

Intersectional discourse in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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INTRODUCTION

When the fact that race, class, and gender (among other categories) are socially constructed is contextualised in literary criticism, it is possible to qualitatively capture the complex relationship that exists between different categories of identity. Such an approach is beneficial in interpreting actions, language, and characterisation within narratives. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are used to demonstrate this approach in this paper. Both of these novels exemplify the fluctuating nature of discourses that frame different identities. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Jennifer Nash, Leslie McCall, and other scholars have brought the intersectional mode of interpretation into perspective to scrutinise identity discourse and issues of inequality. Crenshaw recommends intersectionality as a framework for understanding identity and inequalities; it emphasises that identity is multilayered and that markers of identity, such as race, ethnicity,

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class, gender, and sexuality are often deployed and employed in discourse. Crenshaw (1989), in a study on violence against women of colour, previously argued that ignoring differences within groups contributes to tensions among these groups. Intersectionality mediates the arising tensions between individuals' navigation of multiple identities (ie their reality) and the organised system of thoughts that govern identity relationships (ie discourse). As a practice, however, intersectionality precedes its coinage, as reflected in the works of African, African American, and Marxist feminists on the significance of other categories and experiences to gender discourse, particularly racial and class dimensions. These positions emphasise that gender discourse must cover the interplay between identities to reduce animosity, exclusion, or alienation.

Intersectionality is based on the notion that individuals are simultaneously situated in multiple social structures, which interact in complex ways. An intersectional approach seeks to understand individuals' and groups' positions within multiple systems of oppression driven by "interlocking social institutions" (Hill Collins, 2000: 277). Hill Collins provides a broader perception of intersectionality as an interpretative model that captures "varying responses to common challenges" (1993: 28). There is extensive evidence of how the intersection of multiple identities affects wellbeing, experiences, and social structures (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). The feminist literature highlights, for example, that the day-to-day experiences of ethnic minority women are drastically different from those of ethnic majority women, although both groups fare worse than men in most outcomes. Determining what makes ethnicity exacerbate gender-based divisions (and vice versa) often requires a detailed understanding of the context in which these relationships take place, but it is instructional to recall the "translocational lens" proffered by Floya Anthias as "a tool for analysing positions and outcomes produced through the intersections of different social structures and processes" (2013: 12). As such, intersectionality is as much about the processes through which multiple identities interact and evolve over time, as it is about what these interactions imply for outcomes at a point in time. This paper explores how both experience and context contribute to varying responses and meaning.

Both *The Bluest Eye* and *The Color Purple* demystify the inherent contradictions that are embedded in identity discourse through their portrayals of characters struggling to resolve the conflict of their multiple identities, which results in fluctuating relationships as manifested between/within identities. This contributes to fluid and robust discourse on identity inequalities without outright immersion in categorical representations. Traditionally, hierarchies inherent in cultures have

been maintained through narratives that facilitate either inclusion or difference. Therefore, when writers such as Morrison and Walker mediate between these ideas, they adopt styles that generate multiple responses through processes of parallelism or paradox-building to bring the inherent contradictions in discourse to the surface. The onus therefore lies on the literary critic to be guided by suitable methods of interpretation in the demystification of narratives to generate multiple layers of meaning.

Fiction requires conflict, and the conflict of identities – both within and between identities – is central in Walker’s and Morrison’s fictions. The question, therefore, is to examine to what extent these writers blur alienating codes in narrative. Racial discourse, when considered in tandem with class and gender, constitutes a complex relationship that fragments discourse on identity inequality. By espousing the intersection between class and the imposing reality of racial identity, identity discourse in narrative is shaped. Attempts to gloss over the intersection of inequalities is the undoing of much creative or critical literary criticism that employs single-lens analytic frameworks. In representing glaring crises of identity, Walker and Morrison point to complex relationships within and between different identity categories that cannot be glossed over and in doing so expose their characters’ dilemmas.

Contrary to popular commentaries that situate Morrison and Walker’s novels as dogmatic feminist projects, both texts demonstrate a deep awareness of the multiple categories within African American identities. The evident index of gendered or racial binaries intersect with class, disability, sexuality, and other structural factors that produce unequal relationships. Focusing on one category to the exclusion of all others in literary discourse is fallacy – and contrary to reality. However, it is also important to emphasise that to disclaim artistic representation and exploration of society based on characterisation, plot, or setting by focusing on identity only would also amount to gross misinterpretation. The task of a critic therefore rests in interpreting these choices in relation to other aspects of literary works. This critical project exemplifies this dual focus by seeking out how Walker and Morrison go against the grain in their treatment of inequalities, or otherwise seem to perpetuate them. Both writers articulate the simultaneity of race, class, and gender inequalities without maintaining binary relationships within identity categories. Instead, having reinforced existing historical relationships, they introduce other categories to disrupt traditional identity discourse, reflecting the complex relationship between culture, history, and discourse. To show the simultaneity of racial, class, and gender inequalities is to espouse these

narratives' contributions to identity discourse. Elements of discourse would be isolated and treated based on their recurrence and literary strength.

Examining *The Bluest Eye* and *The Color Purple* reveals that experiences of marginalisation cut across characters with different class backgrounds, racial identities, and genders. Alice Walker is credited with creating a model of feminism called womanism, which was summed up by Delores Williams in her theological reading, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, as standing “against all oppression on the basis of race, gender, class, sexual preferences and physical abilities” (1995: xiv). *The Color Purple* captures these different categories with deftness: by not focusing on single aspects of identity, overt generalisation is minimised. Similarly, Morrison’s novel shows the impact of general consciousness and reorientation on identity discourse. *The Bluest Eye*, through its carefully crafted setting, suggests that oppression is sustained through an accommodating collective consciousness. Negotiating characters’ identity around racial, gender, migratory, and economic boundaries reveals the limitations imposed by cultural constructs. However, many critics tend to narrowly interpret both works as solely dealing with the ordeals of African American women. My contention is that the general focus is in fact on the relationship between humans and the boundaries imposed by consciousness.

DISCOURSE IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

In *The Color Purple*, the journey of the protagonist, Celie, through a torturous, vulnerable stage to awareness in her teen years ultimately shapes her identity. Celie is a victim of rape (by her stepfather) and endures a torturous marriage to Mister. Through the timely intervention of Shug Avery (a singer, and Mister’s mistress), she is able to transcend the confines of religion to an awareness of self. The change in consciousness that attends the different levels of her maturation is remarkable. While Celie’s liberation from the oppressive systems of gender, class, and race is passive, her sister, Nettie, engages actively in the discourse around her through application of logic and sensibility, questioning conventions, religion, philosophies, history, and attitudes among others.

Celie’s use of language in *The Color Purple* is a negation of ‘standard’ English grammar. This introduces historicity and interrogates the forces that determine what constitutes the standard. Walker’s opinion is (arguably) delivered through her protagonist: “only a fool would want you talking a way that feels peculiar to your mind” (223). In projecting the Black American vernacular as a penchant for

selfhood, Walker marks their experiences as evolutionary. She seems to unite with the view that language frames discourse, and refusing to be conscripted into a general discourse is the right direction to independent thought and a rising awareness that is liberated from the 'general unconscious'. There is a marked disregard for the rules of pluralisation, and idioms and diction are deployed to show variation. Celie refuses to be intimidated by a lack of fluency in the English language. She embraces herself and asserts her position as a human with a voice, choices, and desires. The blend of African American folk grammar and the English grammatical structure reflects African Americans' history as enslaved, subjugated people. Walker also uses African American dialect to distinguish social class.

The Color Purple typifies how a change in consciousness aids the evolution of humanity. As Celie notes, 'right after that he starts to improve. You know means kills she says' (231). Harpo, Mister's son, emerges through a warped masculine consciousness to support his wife Sofia in the care of their children. Squeak/Mary Agnes, Harpo's mistress, asserts herself by demanding respect from all, insisting that Harpo should mention her name (ie Mary Agnes) and by leaving him to pursue a music career. Consequently, she models herself on Shug. Celie's consciousness is raised after she receives letters from Nettie, whom she had presumed was dead. The exciting tone of Nettie's letter liberates her, and serves as a springboard for her deserting Mister to go with Shug to the city: "Now I know Nettie alive I begin to strut a little bit. Think, when she comes home us leave here. Her and me and our two children" (158).

Correspondingly, Sofia transcends a consciousness that stems from years of confrontation against masculine authority, which leaves her consistently in rebellion against its culture, conventions, and beliefs. Her confrontational attitude is explained by the exposition "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers... A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (42). She carries this attitude into her marriage, and is opposed to all forms of discourse framed by masculinity. However, after being imprisoned for publicly humiliating the mayor's wife, her perspective shifts. She subsequently tones down her racial animosity and embraces humanity as cultivated in the care of Eleanor Jane, the mayor's daughter. Walker suggests the need for balance and the application of reason in the navigation of identity within wider contexts. In eschewing extremity in attitudinal and relational dispositions, Walker upholds the logic of a balanced consciousness that – although ostensibly deviating from what can be thought of as the popular consciousness – merges with the general discourse through an interaction that systemically upturns inhumanity or dogma.

Shug is another example of this type of consciousness. Her insight into the conspiracy of all forms of oppression informs her identity as a woman and Black American, which ultimately enables her to bounce back from her emotional, psychological, and economic burdens. She rationalises her position in society, and her character is therefore as divergent as the responses generated to her in, and informed by, society. This does not, however, truncate her personal desire to stimulate a complex where people are united in their love for humanity, which perhaps influenced her choice of a music career and her relationships, firstly with her old flame, Albert (Mister), and later with Celie. Shug is an agent of change in attitudes, an advocate of discourse against internalised oppressive masculine tendencies, and the ultimate representation of logical reasoning.

Shug serves as inspiration to Celie, who is resigned to her fate as a caregiver – first for her ailing mother until her death, then for Mister and his children, and then lastly for Shug, who ushers her into a new belief system, one that questions societal values and practices. Although, it might be perceived as demeaning to have to cater for her husband’s mistress, Walker transforms this situation into a pleasurable experience for her protagonist. Celie writes: “I wash her body, it feel like I’m praying. My hands tremble and my breath short” (51). Celie develops a romantic relationship with Shug, from which she derives sanity. Shug composes and names a song after Celie, and professes her love for her: “She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth ... us kiss and kiss till us can’t hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other...” (118). Their relationship flourishes and blooms into a rebellion against heteronormative structures of sexuality through how it shapes the definition of self and the neglect it leaves in its wake. Celie quickly transforms from a living condition characterised by lack (in the words of her predatory stepfather, Alphonso: “you can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed or cloth it” [9]) to making demands for attention from Shug. However, once she is liberated from male-dominated perspectives on sexuality, Celie remains reliant on Avery Shug. It is not until she learns how to make pants and returns to inherit the house willed to her by her father that she becomes economically independent and thus appoints herself as the sole determiner of her happiness.

Sexuality is fluidly constructed in *The Color Purple*. Shug has sexual relationships with both men and women, and her motivation is tailored towards blurring the lines imposed by a masculine construct of sexuality that views same-sex relations as evil. She and Celie mutually complement each other. Shug refuses to transfer a masculine-reliant consciousness into her new life with Celie: “you are not my

maid ... I brought you here to love you and help you on your feet” (218). Despite the condescending tone of her remarks, they liberate and encourage Celie to maximise her new-found freedom from servitude. This may also serve as a justification for Shug’s ‘infidelity’, which is perceived by Celie as a betrayal of their relationship. It could be argued that, by gallivanting around town with her boy toy, Shug creates room for the full evolution of Celie’s thought. In such a reading, Walker denounces the entitlement mentality and expectation of fidelity that often characterises heterosexual relationships. Elsewhere, Walker allows the negative to reign supreme in traditional heterosexual or gendered relationships. Marriage is presented as a subduing force, and caring for children as an obligation that represses emotional outbursts. Nettie’s marriage and Sofia’s experience with the Mayor (she is subdued by being forced to caring for his children) are privileged events that reinforce masculine discourses in different ways, rather than presenting a different perspective of female experience in general or of Black womanhood in particular. The former offers marriage as a springboard for female liberation and a rise in social stature, while the latter remarks on the benefits of embracing ‘female virtues’.

After their stepfather’s death, Celie and Nettie inherit a dry goods store – generational wealth transfer. Walker explores the African-American effort to break through into the American economy and at the same time creates a fixed reality in which African Americans find themselves caught in the centre of two binaries: superior/inferior and productive/destructive. Celie’s and Nettie’s biological father and their uncle both work hard and own properties. However, some white storeowners consider this effort an affront and burn their store down. In a similar fashion, the missionary trip that Nettie goes on in *The Color Purple* reproduces the destruction that the West left in its trail under the guise of ‘civilising’ Africa. The Olinkan village is a microcosm of this colonial intrusion. The fusion of western and African culture ultimately results in a confusion of identities.

Nettie writes letters to Celie, which Celie does not receive because Mister intercepts them. However, they are eventually recovered with Shug’s help, and offer a window into history. The first imagery of slavery is delivered even before Celie opens the letters, by the two stamps on the envelopes. As Celie tries to interpret them, images of race and class collide, and binaries inherent in racial and class discourse are recreated. As Celie recounts: “Saturday morning Shug put Nettie letter in my lap. Little fat queen of England stamps on it, plus stamps that got peanuts, coconuts, rubber trees and say Africa. I don’t know where England at. Don’t know where Africa at either. So I still don’t know where Nettie at” (116).

This introduces elements of history that remain a point of debate. The “fat” queen functions as a metaphor for the West, while the peanuts, coconuts, and rubber trees symbolise Africa’s rich vegetation. Celie is domestic and obscured, while the “little fat queen” is a symbol of privilege and oversight. The royalty of England is projected as dialectically opposed to the images of African resources, representing the modernity/primitivism binary underscoring colonial discourse. These images are represented throughout the novel, and Nettie observes and makes connections between the missionary conquest and larger economic benefits for the West. The contradiction between discourse and reality, such that a culture is simultaneously suppressed and venerated, is emphasised.

In a bid to access these African resources, a road is constructed through the Olinkan village in *The Color Purple*. This road – a symbol of modernity – is contextualised as a negative force to facilitate exploitation of the natural resources of the community and the destruction of their culture. The Olinkan village is ravaged in service of the British Empire. Positioning the perpetuation of the sovereignty of the West as ‘modernity’ or ‘civilisation’ underlines the broader colonial project. The West defines as savagery any culture, superstition, or myth that they cannot relate to. In *The Color Purple*, so too do the Olinkans, which highlights the tendency to define the other in relation to the self. Whereas the West considers Africa to be a space of savagery, the Africans in *The Color Purple* perceive the West as destructive. The missionaries try to justify their presence in Africa and explain the frustrations they were experiencing in proselytising Africans to their western religion. However, their superficial aim is defeated by Tashi, who shows adeptness in assimilating Nettie’s tutorials. Tashi demonstrates free consciousness and chooses to undergo the Olinkan facial scarring ceremony and rite of female initiation (circumcision) when Nettie and Samuel travel to Europe to garner support to rebuild Olinka in the aftermath of colonial destruction. Both rituals are symbolic of being inducted into her African identity and the rejection of imperialist culture. While Olinkans believe that the rituals are emblems of identity, the westerners consider these physical modifications unhealthy. Walker compels us to question: who determines the standard?

In a different situation, the patriarchal traditions of the Olinkans resemble Western patriarchy, and it takes Nettie, who has experiences of both cultures, to make the connection. She observes that the Olinkans do not believe girls should be educated, and that girls only realise themselves through marriage (as only her husband can determine her happiness). Little wonder therefore that Catherine, Tashi’s mother, refuses to remarry upon the death of her husband: “since she

already has five boys she can do whatever she wants. She has become an honorary man” (150). Tashi is persecuted for aspiring to a Western education, just as Celie was withdrawn from school (11). Nettie faces prejudice in her missionary work in Olinka because of both her race and her gender. While Corrine and Samuel represent the privilege of being Europeans and thus purportedly agents of a higher civilisation, she is considered inferior.

DISCOURSE IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

Discourses in *The Bluest Eye* also intersect along racial, class, and gender lines. The novel is divided to reflect the different seasons, but the consistency of African American identities is maintained. Colour qualifies elements in the text, from the physical environment described in different shades to physical qualities of characters, and informs discourse that is tailored to reveal the relationship between characters constructed in relation to race. Consider the main narrator Claudia’s use of diction: “Frieda and I lag behind, staring at the patch of color surrounded by black” (10). Words and their associations typify racial oppression, to such an extent that ‘black’ is not treated as a colour but is distinguished into a class of its own. Claudia describes her home as clouded in darkness during the night. The devil is described by Cholly Breedlove, protagonist Pecola’s father, as a “strong”, “black” figure that ‘blot out the sun’. The language reflects the infiltration of race into society’s consciousness and how entrenched the dichotomies are.

Discourse is also structured to reveal class struggle. As Claudia narrates, “Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weakness ... our perpetual existence” (17). Class dichotomies are graphically presented, with carefully crafted words terms such as “propertied black people” on one hand and “renting blacks” (who include the Breedloves) on the other. These demarcations suggest gender, race, and class are the cardinals of oppression in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison, however, muddles these coordinates. Maureen Peal, a light-skinned girl at Claudia and Pecola’s school, is described as “rich by our standards”, for example. Elsewhere Mrs MacTeer (Claudia’s mother) idealises poverty in her songs (25).

Cholly Breedlove burns down his house, which is presented as a direct result of his irresponsibility and drunkenness, rather than linked with frustration and disillusionment resulting from racial inequality. This episode graphically illustrates more the tragedy of a deeply classed society, and recalls a similar scene in

V S Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Morrison presents an alternative to Cholly in Mr MacTeer (Claudia's father), who is cast as responsible and ensures the social and economic security of his family through hard work. Morrison's narrative codifies the contemporary experience of African Americans to show how the history of racial discrimination has amplified existing gaps in social class and evolved over time as a result of increased consciousness. The ripple effects of racial discrimination as manifested in poverty and the emergence of slums are given as an extension of the political disadvantage of African Americans, who, having been deprived the privilege of breaking through economically, find it difficult to climb the ladder of social class. However, the MacTeers, through hard work and reorientation, break through the ranks.

Demystification of discourse at a metaphorical level can generate deeper meanings in the reading of texts. Scrutiny of discourses that surround racism, class struggle, and gender tensions expose the underlying motive behind these oppressions: domination of the other. Frantz Fanon's work is illuminating in this regard – particularly his critique of Octave Mannoni's argument that “colonial exploitation is not the same as other forms of exploitation and colonial racism is different from other kinds of racism” (quoted in Fanon 88). Ironically, Mannoni made this statement in a bid to dissociate poor white South Africans' contempt for “the Negro” from economic factors. Reflecting on the pervading consciousness that underlies racism and discrimination of any sort, Fanon premises his argument on the thought that, “it is utopian to try to ascertain in what ways one kind of inhuman behavior differs from another kind of inhuman behavior” (86). This reflects an intersectional approach to issues relating to disadvantage and otherness, one that seeks to holistically associate discourses framing inequality with practice rather than focusing on consequences. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* illustrates the contradictions inherent in the thought and cycle of oppression. He considers the relationship between the coloured male/female versus the white female/male to show the arbitrary nature of relationships, and the limitations of the ideas that frame their comprehension. His conclusion: “racial imperialism is no different from other colonialisms” (88). Analysing attitudes and historical nuances in relationships framed by race, class, and gender reveals a cycle that tends towards maintaining binaries and the justification of inequality through a synergy of forces. A concise narrative to Fanon is therefore one which takes into cognisance all the forces at work in a given culture to explain attitudes, relationships, and renditions of history in an attempt to resolve them. Discourse is therefore identified as the real culprit in instituting differences.

By fusing identity discourse and definition of self in opposition to the “other” into one, analysis of social language reveals the shaky boundaries between given categories that ultimately point to existing intersections. This leads to the fragmentation of the myths and general dispositions prevalent in identity discourse. For example, the originator of racial discourse, the West, frames its language and assigns a privileged position to whiteness while imposing a disadvantaged spot on the “other”. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* captures this practice vividly. Said conceptualises the orient and orientalism back to back by drawing out the relationship between ‘the Occident’ and ‘the Orient’ as a pair of binaries embroiled in power plays where the dominant emerges as the superior.

Morrison deftly illustrates the isolation of Black as a racial category and the consciousness of ‘disadvantage’ associated with it. Pauline (Pecola’s mother) is obsessed with transforming herself to match the beauty standards of whiteness, as recounted in her psychological trance where she transforms into Jean Harlow. The happiest moment of her life, she recalls, was when she styled her hair like the actress’s. Pecola interprets the abuse she experiences as a direct consequence of her colour, and rationalises that she would be loved if she wasn’t “ugly”. Said argued that “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (1979: 3), and that the image of the Orient gradually pervaded the consciousness of the East and became its reality through a process of internalisation of the culture imposed on it. He delineated how certain images of the Orient became naturalised with their introduction as model in historical narratives, and how whiteness therefore became the internalised symbol of privilege. Morrison continuously explores how her characters relate to these perceived beauty standards. Claudia’s coping mechanism rests in the dismemberment of every white doll given to her (20). The violence that Pecola encounters at home via her parents – who “fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism” (43) – compounds her complexes. She rationalises that her ugliness, a result of her Blackness was responsible for the frequent outbursts. She fantasises that acquiring blue eyes would quell the tension: “why, look at the pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes” (46). She is so consumed with these blue eyes that even an illusion cast on her by a dream interpreter could not allay her concerns (“suppose there is somebody way off somewhere with bluer eyes”; 202).

The relationship of the characters in *The Bluest Eye* to colours is framed by their sociocultural experiences, where Black is always perceived as a race. Every desirable trait is associated with whiteness, while vices are linked with Blackness.

This accounts for the description “ugly and black” slammed on the prostitutes Poland, China, and Marie, who live upstairs from the Breedloves. They are not positioned as physically ugly, but in their alienation they are grouped with Pecola, with whom “they were as free as they were with each other” (57). Irrespective of differences in class or background, female characters are mutually disadvantaged, and relate to the emotions of rejection and a “desirability that had escaped them” (20) on both racial and gender levels. To say, therefore, that Morrison foregrounds female experience as a gender category rather than an embodiment of the female African American identity specifically would be to deny the intersection of race, class and gender in the text.

The women of *The Bluest Eye* are united in their experiences of existing outside desire, but what is more interesting is how they choose to navigate and negotiate their identities as humans against oppressive systems. Indeed, tensions between characters in *The Bluest Eye* primarily arises as a result of skin colour and the proliferated standard of beauty. The character Geraldine’s disposition to Blackness reinforces this consciousness. Although black, her light skin gives her a sense of affiliation with whiteness, which inspires her to instruct her son Junior to avoid association with other Black children and to call Pecola a “nasty little black bitch” (91). Similarly, Maureen Peal squeals at Claudia and Frieda, “I am cute, and you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!” (72). Although the duo’s humiliation stems from their defence of Pecola, which was inspired by a refined consciousness that disregards white beauty standards, Claudia is dismayed: “Dolls we could destroy but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encounter the Maureen Peals of the world” (74). (Maureen is also from a wealthy family, which confers on her twin privileges in terms of class and race.) In an attempt to dissociate themselves from their Black ancestry, Geraldine and Maureen reinforce Eurocentric standards of beauty, which peripheral characters such as Yacobowski, the white shopkeeper, also bolster.

Morrison creates a synergy between racial, class and gender oppression and a cyclic manifestation of disadvantage in the relationship between and within identity categories. Although racial oppression is directly linked with class discrimination, gender introduces a complex relationship between the two to perfect this cycle of oppression. Junior, Geraldine’s son, bullies girls. He tricks Black “ugly” Pecola into his house and frames her for the death of his mother’s cat. Although “Junior used to long to play with the black boys” (87), he comes to think of himself as “coloured” and thus superior to them. He is caught within

a system that creates boundaries based on race, and thus turns oppressor on a female character, upon whom he can assert his masculinity. The invitation that Junior extends to Pecola tantalises her senses by allowing her to briefly cross the boundary of consciousness imposed on her by her race, class, and gender, before quickly retracting it.

CONCLUSION

The literature of any society functions as a mirror to that society. African American literature reflects the experiences that attend the fusion of different identities. It shows how oppression has resulted in furthering existing gaps in societies, the fragmentation of discourse, and difficulties for people as they negotiate the complexities of different layers of identities foisted on them by different developments. What ensues in African American literature is a paradox of narrative, and the disintegration of identity discourses solely built on polar opposites. *The Color Purple*, which is structured to represent an epoch in the early 20th century, emphasises the intricacies involved in the evolution of African American history and how ripples in that history affect characters' contemporary experiences. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, on the other hand, suggests that as time ticks on – as the seasons change – its characters' internalised consciousnesses are static. Their vulnerability, meanwhile, intensifies, to show the tragedy that results from non-evolving consciousness despite ever-evolving identity discourse.

The climax of *The Color Purple* delivers a rightening of history through a journey of an evolving consciousness that comes with a change in economic conditions. The experiences of characters give them new insights that properly place them and grant them access into the reality of their new identity, which leads to the reclamation of their heritage. Conversely, the characters in *The Bluest Eye* are largely constrained by discourses that remains deeply grounded in binaries. As the economic conditions of Black characters improve generally, there is a transition into a more conducive environment for selfhood. The elimination of boundaries imposed on African American identity would aid their emergence and integration into the mainstream, which would introduce a different strand of discourse. By adopting a critical intersectional approach to reading these texts, I was able to analyse social categories within plot intricacies and their contextual bases. Similarly, by adopting an intersectional framework, any potential for identifying a grand narrative within texts is undercut via the interrogation of

characterisation spread across multiple categories. The implication of the choice of narrative styles and literary devices adopted in the discourse of inequality, and the inherent similarities across categories, is also harnessed to enable a cross-comparative study anchored in intersectionality.

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