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Intersectional Trauma in Nowhere Is a Place by Bernice McFadden and The Temple of My Familiar by Alice Walker

(Extracted from MA Thesis)

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Abstract:

This article explores the intersectional oppression in the literature of African American women by using comparative analysis studying Nowhere Is a Place by Bernice McFadden and The Temple of My Familiar by Alice Walker. Making use of the theory of intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw, this study examines how race, gender, and class interweave to produce unique shapes of trauma and resistance in multiple generations of black women. Through close reading, this article classifies three essential dimensions: systemic discrimination via intersecting oppression, the transmission of intergenerational trauma through material lineages, and the different strategies the characters use for psychological liberation and healing. The study shows that the two novels illustrate how the experiences of black women cannot be comprehended via single-axis structures but need understanding of how several oppressions intersect in producing distinct vulnerabilities and ways of resilience. McFadden and Walker illustrate how trauma works as both as victimization and motivation for transformative resistance. The characters deal with racialized violence, economic marginalization, and patriarchal control while also highlighting female kinship networks, creative self-determination, and spiritual resources to reclaim dignity and agency.

1.Introduction

Intersecting systems of oppression based on race, gender, and class work together to create complex forms of oppression that cannot be analyzed through singular categories of identity. Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, refers to categories of difference that we embody simultaneously (race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on) and how these categories interact with each other on an individual, institutional, and symbolic level. The outcomes of these interactions create different power positions, which means we all inhabit different levels of privilege and discrimination (Jouwe 2015, p. 1).

Contemporary African American literary works provide a critical foundation for analyzing intersectional dynamics, especially as they narrate intergenerational trauma alongside possibilities for resilience, healing, and self-determination (hooks 2015b, p. 4). Nowhere Is a Place by Bernice McFadden and The Temple of My Familiar by Alice Walker serve as case studies for analyzing how black women navigate intersecting structures of oppression while asserting agency and reclaiming a sense of self and dignity.

The article explores the multifaceted relationships among racial discrimination, patriarchal systems, and gendered violence as represented in these two novels. Through an intersectionality-informed close reading, this study addresses three focal themes: the embodiment of intersectional oppression in black women's experiences, the transmission of trauma across generations via maternal lineage, and the various approaches characters utilize to overcome their struggles and attain psychological freedom.

Pasi (2013) examines the works of Alice Walker such as The Color Purple, The Third Life of Grange, and In Searches of Our Mother's Gardens (a collection of essays), through an African feminist framework. Her article demonstrates how black women's resilience against "triple oppression" of race, gender, and class is celebrated by Walker. Rahim, Khattak, and Khan (2024) examine Beloved through an intersectional framework, demonstrating how Sethe experiences dual marginalization as a black woman because she is subjected to the intersecting oppression of racism and sexism; her act of infanticide symbolizes the consequences of slavery's systemic oppression on black motherhood. There are many academic studies that examine themes of racism, black womanhood, and intergenerational trauma in works written by African American women such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, while Nowhere Is a Place by Bernice McFadden has not received the same scholarly attention despite the novel's dealing with the same themes as the ones by Morrison and Walker.

Thomas (2007) examines how Walker makes use of transmigration in The Temple of My Familiar as a literary technique to demonstrate spirituality, healing, and a challenge to Western notions of identity and time to remember black women's histories and experiences. Ruhina (2020) discusses how Walker continues to use "womanist ethos" in three novels written by her, among them is The Temple of My Familiar, using womanism as an intertextual technique through her recurring characters such as Celie and Miss Shug to make a connected vision of wholeness and resilience for women of color. Although The Temple of My Familiar deals with the examination of race, gender, race, and inherited memory, it did not get the same scholarly attention as Walker's other works; the critical attention has focused on traditional womanist themes and has not examined how womanism and intersectionality intersect within the text, establishing a gap in contemporary academic work.

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative framework, drawing on an intersectional lens and close textual analysis to examine the layered meanings within the two novels. Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and black feminist thought as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins, this study focuses on two works of African American literature: Nowhere Is a Place by Bernice McFadden and The Temple of My Familiar by Alice Walker. The aim of this article is to show the novels presentation of an intersectional framework of race, gender, and class, and their role in forming the experiences of generational traumas of black women. This method enables a close exploration of the complicated stories in the texts, it highlights

the role of literature as a means for demonstrating resistance and healing in African American communities.

This study goes beyond literary criticism, highlighting wider social and cultural pattern of resistance grounded in African American historical and cultural experiences. It analyzes how personal narratives of the intersecting racial, gendered, and class oppressions and healing are illustrated in both novels. It also highlights the diverse nature of the experiences of black women in the united states of America, Finally, it deals with the contemporary literary depictions of trauma, healing, suffering, and endurance.

2. Nowhere Is a Place: Representing black Womanhood, Trauma, and Intersectional Challenge

2.1 Intersecting Identities, Intersecting Traumas

Nowhere Is a Place by Bernice McFadden demonstrates black women's lived experiences across generations, showing how intergenerational trauma, intersectional oppression, and the effort to achieve authentic identity shape their lives. Using the interconnected narrative of characters such as Lou, Dumpling, Sherry, the sisters Lillie, Beka, and Helen, McFadden demonstrates the complicated ways in which race, gender, and class intersect to form different shapes of suffering and resilience. The study examines three aspects of black womanhood in the novel: intersectional oppression, trauma, the quest of unique identity, motherhood and female lineage, healing trauma, and the restoration of dignity.

McFadden's Nowhere Is a Place introduces a multigenerational story that focuses on the tragic experiences of Lou and her offspring. Using the rocky relationship between Sherry and her mother Dumpling, the text narrates ancestral tales of dispossession, pain, rape, and survival. The novel positions black womanhood as a site of complex navigation, where love, confrontation, and suffering co-exist. McFadden examines patriarchy's grip on relationships, such as in Sherry's experience with Ellison. When she confronts his betrayal, he retaliates with physical violence: "his piano-playing fingers came down across her face" (McFadden 2013, p. 16). This act is not isolated, yet it is normalized by society's unspoken belief that male dominance, even when abusive, is somehow natural, especially when women are black and therefore expected to endure.

Intersectionality, as Else-Quest and Hyde describe, draws attention to how race, gender, class, and sexuality do not act independently but compound one another, producing unique lived experiences (2016 p. 155). Sherry's identity as a black woman places her at a distinct disadvantage in her relationship. When she walks in on Ellison's white mistress mocking her from Sherry's own bed, the scene summarizes how racial hierarchies play out between women as well: "a sly silence settling around her as she looked down on Sherry with quiet amusement and outright contempt" (McFadden 2013, p. 17). McFadden critiques how even intimate spaces become battlegrounds of racial and gendered power.

Historical trauma is powerfully rendered through Lou's storyline. Her introduction to menstruation is not a formality of passage but a prelude to sexual exploitation by the enslaver Henry. A fellow enslaved girl chillingly informs Lou that her period "will come every month till 'Massa get to you'" (McFadden 2013, p. 59). The normalization of sexual violence under slavery reflects a system that reduces black girls to reproductive instruments.

Even Verna, Henry's wife, responds not with protection but aggression toward the enslaved girls, a product of internalized patriarchy. Although she fears her husband's intentions, she has no real power to object. When she raises concerns, Henry silences her with financial threats and masculine entitlement: "Don't you tell me about my affairs" (McFadden 2013, p. 68). Verna becomes both victim and enforcer, keeping a system that disempowers women across class and racial lines.

The intersectionality framework validates complexity, requiring an in-depth understanding of the experiences, meanings, and consequences of individuals who simultaneously belong to multiple intertwined social identities embedded in social contexts of power, discrimination, and social exclusion. (Hulko 2009, p. 49; Hankivsky and Cormier 2011, p. 218). Lou and Verna embody different expressions of patriarchal domination, one as an enslaved girl, the other as a silenced wife. Their pain illustrates how hierarchy functions through racial, gendered, and economic subordination.

2.2 Gendered Inheritance and the Denial of Legacy

Ownership and inheritance reflect the gendered injustices within black families. Willie, who survives slavery and works to own land, passes his entire legacy to his son Vonnie: "Everything that lives, breathes, and grows on this land will be yours," he tells Vonnie (McFadden 2013, p. 251). Even though his daughters are also his children, his flesh and blood and equally deserve recognition, Willie 's choice is not only personal, it illustrates a broader injustice usually left ignored. "Demonstrating to boys that their status as males is valuable and useful, the provider role concept and practice inhibits the adoption and development of more negative forms of masculinity" (Brown 2016, p. 37). In a world where being black is challenging, being a black woman means shouldering a double burden. While black men were subjected to the violence of white supremacy, black women endured that and more, oppression from within their communities and sometimes even within their families. As bell hooks reminds us, black women's oppression is compounded by race and gender, even within their own families (2000, p. 40). Vonnie was raised to believe that ownership equals entitlement. He may have used that power to justify his actions of sexually molesting his sisters, expecting silence and obedience from those around him because, in his mind, he had inherited not just land, but control. McFadden reviews how generational trauma persists not just through external systems but through decisions made within the home.

2.3 black women inheriting trauma because of racism and patriarchy

In most cases, trauma has a cycle that influences multiple generations, and often it is not limited to one generation. Bernice McFadden's Nowhere Is a Place highlights the physical, psychological, and emotional wounds that black women navigate that are inherited from the previous generations, forming the experiences of daughters in complex ways. Using the theory of intersectionality, this part shows how unresolved childhood trauma, especially trauma rooted in gendered violence, persists to echo through family lineage, demonstrating a haunting legacy that complicates love, motherhood, and healing.

According to Kilpatrick et al., "In a sample of nearly 3000 participants from across the United States, 89% of participants experienced at least one event that was defined as traumatic… such as serious injury, sexual, or physical violence" (2013, p. 7). This psychological research confirms what McFadden illustrates in her fiction: unaddressed trauma, particularly childhood trauma, lingers far into adulthood. The weight of this trauma, when not confronted, often spills into parent-child relationships, as is the case with Dumpling and Sherry.

Dumpling, having survived sexual abuse by her brother Vonnie, carries the pain silently: "Sherry was just six years old on that day when she sat curled up in her Uncle Beanie Moe's lap… Her mother, Dumpling, had walked into the room smiling, then stopped and stared as the smile froze and cracked on her face. Sherry couldn't have known that her sitting innocently on her uncle's knee would hurtle her mother back in time—back to a warm Easter afternoon when a misplaced hand had suddenly turned ugly." (McFadden 2013, p. 16). She inadvertently passes it on to her daughter. In one pivotal moment, she slaps Sherry upon seeing her in what is an innocent position, sitting on her uncle's lap. This reflexive act is not about discipline but about triggered trauma. Sherry, unable to understand the context, internalizes the moment as betrayal. "I ain't done nothing to her I ain't done to the other two," Dumpling says defensively, "but you would think I was the worst mother in the world" (McFadden 2013, p. 28). Sherry's retort, "For one, they

don't hit their children" (McFadden 2013, p. 49), reveals not the physical pain of the slap, but the emotional rupture it caused.

Their strained relationship is echoed again when Dumpling asks Sherry whether the home she was born in still feels like home. Sherry responds curtly, "No." Dumpling narrates, "Her answer is short, sharp. I wince and turn my head away... but I feel a knife in my heart" (McFadden 2013, p. 27). This silence, this emotional chasm between them, is not just personal but emblematic of the wider issue of inherited trauma, trauma that remains unnamed yet omnipresent.

The novel presents the disturbing experiences of the three sisters, Lillie, Helen, and Beka, who were all molested by their brother Vonnie. Their stories, though fragmented, speak to a culture of silence and denial surrounding abuse. Research proves that the relationship of siblings shows an interpersonal paradox in trauma; affectionate and loving siblings' relationship can be protective and limit symptoms of trauma, at the same time, siblings can also be sources of direct victimization through abuse and incest (Nelson Goff et al. 2020, p. 9). Lillie's desperate escape from Sandersville; "The only way I'll ever come back here will be in a pine box!" (McFadden 2013, p. 218) and Helen's quiet resistance, "She had things she might be able to tell a Phila-del-phia lawman that she couldn't tell Sheriff Oakland back home" (McFadden 2013, p. 227), both reflect how abuse fractures not just individuals but entire family systems.

Martini, their fourth sister, does not survive the trauma. Her death is hauntingly narrated: "Martini's eyes open and staring, lips parted and blue... a tear slid down her face just before Doctor Dentist pulled her eyelids down" (McFadden 2013, pp. 212–213). The silence surrounding Martini's death, like the silence surrounding the abuse, is thick with implication. Shame, blame, and communal dismissal all contribute to the sisters' inability to speak out. Trauma influences the communication among family via issues of secrecy and protective buffering. In this situation, the members of a family ignore dealing with traumatic experiences because they fear the consequences of dealing with them. This communication avoidance results in internalizing symptoms and an insecure bond in children. This dynamic creates a cycle, where the wish for shielding family members from troubling information continues trauma and blocks healthy dealing with traumatic experiences (Nelson Goff et al. 2020, p. 12).

Lillie's trauma does not end with her; it is inherited by her daughter, Lovey. Upon Lillie's death, Lovey "leaned over, pressed her open mouth over her mother's, and took Lillie's last breath" (McFadden 2013, p. 243). This symbolic transfer marks not just a daughter's grief but the literal inhalation of her mother's unresolved trauma. Research studies highlight wide observational support for trauma's intergenerational transmission, where the remaining influences of traumatic experiences on children are passed down across generations in many ways, among them direct traumatization, modeling of parental behaviors, and social learning. This trauma can perpetuate dangerous patterns in the next generation (Nelson Goff et al. 2020, pp. 10-11). Lovey's subsequent revenge, haunting Vonnie, driving him to desperation, and later herself falling into prostitution, illustrates the destructive power of second-hand trauma.

Lovey's transformation, especially when she wears Lillie's red gloves, "Lovey slipped one glove on, and Lillie's tears disappeared... I can wear them for you, Mama, huh?" (McFadden 2013, p. 258), is a distressing depiction of postmemory. As Marianne Hirsch writes, "children of survivors grow up with narratives that are so powerful that they seem to constitute memories in their own right" (2008, p. 4). Lovey lives her mother's trauma as if it were her own, blurring the lines between past and present, agency and inheritance.

Though Lovey succeeds in making Vonnie suffer, he eventually remarries and continues his abuse, the cost of revenge is high. "Lovey - at school selling pussy look-sees for a penny... a touch cost five cents" (McFadden 2013 p. 275), McFadden writes, underlining the way trauma twists innocence and rewrites a young girl's understanding of her body and worth.

Vonnie's survival and continuation of his crimes, despite everything, speaks to the persistence of patriarchal impunity. While the women he sexually molested collapse because of trauma and pain, he goes on with his life to have six children and even continues his acts of sexual abuse, including molesting Dumpling (McFadden 2013, pp. 278-279). The cyclical nature of violence remains unbroken, illustrating the structural rather than individual depth of the problem.

Sherry is a character who has strong autonomy. She refuses to have the typical household life with a husband and children, like her older sister Medline. Sherry, not following in her sister's footsteps like most girls, is a symbol of her breaking away from what is expected of women in society. She refuses the stereotype about Black women always being maids like the Mammy figure. The Mammy figure is a "contented domestic worker, meaning she is expected to be submissive to the white family or employer" (Henderson 2002, p. 66).

Although Sherry is educated and has taken many courses that would qualify her to have the regular working office job that most women aspire to have, she refuses those jobs and travels to different parts of the world because she says she is searching for herself: "She been to Africa six or seven times, spent a month in India, been to all of the islands, South America, Central America, Greenland, and a bunch of other places that I can't recall" (McFadden 2013, pp. 26-27).

Even in her romantic life, Sherry asserts her agency. She engages in a relationship with Edison, a white man, not out of rebellion but out of choice. When he betrays her, she ends the relationship decisively: "He dead to me, next subject please" (McFadden 2013, p. 26). This action symbolizes the fact that Sherry's life, just like many women's lives, will not end because of one failed relationship. Sherry symbolizes the free-spirited women who have autonomy and live only for themselves. They do what they want and know that the rules of society are not meant for everybody.

If Sherry represents personal freedom, Lou represents historical resilience. A survivor of profound losses, her mother's murder, enslavement, sexual violence, and the forced separation from her children, despite all of this, Lou never surrenders her dignity. She secretly learns to read and write while tending to her enslavers' daughter: "She practiced writing her alphabet in the wet dirt around the stream's embankment" (McFadden 2013, p. 79).

Despite being violated and used as a pawn in male bargains, Lou remains emotionally available. She finds intimacy with her husband Vista and gives birth to children, even knowing they could be taken away: "They weren't hers and she knew they weren't here to stay. They could be gone with a blink of an eye" (McFadden 2013, p. 101). Her death, marked by pain and fear even from her son Jeff, symbolizes the toll of a life filled with loss, but also the fierce love that kept her going (McFadden, 2013, pp. 144–145).

Nowhere Is a Place shows that black women's experiences cannot be understood only via a single framework of oppression but must be explored through the complicated connection of race, gender, class, and historical trauma. The novel shows that intersectional oppression makes a distinct and overlapping challenges for black women, and that creates unique forms of resilience and resistance. The novel works as a treatment of the enduring strength black women have and their continuous struggle to define themselves, despite the limitations created by society to diminish their agency and worth.

2.4 The Sisters' Conflicting Paths

The story of the sisters, Lillie, Beka, and Helen, reveals the varied ways trauma is internalized and expressed. Lillie, once bright and ambitious, becomes hardened by pain. After being abused by her brother Vonnie, she marries an older man and spirals into emotional instability. Her deathbed is filled with rage: "Damn him, damn him. He gonna suffer too. He gonna suffer worse" (McFadden 2013, p. 243). Her trauma is not just unresolved, it is inherited by her daughter Lovey.

Beka, the eldest, is painfully self-aware but paralyzed. Her passivity stems from deep-rooted fear and internalized weakness: “She was a coward, wasn’t she? The eldest and the weakest” (McFadden, 2013, p. 24). Her survival is marked by silence, a common reaction among women taught to endure rather than resist (hooks 2000, p. 85).

The result of this lineage of women is not a single story of healing, but a complicated map of survival. The women in McFadden’s novel deal with their trauma differently, some with anger, some with silence, some with hope. At the end of the day, all of these different strategies are bound by the same legacy. The novel does not provide an easy outcome, but it does offer an important truth: when trauma and pain remain unaddressed, it does not end, it actually multiplies.

3. Recovering Voice and Identity: Intersectional Struggle in The Temple of My Familiar

Walker’s The Temple of My Familiar uses a nuanced spiritual narrative that explores the lives of connected characters. These characters are Suwelo, Fanny, Lissie, and Carlota, whose lives and experiences are shaped by ancestral trauma, reincarnation, and historical memory. The novel portrays how patriarchal systems have kept dehumanization and violence alive across generations, at the same time, the novel celebrates the resistance and resilience of the characters who refuse to be broken by these systems. The novel shows that transformation and healing are possible when a person decides to refuse rigid expectations society has, and embrace genuine selfhood.

3.1 Service and Silence

One of the most haunting scenes in the novel comes through Lissie’s memory of a brothel filled with black women and children of various shades. She later learns these women were enslaved, repeatedly raped by their white masters, who eventually “gambled her and his son away in a game of cards” (Walker 1989, p. 71). The horror is not only in the violence, but in the casualness of it, the way black women’s bodies and their children could be wagered and discarded like poker chips.

This scene demonstrates how intersectional oppression overlaps. The exploitation these women endured was not because they were women, or because their skin color was black, or because they were poor, but in reality, all these factors intersected in a system that positioned them only as sexual and reproductive tools.

However, white colonizers are not only to blame. The painful truth is that some African men participated in the slave trade, exploiting women and children under the guise of tradition and religion. Lissie recalls being sold by her own uncle, a guardian entrusted with her care, “because he wanted to buy some jewelry for his young wife” (Walker 1989, p. 66). He claimed religious piety while committing a heinous act, showing, as Crenshaw argues, how systems of power cannot be neatly divided. Religion, patriarchy, and colonialism overlap to form structures that exploit the most vulnerable (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1242).

This moment forces readers to consider the ways patriarchal values are deeply rooted not only in Western ideology but also in indigenous traditions, where they are sometimes disguised as custom or spiritual duty. If a man’s desire or ego takes precedence over a woman’s autonomy, Walker suggests, true liberation is incomplete.

The narrative reveals how theological justifications were historically used to rationalize slavery and misogyny. Hrabovsky explains how biblical stories like the Curse of Ham were twisted to claim black people were destined for servitude (Hrabovsky 2013, pp. 74–75). These pseudo-spiritual ideologies helped uphold slavery while disguising brutality as divine order.

Lissie’s memory of being repeatedly raped on a slave ship, along with the other girls, and sold pregnant for profit adds another layer of horror: “The young women among us pregnant by force and too young to know it… we earned a bonus for the master of the ship” (Walker 1989, p. 75). This is not just an account of physical violence; it is the commodification of trauma, a system where suffering translates in financial gain.

The battle between patriarchy and female agency into the intimate sphere of marriage. Suwelo cannot understand why Fanny, a deeply spiritual and self-aware woman, would want to divorce him. It is not him she is rejecting, she insists, “It’s marriage I don’t want… not you” (Walker 1989, p. 143). Suwelo refuses the divorce not because of the idea of divorce but because he “felt abandoned, rejected, set adrift” (Walker 1989, p. 143) although she told him many times, “‘It’s marriage I don’t want,’ she insisted, ‘not you’” (Walker 1989, p. 143). It is his ego as a man hurting him, not because he feels that Fanny does not love him. Fanny’s resistance reflects the same resistance in Celie in The Color Purple, another novel by Walker. These women have their own autonomy and reject being limited to roles such as lovers, caregivers, and child bearers. They desire to present themselves as individuals beyond the traditional gender roles that society and patriarchy desire to impose on women. When Fanny connects with the spiritual voice of Arveyda, she does not even need to see him. She says with faith and calm, “I’ll wait until he dies, or until I do, and then... I will see him” (Walker 1989, p. 132). She desires to have a soulful love because that is what she wants, and not a possessive love which society and patriarchy want.

In the novel, memory becomes a divine tool. Lissie’s past lives are testimony, not a fantasy. It is a way for her to restore repressed histories and bear witness to the continuous nature of pain, rebellion, and survival. Through using memory and reincarnation, Walker connects back womanhood not just across space, but across time; Trauma is not limited to the present time: it echoes across generations as strength echoes.

The structure of The Temple of My Familiar is intersectional. It does not follow a single character or linear story arc. It shows the ways trauma and healing operate in layers, cycles, and echoes. By using this structure, Walker highlights that real liberation must be historical, political, spiritual, and multi-dimensional.

The Temple of My Familiar illustrates that black women’s struggles cannot be comprehended without paying attention to the multi-layered intersections of race, gender, and class. It demonstrates that black women’s lives are not only centered on pain, but are also centered on beauty, strength, and revolution.

3.2 Motherhood and Female Lineage

Alice Walker in, The Temple of My Familiar, shows us the complex intergenerational nature of black womanhood, trauma, and motherhood. The novel illustrates how ancestral memory, deeply rooted trauma, and inherited resilience form the experiences of black women across generations. This is especially proven via Olivia’s developed understanding of her mother, Celie, and her lover, Miss Shug.

Celie’s story, which Olivia pieces together in memory, is one of haunting suffering and powerful resistance. Though slavery had legally ended in her time, the brutality of white supremacy and patriarchy persisted. Celie was raped by the man she believed to be her father, an experience compounded by the horrifying irony that he was “admired by Black and white in the community where he lived” (Walker 1989, p. 149). The violence Celie suffered was not merely racial or gendered; it was a fusion of both. Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality reminds us that black women often endure unique and compounded oppressions that remain unseen in mainstream social justice discourses (Crenshaw 1991, pp. 1251-1252).

Yet Celie, despite being let down by every institutional structure around her legal, religious, social—survived. Her healing and eventual reclamation of selfhood came through her relationships with other women: artists, spiritual seekers, and fellow survivors like Miss Shug. Olivia’s recollections of these women reveal a distinct absence of self-pity: “There was so much oppression... but there was absolutely no self-pity” (Walker, 1989, p. 170). As Patricia Hill Collins argues, black feminist thought is born in the everyday acts of resistance and care that black women enact within and beyond their communities (Collins 2000, pp. 97-101).

Despite this, Walker does not romanticize the character of Celie; she complicated her character. Olivia also recalls her mother's flaws. One particularly striking moment involves Celie's treatment of her loyal dog, Creighton. Despite the dog's love and devotion, Celie abuses him. Olivia observes that in the South, cruelty to animals was often normalized, especially among black communities still grappling with the psychological residue of slavery (Walker 1989, p. 307).

This cycle of harm, passed from oppressor to oppressed and then redirected to the powerless, speaks to what Fanon described in Black Skin, White Masks: how colonized people internalize the logic of domination as a survival mechanism (Fanon 1986, p. 151). Similarly, bell hooks notes that when black individuals internalize systems of hatred and violence, they may begin to see those as the only viable forms of power (hooks 2004, p. 111).

What makes this moment in The Temple of My Familiar so powerful is Creighton's quiet resistance. After one of Celie's beatings, he finally bites her, a single act of defiance that changes everything. This incident leads Celie to treat him and other animals with respect and love. This turning point symbolizes something greater: the moment when the oppressed stop accepting violence and begin to resist it. Decolonization begins when people assert their dignity in the face of cruelty, refusing to be seen or treated as less than human (Agozino 2003, p. xiii). In this way, Creighton's rejection becomes a metaphor for the black struggle for justice, demonstrating that sometimes patience and kindness are not enough when dealing with deeply entrenched systems of violence. A firm and clear Resistance is often what finally commands respect.

In addition, Fanny's memories of growing up surrounded by Celie and Shug provide a more nurturing portrait of generational womanhood. She recalls the tenderness of their affection, their laughter, and their joy in her presence: "Big Mama... and Mama Shug... were always good for a kiss, a laugh, a squeeze, a ride to the garden or at least to the front porch" (Walker 1989, p. 156). This everyday warmth shaped Fanny's confidence and self-worth, a contrast to many black households where boys were traditionally favored. "In their own homes boys were more prized. In our house, however, it paid to be a girl" (Walker 1989, p. 157).

Positive reinforcement during childhood has been shown to promote healthier relationships and self-image later in life. According to Plan International, children thrive emotionally and psychologically when they are valued and affirmed (2009 p. 139). Fanny's acceptance of homosexuals comes from her two grandmothers' love relationship. She saw how they were in love and happy till their death because they were themselves, although they were hated by people. This, in turn, makes Fanny to be brave about living her life in a way that brings her joy, regardless of what others think.

Fanny is also influenced by her mother, Olivia. She did not like her as a child because, according to her, Olivia was "a boring woman, who rarely laughed and always had her nose in a book." (Walker 1989, pp. 156-157). Later, she comes to understand why her mother was like that toward her: "Big Mama Celie and Mama Shug. Next to these two, and even next to Great-aunt Nettie, who raised her, my mother's flame seemed feeble" (Walker 1989, p. 158). The lights of these people were so shiny that it made her mother's light feel not so strong. Her mother was excused for not being involved in parenting her because, at the end of the day, she was the product of rape. Although Fanny was innocent, she was still the fruit of something her mother probably wanted to forget. Later, their relationship gets better, and she appreciates her mother for being a strong minded woman who is admired by her students.

When Fanny is consumed by rage toward white people and contemplates violent revenge, it is Olivia who guides her away from hatred. Olivia explains that the destructive behavior of white oppressors stems not from superiority but from emptiness: "The white man is our brother… He is so empty, so ravenous... that the fatted calf has barely served as an appetizer. He has moved on to devour us and our children, our minds and our bones… But this is not the behavior of well people" (Walker 1989, p. 303).

Olivia reframes their pain as a reflection of the colonizer's spiritual sickness. She teaches Fanny to have compassion without condoning violence. She also reminds her daughter that African ancestors died with their dignity intact: "Some of them... died as who they were, as the best of who they were. As whole people" (Walker 1989, p. 305).

This idea is profound. The colonizers, in their obsessive pursuit of control and meaning, could destroy bodies but not spirits. Their violence was ultimately rooted in their own void, a void that no amount of conquest could fill. As Frantz Fanon writes in The Wretched of the Earth, colonial violence was not just physical; it was psychological, designed to shatter the colonized from within while masking the colonizer's own spiritual emptiness (2004, p. lviii).

Through Fanny's developing view of Celie and Olivia, Walker demonstrates that intergenerational healing is probable, but only when the wounds of the past are not buried but accepted and transformed. The Temple of My Familiar show us that motherhood, although marked by pain and imperfection, can also be the reason of transformation and radical love. These women, via their choices and contradictions, provide us an important truth: healing is not perfection, but it is memory, love, and courage.

3.3 A World That Devalues One's Humanity

To survive in a world that constantly devalues one's humanity because of one's skin color is not just exhausting, but it requires an intelligence and emotional resilience many fail to recognize. Rafe, a black man working as a porter, performs this kind of survival strategy daily. His job is not only to carry luggage but also to navigate the emotional labor of making himself small, non-threatening, and invisible to white passengers. Suwelo's reflection on this life captures the torment behind such a performance: "What a nightmare, thought Suwelo, a hellish nightmare" (Walker 1989, p. 41). Studies in trauma psychology reveal that individuals exposed to chronic social stress, especially rooted in discrimination, often live in a prolonged "fight-or-flight" state (Zeidner et al. 2009, pp. 203-209). For a lot of people, this kind of pressure can lead them to despair. Rafe resists this dehumanization, not through open rebellion, but through a subversive brilliance. He plays the role expected of him, appearing agreeable and unthreatening. His resistance lies in his refusal to let society's gaze define his sense of self. As bell hooks notes, "black men often resist by choosing joy and community as radical acts of self-love" (2004, pp. 115-116).

3.4 Mr. Hal and the Rewriting of Masculinity

Traditional masculinity tells us that men must dominate, that a woman with sexual autonomy undermines a man's value. By that logic, Mr. Hal, whose wife Lissie has had other lovers and children, is a weak man. In this novel, Alice Walker invites us to see strength in a different light. Hal's relationship with Lissie evolves into one built not on ownership but on mutual respect. When Lissie names their daughter after a past life in which she loved a woman, Hal listens without judgment. When he undergoes a dramatic transformation, becoming asexual after delivering their daughter in the absence of Lissie's maternal relatives; the experience transforms him. He was deeply moved by the pain he saw in childbirth and the historical suffering of women like Lissie that he became asexual: "I became a eunuch myself" (Walker 1989, p. 112). Rather than demanding fidelity or suppressing her sexuality, Hal supports her continued journey as a mother and lover. He even helps deliver her babies whom their fathers are other men, including his best friend, Rafe. This is a rejection of patriarchal entitlement. Real strength in men is found not in control or dominance, but in the ability to love, to be vulnerable, and to reject the toxic scripts patriarchy writes for them (hooks 2004, pp. 110-113).

3.5 Fanny: The Courage to Choose Herself

Society often tells women that their worth lies in marriage, titles, and respectability (hooks 2015a, p. 247). Fanny, however, dares to defy all these conventions. Her decision to divorce Suwelo is not a rejection of

love but of constraint. Suwelo does not understand this at first. “He felt abandoned, rejected,” even though she tells him, “It’s marriage I don’t want, not you” (Walker 1989, p. 143). Fanny is not walking away from affection; she is walking toward freedom.

She also turns her back on academic respectability, resigning from the kinds of jobs people typically fight to hold onto. “Fanny had given up so much that Carlotta still clung to. The respectable job, the dresses and skirt” (Walker 1989, p. 243). The difference between her and those people is that, from a young age, she lived for herself. In contrast, those people might, in their old age, regret wasting their years being unhappy. Some people even need more than one life like Miss. Lissie to know that!

Fanny is an example of a woman patriarchy has worked for a long time to erase. She is a kind of woman that does not need acceptance or validation from a man or from a position to feel whole. Her story demonstrates that true liberation is not about refusing ambition or relationships, but about rejecting to let them define your self-worth or identity. Women like Fanny remind us that healing from generational trauma begins with the courage to define life on your own terms.

On the other hand, Suwelo is not a villain. He is a product of patriarchy, just like the women in his life are products of its harm. He was raised to believe that masculinity equals dominance and control (Connell 2005, p. 77). he struggles to understand Fanny’s spiritual and emotional independence. At first, he sees her as distant, even self-absorbed. But beneath his resentment is a longing for something deeper: “I didn’t understand or share these flights of fancy... but I enjoyed them vicariously” (Walker 1989, p. 273).

His journey is one of painful unlearning. With time, he begins to regret the way he treated Fanny; forcing her to wear clothes he found attractive, demanding conformity instead of love (Walker 1989, p. 277). He even admits to enjoying women’s underwear, revealing that his own gender expression was never as rigid as he pretended. “I did start wearing skinny, scanty, colorful underwear, because I did like it” (Walker 1989, p. 278). This is not emasculation; but rather, it is liberation. Suwelo is beginning to see that manhood does not have to be built on suppression. Judith Butler reminds us that gender is not fixed; it is performed and socially constructed (1990 p. 33). Suwelo’s growth does not make him perfect, but it makes him real. He embodies the painful but necessary work of unlearning patriarchy and discovering a version of masculinity rooted not in power over others, but in responsibility, love, and truth.

In The Temple of My Familiar, the process of healing is not simple; it is not a button you can click. It happens in small acts of care, conversations, and silent refusal of what society expects. It happens when Hal supports Lissie’s truth, it happens when Rafe rejects to be reduced to a stereotype, and when Suwelo shows that he wants to feel and have emotions, not just act like he is strong.

Conclusion

This analysis has proven that intersectionality is not just a theoretical framework but a lived reality, one that forms how black women deal with the world, and how they carry their pain, their resistance, and their strength across generations. Through closely reading Nowhere Is a Place by Bernice McFadden and The Temple of My Familiar by Alice Walker, the overlapping nature of race, gender, and inherited trauma does more than oppression because it also defies and eventually liberates.

In the two novels, the women are not oppressed because of one form of oppression; there are many forms that intersect to oppress them but they survive all of them. The root of their trauma is not only from enslavement or sexual violence, but also from the pressure of performance, the silencing of memory, and the emotional prices of being bodies that the world usually sees as less than human. Moreover, these narratives do more than represent pain, since they show new paths of being. They demonstrate how healing can take place in telling the truth, in breaking cycles of silence, in choosing love, and in unlearning inherited shame, not just love that is romantic, but self-love, ancestral love, and spiritual love.

For example, Helen, unlike her sisters, she seeks growth. Her decision to stay in Philadelphia with Lillie marks her first step toward freedom (McFadden 2013, p. 239). Yet, unlike Lillie, Helen does not rebel destructively. Instead, she finds joy in her independence and discovers healthy, consensual intimacy: “She forgot herself at the Friday-night dances and the Sunday picnics. Forgot all of herself when she let Irving Matthers press himself up against her and kiss her full on the lips” (McFadden 2013, p. 244). This kiss is not an act of loss or violation, but of freedom and trust, something her sisters never experienced.

Eventually, Helen not only survives but becomes a caretaker for the next generation, raising Lillie’s children with the care their mother could not give. Her decision to leave Sandersville again, declaring, “Harlem calling me” (McFadden 2013, p. 275), is a powerful moment of self-affirmation. black women’s resilience often lies in their ability to turn trauma into purpose, using personal pain to transform both themselves and their communities (Collins 2000, pp. 112-113). Helen becomes that example, healing not only herself but protecting others from further harm.

Through concentrating on narratives such as McFadden’s and Walker’s, this analysis honors the literature of black women as a strong space of cultural memory and transformation. These stories do not just preserve the past, they reform it. They reject to let oppression be the final word. Rather they create a radical hope: that via voice, connection, and resistance, black women have the ability to reclaim what history tried to take away— their joy, their dignity, and their right to define themselves.

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