

**GENDER, CLASS, AND IDENTITY IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*
AND SUZAN-LORI PARKS' *IN THE BLOOD***

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ABSTRACT: *The genesis of suffering of Afro-American women has multilayered factors, i.e., race, class, gender, etc. But the struggle of these women is still underrepresented. The present paper looks at the representation of Afro-American women in the fictions of two Afro-American women writers – Alice Walker and Suzan-Lori Parks – to investigate the gender, class, and race dynamics in their works. Their selected works were analyzed from a comparative perspective with a view to highlight the plight of Afro-American women, and to look for possible convergence in the emancipated portrayal of their juxtaposed characters. The thematic stress and characterization of the protagonists in the selected works suggests that oppression of black women can be challenged only if they realize their own strength, in the bonds of sisterhood, for instance, or in the refusal to submission to oppressive conditions. Superficially, the writers have come up with juxtaposed images of black women – Alice Walker's Celie victimized because of her poverty, race and gender, while Suzan-Lori Parks' Hester allowing herself to be exploited by men, resorting to filicide in the end. But, at a deeper level both the writers chide black woman for their lack of strength to put a bold face against their oppressors.*

KEYWORDS: Afro-American Women's Oppression, Gender, Class, Race, Filicide

INTRODUCTION

The struggle of black women for agency and self-expression is generally underrepresented, not only in the socio-political life of the land they inhabit (for instance, Afro-American women) but also in creative and critical literature, though there are a few notable studies on the subject, such as Ruth El. Saffar (1985), Patricia, H. A. (1985), Thyreen (1999), Jeannie Rena Fraden (2007), Carol Schafer (2008), Jennifer Larson (2008), Ashraf Hadia (2012), and K. Priya (2014), but still this area of research needs more work. The present research is an outcome of this concern, and with this objective in view, I have selected the fictional works of two contemporary black American women writers – Alice Walker [1944-] and Suzan-Lori Parks [1963-] – whose attempts to give voice to the otherwise muted black women are commendable. Although the chosen works have few elements in common as one is a novel and the other is a play, and present the images of their black women protagonists seemingly contradictory to each other, yet the selection involves a careful scrutiny of a few commonalities as well. The common elements in the two works are the contributing factors behind black women's oppression in America, i.e., their race, class, and gender. The [female] protagonists face victimization in both the works since they are black, poor, and women. The other common thread, which forms the background for the selection of the two juxtaposed works for a single study, and which also sustains my primary argument in this paper, is that in both the works the writers strongly advocate for the emancipation of black women on their own terms, suggesting that they should not beg for any sympathy from the capitalist-/ white-/ male-dominated society around them

which has mercilessly exploited them enough for centuries. My argument is that as a remedy, Alice Walker suggests forging strong bonds of sisterhood, even resorting to anti-establishment lesbianism, among black women since they understand each other perfectly well, and united they can stand to any oppression, while Suzan-Lori Parks obliquely, through the metaphor of filicide, suggests a total rejection of the patriarchal structure which hegeminizingly allows framing of its victims for the sins inherent in the structure.

The present research hinges upon a comparative outlook, as well as an urge to examine the works of two writers from similar background, creating characters facing similar life-conditions but ending up with different predicaments. I approach the issue with questions like, whether the meanings implied in their literary writings help deliver the same image of Afro-American women or they differ in their representations. In doing so, the chosen texts are analysed from a dual perspective, one that takes into consideration the particular circumstances of each female character and the aspects that influence their identities, such as gender, race, social status, etc., and a second perspective that pinpoints the similarities and differences between seemingly similar constructed central female characters.

DISCUSSION

Alice Walker raises issues in the lives of Afro-Americans, especially black women, in her fictional works, such as *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982), and *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989). She has stressed upon the purpose of her works in an interview with John O'Brien (1994): "I am preoccupied with spiritual survival, the survival of whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women" (p. 75). Black women have to cut through both racial and patriarchal domination as they are marginalized by both their colour and sex. Such marginalization may prove to be traumatic to some people, as Jessica Lewis (2017) opines that "identity experiences and traumatic experiences are intricately related to the psychology of trauma" (p. 24). They are appreciated neither by men in their own community nor the white men, who want them to be sexually and spiritually dead, thus completely mute, as King-Kok Cheung (1988) calls them "thrice muted on account of sexism, racism and a 'tonguelessness' that results from prohibitions or language barriers" (p. 163). These women, victimized in one or the other way, empathize with each other as they stand on the same boat.

A case in point is Alice Walker's protagonist Celie, in *The Color Purple* [henceforth TCP], although whose image reminds one of the oppression of women as a universal phenomenon regardless of culture, caste and creed, yet her struggle highlights the plight of black women in particular. Her personality evolves through the simple story of 'one person's life' (Walker 2005, p. 177). The story is the transformation of fourteen years old Celie, a transformation possible only with the help of inspiring and influential female characters who establish a special bond with her. She is transformed from an uneducated, submissive and dependent girl into a confident, economically independent complete woman. The novel begins with Celie deprived of respect, love, honour and home. As a woman, she is always identified as a lower sex and controlled by men. She is harassed physically and sexually, first by Alphonso, her step-father whom she calls Pa, who repeatedly rapes, abuses, beats and degrades her, and later by her abusive husband who she is forced to marry against her will. Her rape by Pa produces a son, Adam and a daughter, Olivia. Pa takes them away after their birth, reminiscent of African

people selling off children during the heydays of slavery. She cannot open her mouth to the questions of their fatherhood, “She ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God’s Finally she ast Where it is? I say God took it” (TCP, 3).

Celie's first bond of sisterhood is established with Nettie, her younger sister. Celie is always disapproved by her father, but Nettie is ‘the gifted one.’ Nettie is allowed to continue her education while Celie is forced to leave school, though “... all day she read, she study, she practice her handwriting and try to git us to think” (TCP, 17). But the two sisters love each other and care for each other. Nettie tries to convince her father; she even asks her teacher to talk to their father, but all in vain. Celie tries to protect her sister Nettie from the abuse of Pa and the miserable life that she herself failed to escape. After Celie's marriage to Mr._, Nettie runs away from her step-father and goes to live with Celie. She encourages Celie to fight for her rights in life, teaches her whenever she gets a chance, not to let her get exploited by others.

Celie's miseries are compounded when Alphonso makes Celie marry a man, the reader knows by the name Mr._. These men treat her as if they were in a slave market to sell and buy her. Pa calls her as Mr._ wants another look at her. (TCP, 10-11). Mr._ agrees to marry Celie when Pa tells him that she works like a man. Her submissiveness, passivity and docility reflect in her belief that she is worthless and cannot be loved by anyone. She doubts her own humanity when her husband Mr._ also treats her only as a sex slave and beats her:

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don’t never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how I know trees fear man” (TCP, 23).

She loses the sense of self-identity, owns nothing, and has no sense of belonging in this world, as she feels nothing more than a sperm repository. Mr._ rapes her as “he goes to the toilet on [her]” (TCP, 80). His forced sexual affair is reminiscent of the feeling of slave-masters' ownership of others' body. He doesn't even allow her to wear red or purple dresses—the colours that symbolize happiness; she has to wear brown or navy blue colours, which suggest oppression and depression. He takes Shug Avery, his long-time mistress, home when she is unwell and Celie has to look after her. Celie compares her ugliness with the beauty of Shug Avery who is a jazz and blues singer, and thinks “she is like a queen to me” (TCP, 22). Shug is wild, confident, sexy, glamorous, independent and magnetic. She is initially rude to Celie but later the two women become friends. She teaches Celie the lesson and reason to fight and excites her fancy to determine to come out of her ‘tree.’

Celie's next bond of sisterhood is established with Sofia, Harpo's wife. Sofia is a strong and bulky girl but brave and self-confident. Celie first meets her when she is eight or nine months pregnant but feeling neither shy nor guilty about it. She came to ask for the permission of Mr._ to marry his son. Mr._ disapproves it. Harpo also doesn't defend her. Sofia laughs at him ironically, “Harpo, you stay here. When you free, me and the baby be waiting” (TCP, 32). Celie is surprised at Sofia's confidence and strength. She learns courage from Sofia and gets a sense of understanding of herself. She learns that all men want a dog for a wife (TCP, 64), that a girl is not safe in a family of men, so she has to fight for herself and her rights, that Sofia will even kill Harpo before she let him beat her (TCP, 39). Sofia possesses a high self-respect and refuses to work for the mayor's wife (TCP, 86). The mayor slaps her but she blows a knock at him. The police beat her black and blue, “the color of a eggplant” (TCP, 87).

Celie establishes a close bond with Shug Avery. They talk of her sex life with Mr._, which is nothing but a passive fulfilment of his animal instincts as to him Celie doesn't exist as a woman, "... never ask me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (TCP, 80). Celie's relationship with Shug Avery grows more intimate and enhances Celie's awareness of self and enables her to have better faith in herself. It is Shug Avery who helps Celie find Nettie's letters in the chest of Mr._ who has hidden them all these years. The letters signify as the only source of Celie's strength and inspiration to live and tolerate all her pains and sufferings. She finally finds out that her sister Nettie is alive, does well with the missionaries and is going to return to her sister soon. Celie's children by Pa, Adam and Olivia, were adopted by Samuel and Corrine, the Christian couple who by chance hired Nettie. Corrine is the only black woman of education, love, health, peace and happiness in the novel. She, along with her husband, works as a missionary. Nettie writes:

There are colored people in the world who want us to know! Want us to grow and see the light! They are not all mean like Pa and Albert, or beaten down like ma was. Corrine and Samuel have a wonderful marriage. Their only sorrow in the beginning was that they could not have children. And then, they say, 'God' has sent them Olivia and Adam. (TCP, 124)

Walker raises yet another social issue plaguing the black community – gender disparity. For instance, Tashi, a friend of Adam and Olivia, belongs to the Olinka tribe who do not treat women equal to men; girls are not allowed to attend school; to them a girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something, i.e., "the mother of his children" (TCP, 162). The Olinka people perform rituals, such as female circumcision and facial scarring to distinguish them from other cultures and give them a sense of identity. Like other women of her tribe, Tashi has to go for these ritual practices. So, here too it is the woman who struggles, as Ray (2005) suggests, "to reconcile the two warring cultural consciousnesses" (p. 63).

A significant development in the novel is treatment of lesbianism as an offshoot of close bonding between women, especially as they find it a liberating force helping them find their own self. To Walker's characters it's essential to cross this social taboo. Celie almost loses her control and subconsciously desires for Shug's body when for the first time she bathes a sick Shug. "First time I got full sight of Shug Avery long black body with its black plum nipples, look like her mouth, thought I had turned into a man" (TCP, 49). Here, Celie has taken her first step towards a new world woman and completes her journey with the help of Sofia and Shug who have gained independence and self-sufficiency long before Celie. Celie is totally unaware of her own body, like her clitoris, so, she is confused about the hot pulsating waves Shug's touch sends into her body. Shug teaches Celie to know her own body and to appreciate her reproductive organs, a lesson in "self-reclamation" as Pifer and Slusser (2016) call it as "she sees her own genitals for the first time" (p. 48).

Shug dedicates a song to Celie and it gives her an identity and the feeling of self-recognition. She develops courage to express her feelings. She realizes she must move towards self-acceptance and self-definition, and culminates in her announcement to leave Mr._, "You a low down dirty dog... Time for me to get away from you, and enter into Creation. And your dead body'd be just the welcome mat I need" (TCP, 185). She attains financial independence through the love and support of Shug who takes her to Memphis where she starts sewing clothes. Shug makes Celie realize her talent in stitching and in course of time she establishes her stitching company called 'Folkspants, Unlimited.' This way she "frees herself from her husband's repressive control" (Watkins, 1982). Like a newly married couple, Celie and Shug start their

life in their new house in Tennessee. Unlike in the house of Mr. _, Celie has the choice to decorate her room with purple. Shug picks up an old horse-shoe and utters, “us each other’s people’s now” (TCP, 189), which symbolizes their marriage. When Celie once leaves Memphis to visit Sofia and Harpo, she feels amazed by herself—this new black woman, she “feel[s] different. Look[s] different” (TCP, 198). Even Mr. _, who is sitting on his porch, does not recognize this new Celie. She is a new woman whom she can be proud of, having respect, love, honor and her own home, as she declares, “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here” (TCP, 214). Celie’s rebirth teaches her to express her sexual and psychological freedom.

Now Celie addresses her letters to her sister, not to just God, the practice she starts after finding belief in her inner strength. This 'self-transformation' is attained through finding one's own capabilities, as note Linda Tate (1996) that the key to her transformation lies "in the ability to take control over defining oneself, naming oneself" (p. 131). In her letter to Nettie from Memphis, Celie writes “I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children” (TCP, 220), and it is the first time Celie signs her letter. Later, when Shug confesses her love for a nineteen year old boy in Germaine, Celie does not have any objection to it and lets her leave; she sacrifices everything for her love. Celie has learnt the lesson to respect other's freedom and independence, especially of Shug to whom she mostly owes her transformation. Celie knows that “Shug got a right to live too. She got a right to look over the world in whatever company she choose. Just cause I love her don’t take away none of her rights” (TCP, 236). Shug can have her normal man-woman relationship.

Celie is finally united with her long-lost sister and children as well as her love Shug Avery. She feels her importance as a woman that she can also be loved; she can see a new world outside of the property of Mr. _ waiting for her. She eventually discovers the power of her spirit that makes her free from the past by gaining her voice against patriarchy. The novel ends showing Celie forgiving Albert and becoming friends with him and Celie reuniting with her family. Celie is transformed into an emotionally and sexually active new woman, emancipated physically and spiritually who acquires her equality and individuality. Celie’s transformation from a neglected creature into the new woman becomes a saga of human life that makes Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* much more than an ordinary feminist novel. The bond of sisterhood unites the suffering black women characters in the novel to drive strength from each other, and it empowers them, as notes Jing (2012), "to shake off resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, and self-denial imposed by men" (2012, p. 203).

Alice Walker has presented, to a large extent, an ideal transformation of a black female's life from darkness to light, from misery to happiness, but idealism apart, one may wonder, if this really happens in the real life conditions. How about those who don’t get a chance to forge strong bonds with helping hands like Celie did? This picture of the situation on the other extreme can be apprehended through the life of Hester La Negrta in Suzan-Lori Parks’ play *In the Blood* (2001). The sense of victory witnessed in *The Color Purple* stands in stark contrast to the feeling of utter defeat observed in *In The Blood*.

In The Blood (1999) is known collectively with another play entitled *Fucking A* (2000) as *The Red Letter Plays* - a retelling of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). *In The Blood* (henceforth ITB) is a modern-day adaptation of the central character in the novel, Hester Prynne, the source of inspiration for the main character in Parks’ play. The dramatist retells the novel by revising specific concepts discussed in the canonical text such as adultery, social ostracism and single-parenting. Like Hawthorne’s Hester, Parks’ Hester is branded [as a 'slut']

for her sexual transgressions. In fact, Parks “contrives a black Hester to satirize contemporary American mainstream culture” in the same way as Hawthorne uses “a white female Hester Prynne to critique the hypocrisy of 19th century puritanical society, which was the mainstream at that time” (Parks 2008, pp. 129-130). The difference is that Parks’ Hester is not working against the confinement of the Puritan society of Hawthorne but instead is facing all the difficulties and restrictions as a single black woman within a modern society.

Suzan-Lori Parks shares with Alice Walker the brilliance of tackling the struggle of black women not as an individual racial issue but rather as a universal theme. Parks resists the idea of dealing with her works from that limited perspective which separates the African American writers from their White counterparts as she says,

It’s insulting, when people say my plays are about what it’s about to be black—as if that’s all we think about, as if our life is about that. My life is not about race. It’s about being alive. [. . .] Why does everyone think that white artists make art and black artists make statements? (Solomon 1990, p. 73)

If we look at Walker's and Parks' protagonists through a comparative lens, Just like Celie, Hester La Negrita is an illiterate black mother whose status has relegated her to the margins of her own society. The two characters are oppressed thrice; as women, black and poor. Hester is a homeless social outcast, and like Celie, she is brutally victimized verbally, physically, and socially by all the men she meets and the social system under which she lives. Hester, like Celie who gave birth to two illegitimate kids, finds herself responsible for raising five children, each from a different father; Jabber (13, boy), Bully (12, girl), Trouble (10, boy), Beauty (7, girl) and Baby (2, boy). But unlike Celie whose children are taken away from her by Pa and who never meets them until they are grownups, Hester is a single mom bearing solely all the responsibility of raising them. She works insistently to establish a new life for herself and for her homeless children. Unfortunately, her mission to support this big family seems impossible with no help from her ex-lovers, the fathers of her kids.

Similar to Celie who is raped by her step father, Hester is sexually exploited by all the men around her. The Doctor, for instance, who is supposed to have mercy on her, advises her to be spayed. In his opinion, it is the only way to control her birth rate though Hester believes spaying is like taking away her womanhood, motherhood and even her humanity. The Doctor takes advantage of her and rapes her viciously, thus adding to her piles of oppression. Mistakenly, Hester thinks that she can gain love and support if she gets into a relation with someone in power. The priest, REVEREND D., who represents the church, proves her wrong. He gets into a sexual relationship with her which results in having her youngest kid “Baby.” The father of the child deals with her only as an object of his pleasure and never tries to take responsibility for his actions. He never supports her, neither emotionally nor financially, and eventually, Hester’s sense of humiliation intensifies. In a shocking confrontation, REVEREND D., betrays her as did all the men she has previously encountered. She takes the child to him to make him own the child, and in a comic fashion repeats every word the priest tells her to say to the supposed father of the child, but he is unmoved. Her repetition of the priest’s exact words sheds light on her astonishment at the one who is supposed to be the most faithful of all the men she knows. It is dramatic irony as well as a shock to the audience since they know that REVEREND D. is the father of Baby while he pretends ignorance. Parks' oblique comment on the hypocrisy of religious institutions where priests give breaching speeches on helping the poor while themselves do nothing to people of their own flesh and blood is significant. When Hester begs him to give her some money for their child, he, being in a position of power, threatens her,

calling her a slut: "Dont ever come back here again! Ever! Yll never get nothing from me! Common Slut. Tell on me! Go on! Tell the world! I'll crush you underfoot" (ITB, 47).

Cowardly, both REVEREND D. and the Doctor use Hester to fulfil their animal desires, and unlike Celie who constantly complains to God, Hester, with courage and dignity, goes on in her life without the slightest complaint. The only man showing willingness to help her is Chilli, the father of her eldest son. He proposes to marry Hester deeply regretting his abandonment of her in the past, but when he finds out that she has four other children, he calls off the marriage and leaves.

The prologue in the play, in a Greek way where the actors perform like a chorus, excludes her from the beginning. A social outcast, the chorus describes Hester as such mocking her illiteracy, a woman who "CANT READ CANT WRITE." They all refer to her as a "SLUT," "HUSSY" and a "BURDEN TO SOCIETY," Her children are nothing but "BASTARDS," though she calls them "treasures" (ITB, 5). Obviously, Hester is at war with the society. She is punished for being "less-than-civilized by the society in which she lives," remarks Carol Schafer (2008, p. 189). She carries the seed of rage implanted inside her long ago and a glance of the word "SLUT" scribbled on the wall under the bridge where she lives makes her seethe with rage since it is emblematic of "public branding and abasement" as Harry Elam asserts (p. 119). Despite being illiterate, she is aware of the insult the word carries:

HESTER: We know who writ it up there. It was them bad boys writing on my home. And in my practice place. Do they write on they own homes? I don't think so. They come under the bridge and write things they don't write nowhere else. A mean ugly word, I'll bet. A word to hurt our feelings. And because we aint lucky we gotta live with it. 5 children I got. 5 treasures. 5 joys. But we aint got our leg up, just yet. So we gotta live with mean words and hurt feelings. (ITB, 5)

The word scribbled on the wall from the beginning of the play, and all through the scenes, works as a reminder to constantly evaluate Hester, who sees it all day long, and it piles up her feelings of resentment and rage. Eventually, the growing anger, created by the society, contributes with other forms of oppression to the final bloody action.

Poverty is, indeed, the real enemy in the play. Hester says sadly: "the world'll take care of the women and children," and "All I need is a leg up. I get my leg up I'll be ok" (ITB, 70). Definitely, she is mistaken for in the contemporary capitalist America, no one helps the poor. On many occasions in the play, Hester refers to stomach pains she feels out of starving. For nights, the only dinner she can provide her children with is soup, but one has to appreciate her imaginativeness as says Gies (2004) that "she helps the children enjoy the meagre soup that she feeds them for dinner by telling them that it has everything they love in it" (p. 83). With literally nothing in her pockets, she is presented as the self-sacrificing devoted mother whose power comes only from within.

In *The Color Purple*, women's exploitation comes only from the males, whereas Parks in her play presents a different image where African American women display no sympathy for each other. The Welfare lady is a good example for this case. She is a rigid middle-class African American social worker who offers Hester a sewing job without even teaching her how to sew, blaming her all the time not only for her poverty but also for having five illegitimate children:

WELFARE: You wont get something for nothing.

HESTER: I been good.

WELFARE: 5 bastards is not good. 5 bastards is bad.

HESTER: Don't make me hurt you!

(HESTER raises her club to strike WELFARE)

WELFARE: You hurt me and, kids or no kids, I'll have you locked up. We'll take yr kids away and yll never see them again. (ITB, 59-60)

Obviously, Hester is not only victimized by the whites in her society but also by the blacks, females in particular. The Welfare lady even uses Hester for physical pleasure when she shamelessly asks her to engage in a sexual act with herself and her husband. Courageously enough, Hester, heroically admits that to beget five illegitimate children is her own fault, not of the society. But it leads to her downfall like that of a tragic hero, as notes Carol Schafer (2008), that her act not to name and blame her oppressors "allows us to perceive her as a tragic hero with a tragic flaw who brings about her own downfall" (p. 192). She continues to be a devoted mother doing all she can to support them without outside help.

The lone battle of Hester is heightened in contrast to Celie's struggle (TCP) as Celie can resort to Nettie, Shug, and Sophia for self-empowerment. The only companion Hester trusts is a poor white lady Amiga Gringa, but also she leaves no chance to exploit Hester. 'Amiga' in Spanish means friend, while 'Gringa' in Latin American contexts refers to 'foreign white women' which is historically held in negative connotation. Amiga is, likewise, a friend and a foreigner to Hester. Her race gives Amiga a better advantage and she is aware of it. Despite the fact that both women are poor, Amiga considers herself above working in a sewing factory. Furthermore, Parks, in fact, creates this character as both a victim and a convict. Amiga claims more than once that she wants to help Hester but because she cannot help herself, she steals Hester's food. Amiga takes the fabric given to Hester by the Welfare lady to sell in the open market and steals from her by giving her pennies and keeping the rest for herself. What is worse is that Amiga exploits Hester sexually too. She admits that their sexual encounters result always in rape, and when they got raped, she puts the blame on the society: "I let her ride my knees...one day some of the guys took advantage. Ah, what do you expect in a society based on Capitalism" (ITB, 72). But, the problem is that Hester loves Amiga even knowing she is a cheat since Hester needs her to feel surrounded by someone, to fill her empty world. So, in a sense, Hester is complicit in her own oppression as remarks Harry Elam (2002) that Hester's tale "offers a poignant, contradictory conjunction of suffering and survival, institutional neglect, and individual abuse" (p. 117).

Walker and Parks both highlight the significant role of gender in power relations in their works. While Walker's protagonist, Celie, stands up to challenge her oppressors, men, Hester is found in abject submission to men. And it is interesting to note that the same Hester Challenges women if they are hostile to her. She threatens the Welfare lady, "Dont make me hurt you!" when she calls her children "5 bastards" (ITB, 58), and in the same scene, she calls the Welfare lady a 'Bitch' (ITB, 62). In another incident, when Amiga says she wants to sell the fabric given to her by the Welfare lady, Hester displays the same power: "Cheat me and I'll kill you" (ITB, 71). The dynamics of power is remarkably dissimilar considering Hester's engagement with the men in the play. With both Chilli and REVEREND D., Hester is submissive, as the weak

party. "I been good," Hester says softly to REVEREND D., followed by "I haven't bothered you" (ITB, 47). Apparently, she is almost apologetic for speaking with him about their son.

Hester's frustration reaches its climax when her eldest son, Jabber, reminds her of the word written by the boys on the wall telling her that he was lying about not being able to read it. As he looked at her in the eye and said the word "SLUT," Hester's rage is maximized. In a tragic tableau, the loving mother suddenly becomes a murderer. Upon hearing that word from her own flesh and blood, Hester is so infuriated that in a violent fit of anger she beats him to death using the police club she keeps around. She keeps the club for self-defence, and the audience recognizes this fact since Hester has been abused, physically for a long time and verbally quite often. But, the first time the repressed volcano erupts only swallows her own 'treasure' as she is unable to tolerate Jabber's utterance of the word, which, in the words of Verna Foster (2007), becomes "simply the last in a series of abuses inflicted on Hester throughout her life and over the course of the play" (p. 79).

JABBER: Wanna know what it said? Wanna know what the word said?

HESTER: What?

JABBER: "Slut."

HESTER: I said I dont wanna hear that word. How slow are you? Slomo.

JABBER: Slut.

HESTER: You need to close yr mouth, Jabber.

JABBER: I know what it means. Slut.

HESTER: (Shut up.)

JABBER: Slut.

HESTER: (I said shut up, now.)

JABBER: I know what it means.

HESTER: (And I said shut up! Shut up.)

JABBER: Slut. Sorry.

(The word just popped out, a child's joke. He covers his mouth, sheepishly. They look at each other. . . HESTER quickly raises her club and hits him once. Brutally. He cries out and falls down dead. [. . .] HESTER beats Jabber's body again and again and again [. . .] (ITB, 107)

Hester, it appears, was tired of conforming to, as Verna Foster (2007) calls "the conventional model of the good mother" (p. 78), but her frustration with the unsympathetic society around her, against which she feels powerless, led to attack the one against whom she could wield power. On the subconscious level, she distances herself from her own weakness, which Foster (2007) calls her 'despised part,' to be destroyed through this killing, as it is her "desire to destroy the 'weak and despised' part of herself" (p. 82).

The violence in the climactic scene in the play needs some meditation. It is sure Hester's accumulated rage against society that surfaces at the slightest provocation by her son, but it also speaks volumes of her own guilt, her own "sexual sins and shame," as remarks Philip Kolin (2006, p. 246). To Kolin, the word 'Blood' in the title of the play symbolizes her pollution as

well as "her biological scarlet letter" (p. 246). With bloody hands, Hester writes 'A' on the ground next to her son's dead body. 'A' might symbolize 'adultery' though it is never mentioned in any of the scenes. Early in the play, Jaber teaches her the shape of letter A saying, "legs apart hands crost the chest" (ITB, 11). This sexualized description, as Gies (2004) points out, "reveals the extent to which for [Hester], too, it has become a kind of bodily marking" (p. 86). Violence is the first step towards Hester's spiritual healing. Parks' own comments corroborate this idea as Kolin and Young (2014) remark that from Parks' perspective, though the ending is so violent, it is an assurance that "the play creates a wound that is actually the first stage in the healing process" (p. 17). 'Blood' also refers to the disease Hester is suffering from, i.e., AIDS - the consequence of her sexual transgression that will torture her for the rest of her life. Right from the prologue, she is condemned by the chorus for having "bad news in her blood" (ITB, 7). To Hester, 'blood' symbolizes her offspring to whom she is physically and spiritually devoted. She feels her existence through them: "My kids is mine,"... "I get rid of em what do I got? Nothing. I got nothing now, but if lose them I got less than nothing" (162). Furthermore, the title of the play appears to indict all the fathers who do not acknowledge Hester's children as their own, and so is "synonymous with entrapment, a diminishment of their identity" as notes Kolin (2006, p. 254).

It is this bad blood used to write the letter A that brands her as a social pariah.

CONCLUSION

All the odds are completely against Walker's and Parks' female protagonists, as one can elicit from the analysis, and many issues plaguing modern society are raised in their works. Their characters are oppressed because of their race, class, and gender. These factors form a triangular trap that encloses the social realities of oppressed Afro-American women. The analysed works are the stories of women abused by people around them who are ideally meant to aid them. The stories in both the works are different, and accordingly, the writers' representations of the images of oppressed Afro-American women are different. Walker asserts that black women can have agency and voice against injustices and can muster inner strength to fight oppression, exploitation, violence and inequality in a patriarchal society. Solidarity through sisterhood can channelize black women's strength to defend themselves against the oppressive hierarchy and hegemony of men. They construct new identities while struggling for freedom and equality in the face of dehumanization and degradation by dominant culture and pain under patriarchal subjugation and repression. Conversely, Parks shows that the kind, devoted black women can be transformed into killers if the society does not provide them with the needed support. I agree with Hadia's (2012) observation that in the play no solution is offered by Parks. Instead, she leaves it to the audience that "a re-evaluation and a re-consideration of the materialistic and social values are important to fill the gap between the poor and the rich" (115).

However, both protagonists, despite all the surrounding difficulties, have a deep sincere desire to be good, productive citizens. They try with the bare minimum means they have to prove themselves and fight all types of oppression inflicted on them. In Walker's novel, self-determination wins over oppression, while in Parks' play, self-defeat prevails. Despite the fact that Walker and Parks display opposite images, their works might lead to a similar transformational shift in consciousness where African American women learn to challenge and resist such patriarchal and domineering oppressive systems. These two works would definitely

stimulate, or rather incite, women in general and African American women in particular, to think critically about themselves and to move towards proving themselves socially and actively in a way that opposes the prevalent patriarchal system of oppression and repression. What is sent beyond the written pages is meant to enhance the potential to transform, to impose a change on how black females should identify their positions in relation to the world around them. Two choices are given - whether to let oppression be the master of their lives, like Hester, or to be themselves the masters, like Celie.

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