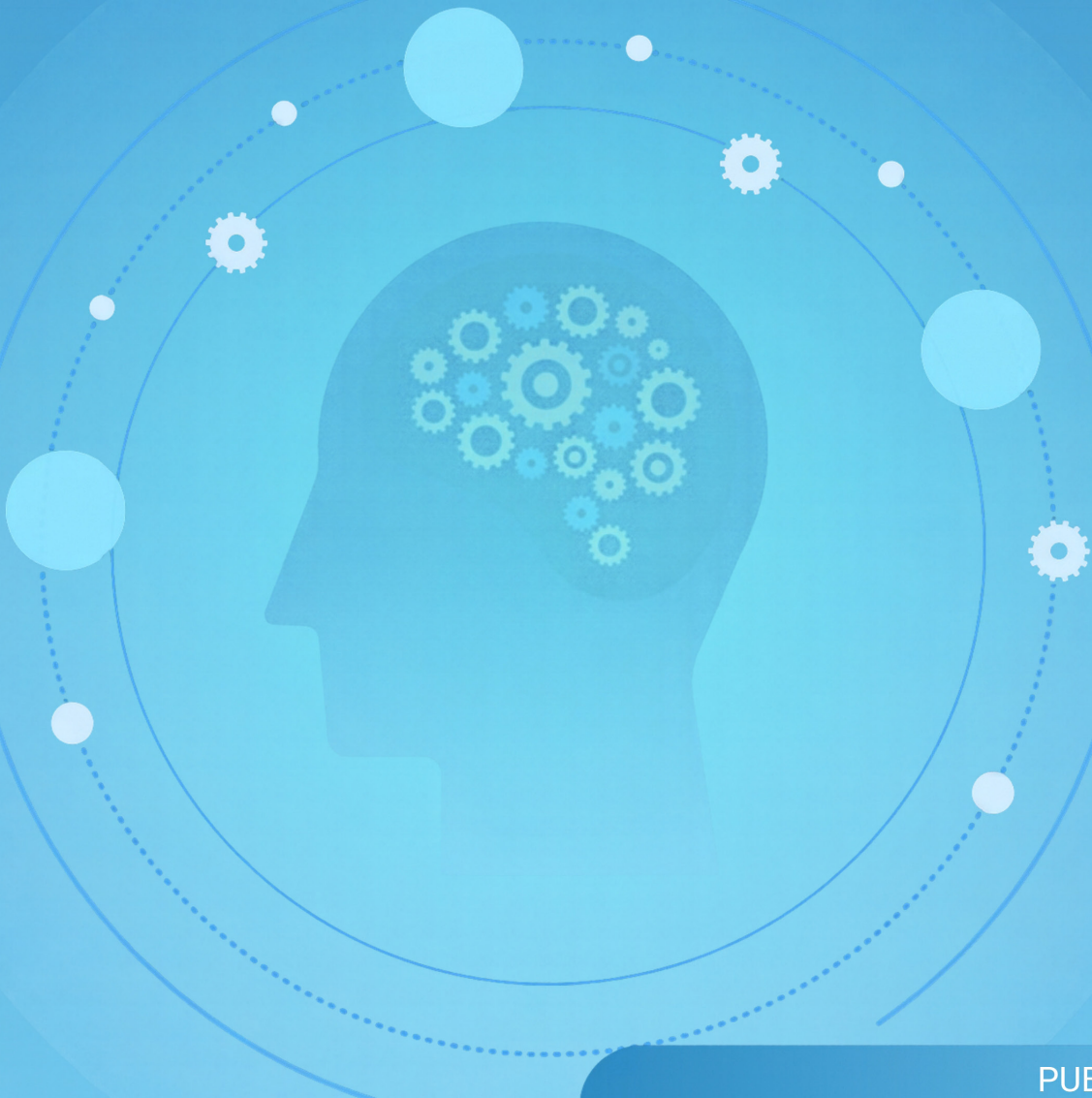




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Dual Oppression: Race, Gender, and Masculinity in Walker and Morrison

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ABSTRACT

Feminist readings of African American women's fiction often treat Alice Walker and Toni Morrison separately, with Walker read for domestic and sexual violence and Morrison for racial ideology and the memory of slavery. This study reads them together to show how patriarchal domination, racial subjugation, and hegemonic masculinity work in tandem, and in doing so extends intersectional feminist thought by tracing how structural power turns into intimate violence. Using close textual analysis, it examines Walker's *The Color Purple*, "Everyday Use," and "How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It Was Easy," and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *Sula*. Passages of violence, coercion, and resistance were coded under critical race theory and Black feminist thought, Gramsci's cultural hegemony, and masculinity studies, then compared across the texts. The analysis yields three findings. Violence within Black families emerges as a product of racial emasculation operating inside a patriarchal culture, not as individual failing. Economic dependence secures consent in Walker's fiction, while internalized racial ideology does the same in Morrison's. Female solidarity, whether emotional, economic, or communal, weakens patriarchal control where it is present. In selected texts, the control on body and children is gradually transformed into self-definition, economic independence, and control of memory and heritage in terms of Black female autonomy. The findings are limited to chosen works only. Walker and Morrison use literature to record trauma, reclaim the self, and imagine social and political agency.

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is usually described as a political movement that aims to end gender inequality and secure basic rights of women. Mainstream feminist writing, though, has often left out how gender inequality is tied to race and class. Patriarchy places women under male authority, at home and in public life, almost everywhere. How that works in practice depends on the history and the race of the women involved.

For Black women, this produces a kind of oppression with its own shape, which some scholars call double jeopardy or misogynoir. Black women lived through the transatlantic slave trade, ownership as property, and racism after emancipation. The violence came from white men and women. It also came from Black men, some of whom were reacting to their own exclusion under white supremacy. Hegemonic masculinity helps explain this. It is the cultural picture of the ideal man, and it gives men a claim to rule women and any men who do not fit it (Connell, 2005).

This study reads the fiction of two major African American writers, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. I compare Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), "Everyday Use" (1973), and "How Did I Get Away With Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It Was Easy" (1981) with Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Beloved* (1987), and *Sula* (1973). The aim is to see how these works show Black women's trauma and their endurance.

The two writers fit together for a practical reason. They examine the same structural problem from different

angles. Walker writes about domestic and sexual violence in homes and communities, and about the money that makes that violence possible. Morrison writes about how racial ideology and the memory of slavery shape the mind and the family. Read together, the books show race, gender, and masculinity working tandem. This study adds that comparison. It has three aims: (a) to analyze how patriarchal and racial power appear in the selected texts, (b) to assess whether female solidarity works as a counter-hegemonic force, and (c) to trace how Black female autonomy changes across the periods the works cover.

The study asks two questions

1. What role does female solidarity and sisterhood play in breaking patriarchal violence and helping marginalized Black women become self-determining?
2. How do Walker and Morrison show the changing path of Black female autonomy, from the legacy of slavery to the years after the Civil Rights movement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper uses four theoretical approaches to read Walker and Morrison: critical race theory, Black feminist thought, Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, and masculinity studies.

Intersectional Feminism and the Black Female Body

Feminist theory was shaped early on by white middle-class scholars and activists. They treated gender discrimination as the main issue and pushed race and class to the side.

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Black feminist writers took a different route. Crenshaw (1989), hooks (1981), and Collins (2000) describe race, gender, and class as systems of oppression that operate together.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir (1949/1953) describes women as the Other in societies run by men, and argues that those societies project their anxieties about existence onto the female body. She also writes about the “eternal feminine” and about a contradiction in motherhood. The female body is praised as the source of life and feared as a sign of death.

Beauvoir’s ideas help explain gendered otherness, but they need to be stretched to fit African American history. During the slave trade and under chattel slavery in the Americas, African women had no legal control over their own bodies. Enslaved people were treated as property and as a source of labor. Enslaved women were also used to produce more enslaved people, which added to their owners’ wealth, and they suffered severe physical and sexual violence (hooks, 1981). Slavery was abolished in 1865, but the racial caste system stayed. It took new forms: Jim Crow segregation, economic entrapment, and political disenfranchisement. Black women carried a triple burden. They were held back economically, they faced racism from white society, and they could face violence from men inside their own families and communities.

Cultural Hegemony and Consent

Gramsci (1971) argued that ruling classes do not hold power by force alone. They also control culture, distribute small material benefits, and shape how people think, so that the ruled come to accept their position. This is cultural hegemony. In the texts studied here, white and white-patriarchal characters use money in this way. They make poor Black women dependent on them and present their control as care or affection, which makes it harder to see and harder to resist.

Masculinity Studies and Hegemonic Power

Hegemonic masculinity is the cultural ideal of manhood. It justifies the subordination of women and of men who do not meet the standard. The ideal man is heterosexual, physically strong, emotionally closed, aggressive, and financially successful. Institutions such as the family, schools, religion, and the media present male dominance as natural, and men who match the ideal, or seem to, rank at the top of the social order.

Donaldson (1993) notes that the system rewards are uneven. Men are taught from the start that they are better than women, but very few can actually meet the standard. Men who fall short, such as men of color, working-class men, and gay men, are pushed down by dominant men. Many of them still try to dominate at home.

Connell (2005) adds that hegemonic masculinity sets up a hierarchy among men as well as rules over women. White supremacist institutions deny marginalized men economic independence and political power. Some of these men try to get back a sense of control by ruling the women

in their homes. I read the male characters in Walker and Morrison with this in mind. It lets me treat violence inside Black families as a product of racial emasculation working within a patriarchal culture. It is more than one man’s personal failing.

Alice Walker’s Life and Activism

Alice Walker was born in 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia. Her father, Willie Lee Walker, was a sharecropper, and her mother, Minnie Tallulah Grant, was a maid. She grew up under Jim Crow and knew rural poverty, racism, and economic exploitation from early childhood. When she was eight, her brother accidentally shot her in the eye with a BB gun and blinded her in that eye. The scar affected her for years. She became withdrawn and spent much of her time watching and thinking, habits that later marked her writing.

Walker went to Spelman College in Atlanta on a scholarship, then transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in New York and graduated in 1965. In those years she took part in the Civil Rights Movement. She registered voters in Mississippi and worked for the Head Start program. She married Melvyn Leventhal, a white civil rights lawyer. They were the first legally married interracial couple in Jackson, Mississippi, and white supremacists harassed them constantly.

Her experience of southern poverty, political struggle, and racial hostility went straight into her writing. In her essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983), Walker used the word “womanist” to describe a Black feminist or feminist of color, committed to the survival, wholeness, and liberation of women and men. The term set her apart from mainstream white feminism (Walker, 1983).

Toni Morrison’s Life and Work

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, an industrial city in the North. Her father, George Wofford, was a welder, and her mother, Ramah Wills Wofford, was a domestic worker. She grew up in a working-class home full of African American folklore, music, and storytelling, which gave her an early sense of how a story is told.

Morrison studied at Howard University and earned a bachelor’s degree in English in 1953. There she began using the name Toni. She earned a master’s degree from Cornell University in 1955 with a thesis on suicide in the work of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. She went back to Howard to teach English and met Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, whom she married. They had two sons and divorced in 1964.

In the late 1960s and 1970s Morrison was a senior editor at Random House in New York. She brought writers such as Angela Davis, Huey P. Newton, and Gayl Jones to a wide readership. In her essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” (1989), she criticizes the Eurocentric bias of the traditional American canon. She argues that African American literature has long been dismissed, and

deserves serious analysis on its own terms. It should not be measured against Western standards of aesthetic refinement (Morrison, 1989).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive design based on close textual analysis. The primary texts are Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), "Everyday Use" (1973), and "How Did I Get Away With Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It Was Easy" (1981), and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Beloved* (1987). I chose these works because together they cover settings from slavery and Reconstruction to the Civil Rights era, and because each one centers on Black women's experience of racial, sexual, and economic domination. The secondary sources are peer-reviewed articles, theoretical books, and the authors' own essays. I used them to build the framework.

I worked in three stages. First, I marked passages of violence, coercion, and resistance in each text. I coded them under the categories from the literature review: intersectional oppression, cultural hegemony and consent, and hegemonic masculinity. Second, I compared the coded passages across the texts to see how each writer links structural power to intimate violence. Third, I weighed the findings against the two research questions, female solidarity and the path of Black female autonomy. Quotations are taken from the editions in the reference list. The study does not speak for all African American women's writing. Its conclusions apply to the selected texts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis is organized around the kinds of violence the texts show, the resistance they imagine, and the two research questions. In Walker's and Morrison's fiction, physical, sexual, and psychological violence against Black women comes out of historical and structural inequality. Each act has a history. None of it is shown as random or purely personal.

Trauma and Physical Violation in *The Color Purple*

In *The Color Purple*, Celie is abused physically and sexually from childhood. The novel begins with her letters about the man she calls Pa:

"He [Pa] never had a kind word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't . . . When that hurt, I cry. He starts to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it." (Walker, 1982, pp. 1–2)

Pa takes away Celie's control over her own body, and she is trapped in an abusive home. She cannot tell anyone because he threatens her, so she writes letters to God to get through it. Berlant (1988) reads this kind of abuse as part of a wider social pattern. It is more than a private family matter. It reflects how society has long oppressed women and marginalized people. Celie's pain gets worse when Pa takes her two children and gives them away to strangers.

After Celie is married off to Albert, her home life is still one of exploitation. Albert uses her as unpaid labor to raise his children and work the farm, and as an object for sex. He beats her, and in his view that is normal. When his son Harpo asks why he hits Celie, Albert answers, "Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—" (Walker, 1982, p. 23). Wife-beating here is a routine way to force obedience.

Sofia contrasts sharply with the early Celie. She grew up in a family where she had to fight to stay safe, and she refuses male control. She tells Celie:

"All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house." (Walker, 1982, p. 42)

Sofia will not accept Harpo's attempts to dominate her with his fists, and that breaks the usual patriarchal pattern. Her defiance costs her a great deal when she faces white authority, though. She refuses to work as the mayor's maid and hits him after he strikes her. The police beat her badly and she goes to prison, and she ends up serving in the mayor's household. White supremacist power uses state violence to crush Black women's independence.

Cultural Hegemony and Revenge in Walker's Short Fiction

Walker deals further with power and manipulation in "How Did I Get Away With Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It Was Easy," from *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (Walker, 1981). The story shows Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). The powerful gain compliance through manipulation and money, without needing open force.

A rich, white, adult lawyer named Budda exploits a poor Black girl of sixteen. He does not use force. He uses his money. The narrator says:

"He told me he loved me. I didn't love him, but he had begun to look a little better to me. Really, I think, because he was so clean. He bathed a lot and never smelled even alive, to tell the truth. Or maybe it was the money he gave me, or the presents he bought." (Walker, 1981, p. XX)

Budda's gifts look like freely given affection, and that dulls her resistance. He then gets her to sign legal papers that send her mother to a mental institution after the mother sees what he is doing. The mother asks her, "Didn't you know he was a white man? Didn't you know he was a married man with two children? Didn't you have good sense?" (Walker, 1981, p. XX). The mother understands that in a white supremacist society, white men have long treated Black women as less than human. The turning point comes when the girl sees how fully she has been used. The illusion of consent breaks. She plans her revenge and carries it out. She kills Budda and takes back his wealth. Walker shows the oppressed turning on their oppressor, and victimhood becomes action.

Racism and Psychological Damage in *The Bluest Eye*

Walker's fiction mostly concerns physical survival and fighting back. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* looks at the mental and emotional damage that comes from hating one's own race. The novel is set in Lorain, Ohio, in the 1940s. It follows Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old Black girl whose surroundings teach her that she is ugly. Morrison shows how white culture spreads a Eurocentric standard of beauty through the media, Shirley Temple dolls, and Hollywood films. Dark-skinned Black girls and women fall outside that standard. Pecola believes that blue eyes would change her life:

"It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different." (Morrison, 1970, p. 46)

Her wish comes from her need to escape the neglect and hostility she faces every day. Her mother, Pauline Breedlove, has taken in white standards of beauty while working as a servant for a wealthy white family. Pauline is warm and caring toward her white employer's child and cold and physically harsh toward Pecola. Kuenz (1993) observes that race and class press on the Black female body together in the novel, and turn it into a site where competing ideas about proper femininity meet.

The tragedy peaks when her father, Cholly Breedlove, rapes Pecola twice. His violence has roots in his own childhood. He was abandoned as a baby and grew up without proper care. As a young man, he was humiliated when armed white men interrupted his first sexual experience. He could not deal with his helplessness and shame, and in the end he turned that pain on his own daughter. Pecola gets no protection from her community either. The town turns on her and blames her until she breaks down completely. Through Claudia MacTeer, Morrison presents Pecola as a scapegoat. She carries the weight of a hurt community and takes in all its self-hatred, so that everyone else can feel better about themselves (Morrison, 1970).

Slavery, Motherhood, and Memory in *Beloved*

In *Beloved*, Morrison addresses slavery and its long-term psychological effects directly. Through Sethe, Paul D, and Baby Suggs, the novel shows how slavery broke up families again and again. It damaged the bonds between mothers and children and weakened people's sense of who they were. Even after they gained legal freedom, formerly enslaved people carried deep psychological wounds.

Paul D thinks about the danger of strong attachment in a system that separated families:

"Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children, she had settled on to love" (Morrison, 1987, p. 45).

Sethe's own past follows the same pattern. When *Beloved* asks about her mother, Sethe remembers only a few distant moments:

"I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she

was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line . . . She didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember." (Morrison, 1987, p. 60)

This kind of absence was ordinary under chattel slavery. Nan raised Sethe, and Nan tells her that Sethe's mother threw away her other children, whom white sailors fathered. She kept only Sethe, whose father was a Black man she had chosen (Morrison, 1987). That history sets a pattern, passed from one generation of mothers to the next, of extreme choices made under total oppression.

When Schoolteacher comes to 124 to take Sethe and her children back to Sweet Home, Sethe decides, in desperation, to kill her young daughter instead of letting her be taken back into slavery. Demetrakopoulos (1992) argues that in the extreme setting of chattel slavery, Sethe sees death as better than a life in bondage for her child. Radical feminist theory holds that taking back control over reproduction and the body is central to overcoming subjugation. Sethe claims control in its most extreme form. She takes ownership of her children's fates.

Slavery also marks the male characters. Paul D was held in iron shackles on a chain gang, and he survives his memories by shutting himself off emotionally (Rashid, 2012). Halle is driven to madness by what he sees. Through these men, Morrison shows that slavery damaged human identity across gender lines and left long-term trauma after it ended in law.

The Healing Power of Sisterhood

In *The Color Purple*, Celie changes from a silent victim into an independent woman because of her relationships with other women. The most important one is Shug Avery, a blues singer who lives on her own and has been Albert's lover for years. Shug lives on her own terms. She owns her sexuality and earns her own money.

Shug gives Celie a different idea of spirituality, desire, and self-love, one that men do not control. Through Shug's care and affection, Celie learns to value her body and her own worth. Shug also helps Celie find the letters Albert hid for more than twenty years, from Celie's sister Nettie in Africa. Finding them turns her life around. It reconnect her to the history she lost and confirm her own experience. With the support of the women around her, Celie finally confronts Albert and breaks a silence of many years:

"Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble . . . I'm poor, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (Walker, 1982, p. 187).

Celie then leaves Albert, moves to Memphis with Shug, and starts her own business, Folkspants Unlimited. She designs and sews custom clothing, which breaks the usual gender division in garment work. She earns her own income and a sense of self she can rely on.

In Morrison's *Sula*, friendship between women is central to the story. Sula Peace and Nel Wright are close, and their bond is rare in the small community of the Bottom, which offers them little. They respond differently to the expectations placed on women. Nel follows them. She marries and has children. Sula rejects the traditional roles

and insists on personal freedom, and the community calls her an outcast for it. Morrison does not make Sula a simple villain. Her independence shows how narrow the community's rules are. The two women fall out over Nel's husband, Jude, and both of them lose something. Years after Sula dies, Nel realizes that what she has really been mourning is her friend, and not Jude:

"We was girls together . . . O Lord Sula, she cried, girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" (Morrison, 1973, p. 174).

Heritage and Self-Definition in "Everyday Use"

In "Everyday Use" (Walker, 1973), the question of autonomy moves into the home and into the lives of three women. The narrator, Mama, is a rural Black woman shaped by hard physical work and little schooling. Her daughter Dee, who is educated, comes to visit and now calls herself Wangero. Dee says she has dropped a name imposed by oppressors. Mama points out that Dee is a name that goes back through the family, so Dee's act of naming herself wipes out a family line even as she claims one.

The main conflict is over quilts pieced by hand from scraps of old family clothes. Dee wants to hang them as heirlooms. Her sister Maggie, who has scars from a house fire, learned how to make them and would use them. Mama takes the quilts from Dee and gives them to Maggie. In doing so she decides what the quilts mean and how family memory is kept, a power her foremothers did not have under slavery or poverty. The story presents autonomy as a rejection of white standards of beauty, and it as the right to decide how a community's history is kept and lived (Walker, 1973).

Female Solidarity Against Patriarchy

Walker and Morrison show female solidarity in resistance to patriarchal violence. Black women who are isolated, like Celie in the early part of *The Color Purple* and Pecola throughout *The Bluest Eye*, are the most exposed to abuse at home. Both novels also show mental breakdown and physical violence. Where solidarity is present, patriarchal control loses its grip.

When Black women form real bonds with each other, they create spaces where their shared experience is believed and where they can resist the institutions that oppress them. Solidarity takes several forms. One is emotional acceptance. Friendships like Celie's with Shug help women drop their self-hatred and define themselves without men's approval. Another is economic. Shared resources, such as Celie and Shug's sewing business or the childcare Sofia and Mary Agnes share, give women the means to leave abusive homes. A third is communal healing and protection. In *Beloved*, the women of the neighborhood gather outside 124 and act together to break a cycle of trauma and to protect Sethe from self-destruction.

In these books, solidarity is a working political strategy against patriarchal structures.

The Path of Black Female Autonomy

Across these works, Black female autonomy moves from

the total ownership of the body under chattel slavery toward self-definition. The path is uneven.

In *Beloved*, which covers slavery and Reconstruction, a Black woman's autonomy is severely limited. Even claiming her own body or her own children takes violence. In the early to mid-twentieth century, the setting of *The Color Purple*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Sula*, slavery had ended in law, but Black people were still not free. White society kept discriminating against and oppressing them. Men kept power over women, often treating them abusively, at homes and in local communities. For Black women in this period, independence was weak and easy to break or take away. Women who tried to stand up for themselves or live independently were punished with violence. Sofia's imprisonment and Pecola's destruction are examples.

As the narratives reach the Civil Rights era, autonomy shifts from basic survival toward self-definition and economic independence. The characters show this shift to different degrees. Celie and Shug build their own income and no longer have to depend on others. Sula refuses white and male norms and demands self-respect, but she never gains economic security, and the community turns on her. Mama's decision about the quilts in "Everyday Use" shows a later form of autonomy, control over memory and heritage. Institutional barriers remain in all of these stories. Even so, the women in them find a way toward some freedom.

CONCLUSION

The work of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison helps us see how race, gender, and patriarchal power shape Black women's lives. Their books show the pain of Black women characters who are harmed by patriarchy inside their own communities and by white supremacy in the wider society. They also show agency and endurance. Sofia, Celie, Sula, Sethe, and Claudia each survive in their own way. Both writers stress that female solidarity matters in the fight against patriarchal discrimination. Their work asks readers to look at these characters' inner lives, who choose not to follow the conventional path set for Black women and instead challenge it.

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