus becomes a figure of unresolved trauma, feeding on memory until it threatens to consume the present. As Morrison writes, "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it" (p. 474). In this relationship, the haunting is not merely supernatural—it is the embodiment of guilt, grief, and the compulsive reliving of pain.

Paul D's struggle is different but no less haunted. While Sethe battles a literal ghost, Paul D is imprisoned by memories he has locked away in order to survive. His years at Sweet Home and later on a Georgia chain gang left both physical and emotional scars. At Sweet Home, he was treated as property; in Georgia, chained underground and subjected to constant brutality. The worst damage, however, is the emotional numbness slavery forced upon him. Morrison gives this repression a potent metaphor: "He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut" (p. 142). This "tobacco tin" is his survival mechanism, sealing away the feelings he cannot bear to face.

Beloved's presence begins to pry open this rusted container. She forces Paul D to confront memories of sexual abuse and humiliation that he had kept buried. His first reaction is to run from Sethe and the house, showing the difficulty of integrating traumatic memories into a coherent self. Trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra (2001) observes that healing requires re-telling and working through the past, rather than endlessly repeating it. By the novel's end, Paul D takes tentative steps toward this kind of healing, reconnecting with Sethe and imagining a shared future. Morrison suggests that while pain may never fully vanish, survival depends on confronting it and reclaiming one's own narrative.

Denver offers a third perspective, one that points toward renewal. At first, she is fascinated and frightened by Beloved, but when she realizes how her mother is being consumed, she chooses to act. Unlike Sethe, who remains trapped in cycles of memory, Denver reaches out to the Black community for help. Her decision "to step off the edge of the world" (Morrison, 1987, p. 458) is both literal and symbolic—stepping out of isolation, rewriting her own survival story. Through Denver, Morrison offers a vision of endurance that does not deny the past but refuses to be entirely defined by it.

In *Beloved*, ghosts and memories are more than narrative devices—they are vessels for history, carriers of grief, and tests of resilience. Beloved herself embodies the wounds of enslaved mothers; Paul D’s “tobacco tin” reveals the hidden costs of emotional survival for enslaved men; Denver’s courage to rejoin the community signals the possibility of a future unchained from inherited trauma. Morrison’s treatment of the supernatural is inseparable from cultural memory, showing that the legacy of slavery is not safely sealed in the past but lives on in bodies, minds, and stories. Survival, she suggests, lies not in forgetting but in finding a way to live with what haunts you.

5.4 Morrison’s Use of Magical Realism & Trauma Narratives

In *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison blends the supernatural with lived history to explore the deep emotional and generational wounds of slavery. This technique is often described as “magical realism,” though Morrison herself rejected that term, framing these elements instead as an extension of African American oral storytelling traditions and cultural memory. In her work, the ghostly and the everyday inhabit the same space without contradiction. The effect is not to create fantasy, but to insist that the lived experiences of Black women—including the uncanny ways the past insists on returning—are as real as any officially recorded history.

Beloved’s ghost is more than an otherworldly presence—it is the embodiment of historical trauma, the voice of enslaved mothers who were separated from their children, silenced by violence, and erased from official records. Morrison’s refusal to confine her story to a straight timeline or strict realism forces readers to confront the past as something active and unresolved. “This is not a story to pass on” (p. 523) carries a haunting ambiguity: it reads both as a warning not to repeat the trauma and as an injunction to remember it so it is never erased. That tension—between the desire to forget and the moral duty to remember—sits at the heart of *Beloved*.

By adopting a structure that mimics trauma’s cyclical nature, Morrison challenges the linear, closure-driven narratives favored in Western literary traditions. This disruption also serves a feminist purpose: it re-centers the voices and experiences of Black women, whose suffering under slavery included sexual violence, forced reproduction, and the systematic destruction of maternal bonds. Characters like Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs embody different responses to this legacy—whether through direct resistance, community-based healing, or the reimagining of survival beyond inherited pain.

Morrison’s interweaving of supernatural elements with historical realities thus operates as a form of resistance against sanitized history. It is, as Brenda Cooper (1998) describes, a way to render the silenced horrors of slavery visible and undeniable (p. 142). By treating the ghost as a natural part of the narrative world, Morrison insists that the pain and endurance of Black women are not marginal or metaphorical—they are central to the story of America itself.

Morrison’s writing style in *Beloved*—with shifting viewpoints and poetic, broken-up sentences—further strengthens the novel’s feminist themes by questioning traditional ways of telling stories. She deliberately avoids a straightforward, singular narrative, instead using a form that mirrors how trauma is felt and remembered. This choice aligns with feminist literary traditions that privilege personal experience, emotional truth, and challenges to dominant power structures.

The fragmented storytelling mirrors the unreliability of memory, especially for those who have endured sustained violence, while Morrison’s lyrical and symbolic language makes the characters’ suffering visceral for readers. In her hands, pain, longing, and resilience are rendered with an intensity that plain prose might not achieve. The novel’s closing words— “So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep.” (p. 523)—leave the reader with the enduring presence of the lost child, refusing to let her be forgotten. Ending with Beloved’s name underscores the novel’s central insistence on remembrance as an act of love and defiance.

Through this blending of the supernatural with real histories, fragmented narrative form, and poetic voice, Morrison does more than recount the legacy of slavery—she makes readers feel its weight. Her work becomes both a creative and political act, ensuring that the voices of Black women are not only recorded, but heard, remembered, and honored.

5.5 Depictions of Black Men in *Beloved*: A Critical Perspective

While *Beloved* focuses most intensely on Black women’s experiences of slavery and survival, Toni Morrison’s portrayal of Black men—especially Paul D—has generated debate. Some critics argue that her deep attention to women’s inner lives leaves male characters sidelined or diminished, while others see in her work a painful but truthful portrait of Black masculinity shaped by the brutal constraints of slavery. Morrison’s rendering of these men must be read within the novel’s larger feminist and historical aims, which insist on telling the full, if uneven, story of a community fractured by oppression.

A frequent critique is that Morrison’s men, and Paul D in particular, appear emotionally closed, powerless, or unable to fully support the women around them. His reaction to Sethe’s fierce maternal devotion— “Your love is too thick” (p. 314)—has been read as evidence that male characters in the novel struggle to match the resilience and resolve of the women. While *Beloved* acknowledges Paul D’s own trauma, the depth of Sethe’s suffering as a mother often takes center stage.

Yet Morrison’s portrayal of Paul D is far from dismissive or one-dimensional. Rather than depicting him as weak, she reveals how slavery systematically stripped Black men of roles and expressions historically linked to masculinity—protector, provider, partner—and replaced them with humiliation and forced silence. Paul D’s metaphor of his heart as a “tobacco tin” rusted shut captures the survival mechanism of sealing away feeling in order to endure (Morrison, 1987). His reserve is not a moral flaw, but a wound inflicted by the “social death” Orlando Patterson (1982) describes, in which enslavement eroded both male and female identities.

Importantly, Morrison does not leave Paul D in this closed state. Across the novel, he begins to reopen himself, risking vulnerability. His decision to remain with Sethe at the end, telling her, “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (Morrison, 1987, p. 521), marks a reclamation of emotional agency and the possibility of a masculinity grounded in tenderness rather than domination. In this sense, Morrison offers a hopeful counter-image: Black male identity rebuilt on openness, mutual care, and shared survival.

Placed within Morrison’s broader project, Paul D’s portrayal reflects her refusal to conform to either traditional feminist or masculinist prescriptions. As she explained in an interview (Denard, 1997), her commitment was to telling the “unwritten” histories as she understood them, without being bound to a single ideological frame. While *Beloved* centers women’s endurance and agency, it does not erase the suffering of men. Instead, it shows that the system that sought to own Black women’s bodies also destroyed Black men’s ability to love, to protect, and to see themselves fully. Healing, Morrison suggests, demands reckoning with the damage done to both.

In the following chapter, I will turn to a comparative reading of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, examining how each author portrays resistance to oppression and the ways gender shapes their visions of liberation.

Chapter Six

Comparative Analysis of Resistance in Walker and Morrison

6.1 Analysis of Resistance

When placed side by side, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reveal two complementary modes of Black feminist resistance. Walker's womanist lens foregrounds interpersonal healing, creative self-expression, and solidarity among women, while Morrison excavates the deep wounds of historical trauma, showing how the past continues to live in the present. Both explore struggle, survival, and healing in the face of racism and sexism, but their different approaches illuminate the range of strategies available to Black women resisting oppression.

Both authors depict women resisting systems that combine racial and gender oppression. In *The Color Purple*, Celie endures sexual violence from her stepfather and years of control by Mister, yet gradually reclaims her voice and autonomy. In *Beloved*, Sethe resists the dehumanization of slavery, fighting to protect her children even at unbearable cost. In both cases, resistance is not defined by overt rebellion alone—it is also about preserving dignity and humanity despite sustained assault. Seen through an intersectional lens.

Motherhood, in each text, becomes a site of both vulnerability and defiance. Celie's early experiences of forced motherhood—losing her children through abuse and exploitation—reflect the intersection of patriarchal and racial violence. Over time, relationships with women like Shug and Sofia allow her to reclaim nurturing as an act of choice rather than coercion. In Morrison's novel, Sethe's decision to kill her daughter is framed not as cruelty but as a radical act of protection against enslavement, unsettling conventional notions of maternal love. In both stories, survival is tied to solidarity: Celie's liberation depends on the women who model self-worth, while Sethe's is sustained by a community that confronts Beloved's ghost. Together they affirm that resistance flourishes when women unite to protect and affirm each other, whether through intimate networks (Walker) or collective gatherings (Morrison).

The scope of resistance also diverges. Walker frames it as an inward journey toward self-definition. Celie's transformation—from silenced victim to independent businesswoman—unfolds within the space of personal relationships and creative work, aligning with womanist ideals that root freedom in everyday acts of self-empowerment. Morrison instead situates Sethe's struggle within the transgenerational trauma of slavery. Beloved's haunting embodies the persistence of historical memory and its refusal to be erased. Resistance here means not only claiming one's selfhood but also engaging in the communal labor of confronting a suppressed past.

Even their endings reflect this philosophical divide. Walker closes with restored community and personal joy, affirming that healing—emotional and material—is attainable through love and solidarity. Morrison ends with uncertainty: although Sethe is freed from Beloved's ghost, her near-catatonic state signals that the residue of trauma cannot be easily erased. Walker offers the possibility of closure through personal transformation; Morrison underscores the unfinished work of historical reckoning.

Their narrative styles reinforce these thematic differences. Walker's epistolary form grants Celie narrative control from within her own world, her voice evolving steadily in a linear structure that mirrors her gradual empowerment. Morrison's fragmented, multi-voiced storytelling mirrors the disorientation of trauma, compelling readers to experience temporal disruption alongside the characters. In feminist terms, Walker's style enacts self-authored healing, while Morrison's immerses the audience in the collective process of historical remembrance—two distinct but equally powerful visions of resistance.

Shared Feminist Themes in Walker and Morrison

Although Alice Walker and Toni Morrison differ in style and narrative approach, both center motherhood, autonomy, and solidarity as crucial elements in Black women's resistance to oppression. *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* portray women reclaiming their lives, confronting injustice, and sustaining one another in ways that challenge racism, sexism, and patriarchal control. By placing these themes side by side, it becomes clear how each author contributes to Black feminist thought from distinct but complementary perspectives.

Motherhood emerges in both novels as a place of both deep vulnerability and immense strength. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's early experience of forced motherhood—losing her children through sexual violence—shows how patriarchal and racial domination work together to control women's bodies. Over time, however, nurturing becomes a choice rather than a condition imposed upon her. Reconnecting with her children and building loving relationships with other women allows Celie to experience motherhood as healing and self-affirming. In *Beloved*, Sethe's radical act of killing her daughter to prevent her enslavement reframes maternal love as an act of defiance against a system designed to strip Black women of agency over their children. Read through an intersectional lens, both depictions demonstrate that motherhood under oppression is not purely about care—it can also be a form of resistance, a way of reclaiming control in the face of systemic violence.

Both narratives also chart the arduous journey toward autonomy. In Walker's story, Celie moves from silence and subjugation to a point where she asserts her self-worth and shapes her own life. This transformation, supported by the encouragement of Shug Avery and Sofia, embodies the womanist principle that healing and empowerment grow from supportive female relationships. Similarly, in Morrison's novel, Sethe struggles to imagine herself beyond the identity slavery imposed on her. Paul D's reminder—telling her she is her "best thing"—is less a promise of full recovery than an opening toward self-recognition. In both cases, autonomy is not granted; it is fought for and nurtured within a network of care, underscoring how self-definition is inseparable from relational support.

Solidarity among women is the connective tissue that makes both journeys possible. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's liberation is directly tied to the women around her, whose strength and love offer her new ways of seeing herself and her future. Shug's insistence that Celie remove "man off [her] eyeball" pushes her toward independent thought, while Sofia's unflinching spirit models everyday resistance. Morrison expands this vision of solidarity beyond personal circles to a broader spiritual and ancestral community. The scene in *Beloved* where neighborhood women gather to banish Beloved's ghost illustrates how healing from generational trauma is a collective act. Baby Suggs's exhortation to "love this flesh" resonates as a theological statement about embodiment and self-worth in the face of dehumanization. Walker roots solidarity in intimate relationships; Morrison situates it within the communal and historical, but both see it as a foundation for resistance.

Taken together, these shared themes reveal a consistent truth in Black feminist and womanist literature: survival and liberation depend on the interplay between self-love, mutual care, and collective action. Whether in Celie's journey toward creative independence or Sethe's struggle to reclaim humanity from the weight of slavery, both authors show that the power to resist lies in connection—with oneself, with other women, and with the histories that shape them.

Different Lenses on Resistance: Walker's Personal Transformation and Morrison's Historical Trauma

Although Alice Walker and Toni Morrison both center Black women's defiance of oppression, they frame that resistance through distinct lenses. In *The Color Purple*, resistance is rooted in personal transformation—an inward journey toward reclaiming one's voice and agency. In *Beloved*, it is bound up with the collective memory of slavery, confronting wounds that extend beyond one lifetime. Set side by side, Walker's womanist emphasis on interpersonal healing and Morrison's excavation of historical trauma reveal complementary strategies within Black feminist thought.

Walker's *The Color Purple* frames resistance as self-discovery and the reclamation of personal power. Celie begins as a silenced, abused woman, her agency stripped away by both familial and marital violence. Instead of re-quoting the pivotal confrontations discussed in Chapter 4, it is enough to note that her eventual challenge to Mister marks a turning point where she refuses to define herself by the terms of her abusers. Relationships with Shug Avery and Sofia catalyze this transformation—Shug encouraging her spiritual awakening and Sofia modeling everyday defiance. Walker's use of the epistolary form places narrative control directly in Celie's hands, enacting womanist theory by allowing a Black woman's self-authored voice to drive the arc of liberation.

Morrison, by contrast, embeds resistance in the confrontation with historical trauma. In *Beloved*, Sethe's battle is not just with present-day hardship but with the aftershocks of slavery itself. Beloved's spectral return functions as a living embodiment of the past's refusal to stay buried. The non-linear structure mirrors trauma's fragmentation, aligning with Cathy Caruth's (1996) theory that traumatic memory disrupts chronological time. Sethe's most extreme act—killing her daughter to spare her from enslavement—forces readers to grapple with resistance as a desperate, historically conditioned choice rather than an unambiguously empowering one. In doing so, Morrison transforms the act of remembering into a form of political defiance, ensuring the unrecorded histories of enslaved women are neither sanitized nor erased.

The outcomes in each novel reinforce this philosophical divergence. Walker closes with a vision of healing and reconnection—Celie's financial independence, reunion with Nettie, and a restored sense of joy suggesting that personal liberation can culminate in lasting fulfillment. Morrison's ending is deliberately unresolved: although Beloved's departure frees Sethe from the haunting, she remains physically and emotionally diminished, needing Paul D's affirmation to begin envisioning a future. This contrast reflects differing definitions of resistance: in Walker's world, self-determination and loving bonds can lead to renewal; in Morrison's, survival itself is a form of victory when historical wounds are so deep they may never fully close.

Formally, Walker's chronological, letter-driven narrative makes Celie's growth transparent, allowing readers to trace her empowerment in clear steps. Morrison's fragmented timelines and shifting perspectives immerse readers in the disorientation of generational trauma, refusing the comfort of a singular, linear truth. From an intersectional perspective, these structural choices matter: Walker's approach asserts that healing is achievable through relational empowerment, while Morrison’s form replicates the lived experience of historical dislocation, insisting that resistance also means preserving collective memory in all its complexity.

In sum, Walker’s vision of resistance emerges from the inner work of self-love and the outer work of community connection, rooted in womanist ideals. Morrison’s vision centers on the necessity of confronting historical trauma, aligning with Black feminist commitments to remembrance and testimony. Together, they expand the meaning of resistance to encompass both the intimate reclaiming of one’s life and the communal act of carrying forward histories that the dominant culture would rather forget.

6.2 Literary Techniques & Symbolism: A Comparative Analysis of Walker and Morrison

Alice Walker and Toni Morrison’s feminist visions are shaped not only by what they write about but by how they write it. Their narrative structures, stylistic choices, and use of symbolism reveal distinct approaches to portraying Black women’s resistance, healing, and identity. Walker’s epistolary clarity offers a steady arc of personal empowerment, while Morrison’s fragmented lyricism immerses readers in the lived texture of historical trauma.

Walker’s *The Color Purple* unfolds in a linear, letter-based form, granting Celie narrative control over her own story from within her world. The gradual shift in tone and address—moving from letters to God to letters to Nettie—mirrors Celie’s journey toward self-definition. This transparency allows readers to witness empowerment step-by-step, in keeping with womanist principles that center self-authored growth and interpersonal healing. In contrast, Morrison’s *Beloved* moves through shifting timelines. The fractured narrative forces readers to piece together events much as survivors reconstruct memory, turning the act of reading into an engagement with the disorienting legacies of slavery.

The authors’ stylistic differences are equally telling. Walker’s plainspoken clarity mirrors the oral storytelling traditions of Southern Black communities, emphasizing accessibility and direct emotional resonance. Morrison’s dense, poetic language—seen from the opening’s cryptic “124 was spiteful”—demands slower reading, layering metaphor and rhythm to evoke the intertwined beauty and violence of Black history. This stylistic divergence has political weight: Walker invites a broad readership into Celie’s intimate awakening, while Morrison makes the audience inhabit the intellectual and emotional labor of confronting suppressed histories.

Symbolism becomes another arena where their feminist strategies diverge. Walker invests domestic and everyday objects—sewing, the color purple—with transformative power. Sewing functions as both livelihood and metaphor for reconstructing identity; the color purple becomes a spiritual emblem of joy and self-worth. These symbols enact womanist resistance by reclaiming traditionally "feminine" labor and beauty as sources of autonomy. Morrison's symbols are more mythic and layered: Beloved herself as a ghost embodies generational trauma; water marks transitions between bondage and freedom; trees signify both natural beauty and racial terror, as in Sethe's"chokecherry tree" scar. Where Walker's symbols root resistance in everyday creativity and bodily autonomy, Morrison's tie it to ancestral memory and the need to bear witness to pain.

Their handling of voice and perspective further reflects their ideological commitments. Walker's single-voiced letters centralize one woman's reclamation of self, affirming that resistance can be told in the first person without mediation. Morrison's polyphonic approach, shifting between Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and Beloved, enacts an intersectional understanding of how race, gender, and history intersect across different lives. In *Beloved*, no single perspective owns the story; memory itself becomes collective property.

In short, Walker's linear epistolary form and accessible symbolism make personal liberation visible as a gradual, achievable process rooted in community bonds and self-authored identity. Morrison's fragmented narrative and layered metaphors insist that resistance must also grapple with the messiness of history and the persistence of inherited wounds. Together, they show that Black feminist resistance is both the intimate work of claiming one's own life and the communal work of preserving collective memory against erasure.

6.3 Impact on Feminist & Black Literary Studies: The Influence of Walker and Morrison on Modern Feminist Thought

Alice Walker and Toni Morrison reshaped both feminist discourse and Black literary studies by centering Black women's voices and experiences in ways that neither mainstream white feminism nor conventional literary canons had previously done. *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* do more than narrate survival—they redefine resistance as a blend of personal reclamation, communal healing, and historical memory.

Expanding Feminist Frameworks Beyond the Mainstream

Walker's *The Color Purple* embodies the womanist philosophy she later defined in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) as a commitment to "survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female." By grounding Celie's liberation in self-love, community bonds, and creative labor, Walker critiques feminist models that isolate gender from race, class, and spirituality. This perspective widens feminist discourse to include Black women's culturally specific modes of empowerment.

Morrison’s *Beloved* presses this expansion further by insisting that the psychic afterlife of slavery is integral to any conversation about gender justice for Black women. Her portrayal of Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Denver foregrounds the compounded impact of racial violence, sexual exploitation, and generational trauma—elements that mainstream feminism historically sidestepped. In trauma theory terms (Caruth, 1996), *Beloved* makes resistance inseparable from the act of remembering, even when memory wounds as much as it heals.

Anchoring Literary Practice in Intersectional and Womanist Thought

Walker’s epistolary form offers Celie an unmediated space to narrate her own becoming, making the structure itself an act of resistance against narrative erasure. The letters trace intersecting oppressions—poverty, sexism, racism—and show empowerment emerging through intimate ties and economic independence. This aligns with womanist ethics, where transformation is both personal and communal.

Morrison’s polyphonic, nonlinear narrative in *Beloved* refuses a single authoritative account of history. By giving equal weight to multiple voices—living and dead—she enacts an intersectional politics of memory, acknowledging that the story of Black women’s resistance is inseparable from the collective story of their communities. This form not only conveys the disorientation of trauma but also models a shared authorship of survival.

Theoretical Contributions to Feminist and Black Studies

Both writers anticipated and shaped academic frameworks in Black feminist thought. Walker’s integration of spiritual joy as a political resource and Morrison’s insistence on ancestral memory resonate with womanist theology, which views faith and cultural heritage as integral to liberation. Baby Suggs’ sermons and Shug Avery’s divine-in-the-everyday philosophy embody resistance that is as much moral and spiritual as it is social or political.

Their narratives also serve as case studies for intersectional analysis in the classroom. Celie’s journey shows how gender oppression is inseparable from racial and economic marginalization; Sethe’s story reveals how historical trauma inflects every aspect of identity. Both invite readers and scholars to interrogate how systems of power overlap and to recognize resilience as a multi-layered process.

Lasting Academic and Cultural Legacy

In literary studies, Walker and Morrison catalyzed a shift toward including Black women’s texts in both feminist syllabi and the American canon. Walker’s *The Color Purple*—adapted into acclaimed film and stage versions—demonstrates the cultural reach of womanist storytelling. Morrison’s Nobel Prize in Literature (1993) affirmed the global significance of Black women’s narratives and underscored her call to “write the book you want to read.”

Together, their legacies lie in having broadened feminist theory to embrace complexity: Walker by showing that everyday acts of care and creation can be radical, Morrison by proving that confronting historical wounds is itself a form of resistance. They offer complementary visions—one rooted in self-authored healing, the other in collective memory work—that continue to inform scholarship, activism, and artistic practice. Their influence ensures that modern feminist thought remains accountable to the full depth of Black women’s lived realities.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

The comparative reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* has revealed the rich and layered ways Black women's struggles, agency, and community power are expressed in literature. Both works center the lived realities of Black women under intersecting forms of oppression, yet they diverge in their narrative paths and artistic choices. Walker frames oppositional strategies as a deeply personal journey of self-definition, nurtured through relationships, creativity, and spiritual awakening. Morrison, by contrast, situates acts of defiance within the long shadow of slavery, foregrounding the collective and intergenerational dimensions of trauma and survival. Together, their narratives complicate and expand our understanding of how literature can embody both healing and historical reckoning.

While Walker's Celie transforms her life through intimate bonds and self-empowerment, Morrison's Sethe confronts the haunting persistence of the past, showing that liberation often demands engagement with memories that wound as much as they teach. Both writers portray motherhood not merely as care-giving but as a space of radical protection and refusal, autonomy as a hard-won reclamation of self, and community as a force that sustains survival when individual strength falters. By reading them side-by-side, we see that emancipatory visions can take the form of quiet creative renewal or fierce, history-facing endurance — each equally vital in the broader tapestry of Black women's freedom struggles.

This research affirms the critical importance of centering Black women's voices in both literary and feminist scholarship. Walker and Morrison challenge the boundaries of mainstream feminism — often rooted in white, middle-class frameworks — by embedding race, gender, class, and historical memory into their storytelling. Walker's womanist lens emphasizes wholeness, community care, and self-affirmation, while Morrison's intersectional vision insists that any liberatory practice must contend with the afterlives of slavery. In highlighting these frameworks, this study contributes to ongoing debates about representation, historical responsibility, and the politics of voice.

It also demonstrates how narrative structure, language, and symbolism are not neutral vehicles but active participants in shaping meaning: Walker's epistolary intimacy mirrors Celie's growth into self-possession; Morrison's fragmented, multi-voiced narration mirrors the fractured legacies of enslavement and the necessity of collective remembrance. Both challenge literary conventions, broadening what counts as authoritative narrative form in African American and women's traditions.

Furthermore, the study underscores how storytelling operates as both a cultural archive and a mode of liberation. These novels do not simply depict injustice; they enact cultural memory work, preserving stories otherwise erased, and modeling modes of survival that blur the personal and political, the spiritual and communal. In doing so, they not only enrich Black feminist criticism but also offer a literary blueprint for social and cultural transformation.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Final Reflection

While this analysis focuses on *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*, this narrowed scope leaves open questions about whether the identified patterns hold across each author's broader body of work. Future research could explore Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* or Morrison's *Paradise* to examine whether the interplay between personal reclamation and historical confrontation remains central, or whether new strategies for liberation emerge. Comparative studies beyond U.S. borders could also deepen the conversation — placing Walker and Morrison alongside writers such as TsitsiDangarembga could reveal how postcolonial, diasporic, and African feminist frameworks intersect with womanism and intersectionality.

Likewise, interdisciplinary approaches — drawing on trauma theory, womanist theology, or ecowomanism — could shed new light on the psychological, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of their work. Reception and adaptation studies, from film to theatre to classroom pedagogy, would further illuminate how their liberatory visions travel across media and generations.

Placing Walker and Morrison in dialogue reveals more than thematic similarity — it illuminates a dual vision of liberation that is at once inward and outward, personal and historical. Their works insist that self-definition and collective memory are not competing modes of defiance but complementary forces. Walker's portraits of creative renewal and relational healing, and Morrison's confrontations with ancestral trauma and historical silence, together form a powerful reminder: freedom work must honor both the wounds and the dreams of the communities it serves.

By weaving artistic form with cultural testimony, both authors extend the possibilities of literature as a political act. They show that oppositional practice can take root in the intimate spaces of letters between sisters or in the spectral confrontations between the living and the dead. In each case, the story itself becomes a site of reclamation, a safeguard against erasure, and a map toward more liberated futures.

In the end, reading Walker and Morrison side-by-side affirms the capacity of literature to function as both historical reckoning and blueprint for liberation. Their visions remind us that acts of defiance are never singular — they are layered, overlapping the personal with the political, the spiritual with the communal. To engage with their work is to be called into the ongoing struggle for justice, to recognize the power of storytelling as survival, and to imagine a world in which Black women's voices are not just heard but centered.

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السرديات النسوية عند ووكر وموريسون وتحليلهما لمقاومة النساء للهيمنة البطريركية

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الملخص

تسعى هذه الأطروحة إلى دراسة السرديات النسوية لدى أليس ووكر وتوني موريسون, مع التركيز على تمثيلاتهما لمقاومة النساء للبنى البطريركية في روايتي اللون الأرجواني (1982) والمحبوبة (1987). وتضع الكاتبتان في صدارة أعمالهما تجارب النساء الأميركيات من أصول إفريقية، اللواتي طالما أُقصيت أصواتهن عن السرد التاريخي، حيث تفتحان فضاءات أدبية تتقاطع فيها الذاكرة والصدمة والبقاء بوصفها أشكالاً من التحدي والممانعة.

وانطلاقًا من الأطر النظرية النسوية و"الوومانِست" (النسوية السوداء)، يحلّل هذا البحث الكيفية التي تعيد بها ووكر وموريسون بناء سرديات القمع عبر أدوات متعددة، منها: الحكي، والروابط الأمومية، والروحانية، والقدرة على الصمود الجماعي. كما يضع الدراسة في سياقها التاريخي والثقافي الأوسع المرتبط بالعبودية والفصل العنصري والفكر النسوي الأسود، مع إبراز الكيفية التي ينهض بها الأدب بوصفه شهادةً وممارسةً مقاومة في آن واحد.

وعبر قراءات مقارنة معمّقة، تكشف الأطروحة أنّ ووكر وموريسون تتحدّيان الخطابات التاريخية المهيمنة من خلال تصوير النساء السود ليس كضحايا سلبيات، بل كفاعلات في صناعة التحوّل الثقافي. كما تُظهر أعمالهما تداخل البقاء الفردي مع الذاكرة الجمعية في سياق النضال المستمر ضد البطريركية والاضطهاد العرقي.

وتخلص الدراسة إلى أنّ ووكر وموريسون قد وسّعتا أفق الأدب الأميركي بإعادة تعريف مفهوم المقاومة النسوية من منظور أنوثة المرأة الأميركية السوداء. وبذلك لا تستعيدان فقط تواريخ مهمّشة وصامتة، بل تؤكدان أيضًا على قوة السرد الأدبي بوصفه أداةً للتحرّر وإعادة الاعتبار

الكلمات المفتاحية: أليس ووكر؛ توني موريسون؛ النظام البطريركي؛ الاضطهاد؛ المقاومة؛ النسوية السوداء؛ الوكالة الأنثوية؛ التمكين؛ التقاطعية؛ أدب النساء الأمريكيات من أصل إفريقي.