

Voices of Resistance: Women's social and emotional liberation in *The color Purple* and *Brick lane*.

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Abstract:

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* both present female characters who engage in everyday actions that function as expressions of resistance against social and emotional constraints. This paper explores the various ways women's voices resist patriarchal, cultural, and racial oppression while tracing their paths toward social and emotional liberation. Although both novels have received extensive critical attention, comparatively little scholarly focus has been directed toward how resistance serves as a catalyst for the protagonists' self-actualization within patriarchal, cultural, and racial structures. Existing studies primarily foreground the oppression of women by male dominance and social or cultural norms; however, the female characters Celie and Nazneen overcome these limitations by asserting their free will, demonstrating determination, and maintaining their individuality. This study conducts a textual and comparative analysis to show how gender, race, and class intersect to shape the protagonists' challenges, employing feminist literary criticism, intersectionality, and postcolonial theory. Ultimately, the research concludes that Walker and Ali not only depict the processes of social and emotional liberation but also promote a more profound rearticulation of female selfhood, attained through sustained resistance to systems of oppression.

Keywords: Women's Liberation, Patriarchy, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Feminism, Female Identity, Resistance and Agency, Diaspora, Epistolary Narrative,

1. Introduction:

The complexity of women's social and emotional realities has long been examined and interpreted through the critical lens of literature. Across cultures and historical periods, women have been subjected to intersecting forms of oppression, particularly those rooted in patriarchy and racial hierarchies. Yet despite these constraints, women's voices have continued to assert resilience, agency, and the capacity to discover their own identities and effect meaningful change in their social positions. Their narratives reveal not only the depth of their suffering but also the strength with which they resist, survive, and redefine themselves.

“The liberation of women is not only a question of the equality between the sexes. It is first of all a question of interior freedom, of the possibility for every woman to choose her own path, to refuse the roles that imprison her and to live as a complete human being, responsible for her own destiny.”

Women’s spirits remain imprisoned, and patriarchal hierarchies continue unchallenged in the absence of resistance. As bell hooks argues in *Feminism Is for Everybody*

“To be liberated, women must move from silence into speech, speaking is the first step toward claiming the power to name, to define and to create their own lives. Without this act of resistance, patriarchal structures remain unchallenged and women’s spirits remain confined!”

There is an urgent need to take action against oppression. Breaking the silence can dispel fear and sorrow, enabling women to reclaim their sense of identity and self-worth. As Audre Lorde rightly asserts, speaking out is not a luxury, but a vital necessity for survival and transformation.

“The transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-recovery for women. It is through this courageous breaking of silence that women reclaim their identities, confront their fears and reshape the world that ought to confine them. Liberation begins where silence ends.”

Social expectations have long constrained women’s freedom, defining their roles and limiting their aspirations. For generations, a woman’s worth has often been measured by how well she conforms rather than by how fully she realizes her own potential. The roles imposed on women and the fulfilment expected of them cannot be equated with true liberation; real freedom does not come from merely accepting the roles society assigns. It begins when those roles are questioned and challenged. True freedom is achieved when a woman dares to recognize her own dreams, affirm her own needs, and embrace her potential to grow beyond the narrow boundaries of domesticity and social conformity. As Betty Friedan observes:

“The real liberation of women lies not in the acceptance of the roles society assigns, but in questioning those roles. It comes when a women dares to acknowledge her own dreams her own needs, and her own potential for growth beyond the limits of home and conformity.”

According to Maya Angelou,

“A Liberated woman is not one who never feels fear or doubt, but one who refuse to let these fears silence her. She rise, again and again, claiming her right to speak, choose to grow and to love herself beyond the expectations that seek to limit.”

2. Objectives:

- To examine how *The Color Purple* and *Brick Lane* portray women’s emotional and social oppression within patriarchal societies.
- To analyze the process through which Celie and Nazneen evolve from silence and subjugation to self-awareness empowerment.
- To explore how emotional resilience functions as a foundation for social liberation in both novels.
- To compare the cultural, racial and historical contexts that shape the protagonists’ experiences of resistance and identity formation.
- To evaluate the role of language, voice, an expression as tools of self-liberation in both texts.

In *The Color Purple*, an African American woman living in the early twentieth-century American South, Celie endures abuse, racial discrimination, and emotional neglect, revealing the multiple, overlapping forces of oppression that shape her existence. Through its epistolary structure, Alice Walker traces Celie's gradual progression from imposed silence to a determined sense of selfhood—a transformation reinforced by the solidarity and encouragement of other women, who help her overcome internalized fear and patriarchal domination.

In a similar vein, *Brick Lane* focuses on Nazneen, a Bangladeshi immigrant in London, whose life initially revolves around being a compliant and dependent wife. Her gradual transformation into a self-reliant woman reflects the complex realities faced by women living in diasporic societies. Monica Ali, the author of the novel, highlights the emotional and psychological strain caused by migration and cultural displacement. She also depicts the quiet yet self-determined acts of resistance that gradually chart Nazneen's journey toward independence, strength, and self-awareness.

The female protagonists of both novels, Celie and Nazneen, emerge from distinct cultural and historical contexts, yet their emotional resilience forms the foundation for their eventual social freedom. Their personal evolution is expressed through the development of their voices, self-expression, and meaningful relationships, demonstrating the profound link between emotional reclamation and the ability to challenge oppressive systems. The resistance enacted by both heroines is not limited to overt rebellion; it also manifests through inner strength, growing self-awareness, and the reclamation of language. Viewed through a feminist lens in Celie's case and a postcolonial lens in Nazneen's, Alice Walker and Monica Ali redefine womanhood, foreground female agency, and articulate new possibilities for identity formation within restrictive social structures.

In *The Color Purple*, patriarchal power manifests through explicit physical and sexual abuse. From an early age, Celie's stepfather threatens and abuses her, forcing her to promise that she must never tell anyone but God, or it would bring harm to her mother. She adopts a mask of silence to survive. This threatening warning from her father makes silence a necessary condition for her survival.

“You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.”

As a result, Celie's body is treated as an object to be used by the patriarchy of the novel

The male abuse she endures highlights the systemic oppression embedded in patriarchal structures.

“All my life I had to fight... A girl child ain't safe in a family of men.”

Her sense of selfhood is gradually eroded by the threatening behavior of male dominance. Although she initially believes that marriage might bring some happiness, her hopes are quickly shattered. Marriage offers no refuge; instead, it intensifies her oppression. Mr., Celie's husband, treats her as little more than property and labor. She is expected to manage the household alone, care for Mr.'s children, and even attend to the needs of her husband's lover, even when she is weak and ill. This treatment reflects Simone de Beauvoir's idea that women are socially constructed as “the Other.”

“Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him... He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.”

Celie's early understanding of herself reveals how deeply oppression has been internalized. From a young age, she loses interest in her own sense of self, both at home and within her husband's household. Her early survival mentality leaves her unaware of any alternative; simply staying alive becomes her only choice, and as a result, she endures immense suffering.

I don't know how to "fight, all I know how to do is stay alive."

She believes herself to be unattractive, unintelligent, and worthless. In this context, she chooses silence, which is not only externally imposed but also deeply ingrained within her sense of self.

"I'm ugly. I ain't smart. I ain't worth nothing."

In contrast, Brick Lane portrays patriarchy as functioning through the imposition of cultural norms and ideological conditioning rather than direct physical violence. Women are taught to remain silent and endure simply because they are female. Nazneen's silence, therefore, stems from a sense of fatalism shaped by her mother's belief that whatever cannot be changed must simply be endured.

"What could not be changed must be borne."

As a result of persistent patriarchal control and a culture of tradition, her family arranged Nazneen's marriage to Chanu. Although Chanu considers himself highly educated and progressive, he treats Nazneen in a patronizing manner and excludes her from significant decisions, as his male ego dominates his choices. Her restriction is primarily domestic and emotional rather than overtly brutal. Over time, she adapts by listening passively and withholding her thoughts. Her confinement remains largely domestic and emotional:

"She had learned to listen with half an ear."

In this way, Nazneen's silence illustrates what **Chandra Talpade Mohanty** describes as the internalization of cultural expectations that shape and limit women's desires and ambitions.

"internalization of cultural scripts" that regulate women's desires and aspirations.

In **The Color Purple**, the epistolary form is inseparable from Celie's liberation. When Celie writes, "Dear God, / I am fourteen years old. I am pregnant for the second time," The blunt, unembellished syntax conveys trauma through its starkness. Yet even in its simplicity, the act of writing asserts presence: Celie records her suffering in her own words, claiming narrative authority in a world that silences her. As her sense of self strengthens, her language becomes more confident and expansive, reflecting her psychological transformation. A crucial moment occurs when Celie abandons God as her sole addressee:

"I don't write to God no more. I write to you," marks a profound shift.

Celie begins to shift her letters from God, a patriarchal deity, to Nettie, who is close to her heart and whom she believes will truly understand her. This transition marks a movement from isolation and surveillance toward intimacy and solidarity. Through her letters, Celie's dialogue becomes a means of self-empowerment, fostering a reciprocal exchange of feelings and an affirmation of womanhood and selfhood.

In contrast, Brick Lane employs third-person limited narration to trace Nazneen's developing consciousness. Her inner world, particularly her emotions, is closely conveyed through the narrative. Readers witness the formation of resistance in her mind before it is outwardly expressed. At first, doubt

arises regarding the fate imposed on her since childhood. Rather than openly defying her circumstances initially, Nazneen's rebellion begins as internal questioning. When she reflects that she "was no longer certain what fate meant," this uncertainty signals a crucial ideological shift. What once seemed fixed and divinely ordained becomes open to interpretation. By questioning the idea that fate predetermined every aspect of her life, she begins to rely on her own choices and decisions. This questioning marks the start of self-awareness, suggesting that true liberation begins not with dramatic action, but with the quiet, deliberate steps of reflection and reassessment of beliefs once accepted as inevitable.

In *The Color Purple*, at the beginning, Celie feels disgusted with herself; her sense of self is shaped by deeply internalized feelings of worthlessness and submission. However, her transformation becomes evident when she ultimately asserts that

"I'm poor, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook... But I'm here."

This moment is revolutionary. The short, emphatic sentence, "I'm here," marks her emotional awakening. Celie moves from invisibility to presence. Speech becomes an act of resistance, and self-recognition becomes a step toward liberation.

Similarly, in *Brick Lane*, Nazneen is raised to believe that submission is a woman's duty. This sense of predetermined fate, in which women are expected to be submissive to men, dominates the early years of Nazneen's marriage. She resigns herself to solitude in London and to the emotional detachment of her husband, Chanu. She simply accepts that her life in the early phase is determined by fate.

Over time, however, she learns to challenge the societal assumptions imposed on every woman. Her emancipation is understated yet significant—she moves from passively accepting her destiny to actively shaping it.

At one point, she oscillates between reflections on her personal identity and her relationships, questioning the notion that life is predetermined, as she says:

"How can I explain? I wasn't me, and you weren't you. From the very beginning to the very end... we made each other up."

However, she still passively holds all the questions in her mind.

In this way, both novels depict silence not as mere weakness, but as the initial state from which acts of defiance and self-assertion emerge. It serves as the starting point from which resistance develops.

In *The Color Purple*, Shug Avery becomes the catalyst for Celie's emotional rebirth. During a conversation about spirituality, Shug tells her:

"I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."

Shug Avery speaks of the color purple, which serves as a metaphor for women's self-respect and happiness. This declaration reimagines God not as a controlling, male authority, but as a force that celebrates joy, beauty, and fulfillment. Through the realization symbolized by the color purple, as suggested by the book's title, Celie comes to understand that pain is not a requirement of faith. She embraces love, pleasure, and her own dignity, marking the beginning of her emotional liberation.

Similarly, in *Brick Lane*, Nazneen's growing self-assurance is nurtured by her friendship with Razia, who challenges social norms by living and working independently. Nazneen's assertion of self-

determination and independence becomes evident when she openly claims agency and control over her own life.

“I will decide what to do. I will say what happens to me.”

The repetition of “I will” is striking, signaling a shift from passive object to active subject. Unlike Celie’s dramatic confrontation, Nazneen’s resistance is measured and internally cultivated, yet it is equally transformative.

The turning point in Celie’s life comes when she understands her own worth and discovers a new path to selfhood by starting her trouser business. Earning her own income enables her to leave Mr. and live independently. Work becomes a source of personal fulfillment for her. Her earlier curse on Mr. -
“Until you do right by me, everything you think about is going to crumble.”

This symbolically foreshadows the collapse of patriarchal authority over her life

In Brick Lane, Nazneen also gradually becomes empowered when she begins sewing to meet her practical needs. Through this work, she starts to understand her own worth and realizes that she does not need to depend on others to fulfill her basic necessities. By earning her own income, she gains self-confidence and independence. As she states at a moment of self-awareness when she passively accepts her realization—

“I considered how much of my life, how much time, how much energy, I had spent trying not to care, trying to accept.”

Now she can make her own decisions and choose to stay in London instead of returning to Bangladesh. Her realization of her own identity reflects her social independence, as she takes control of her destiny rather than deferring to her husband’s wishes.

Although Celie’s oppression is rooted in racism, poverty, and domestic abuse, Nazneen faces challenges arising from migration, cultural dislocation, and religious pressures. Celie’s journey toward liberation is overt and dramatic, whereas Nazneen’s unfolds quietly and gradually. In the end, however, both emerge as women who assert control over their own lives.

3. Conclusion:

The Color Purple and Brick Lane explore the complex experiences of women navigating social and emotional constraints. The heroines of the novels, Celie and Nazneen, gradually claim authority over their lives, illustrating that liberation is a gradual process rather than a sudden revolt against society—a progression from silence to self-expression, and from passive endurance to deliberate choices. Through interpersonal relationships, dialogue, and acts of self-expression, they develop the strength to assert their independence. Both novels affirm that when women reclaim their voices, they not only reconstruct their personal identities but also reshape the societal structures that previously restricted them from living freely. In these narratives, resistance gradually develops into empowerment, ultimately leading to meaningful change.

By tracing Celie’s and Nazneen’s steady transition from suppression to self-awareness and independence, the novels highlight that emotional resilience lays the foundation for broader social freedom. Comparing the different cultural, racial, and historical settings of Celie’s life in The Color Purple and Nazneen’s experience in Brick Lane highlights both the diversity and the interconnectedness

of women's forms of resistance. Furthermore, both novels emphasize the importance of language, voice, and self-expression as vital means of personal freedom. Viewed through feminist and postcolonial lenses, it becomes evident that Alice Walker and Monica Ali redefine womanhood—not as passive endurance, but as a dynamic, evolving process of resistance, self-discovery, and transformative growth.

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