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# Rape, Resilience and Survival: A Feminist Study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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**Abstract**

This study examines the portrayal of rape and sexual violence in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), focusing on how women's bodies are depicted as sites for the exertion of masculine power. Drawing on Susan Brownmiller's seminal work *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975), the research foregrounds sexual violence as a mechanism of patriarchal domination and female subjugation. In *Beloved*, Sethe's repeated assaults and the theft of her breast milk expose how slavery weaponized sexual violence to obliterate both bodily autonomy and maternal identity. *The Color Purple* further intensifies this discourse, as Celie's repeated rapes at the hands of her stepfather reduce her body to an object of control, yet her eventual reclamation of voice and selfhood resists such dehumanization. Engaging with Brownmiller's concepts of rape as an "act of power" and the male organ as a "weapon," this analysis shows how male dominance is inscribed on the female body through acts of sexual violence that seek to instill fear and enforce submission. At the same time, the narratives highlight forms of resilience and survival—whether through Sethe's radical maternal protection or Celie's eventual empowerment—that complicate victimhood and suggest spaces of resistance. By exploring the intersections of rape, resilience, and survival, this study contributes to a feminist understanding of sexual trauma in African American literature, demonstrating how these novels expose the structural violence of patriarchy while affirming women's enduring struggle for resistance and empowerment.

***Keywords**:* Rape, Women's Bodies, Patriarchal Control, Resilience, Survival.

## Introduction

Rape has long been a painful yet powerful theme in African American literature, reflecting not only the historical trauma of Black communities but also the brutal enforcement of patriarchal authority. More than a personal violation, it functions as a social weapon—a means through which male dominance exerts control over female bodies, particularly those of Black women. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple,* rape is portrayed not merely as an act of physical violence but as a symbol of systemic oppression, leaving both physical and psychological scars that shape the lives of Sethe and Celie. Their experiences illustrate the intersection of racism, sexism, and patriarchal power, extending beyond individual suffering to expose the broader structures of domination that govern society (Breeze & Hassan, 2024; Hassan, 2022).

Wa Thiong'o, in *Writers in Politics* (1981), asserts:

> Literature cannot escape the power structure that shapes our everyday life. A writer has no choice whether or not he is aware of it; his work reflects one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural, and ideological struggles in a society. What he chooses is one

> or the other side in the battlefield, the side of his people or the side of those social forces or class that try to keep his people down (p. 94).

This perspective underscores how Morrison and Walker situate their narratives within broader ideological struggles, aligning their works with the lived realities of Black women whose bodies and voices have historically been sites of oppression. Cohen (1993) similarly argues that in gendered societies, women are subjected to exploitation, denigration, and exclusion, reinforced through religious, legal, and cultural structures. Women worldwide have endured systemic subjugation, a condition particularly acute in Black communities. Disch (1997, p. 10) extends this argument through the metaphor of a cage, stressing that oppression must be understood holistically: focusing on one barrier provides only a partial view, whereas recognizing all the "bars" exposes the inescapability of entrapment. This framework resonates with Morrison and Walker, whose depictions of Sethe and Celie demonstrate how rape operates not as isolated incidents but as manifestations of patriarchal domination and systemic marginalization (Hassan et al., 2025). Within these dynamics, women's voices are also systematically devalued. Their speech is often trivialized as gossip or whispering, contrasted against the supposedly weightier discourse of men. As Kaplan (1986, p. 70) observes, women's language is frequently dismissed as "trivial domestic discourse," reinforcing its marginal status. This labeling is not neutral: it constructs women's speech as uncertain or powerless (O'Barr, 1999; O'Barr & Atkins, 1987), thereby legitimizing gendered hierarchies of communication. What is disparaged as gossip thus becomes a rhetorical strategy through which patriarchy diminishes women's voices while elevating men's speech as inherently authoritative. Also, Ukaegbu and Oguejiofor (2022), in *Women's Rights in Igbo Land*, situate women's violation within cultural, political, and economic systems that systematically restrict female agency. He explains that women in Igbo society—like the majority of women across Africa—face entrenched inequalities in political, social, economic, and cultural domains. He further notes that many women's acceptance of prescribed traditional roles prevents them from exercising rights formally guaranteed to them (p. 4). His observations highlight how cultural expectations normalize subordination and discourage resistance. In this context, Morrison and Walker inscribe rape and its traumatic consequences into literature not only as testimony but also as resistance. Their works become sites where silenced voices are reclaimed and where the ideological struggles of their societies are laid bare. Scholars have underscored the political dimension of sexual violence, situating rape within broader structures of domination. Dowds (2020) emphasizes that rape must be understood in relation to coercive systems where power imbalances blur the line between consent and submission (p.1). This is especially relevant in contexts such as slavery or patriarchal households, where sexual violation often masquerades as legitimate authority. Gardner and Shute (2000), in *The Wrongness of Rape,* similarly argue that penetration in rape functions as a deliberate act of objectification, transforming intimacy into conquest and reducing the victim to an instrument for another's ends. Thus, "it's the worst violation than mere vandalism, theft, and assault" (p. 4). Susan Brownmiller extends this analysis by reframing rape not as an act of desire but as a calculated strategy of male dominance, designed to enforce submission and sustain patriarchal hierarchies (p. 21).

In *Beloved*, Sethe's rape under slavery epitomizes the racial dehumanization of Black women, reducing her body to an exploitable object. Her later infanticide, however horrifying, emerges as a desperate assertion of maternal agency against a system that seeks to annihilate it. Both narratives illustrate how rape functions not merely as an assault on the body but as a strategy of silencing and disempowerment that reinforces racial and gender hierarchies. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's rape by her father undermines the protective role of kinship and exposes the intrusion of patriarchal violence into intimate domestic spaces. Her ensuing emotional disintegration and fixation on passivity reveal how sexual domination erodes selfhood and autonomy. Morrison complicates these depictions by foregrounding women's responses to rape trauma. Sethe resists viscerally, reclaiming agency through radical acts of protection and survival, even as she wrestles with guilt and memory. Celie, by contrast, endures prolonged abuse that initially silences her voice and denies her subjectivity. Yet, through relationships with other women—particularly Shug and Sofia—she gradually reclaims agency and reconstructs her sense of self. Her

trajectory demonstrates the potential of female solidarity to challenge patriarchal violence and facilitate recovery. This paper is therefore a critical exploration of the vulnerability of Black women in a patriarchal and racist society—one that objectifies their bodies, silences their voices, and renders them perpetual victims of systemic domination. Sethe and Celie, though situated in different contexts, reveal how rape and sexual exploitation function not merely as personal violations but as instruments of control within oppressive cultural and historical structures. Yet, through Sethe's fierce acts of resistance and Celie's gradual reclamation of selfhood, Morrison and Walker illuminate the resilience and agency of Black women. This study underscores how African American literature, by narrating trauma and survival, reveals the entanglement of sexual violence with slavery, racism, and patriarchy, while simultaneously affirming women's capacity for resistance and transformation.

**Literature Review**

A substantial body of scholarship on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has examined trauma, identity, and oppression from various perspectives. Alogaili (2024), in Shattered Memories and a Sense of Identity in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, investigates how fragmented memories shape identity formation in Morrison's novel. Focusing on Sethe's traumatic recollections, Alogaili argues that the novel's non-linear structure mirrors the psychological dislocation caused by slavery. Drawing on trauma theory, particularly the work of Caruth and Hirsch, the study highlights how Morrison employs memory—especially through the spectral figure of Beloved—as a narrative strategy to convey the enduring effects of historical trauma. This research underscores the connection between narrative form and the psychological wounds inflicted on African American identity. Similarly, Ghosh, Bhushan, and Kapoor (2024) analyze *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* in terms of ecological language and spatial consciousness. They argue that *Beloved* utilizes ecological imagery and an awareness of space to reclaim indigenous spatial identity and resist cultural erasure, illustrating how ecological expression can serve as a tool for healing and resistance. In contrast, The Bluest Eye depicts characters trapped within destructive racial and colonial hierarchies, highlighting the failure to cultivate space-conscious values. Udoette (2023), in *Re-inventing the Past as 'Rememory': Trauma, Motherhood, and History in Toni Morrison's Beloved,* emphasizes Morrison's reconstruction of the slave narrative through trauma theory and psychoanalysis. The study explores motherhood, sexual violence, and memory, centering Morrison's concept of "re-memory" to show how personal and collective trauma are relived across generations. Udoette demonstrates that Beloved reconstructs identity through a nonlinear, emotionally charged narrative in which trauma functions as both individual and communal wound, shaping African American consciousness. Yigit (2020), in *The Healing Power of the Ghost in Toni Morrison's Beloved,* offers a poststructuralist reading of Beloved's spectral figure. Drawing on Derridean deconstruction and Kristeva's psychoanalysis, Yigit interprets Beloved as embodying repressed trauma and fragmented memory. The ghost disrupts linear temporality, destabilizes fixed meanings, and amplifies the silenced voices of Black motherhood, creating a space for healing, storytelling, and identity reconstruction.

Turning to Walker, Bulman (2025) examines film and musical adaptations of *The Color Purple,* analyzing the representation of Black queer identity. The 1985 Spielberg adaptation downplayed Celie and Shug's queer relationship, reinforcing certain racial and gendered stereotypes, whereas the 2023 musical adaptation foregrounds Black queer experiences more explicitly, highlighting the agency and intersectional identities of Black women.

Graham, Ghoston, and Jones (2025), in *Beyond the Perinatal Period: Using The Color Purple to Explore Maternal Mental Health Throughout the Lifespan*, expand the notion of maternal mental health beyond the perinatal period, emphasizing trauma, community support, and economic stability. Their study highlights how culturally relevant narratives like Walker's can inform holistic, lifespan-oriented approaches to maternal well-being. Kirana and Wiwoho (2025) analyze the 2023 film adaptation of *The Color Purple* through Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought. Their qualitative study highlights how racial discrimination, gender subordination, and negative stereotyping intersect to sustain the oppression of Black women, illustrating the enduring relevance of Black feminist frameworks in analyzing

contemporary adaptations. Wu and Li (2022) read *The Color Purple* as an existential novel, emphasizing Celie's journey from oppression to self-realization and rebirth. They explore the novel's symbolic dimensions, particularly the use of color imagery, to illustrate Walker's advocacy for Black women's survival, independence, and social harmony. Lewis (2017) similarly examines the intersection of gender, race, and trauma, demonstrating how systemic violence renders Black women vulnerable to psychological harm, while Walker's narrative techniques reveal the deep interplay between identity, oppression, and resilience. While existing scholarship has explored racial identity, trauma, and patriarchal oppression, limited attention has been paid to sexual violence as a deliberate tool of power within a feminist framework informed by Susan Brownmiller. This study addresses that gap by examining how Morrison's characters navigate sexual violence, resist patriarchal control, and assert bodily autonomy. By integrating Brownmiller's insights, this research highlights the intersection of gendered violence, resilience, and survival, and foregrounds forms of resistance often underrepresented in earlier analyses.

**Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyze Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The analysis is based on Susan Brownmiller's seminal work *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975), which theorizes rape as a deliberate tool of patriarchal power and domination rather than an act of individual desire. By applying Brownmiller's framework, the research interrogates how rape functions as an instrument of oppression within the selected novels, shaping the lived realities of Black women characters. The method involves close reading, with particular attention to the narrative strategies, symbols, and representations of sexual violence, silence, resilience, and survival. This feminist approach highlights not only the trauma inflicted upon the characters but also how they resist and reclaim agency in the face of systemic violence. Additionally, the study situates its analysis within the broader context of Black feminist thought to recognize the intersections of race, gender, and power that underlie the protagonists' experiences. Brownmiller's framework provides the central lens for examining rape as a patriarchal mechanism. The comparative reading of Morrison and Walker reveals both shared and divergent strategies in depicting resilience and survival, thereby offering an understanding of women's endurance against oppression. The scope of the study is limited to textual interpretation of the two novels, to foreground feminist discourses of trauma, resistance, and healing.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study employs the radical feminist perspective of Susan Brownmiller (1975) as articulated in Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape. Brownmiller reconceptualizes rape not as an act of individual lust, but as a systemic, politically motivated instrument of male domination within patriarchal structures. She asserts that rape functions as a conscious process of intimidation, designed to maintain women in a state of fear and restrict their autonomy. As she observes: Man's discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear (p. 15). Brownmiller situates rape historically as an extension of patriarchal control, linking its origins to property relations and the conceptualization of women as objects to be owned. She emphasizes that the first assertion of male power—through the forcible domination of women—was foundational to the emergence of patriarchy: It seems eminently sensible to hypothesize that man's violent capture and rape of the female led first to the establishment of a rudimentary mate-protectorate and then, sometime later, to the full-blown male solidification of power, the patriarchy. As the first permanent acquisition of man, his first piece of real property, woman was, in fact, the original building block, the cornerstone, of the 'house of the father.' Man's forcible extension of his boundaries to his mate and later to their offspring was the beginning of his concept of ownership (p. 17). Brownmiller's exploration foregrounds the political, rather than biological, underpinnings of sexual violence. Rape, in

this framework, operates as a mechanism to enforce hierarchies—gendered, racialized, and class-based—reinforcing systemic oppression in contexts such as slavery, war, and feudalism. Brownmiller critiques classical theorists, including Friedrich Engels, for focusing narrowly on economic oppression while overlooking the sexualized dimensions of male dominance. She also emphasizes how legal and social systems historically treated rape as a violation of male property rather than as an assault on women themselves, thereby institutionalizing the control of women's bodies.

Importantly, Brownmiller's framework extends beyond the analysis of victimization to emphasize resistance and agency. She stresses that the ideology of rape is socially constructed and, therefore, can be contested. She calls for collective, multi-level strategies of opposition: Fighting back. On a multiplicity of levels, that is the activity we must engage in, together, if we—women—are to redress the imbalance and rid ourselves and men of the ideology of rape (p. 404). Thus, this study adopts Brownmiller's dual focus on the structural roots of sexual violence and the possibilities for resistance. Her framework provides a lens to critically examine sexual violence as both a personal trauma and a political instrument while foregrounding the agency, resilience, and strategies of women who confront and resist patriarchal oppression. By moving from the analysis of rape to the discourse of "fighting back," this theoretical approach underlines the intersection of oppression and empowerment, enabling an understanding of sexual violence in literary narratives and broader socio-political contexts.

## Results and Discussion

### Rape, Power, and Control: Sethe's and Celie's Experiences of Sexual Violence

Sexual violence in both Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* does not appear as an isolated rupture but as part of historically entrenched systems that mark Black female bodies as sites of control, violation, and silencing. For Sethe and Celie, rape functions less as an individual act of cruelty than as a systemic manifestation of patriarchal and racial ideologies that deny Black women subjectivity and agency. Their experiences are embedded within social structures where identity is already scripted by race, gender, and inequality. As Scott et al. (2023) in their work, *The Wear and Tear of Racism: Self-Silencing from the Perspective of Young Black Women,* argue, forced physical and sexual labor leads the women to self-silencing. He continues that such self-silencing strategies reveal the enduring burden of negotiating racism, where the body itself becomes both the target of violence and the medium through which silence is enforced (p. 2). Simone de Beauvoir (1949, p. 6), in *The Second Sex*, observes that woman is defined in relation to man, "the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, the Absolute—she is the Other." It clarifies how Sethe and Celie are positioned within oppressive cultural logics that reduce women to objects of use. Marie Umeh, drawing on Kate Millett's concept of "sexual politics," similarly stresses that patriarchal systems preserve male dominance by sacrificing women's autonomy (p.24). Morrison and Walker make these truths visible through the lived realities of Sethe and Celie, which expose the costs of such structures. McKittrick (2006, p. 127) extends this understanding by noting that bodies, homes, and communities are continually racialized and gendered through hegemonic discourses, shaping how individuals inhabit their "specially racialised place." For Sethe, the enslaved body is commodified within a national and economic system that erases her humanity; for Celie, the home—supposedly a refuge—becomes the site of violation, as patriarchal and racialized expectations render her body available for domination. In both cases, sexual violence enforces silence, turning the body into a battleground where systemic ideologies are violently inscribed.

Sethe's rape is inseparable from the institutional logic of slavery, which commodifies her not only for labor but also for sexual exploitation. Her violation becomes a deliberate stripping away of humanity, autonomy, and voice. Celie—though living in a nominally "free" society—remains bound by racialized patriarchy and inherited trauma. The sexual violence she suffers at the hands of her father reflects not merely familial pathology but the enduring devaluation of Black girls' bodies, a legacy of slavery's silencing structures. Muted group theory underscores this silencing: The male model of society would be considered by the dominant group (men) to be accurate and true since they would see nothing lacking in

the model presented. If the dominant group does not complain or criticize, who will?... Women's models often take a non-verbal, inarticulate, veiled form in contrast to the male discourse, which is more verbal and explicit (Wall & Leary, 1999, p. 23). This silencing is evident in *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*, where Sethe and Celie endure violence that is inscribed on their bodies, reflecting the exertion of power and control over them.

**Sethe's Experience of Rape**

The devastation of women's bodies finds one of its most harrowing articulations in Morrison's *Beloved*. Sethe's early exchange with Paul D captures the brutal convergence of physical and sexual violence: "They used cowhide on you? And they took my milk. They beat you and you were pregnant? And they took my milk!" (p. 16). This moment underscores how, under slavery, sexual violation was not an isolated act of cruelty but a deliberate strategy to dismantle female agency. As Susan Brownmiller (1993) contends in *Against Our Will*, rape is less about sexual desire than about domination, a calculated mechanism through which patriarchal systems sustain power by instilling fear (p. 14). Sethe's repeated emphasis on her stolen milk conveys more than the trauma of bodily violation; it signifies the erasure of her maternal identity and the severing of the most intimate bond between mother and child. I had milk, she said. "I was pregnant with Denver, but I had milk for my baby girl. I had not stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Buglar…. Then they know what it's like to send your children off when your breasts are full (p. 15). The theft of Sethe's breast milk, even while she is pregnant, exemplifies how slavery rendered motherhood itself vulnerable to appropriation, leaving no aspect of a woman's life beyond reach. Angela Davis, in *Women, Race, and Class*, underscores this dual exploitation: enslaved women were treated as genderless laboring bodies when their strength was needed, and as hyper-feminized reproductive bodies when their biological capacity could be weaponized. As Davis (1981) notes, "physical compulsion was necessary at times to secure submission on the part of black women" (p. 20). Sethe embodies this oscillation—whipped and worked like a man, yet simultaneously raped and deprived of her maternal role. Her initial encounter with rape thus illustrates not an isolated cruelty but an institutionalized practice embedded in a patriarchal economic system that reduced Black women to exploitable flesh.

Central to Sethe's violation is the symbolic and physical power of the (white) phallus, which Morrison depicts not simply as a biological organ but as a weapon of systemic oppression. Within slavery, it functioned to assert control, collapse moral boundaries, and manipulate reproductive lives. Sethe's later decision to kill her daughter must be read within this framework: the act, horrific as it may appear, emerges from her certainty that her child would otherwise face the same cycle of sexual violation. The phallic order of slavery—enforced on ships, plantations, and in memory—drove many enslaved mothers to acts of infanticide, not from cruelty, but from the conviction that death was preferable to a life marked by rape and forced reproduction. This structure of domination is reinforced when Sethe overhears Schoolteacher's instruction: "Put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (p. 193). Here, patriarchal violence assumes an epistemic form, reducing Sethe to a specimen of classification, her humanity erased by pseudo-scientific discourse. Schoolteacher's gaze is disciplinary and violent, rendering her body knowable, exploitable, and violable. Hortense Spillers, in *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, explains how the enslaved Black woman's body was transformed into "flesh"—a dehumanized, hypersexualized object of control. Horvitz (1989) similarly observes that Beloved, as a baby ghost, embodies the silenced histories of African women whose voices were erased by slavery, becoming a haunting presence that links Africa and America (p. 93).

Sethe's response while walking away from her sweet home without looking—signals her realization that this gaze extends beyond her own body to her children. The earlier memory of her stolen milk resurfaces, showing how the system that stripped her of bodily autonomy will inevitably claim her daughter. This cyclical violence is crystallized in Sethe's reflection: "That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that comes to mind… dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore"(p.295). The word "dirty" captures the internalized shame of rape, where defilement becomes not only physical but

psychological, corroding dignity and erasing the capacity for self-love. For Sethe, as for many enslaved women, sexual violation is compounded by cultural myths that cast Black women as inherently vulnerable and undeserving of protection. Within the logic of slavery, the Black woman's body becomes economically functional—a site of both production and reproduction. Sexuality is commodified, transformed into a tool for labor and breeding. Motherhood is weaponized, as enslaved women are reduced to "breeding machines," their milk and wombs appropriated for profit. This commodification was not abstract but brutally enacted: nearly all enslaved women were forced into reproductive labor, their bodies treated as property to generate more slaves for the plantation.

The intergenerational scope of this violence also surfaces in the stories of Sethe's mother and Nan, who recount repeated assaults during the Middle Passage. Nan recalls how both were "taken up many times by the crew" (p. 62)—a euphemism for systematic rape at sea. Here, the womb, intended as a vessel of life, is transformed into a site of enforced breeding and trauma. Morrison's inclusion of these memories emphasizes that Sethe's violation is not singular but part of a transatlantic legacy where the Black female body is perpetually subjected to control, silencing, and commodification. Sethe's mother embodies the way rape defined Black motherhood under slavery. She killed all the children born of repeated assaults by white men, sparing only Sethe, who was conceived by a man she had chosen. This grim history underscores how the womb itself became a site of violation, where reproduction was dictated by violence rather than desire. Before her execution, she reveals the scars branded into her breast—marks of a circle and cross—that signify the ownership of both body and motherhood. The breast, a natural symbol of nourishment, is defiled and claimed by others, collapsing nurture into domination. When Sethe innocently asks for her own mark, her mother strikes her, signaling not agency but the inevitability of inheritance: the daughter, too, will live under the shadow of sexual violation. Wilson (2021) stresses that enslaved mothers feared above all for their daughters, knowing they would be forced into reproductive servitude as "breeders" for their masters (p. 123). This cycle of reproductive violence has also been depicted through Baby Suggs, whose life is entirely shaped by coerced childbearing. She confesses: I had eight, and every one of them had gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all… my first-born. All I remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children, and that is all I remember (p. 8). Her eight children have six different fathers, a testament to rape and dispossession. Even her memories are fragmented, reduced to scraps rather than bonds, because intimacy itself is destroyed under slavery. Denver recalls Baby Suggs saying she avoided being "knocked down" by white men in front of her children, since "it made children crazy to see that" (p. 185). Love, desire, and tenderness were replaced by fear, coercion, and humiliation. Morrison underscores that enslaved Black women rarely experienced sexual relationships as consensual, whether with white men who treated them as property or with Black men warped by the same system. For Baby Suggs, sex is never pleasure but duty under coercion; her body functions as an assembly line for producing capital. Even after emancipation, this legacy of violation persists, eroding intimacy in families and communities. As she reflects: Slaves are not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own… they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owns them. Still, they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down (p. 186). Sethe's own violation by the Schoolteacher's nephews demonstrates how sexual assault was institutionalized to enforce domination. The chokecherry tree on her back is both a scar and a text, inscribing her body with the violence of rape and whipping. When she recalls:

After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's why they came in there for. Held me down and took it…. A schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed, it made a tree. It grows there still (p. 15). Sethe fuses maternal violation with bodily mutilation. Her milk, meant for her child, becomes the object of theft, collapsing motherhood into yet another site of appropriation. Morrison presents sex in *Beloved* as a space haunted by this legacy. At Sweet Home, intimacy is never desire but domination: white men assert "super manly power" over Black women, while Black men, emasculated by slavery, sometimes attempt to reclaim manhood through the same violated body. Paul D's sexual encounter with Sethe reflects this fracture: It was over before they could get their clothes off. Half-dressed

and short of breath, they lay side by side, resentful of one another and the skylight above them. His dreaming of her had been too long ago. Her deprivation had been not having any dreams of her own at all. Now they were sorry and too shy to make talk (p. 20). Here, intimacy collapses under the weight of historical trauma; sex carries the memory of violence rather than the possibility of connection. Beloved herself embodies this haunting. As the ghost of Sethe's murdered child, she represents the generational transmission of trauma—how rape, violation, and fear corrode bonds between mothers, fathers, and children. Paul D, silenced by the iron bit forced into his mouth, and Halle, driven mad by helplessness, embody the male counterpart to this legacy: emasculation, silence, and the breakdown of intimacy. In Morrison's world, rape is not an isolated act but the structural engine of slavery, leaving permanent scars on the female body, memory, and possibility of love.

**Celie's Endurance of Sexual Violence**

Celie's rapist, much like Cholly in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye,* emerges from a racist and sexist order that denies Black men authority in public life. Deprived of power in the wider world, he reclaims it in the private sphere by dominating the most vulnerable body available—that of a Black girl. In *Queering Patriarchy*, Jenkins (2002) explains how patriarchy endures through cycles of domination: men, shaped by the oppression of their fathers or white authority, reproduce the same control within the household. Harpo exemplifies this dynamic. Though emasculated under Mr. ____'s tyranny, he internalizes patriarchal ideals of masculinity, directing his frustrations toward women in an attempt to assert manhood (p. 79). As Reginald Watson notes, the Black female body has been doubly subjected—first to the white phallus and then to the Black phallus—revealing how women are silenced and stripped of agency through overlapping systems of control. Hurston (2006) captures this inheritance in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: "the white man throws down the load and tells the Black man to pick it up. The Black man picks it up because he has no choice but… passes it to the women" (pp. 47–48). Celie lives this metaphor. She bears the burdens of labor and silence, her body exploited and her voice repressed beneath racial and gender hierarchies that position Black women at the lowest rung. Critics such as Edward (2006) remind us that discussions of slavery often overlook how Black men's emasculation fostered cycles of violence (p. 64). Seeking to reclaim power, many men redefined masculinity through control over women, replicating the very structures of domination that had once subjugated them. Tahir (2014) similarly argues that the treatment of women in *The Color Purple* mirrors the logic of white persecutors: in both contexts, women are reduced to objects, legitimizing male supremacy (pp. 11–12). This inheritance of patriarchal culture reshapes the private sphere into yet another site of oppression. For men like Mr. ____ and Harpo, masculinity is measured not in mutual intimacy or respect but in the ability to dominate. In this way, Black men—though themselves wounded by systemic racism—become complicit in sustaining the very structures of power that once dehumanized them, leaving Black women doubly oppressed, denied both autonomy and voice. The redirection of systemic violence toward the female body reflects what Susan Brownmiller identifies as the central function of rape: "to remind women of their subordinate status and keep them in a state of fear." Celie's very first letter introduces readers to Pa, the patriarch who annihilates her selfhood and agency through rape while enforcing silence through threats and manipulation. His command to "shut up and git used to it" (p. 1) signals that her suffering is to be normalized, silenced, and endured—a stark articulation of how patriarchal systems condition women into submission. More insidiously, Pa warns Celie not to speak of the assault because it "would kill your mammy" (p. 1). By weaponizing maternal ties, he frames disclosure as betrayal, positioning Celie as a rival to her own mother. This manipulation turns female relationships into instruments of control, fostering silence through guilt and shame.

As Singh (2021) argues in *Rape vs Patriarchy: A Socialist Analysis*, rape is less about sexual desire than the assertion of dominance:

Rape is recognized as a crime that is typically committed by a male forcing another person to have sexual intercourse against their will… rape is not always the outcome of an intense or obsessive desire for sexual gratification, but mostly a method to display control over women to maintain… power (p. 4).

Celie's rape thus functions as "patriarchal rape," where sexual arousal is rooted in domination rather than desire. Pa reduces her body to a substitute for her mother's, demonstrating how sexual violence enforces patriarchal authority:

He never had a kind word to say to me. Just say you're gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First, he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggled it around. Then he grabbed hold of my titties. Then he pushed his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cried. He started to choke me, saying You better shut up and get used to it (p. 7). This passage starkly illustrates that Pa's assault is not an act of intimacy but of conquest. His words, "You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't," collapse Celie's identity into her mother's, reducing her to an interchangeable body meant to serve male desire. The choking reinforces this erasure, ensuring that pain and silence become naturalized components of her existence. The imperative to "git used to it" transforms rape into a disciplinary tool, embedding patriarchal power into the rhythms of domestic life. In this moment, Walker reveals how sexual violence functions as a political act within the private sphere, not merely satisfying individual lust but sustaining systemic authority. Celie's initiation into adulthood through rape sets the stage for the broader narrative of *The Color Purple*: a world in which Black women's bodies are rendered sites of domination, where silence is demanded, and where survival requires the eventual reclamation of voice and agency. In *Ain't I a Woman?* (1981), Bell Hooks situates the sexual exploitation of Black women within the enduring legacy of slavery, where their bodies were commodified both for labor and for sexual access. She observes:

Racist, sexist socialization… conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and to regard race as the only relevant label of our identification… We were… taught to submit, to accept sexual inferiority and be silent… afraid to acknowledge that sexism could be as oppressive as racism (pp. 1–2).

Hooks' statement underscores how racist and sexist socialization functions on intersecting levels: it trains Black women to foreground racial identity while erasing or minimizing the particular oppression they endure as women. By internalizing this conditioning—accepting sexual inferiority, silencing themselves, and fearing to name sexism as equally destructive as racism—Black women are positioned within a system that ensures patriarchal dominance remains unchallenged. Celie's experience in *The Color Purple* embodies this internalized submission. Raised within a racist and patriarchal order, she accepts suffering and exploitation as her natural condition. The socialization hooks become visible in Celie's silence and endurance; she imagines herself not as an autonomous subject but as an object of survival, likening herself to a tree—bearing pain, rooted in silence, and unable to resist. This metaphor underscores how deeply systemic violence is naturalized: Celie comes to view oppression as inevitable, her suffering as inescapable. Thus, hooks' analysis offers a crucial framework for reading Celie's subjugation not as the product of isolated cruelty but as the outcome of intersecting structures of racism and patriarchy that normalize her dispossession of voice, agency, and selfhood.

**Sethe and Celie: Resilience and Survival Against Sexual Violence**

Sexual violence against Sethe in Toni Morrison's Beloved and Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* functions not merely as personal brutality but as an instrument of patriarchal domination. Both women suffer assaults meant to enforce silence, submission, and erasure. Brownmiller (1975) observes that rape has historically been employed as man's "basic weapon of force against woman, the principal agent of his will and her fear," making it a vehicle of male conquest over female existence (p. 14). She further explains that sexual assault ruptures a woman's emotional, physical, and rational integrity (p. 376). Yet Brownmiller (1975) does not stop at identifying women as victims; she emphasizes that women can and must "fight back" against this structural violence (p. 397). Morrison and Walker echo this possibility: Sethe resists through her radical maternal defiance, refusing to let slavery claim her children, while Celie reclaims her subjectivity through speech, solidarity, and self-assertion. Their trajectories illustrate

Brownmiller's conviction that even in the face of rape as a weapon of domination, women's resistance and survival unsettle the very structures meant to subjugate them. Andrea Dworkin, in Intercourse, extends this critique by arguing that men assert domination over women's bodies through sex, seeking to possess them as "property out of fear of female power and sexuality" (Dworkin, 1987, p. 6). When read alongside Brownmiller (1975), Dworkin's argument underscores that sexual violence and patriarchal control are not only acts of aggression but also strategies of containment. Yet it is precisely within these oppressive frameworks that Sethe and Celie forge acts of resilience and survival. Their resistance demonstrates how survival does not signify passive endurance but rather an active, transformative struggle—one that reclaims bodily autonomy, restores voice, and disrupts both patriarchal and racial hierarchies. Resilience and survival in Beloved take shape through Sethe's radical refusal to remain bound by slavery's violence. Her flight from Sweet Home becomes a defining act of resistance, one that embodies both defiance and maternal protection. Morrison(1987)captures this moment of determination:

And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. No-one. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt (p.163).

This insistence on saying "No" transforms survival into an act of agency, as Sethe reclaims ownership of her body and her children from the system that sought to reduce them to property. In Black Feminist Thought, Collins (2000) emphasizes that oppression and resistance operate on interlocking levels—the personal, the communal, and the systemic. While oppression penetrates most deeply at the personal level, it is also there that resistance first takes root (pp. 544–545). Sethe embodies this dynamic: her radical maternal love becomes both the foundation of her defiance and the source of her resilience. Recognizing that, under the Schoolteacher's command, she had no control over her own life or that of her children, she risked everything to escape and secure their safety. Even when "death didn't seem such a bad idea, all in all" (Morrison, 1987, p. 37), the unbearable thought of her children suffering without her propelled her to the desperate act of killing her daughter. Yet this uncompromising and "thick" love, as Paul D later observes, is at once Sethe's greatest strength and her heaviest burden. This here, Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped, and she began… 'Your love is too thick,' he said (p. 193). Sethe's act of infanticide thus emerges as both the darkest and most radical form of maternal protection—an expression of resilience that unsettles conventional notions of survival. It exposes a complex form of resistance under slavery, where love itself was distorted by systemic dehumanization, compelling a mother to transform even the most natural bond of affection into a harrowing act of defiance. As Miller (2007) explains, this act can be understood through the logic of autoimmunity, since in killing her daughter, Sethe sacrifices what she most cherishes to protect herself from an even greater violence, effectively destroying the best part of herself to ensure her safety (p. 31). Sethe's resilience is not sustained by maternal defiance alone; it is equally nurtured through intergenerational bonds of women's solidarity. Brownmiller (1975) asserts that women, when united, can resist the structures designed to oppress them. Similarly, Rowbotham (2014) emphasizes that women must fight together if they wish to bring about meaningful change. She argues:

An individual woman who appears as the spokeswoman for the freedom of all women is a pathetic and isolated creature. She is inevitably either crushed or contained as a sexual performer. Also, she presents no threat… It is only when women start to organize in large numbers that we become a political force (p. 3). This idea is embodied in Morrison's Beloved, where Denver, Beloved, and Sethe share "intimate moments of domesticity" by creating a storytelling space in which Sethe recounts her past. Papa (2010) describes this act of storytelling as a "mother-love alignment," where maternal connection and memory themselves become acts of resistance (p. 88). In these exchanges, Sethe recalls "her own mother, whom she barely remembers" ( p. 88), while Denver invokes the legacy of her grandmother, Baby Suggs. As the family's elder, Baby Suggs embodies balance, wisdom, and healing, offering strength that extends beyond her own life. Though enslaved for much of her existence until freed by Halle, she became a vessel of communal knowledge, sharing her insights with others. Barber (2006) describes this process as memories

"embedded in the memory" of following generations, allowing Denver to inherit—consciously or unconsciously—the collective suffering and resilience of the women before her (p. 353). Pain inflicted on women's bodies is thus transformed into endurance, circulating across generations and enabling Denver to channel strength back into Sethe's survival. Morrison, therefore, presents resilience not as an isolated act but as a communal force where trauma, reworked through solidarity, becomes shared strength. Brownmiller (1975) similarly emphasizes the importance of collective women's resistance, highlighting the "organization of women" and their "combative slogans" of "Stop rape, disarm rapists, smash sexism," as examples of women seizing the offensive (p. 397). This communal force—the solidarity and guidance among women—is most vividly revealed when Denver, confronted with her family's collapse, hears the guiding voice of Baby Suggs urging her forward. She recalls: 'But you said there was no defense.' 'There ain't.' 'Then what do I do?' 'Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on'" (p. 244). Reflecting on the scars and sufferings of Baby Suggs and Sethe—their broken hip, battered feet, and scarred back—Denver understands that trauma and survival are inseparable. Rather than paralyzing her, this awareness becomes a source of courage. Strengthened by her grandmother's wisdom, Denver steps beyond isolation and seeks help, an act that ultimately ensures both her mother's survival and her own. Her empowerment is not an individual triumph but the continuation of resilience inherited from Baby Suggs and Sethe, demonstrating how women's solidarity—across bodies, memories, and generations—transforms suffering into collective survival. Denver's turn to the community, inspired by Baby Suggs's perseverance, reveals that solidarity itself becomes a pathway out of entombment in the past and toward the possibilities of the future. The figure of Baby Suggs, therefore, becomes the one who provides Denver with what Brownmiller calls the "systematic training of self-defense" (p. 403), enabling her to overcome her fears of living. In turn, Denver gives renewed strength to Sethe, helping her negotiate her "rape scars" and reflect on Paul D's words: "'You your best thing, Sethe. You are.' To which she replies: 'Me? Me?'" (p. 243). This vision of collective resilience and survival can also be traced in the character of Celie in Alice Walker's The Color Purple. Just as Sethe's endurance in Toni Morrison's Beloved is sustained by the ancestral strength of Baby Suggs and the unwavering support of Denver, Celie's transformation from silence to selfhood depends on her affective bonds with Shug Avery and Sofia, who enable her to resist patriarchal domination and survive with dignity. As Brownmiller (1975) suggests, women's capacity to resist emerges not from isolated struggle but from a recognition of shared female strength and solidarity (404). Sofia, Albert's wife, plays a crucial role in helping Celie rebuild herself with fortitude. She is portrayed as one of the strongest female characters in the novel—aware of her rights and determined to claim them even against familial opposition. Sofia performs multiple roles—housework, childrearing, and farm labor—yet her husband, Albert, perceives her strong-willed personality as a threat to absolute male authority. In a moment of jealousy and internalized oppression, Celie instructs Albert, "Beat her. I say" (Walker, 1982, p. 36), demonstrating her complicity in patriarchal violence. Sofia's defiance, however, extends beyond the domestic sphere. When she refuses Miss Millie's request to work as her maid, Sofia confronts not only gendered expectations but also the racial and class hierarchies entrenched in the Southern social order:

The mayor looks at Sofia, pushes his wife out of the way. Stick out his chest. Girl, what you say to Miss Millie? Sofia says I say, Hell no… Sofia knocks the man down. The police come; start slinging the children of the mayor, bang, they head together. Sofia really starts to fight. They drag her to the ground (p. 89).

Sofia's rebellious personality is eventually subdued and humiliated through intersecting structures of class, race, and gender oppression. Her plight illustrates how Black women's suffering cannot be addressed through superficial or idealized resolutions of feminism but requires authentic solidarity from within their marginalized communities. Sofia and Celie's relationship thus becomes mutually transformative: Celie learns from Sofia the courage to reclaim her rights, while Sofia, despite her subjugation, embodies the resilience of a woman who refuses to be annihilated by dominant power structures. As Sofia memorably declares, "All my life I had to fight" (p. 85). Equally significant is Celie's relationship with Shug Avery, which functions as another powerful manifestation of sisterhood and solidarity. Shug helps Celie transcend what Abbandonato (1991) terms "the abused Celie living with

linguistic collapse" (p. 1106). A strong, independent Black woman, Shug challenges patriarchal power structures through her music and her unapologetic relationships with men. When Shug meets Celie, she is struck by Celie's latent beauty and creativity, becoming a crucial source of emotional and spiritual empowerment. As Shug declares, "You are a woman now, I can see" (p. 57). Through song, most notably "Miss Celie's Song," Shug creates a space for Celie's reemergence from silence, singing her existence into visibility. In line with Brownmiller's (1975) claim that women's voices themselves constitute acts of resistance, Shug's musical affirmations—"Sister, you're a woman and I am" (p. 203)—redefine Celie's subjectivity beyond patriarchal erasure. Shug also reorients Celie's relationship with her body. For years, Celie's body had been reduced to an object of sexual violence, leaving her to perceive it as devoid of worth, a mere "tree" stripped of desire. Shug disrupts this narrative by urging Celie to rediscover her erotic selfhood: "Here, take this mirror and go look at yourself down there" (p. 74). This recognition of bodily pleasure, epitomized by what Celie calls "the lil button that gits real hot when you do know what with somebody" (p. 74), marks a turning point in her reclamation of self. Byerman (1985) identifies this acknowledgment of genital beauty as a pivotal factor in Celie's transformation (p. 32), while Haste (1994) underscores that granting authenticity to women's subjective experiences allows them to see themselves—and compels men to see them—differently (p. 204). Beyond bodily reclamation, Shug encourages Celie to channel her creativity into sewing, enabling her to discover economic independence and artistic expression. This empowerment culminates in Celie's defiant confrontation with Mr. __, where she finally verbalizes the words that had been suppressed for so long. Her assertion of agency signals the breaking of silence and the reconstitution of identity. Nnaemeka (1997) states that "women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity, and in the process reinvent themselves" (p. 19). This sense of solidarity often compels women to support one another, creating spaces of resilience and empowerment. By the end of her journey, Celie embodies both resistance and resilience. She resists systemic violence through acts of defiance, bodily reclamation, and the rejection of patriarchal authority; she demonstrates resilience through the reconstruction of her identity via creativity, solidarity, and love. Her transformation exemplifies hooks' (1989) insistence that reclaiming voice is a radical act of survival and self-definition for Black women(p.3). Walker positions Celie not merely as an individual survivor but as a figure of feminist possibility, one who illustrates how silence can be transformed into speech, trauma into creativity, and subjugation into liberation. In affirming Celie's journey, *The Color Purple* envisions resilience not as passive endurance but as generative power—a power that reimagines female subjectivity and offers both a personal and political model of freedom.

**Dhanalakshmi and Lekha (2014) observe:**
Dramatizing the capacity for growth and redemption that emerges through self-expression and female bonding, Walker creates several characters who pursue their own unique paths toward personal fulfillment and, in doing so, guide Celie to discover and honor her own. Thus, she eventually moves from a state of shame and silence to one of pride and full possession of her voice (p. 55). When read together, the trajectories of Sethe in Beloved and Celie in The Color Purple illuminate a shared vision of feminist endurance and transformation. As Brownmiller (1975) asserts, "Fighting back. On a multidisciplinary level, that is the activity we must engage in, together, if we women are to redress the imbalance and rid ourselves and men of the ideology of rape" (p. 404). Sethe, through her radical maternal protection and ancestral grounding, and Celie, through her reclamation of voice, body, and creativity, both chart this pathway where silence is reconstituted into speech and women's solidarity into acts of survival. Walker and Morrison alike refuse to reduce Black women to mere victims of violence; instead, they portray them as subjects who forge strength through community, memory, and solidarity. In affirming these journeys, both novels envision resilience not as passive endurance but as a generative power that redefines female subjectivity and offers a collective model of resistance, survival, and liberation.

## Conclusion

Susan Brownmiller's groundbreaking theory of rape, articulated in her seminal work Against Our Will, positions rape as a deeply political act—a calculated strategy through which men assert dominance and uphold patriarchal control. This perspective illuminates the harrowing instances of sexual violence depicted in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. In *Beloved*, the brutal assault on Sethe's body and the theft of her breast milk, leaving the "chokecherry tree" scars long after the incident, serves as a visceral illustration of how the institution of slavery weaponized rape. It systematically erased maternal identity and reduced women to mere vessels of exploitation. The imagery is striking: Sethe's very sustenance is stripped away, underscoring the profound depths of her dehumanization. Similarly, in *The Color Purple,* Celie's repeated experiences of assault expose the insidious normalization of female violation within a patriarchal framework. Her journey through trauma reveals how such abuse becomes entrenched in societal structures, conditioning women to endure silence and submission. Both Morrison and Walker vividly demonstrate the relevance of Brownmiller's theory: rape transcends the boundaries of a private crime of passion, functioning instead as a systemic tool of subjugation that disciplines women into silence. Yet, through their richly crafted characters, both authors also reveal fractures in this oppressive system. Sethe and Celie's efforts to voice their traumas and reclaim agency highlight essential forms of resistance against forces that seek to silence them. These narratives not only affirm Brownmiller's insights but also challenge readers to confront rape as structural violence, while recognizing the possibilities of survival and resilience in the face of such oppression.

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