

Intersectionality and women's Empowerment: Race, class, and identity Sula by Toni Morrison, The Colour Purple by Alice Walker

Gargi Chauhan, Dr. Guni Vats

Department of English, Manav Rachna International Institute of Research & Studies, India

Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 13 May 2025</p> <p>Revised on: 05 Jun 2025</p> <p>Accepted on: 09 Jun 2025</p> <p>Published on: 15 Jun 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— Gender Representation, Race, Sexual Exploitation, Personal Identity</p>	<p><i>An in-depth examination of gender representation in literature, concentrating on the experiences of African American women during the 20th century. Walker confronts traditional gender norms by illustrating Celie's evolution from a compliant and marginalised young woman to a confident individual who discovers empowerment through her connections with other women. The relationship between Celie and Shug Avery, who starts as her husband's mistress, transforms into a profound connection that enables Celie to regain her voice and sense of self. Their relationship challenges conventional expectations of romantic love. Celie's journey serves as a profound exploration of the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality within a patriarchal society. "The Colour Purple" critiques the systemic oppression encountered by African American women, revealing the stark realities of domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and economic marginalisation. Walker depicts the strength of her female characters, showcasing their ability to manoeuvre and challenge these oppressive systems through unity, spirituality, and personal expression. This paper presents a nuanced exploration of gender representation in literature, highlighting the intricate and varied experiences of African American women. It addresses the interplay of race, gender, and power, while honouring the strength and resilience evident in women's relationships and their personal paths towards self-empowerment and liberation.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

All excellent works of literature has conflict, and Morrison's works revolve on the internal and external struggles with identity. So, we need to find out how much these authors muddle alienating codes in their stories. There is a complicated link between racial rhetoric, gender discourse, and class discourse that breaks down discussions of identity disparity. Narratives create identity discourse by promoting the junction of class and the imposing reality of race. Morrison acts as a go-between, using techniques that elicit a variety of reactions by means of paradox-building or parallelism, thereby highlighting the

inconsistencies present in any given discourse. The core tenet of intersectionality is the idea that people are not only a part of one social framework, but of several frameworks that interact with each other in complex ways. The goal of an intersectional approach, according to Hill Collins (277), is to understand how different social institutions impact different people's situations within different oppressive systems. An analytical framework that includes "different responses to shared difficulties" (28), Hill Collins presents an expanded picture of intersectionality. There is a mountain of data showing how people's intersecting identities affect their happiness, life

circumstances, and social networks (Phoenix & Pattynama, 6).

Narratives that emphasise either membership or differentiation have allowed it to remain intact. As a result, writers such as Morrison and Walker who work with these ideas use tactics that provoke different responses by using methods of paradox or parallelism, which brings attention to the inherent inconsistencies in speech. In order to uncover several levels of meaning in tales, it is the literary analyst's duty to use suitable interpretive tools.

Conflict is an essential component of fiction, and Walker and Morrison's works revolve on the internal and outward struggles of identity. The question then becomes how much these writers obfuscate distancing patterns in their stories. When we look at racial rhetoric in the context of class and gender, we see a complex connection that makes it harder to talk about identity disparity.

Many narratives about identity concentrate on the complex relationship between social class and racial identity. Disregarding the convergence of differences undermines much analytical and inventive literary criticism that depends on individual analytical viewpoints. Through depicting deep-seated identity crises, Walker and Morrison expose the characters' predicaments by drawing attention to the complex interconnections within and between different types of identities.

Both books show a deep comprehension of the many facets of African American identities, which goes against the grain of common interpretations that place Morrison and Walker's works in a purely feminist context. Indicators of racial or gender binaries interact with other structural variables that produce unequal connections, such as disability, sexual orientation, class, and gender. Focusing on only one aspect of literary discourse is simplistic and out of touch with reality's intricacies. Still, it is important to stress that focusing just on identification would be a major misreading of creative representation and the examination of society via characterization, storyline, or location.

A critic's job is to shed light on these choices by drawing connections to other parts of works of literature. This analytical effort exemplifies this ambivalent viewpoint by investigating the ways in

which Walker and Morrison either subvert or unintentionally support standard narratives around inequality. While avoiding oversimplified binary frameworks within identity categories, both writers acknowledge the contemporaneous nature of gender, class, and racial inequities. Instead of just preserving preexisting historical links, they provide new categories that question traditional narratives of identity, demonstrating the complex relationship between culture, history, and discourse. By illustrating how gender, class, and race all exist in tandem, we can see how these narratives play a significant role in defining identity politics. We will look at discourse components and assess them based on how often they appear and how important they are in literature.

Characters from a variety of socioeconomic statuses, ethnicities, and genders all felt marginalised. The work of Alice Walker, who laid the groundwork for feminist theory, deserves recognition.

Described by Delores Williams as a position "against any oppression on the grounds of race, gender, class, sexual preferences and physical ability" in her theological book *Sisters in the Wilderness*, as a paradigm of personalism. By deftly avoiding a narrow emphasis on features of identity, *The Colour Purple* avoids overt generalisation while deftly incorporating a number of categories. Similarly, Morrison's work shows how realignment and communal consciousness impact identity talks.

The Colour Purple shows how a shift in perspective helps people progress as a species. "Right after that, he starts to show symptoms of progress," Celie notes. According to her, "kills" is the meaning (231). While helping his wife Sofia care for their children, Harpo – the son of Mister – manages a warped view of manhood. Mary Agnes, Harpo's partner, shows agency by standing up for herself, demanding respect from everyone, and deciding to leave him to pursue her musical dreams (Squeak/Mary Agnes). Consequently, she follows in Shug's footsteps. Once Celie starts getting letters from Nettie, whom she thought was dead, her awareness goes through the roof. "Now I know Nettie living I begin to swagger a little bit." This is the exact line that motivates her to leave Mister and travel to the city to be with Shug, thanks to the uplifting tone of Nettie's letter. Think about it: "We will leave this area as soon as she comes

back. Our two children, together with her and myself. Specifically, Sofia goes beyond a mentality formed by years of resisting male supremacy, establishing herself in an ongoing posture of rebellion against its cultural standards, customs, and ideas. "All my life I had to struggle." describes her aggressive personality. A quarrel broke out between my father and myself.

An argument broke out between my brothers and myself... In a male-dominated environment, a female youngster cannot feel safe number 42. By seeing her marriage through a critical lens, she rejects any speech that is influenced by traditional gender roles. But her perspective changes once she goes to jail for publicly humiliating the mayor's wife. Eleanor Jane, the mayor's daughter, helps her temper her racial animosity, and she comes to see mankind as a whole. When investigating one's identity within larger contexts, Walker stresses the need of balance and the use of logical reasoning. Walker advocates for a reasoned mentality that eschews extremes in relationships and attitudes in favour of a middle ground that opposes inhumanity and dogmatic ideas while yet fitting in with larger conversations.

The carefully crafted environment of *The Bluest Eye* suggests that a conforming communal consciousness perpetuates oppression. By delving into the many identities of characters spanning gender, race, migration, and socioeconomic status, we can see how cultural frameworks have imposed limitations. Still, many reviewers tend to take an oversimplified view of the books, drawing only on the stories of Black American women. In my view, the main focus should be on how humans interact with the constraints imposed by awareness. Although women from ethnic minorities and women from the majority usually have worse results when compared to males, the gender studies literature stresses that these two groups' everyday lives are quite different. Ethnicity exacerbates gender-based divides, and vice versa; a complex understanding of the contextual elements involved is required to comprehend this relationship. Floya Anthias's "translocational lens" provides a useful framework for thinking about how different social structures and processes interact to produce different positions and results (12). Therefore, intersectionality includes not only the ways in which different identities interact and evolve across time, but also the consequences of these relationships for

outcomes in the present. In this research, we look at how different people's backgrounds and experiences shape their reactions and understandings.

Characters in both *The Bluest Eye* and *The Colour Purple* struggle with the complexities of their many identities, which in turn cause them to form relationships that mirror the interaction between and within their various identities. This complexity and contradiction is inherent in discussions of identity. By avoiding direct confrontation with category representations, this promotes an active and resilient conversation on identity discrepancies. Cultural hierarchies have always placed the burden on literary critics to decipher tales using appropriate techniques of interpretation in order to provide numerous levels of meaning. Many forms of literary critique, whether creative or critical, that use singular analytical frameworks fail because they try to ignore the interplay of inequality. Walker and Morrison reveal their characters' predicaments by depicting obvious identity crises; in doing so, they highlight the intricate interconnections among many identity categories. Morrison and Walker's books show a profound understanding of the multi-faceted nature of African American identity, in contrast to the popular narratives that cast them as rigid feminist endeavours. An intersection of gendered or racial binaries with other structural elements that promote unequal relationships includes class, disability, and sexuality. Literary criticism that ignores or downplays other categories is both erroneous and unfounded. It is worth noting that only concentrating on identification would also lead to a blatant distortion of artistic representation and societal analysis via character development, storyline, or environment. Therefore, it is up to the critic to analyse these decisions in light of other features of literary works. This critical effort uses Morrison's portrayal of inequality – whether it goes against the grain or seems to perpetuate them – to illustrate this dual perspective. Without clinging to rigid gender or racial/class/sexual orientation classifications, both authors discuss the interconnectedness of these injustices.

Analysing Toni Morrison's work in depth sheds light on the structural oppression Black women face by exploring the interplay between social, political, and economic forces. Morrison depicts Black women's struggles with gender and racial prejudice in novels

such as *Beloved* and *Sula*. The hegemony of white values in society, the economic and political marginalisation of Black women, and the exploitation of their bodies are all parts of this systematic oppression that stems from slavery and structural inequality (McGee 21). These kinds of themes highlight the challenges that Black women confront in modern society, such as inequality in healthcare, educational prospects, and employment (Leath et al., 22; Showunmi, 23). Insightful social criticisms and historical narratives, Morrison's writings shed light on the persistence of these oppressions in modern society. The complex characters and stories created by Morrison shed light on the strength and defiance shown by Black women in the face of persistent persecution, providing important context for analysing current societal injustices.

Toni Morrison's understanding of the interplay between gender, race, and identity in her writings sheds light on the pervasive oppression that Black women in America continue to endure. Morrison shows how slavery and racism have affected Black women in all walks of life, from the social to the economic to the political, via complex characters and stories that deal with pain, marginalisation, and the search for identity (Jum-Gyu 23). Her research provides analytical tools to combat long-standing injustices and sheds light on the need of understanding how race and gender interact to better understand the struggles Black women face today.

This research takes a qualitative approach by analysing Toni Morrison's works using content analysis. It aims to examine how *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye* critique modern societal frameworks related to gender and race (Gwee et al. 24). This study relies on secondary qualitative sources for its data, which include Morrison's novels as main texts, relevant journal papers as supporting literature, and research linked to social movements such as Black Lives Matter as contextual data. In this literary critique of Morrison's writings, the author draws parallels between her books and modern social issues and social justice movements (Saddam 78; Thapliyal 95).

Systemic racism, collective trauma, racial beauty standards, and Black women's empowerment were among the major themes identified and structured via the use of thematic analysis (Kamesha et al., 2002;

Seanna et al., 1997). With this information in hand, we were able to evaluate Morrison's story in light of contemporary social issues by placing it within the preexisting literature on social justice movements. Data triangulation, which involves comparing the results of the theme analysis with other academic interpretations and having conversations with specialists in literary and gender studies to confirm the validity of the results, further strengthens the rigour of this research. This study aims to shed light on how Toni Morrison's works provide a critical analysis of modern society's structure and serve as valuable educational tools in current academic discussions about gender, race, and social justice in the US.

Sethe, the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, personifies the ways in which the pain of slavery has shaped Black women's identities and lived experiences. Sethe, a former slave who escapes from a plantation, has deep psychological wounds from the cruel treatment she received while in bondage; this is the story of her journey. For a long time, Sethe feels both bodily and mental pain. She gained a new perspective on herself and the world around her as a result of the event. At the story's heart is the impact of slavery on the bond between Black women and their responsibilities as mothers and vital members of their communities, as shown in the pivotal moment when she chooses to end her daughter *Beloved*'s life rather than let her face enslavement.

The long-lasting impact of slavery on succeeding generations, drawing attention to the obstacles encountered by Black women in addressing the residue of brutality. Morrison highlights the story's female characters, particularly Sethe and Baby Suggs, who are all fighting to reclaim their identities and fulfil their responsibilities in the wake of slavery while carrying the weight of their pain and traumatic experiences. Morrison shows that the tragedy of slavery affects more than just the people who were physically there by embodying a haunting and unresolved history in her character *Beloved*. The scars inflicted by this heritage on succeeding generations have a lasting impact on Black women's identities and the roles they play in society.

In her book *Sula*, Toni Morrison explores the complex relationship of two Black women, Nel Wright and Sula Peace. The story goes on to stress the importance

of Black women's communities and the social demands put on them. At its core, the story is about the friendship between Sula and Nel, which highlights their struggle through a society and a race fraught with obstacles. In order to show how the Black community has different expectations of women, Morrison uses this complex connection. While Sula chooses a more independent path and rejects social conventions, Nel is expected to comply to traditional expectations as a husband and mum. By choosing to go against the grain of society, Sula has effectively cast herself in the role of an outcast. Community members often enforce rigid social norms on Black women's behaviour, which the book sharply analyses.

Sula delves deeper into how these cultural standards limit Black women's independence and freedom. People often criticise Sula for what they see as her immorality since she represents a life of independence. The will of Black women to redefine themselves in a way that defies societal norms is on full display here. In the meantime, patriarchal norms impose restrictions on women like Nel, who tries to conform to society standards. This story criticises the norms that keep Black women from achieving their full potential and highlights the importance of female camaraderie as a safety net while dealing with overwhelming social demands.

When it comes to access to healthcare, education, and jobs, Black women in the US still face serious challenges from systemic racism. Discriminatory practices in student evaluation and placement, inadequate funding in areas with a Black majority, and limited access to high-quality schools are all manifestations of racial inequality in education (Linda 200; Paula et al. 202). Concerningly, there is a gender gap in health care, with Black women often receiving worse treatment than White women. Uneven access to adequate health care resources and shockingly high rates of maternal death are clear manifestations of this inequality. Despite having the same level of education and experience as their male or white female colleagues, Black women often earn less money in the workplace due to racial and gender inequalities (Bailey et al.17). In addition to affecting Black women's access to resources, these issues show how systematic racism keeps them marginalised in many areas of life.

Taking Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality into account is crucial for comprehending gender-based oppression in modern America. Black women face a double whammy of racial and gender discrimination, which intersectionality sheds light on. This puts them in an especially vulnerable position in society. In this setting, Black women face a more complex and systemic kind of oppression as a consequence of racial discrimination in addition to gender-based marginalisation. Legal and legislative frameworks, as pointed out by Crenshaw, fail to adequately address these types of oppression because they treat gender and racism as separate concerns, failing to acknowledge the interaction between the two. Since Black women continue to face prejudice based on both their gender and their race, it is essential to have a thorough understanding of intersectionality in order to analyse the obstacles Black women face in accessing healthcare, jobs, and the judicial system (Crenshaw 89).

Toni Morrison's writings continue to address important issues in modern society, such as gender inequality, reproductive rights, and sexual assault. Morrison explores in *Beloved* the consequences of sexual abuse on enslaved Black women and the deep pain it caused them. When discussing the modern epidemic of sexual assault against Black women, this subject remains very relevant. On a national level, discussions on reproductive rights and health care access tend to exclude Black women, who have unique challenges in this area. Ross et al. found that Black women in the US have a distinct disadvantage when it comes to access to high-quality reproductive health services, which is associated with an elevated risk of maternal mortality due to inadequate treatment. Looking at these challenges from many angles shows that they are more complex than just racial or gender concerns. Rather, they stand for the intersection of the two oppressions that Black women face (Ross et al. 70).

The incorporation of Morrison's ideas into academic curricula has sparked deeper discussions on gender and race in the United States, as well as social justice and the role of education in the fight against racism. Students and scholars alike may use these books to investigate the connections between past stories and systemic injustices in the present.

II. CONCLUSION

By bringing Morrison's writings into the classroom, we may get a better understanding of how gender and race interact in today's society and how communities can rise up against oppression by standing together. Besides serving as insightful criticisms of modern culture, Morrison's writings are great tools for starting meaningful conversations on gender and race in America.

The continuing fight for racial justice has Morrison's writings as an intellectual and emotional cornerstone. Morrison provides deep insights into the dynamics of systemic oppression and how people and communities manage resistance and survival via her investigation of the pain, resilience, and empowerment of Black women. Morrison's writings serve as more than simply literature; they are vital tools for contemporary activists fighting gender, racial, and socioeconomic inequalities.

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