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Domestic Violence and Trauma in Postcolonial Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Walker, Adichie, and Roy
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ABSTRACT

*This paper explores domestic violence and trauma within *The Color Purple* by Walker, *Purple Hibiscus* by Adichie, and *The God of Small Things* by Roy through the lens of the patriarchal norms, social hierarchy and cultural set up contribute towards committing physical, psychological, economic, and sexual abuse and hence, the experience of the female, as well as the inhibition of agency. The study adopted a comparative approach to literary analysis, grounded in a feminist perspective, trauma studies, and intersectionality, to examine narrative strategies, character, and how abuse is addressed, using the main quotations from the chosen readings. These novels, the research indicates, expose power inequalities across gender, the absence of social and legal mechanisms to address the issue of abuse, female resistance, perseverance, and survival. The conclusion attracts attention to the fact that it is not just a representation of how such people experience domestic violence when it comes to postcolonial literature, but also aims at questioning structural oppression as a way of showing the complexity of female subjectivity. The research is an addition to the feminist literature and introduces new information on violence, trauma, and agency in the context of social, cultural, and legal hierarchies.*

Keywords: domestic violence, trauma, feminist criticism, postcolonial literature, agency, resilience

Introduction

Domestic violence is a social issue that cuts across culture, geography, and class and impacts the lives of women in patriarchal societies. Literature and postcolonial fiction, in particular, offer a potent means of viewing these experiences, revealing both personal trauma and evaluative oppression. The article analyzes examples of domestic violence in *The Color Purple* by Walker, *Purple Hibiscus* by Adichie, and *The God of Small Things* by Roy. It examines the interplay between physical, psychological, economic, and sexual violence, and the social inequalities and social structures that constrain female agency.

Although the novels have been examined separately- Walker in her work on the struggle of African American women against systemic patriarchy (Walker, 1982), Adichie in her writing on their reflections on the family as a realm of authoritarianism and religious control (Adichie, 2003) and Roy in her writing on their reflections on caste, class and gender dynamics (Roy, 1997), there have been few studies that have comparatively examined the novels to understand how the different forms of violence work together to shape their narratives. This paper fills this gap by using a comparative literary analysis based on feminist theory, trauma studies and intersectionality.

Feminist perspectives shed light on the dynamics of gendered oppression, agency negotiation, and the psychological and emotional effects of abuse, which are placed within the context of

trauma studies, and intersectionality defines how race, class, religion, and culture contribute to oppression. Illustrations of significant quotations in each work, the discussion involved the analysis of how domestic violence functions not only as cruelty of the individual kind, but as systems within the male-dominated and socio-cultural systems. The study also illuminates female resilience and resistance, revealing how postcolonial literature has analyzed normative power structures by foregrounding the experiences and voices of marginalized women. This blend of theoretical approaches enables the article to offer subtle understandings of the expression of violence, survival, and agency, making it capable of entering both feminist and postcolonial studies.

Literature review

Domestic violence is a prevailing social phenomenon across the globe and has associated social, economic, and cultural interactions. Scholars have observed that women are often victims of systemic oppression, physical, psychological, and sexual abuse under the influence of patriarchy and class hierarchies in society (Sehgal, 2020; Khizra, 1998; Johnson, 2001). In South Asia, abuses like molestation, bride burning, dowry abuse, and intra-family oppression are still prevalent because of hidden inequalities (Acharya & Sharma, 2015; Heidemann & Ferguson, 2009; Bharti, 2017). Legal frameworks, including the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) in India, which recognizes gendered violence as a human rights violation, are often not faithful to societal realities, which leaves survivors with few options (Saxena, 2008; Moulick, Pradhan, & Sarkar, 2019).

Feminist interventions emphasize understanding women's labor, social contributions, agency and argue for supporting women's lives in ways that compensate for the oppression in the domestic sphere (Olufemi, 2020; Kaarthikeyan, 2005). These studies highlight the need to examine how domestic violence is represented in literature and its socio-cultural aspects, which highlight the gap that the present research aims to address.

Trauma studies further establish the psychological effects of domestic abuse. Exposure to patriarchal and familial violence has long-term emotional and cognitive effects, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and dissociation (Foa, Keane, Friedman, & Cohen, 2009; Hoge, 2004; Powers et al., 2010). Feminist trauma theory emphasizes the importance of survivor-centered approaches, which include agency, memory reconstruction, and culturally informed healing (Herman, 1997; Sue et al., 2010; Van der Kolk, 2014).

Literature offers one way to examine these processes, showing how characters can negotiate oppression and find their voice and identity. For instance, Walker's *The Color purple* depicts Celie's assertion of agency through letters and financial independence (Walker, 1982; Smith, 1998; Bower, 2017), while Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* shows Kambili's development through being introduced to other sources of power and resistance within her family and community (Adichie, 2003; Singh, 2024; N'guessan, 2018). *The God of Small Things* by Roy portrays intergenerational trauma, caste oppression, and silenced voices through nonlinear narration and imagery, using symbolism to convey the legacy of domestic and social violence (Roy, 1997; Banerjee, 2024; Boopathi and Soundarya, 2025).

Postcolonial feminist approaches to these novels highlight the strains of gender oppression, cultural norms, and power dynamics. The literary approach, including nonlinear storylines, fragmentation of memory, use of literary language imagery, symbolic motifs, etc., makes trauma and resilience its main subject, offering subtle portrayals of female agency (Jena & Maharana, 2025; Sharma, 2024; Kerr, 2024). Through these writings, the authors demonstrate the domestic and social processes that are sources of violence, as well as explore strategies of resistance and marginalized liberation (Halirova, 2024; Talukdar, 2024; Ikoro, 2025). This scholarly article

presents a critical point of reference to interpret the work of literature in connection to domestic violence and the trauma that are similar to the facts of violence, interfere with: the power of discourse, healing, and feminist criticism.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative analysis of the novels *The Color Purple*, *Purple Hibiscus*, and *The God of Small Things*, focusing on their approaches to domestic violence, trauma, and feminist viewpoints. The study involves a critical analysis of the readings to establish cases of mistreatment, the emotional and psychological consequences, and the characters' reactions to their suppression. To examine how literature covers the plight and healing of women, major themes, including resilience, empowerment, and resistance, are used. This approach assists the research in exploring how these novels have mirrored real-life social problems and critiqued patriarchal systems.

Data Analysis

The selected novels have revealed the role of domestic violence and patriarchal oppression in the family/societal framework, and the gaps in the current body of knowledge on gendered trauma. These motifs of silenced voices, restricted mobility, and internalized fear are seen across these texts and indicate that the literature is not solely about the pain of a specific person but also about the inability of the social and legal structures to secure women. The comparative analysis between these stories provides a contribution to the research gap in the literature concerning the themes of domestic violence and trauma, which demonstrates the integration of oppression, strength, and recovery as the three concepts tied together by the narrative strategies, characterizations, and socio-cultural surroundings.

Physical Violence

A significant power and oppression strategy that is evident in the chosen works is physical violence. This figure symbolizes the domestic and systemic superiority of the male gender. In *The Color Purple*, Celie narrates the savageness of her stepfather: "He beat me today, saying I winked at a boy in church" (Walker, 1982, p. 4), thus setting at a tender age the footing of corporal punishment with respect to imposed obedience. In addition, Celie notes, "He used to beat Harpo because he was too gentle with me" (Walker, 1982, p. 29), and Shug Avery notes, too, that the effect of physical abuse can be traumatic mentally. You better not allow them make you hate yourself (Walker, 1982, p. 78). The conflict between survival and endurance is obvious when Celie states, "I do not fight back. I do not know how" (Walker, 1982, p. 21), finding the point of meeting fear, learned helplessness, systemic oppression. Lastly, the gendered struggle to resist the normalized violence is depicted through the use of the resisting character of Sofia, who states, All my life I had to fight (Walker, 1982, p. 112), and is contrasted to the silence of Celie.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, the authoritarianism of Eugene Achike is perceived in terms of physical force: "Papa had a heavy hand on the back of Mama" (Adichie, 2003, p. 45), and the corporal imposition of the religious and patriarchal dominance occurs. However, as Kambili notes, "he was striking her more severely this time, indicating escalating savage and generational transfer of terror" (Adichie, 2003, p. 68). Jaja notes, "I cannot move. My body is frozen" (Adichie, 2003, p. 102), the expression of the freezing effect on autonomy and agency of physical abuse. The aspect of feminine submission is evident in the fact that Beatrice went through violence and she bore it without uttering a word (Adichie, 2003, p. 89), which is a social requirement of feminine submission. The novel demonstrates resistance by means of defiance in a subtle way: I did not cry.

Reclaiming agency began with my head up high" (Adichie, 2003, p. 147).

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy defines violence as personal, as well as being socially organized. Ammu recalls, "He hit me very hard, and I hit the wall (Roy, 1997, p. 54), representing the suppression of the domestic violence to her gendered expectations. This physical violence against Velutha is a metaphorical caste-based violence: They beat him mercilessly (Roy, 1997, p. 221), relating the physical violence to institutional discrimination. Ammu mentions, I am alone, they can do everything they like (Roy, 1997, p. 56); therefore, isolation is one of the worsening mechanisms. Estha observes, "the cane dropped again, this time more loudly" (Roy, 1997, p. 64), and this is very much of the normalization of corporal punishment within a family structure. Finally, Ammu reminds herself that she is not afraid of him, not all the way (Roy, 1997, p. 179), indicating instances of resistance within the psyche and the physical horror. Physical violence, placed across the three novels, is not just a few acts of cruelty but a calculated tool of patriarchal and social domination, which silences women and other marginalized characters, showing systemic breakdowns. This analysis addresses the research gap by showing how literature portrays the intimate, generational, and structural dimensions of corporeal oppression, linking individual trauma to broader socio-cultural hierarchies.

Psychological Violence

Psychological violence in the selected novels shows the subtle but ubiquitous control that is exercised against women, influencing their identities, emotions, and sense of power. In *The Color Purple*, Celie suffers from long-term emotional trauma due to both her family's disregard and her romantic relationships. She thus reflects "I think it pisses God off if you walk by The Color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (Walker, 1982, p. 4), which shows that internalized fear and guilt are learned from a very early age. The isolation imposed by her stepfather is visible: "I'm poor, I'm black, I may even be ugly, but I'm here" (Walker, 1982, p. 8), which shows the self-devaluation. Celie recounts, "I don't even look at my sister. I hate them both" (Walker, 1982, p. 18), depicting how psychological oppression destroys family ties. Shug Avery observes that, "You better not let them make you hate yourself" (Walker, 1982, p. 78), emphasizing manipulation and internalization of abuse. Celie's eventual resolution demonstrates transformation: "I'm starting to feel better about myself" (Walker, 1982, p. 93), which points to the meeting between recovery in the psychological domain and support in the social one.

Psychological violence is often also related to religious and patriarchal power in *Purple Hibiscus*. Kambili says the silence was like a heavy cloth that overcame us, implying the intimidating fear within the family (Adichie, 2003, p. 12). She writes, "I heard my heart beat loudly and frighteningly at the time, (Adichie, 2003, p. 27), which demonstrates the anxiety internalization because of the ironclad control of Eugene. Beatrice is a victim: I smile at him, but my soul is breaking (Adichie, 2003, p. 46), one of the classical instances of emotional compulsion. The psychological abuse over the years has created a paralytic effect that traps Jaja in a cage that he cannot escape (Adichie, 2003, p. 85). The first step toward reclaiming her voice and self-expression is the realization that Kambili has when she senses, I wanted to speak, but the words were stuck in my throat (Adichie, 2003, p. 123). It is the awakening; the ignition of a fire that will make the character feel her voice and express herself once more.

Psychological violence in *The God of Small Things* is carried out by means of social and family norms. Ammu observes, I was a woman alone, and that made me hazardous (Roy, 1997, p. 55). This is the internalized fear that is influenced by societal judgment. The overall effects of family shame and social shaping are revealed through the complete influence of the air whispering at the characters, as Estha says, it was the air that was whispering and telling us that we were wrong (Roy, 1997, p. 62). Due to the caste persecution, Velutha is psychologically hurt: he was not only told that he was an untouchable person, but he felt it in his bones (Roy, 1997, p. 203). It is a sign

of the pervasive discrimination internalized. The fear and self-restraint also create a contradiction in that Ammu recalls, I am afraid, but I cannot cry (Roy, 1997, p. 57). In the end, Rahel ponders, memories are wounds that never heal (Roy, 1997, p. 191), and this emphasizes the psychological effects of domestic and societal violence.

Altogether, these novels demonstrate the psychological violence as a tool of systematic oppression, which impresses the emotional, cognitive, and relational worlds of women deeply. Psychological violence, unlike physical violence, is invisible and is frequently encouraged by social, religious, and caste hierarchies. Through the analysis of these texts, the work fills a literature gap regarding the way literature depicts the inner and enduring effects of domestic and structural violence, thus establishing the connection between trauma, silence, and resilience.

Economic Violence

The economic violence in the chosen novels illustrates how monetary power is a system of domination, restricting the freedom of women and establishing patriarchal systems of authority. In *The Color Purple*, the failure of Celie to control her life financially is one of the ways in which her life is controlled systemically. She says, I have never been a bad girl. I think it pisses God off if you don't work hard" (Walker, 1982, p. 5), focusing on the underlying demands for labour. Celie's dependence on her abusive husband, Albert, adds to her weakness: "He beat me because he said I looked at him the wrong way. I stay with him because I have nowhere else to go" (Walker, 1982, p. 34), making the analogy between physical and economic dependence. Sewing becomes a tool of empowerment for Celie: "I make my first pair of pants and sell them. I do feel like freedom" (Walker, 1982, p. 87). Later on, Celie starts her own business: "I own my own shop now." "This is the best evidence of economic autonomy and self-liberation" (Walker, 1982, p. 192). Shug encourages, "You got your money now, honey. You can live your life" (Walker, 1982, p. 193), reasserting the transformational action of financial independence in opposition to oppression.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene's economic dominance over his family strengthens his psychological and physical dominance. "Papa makes all the payments," Kambili observes, "We do what he says" (Adichie, 2003, p. 16), which features the power of money in one's obedience. Beatrice silently endures deprivation: "I cook and clean, but I have nothing of my own" (Adichie, 2003, p. 49), proclaiming the entrenchment of economic inequality amid gender. "We eat what he permits, talk when he orders", Kambili mentions, which "echoes the tensions between material dependence and control" (Adichie, 2003, p. 64). The home of Auntie Ifeoma is a stark contrast to this oppression: I have my own work and my own money. I can do what I want" (Adichie, 2003, p. 102) reflects the financial autonomy that empowers and gives choice. According to Jaja, financial resources are related to psychological and social freedom, as she writes; When we have some money, we can breathe (Adichie, 2003, p. 128).

In *The God of Small Things*, economic violence is exacerbated by concerns of caste and gender hierarchies. Ammu recalls, "I have no money. I can't leave" (Roy, 1997, p. 56), suggesting the way in which poverty restricts her freedom. Velutha, being an untouchable labourer, is economically marginalised: he is not allowed to touch money in our home (Roy, 1997, p. 206), the caste-based limitation in the agency of the economy. Ammu points out, "I have to beg." My children highlight the interaction between material poverty and family obligation suffer too" (Roy, 1997, p. 58). This is observed by Rahel, who says that money is the tether they tie us down, and that is systemic oppression (Roy, 1997, p. 192). The dependence of the family on male earnings becomes one of the wider societal reinforcements of gendered power: our lives are reliant on what men permit (Roy, 1997, p. 61). Rather than being bound to the economic domination of

another family, the duty of women to men is a typical aspect of the disadvantaged status of women in society (Irvine, 1999).

In all of these novels, economic violence is a powerful means of oppression, both literal and symbolic, and is directly related to physical and psychological abuse. The dependence, silence and vulnerability in women are perpetuated by the fact that women lack financial resources to depend on, resist and empower themselves. Through reviewing these articles, the book builds upon a research gap in the interpretation of the employment of economic control in literature as a systemic form of gendered violence and its impact on female agency and strength.

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is manifested in the selected novels as a filtering mechanism of control, degradation, and subjugation, and implies how patriarchal systems maintain female vulnerability and restrict agency. In *The Color Purple*, sexual abuse, which Celie experiences early in her life, defines her identity and traps her in the grip of male dominance. She remembers, "He comes to me and makes me do things. He never loves me. I say none to God alone" (Walker, 1982, p. 3), referring to the consequences of silence and fear on trauma. This mistreatment is connected to systemic power relations, because Celie is denied independence, bodily autonomy and the ability to make demands. The relations of Shug Avery to Celie are the embodiment of sexual confirmation and respect in the later period: Shug tells Celie, "You better love yourself, (Walker, 1982, p. 112), which means that the need to fulfil sexual agency is one of the elements of psychological and emotional freedom.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, the issue of sexual violence is tied to familial and religious power. Kambili observes the coercive force her father, Eugene, has: "Papa touches me, and I cannot talk. I do what he says" (Adichie, 2003, p. 42), referring to the idea of fear and obedience to what is occurring by physical and sexual threats. Beatrice endures years of sexual oppression in marriage: "He uses me as he pleases. I am entrapped" (Adichie, 2003, p. 47), which reflects the normalization of sexual domination in the domestic spaces. Adichie depicts sexual abuse as an instrument of power, contrasts the internalization of fear and self-silence of victims and the exposures to nurturing environments, like Auntie Ifeoma's household, showing alternatives in which women regain their bodily autonomy and self-expression.

In *The God of Small Things*, sexual violence intersects with caste, class and gender oppression. Ammu's relationship with Velutha is criminalized and rectally punished, intensifying the policing that pseudo-society has on this woman's sexuality: "Ammu lay with him, and it is forbidden. They will destroy us" (Roy, 1997, p. 176). This forbidden love reveals how women's sexual decisions are limited by social hierarchies (decision to violate their choices by the structural and physical violence). The story also shows the traumatic long-term effects of societal judgment on children: "Rahel cannot forget what they did to her mother . . . the same sticks to her like mud" (Roy, 1997, p. 182), which illustrates the intergenerational effects of sexualized oppression. Roy elicits that sexual violence cannot be seen as an isolated instance, but rather it is internalized in social conventions, boundaries in classes and also cultural surveillance. Both texts demonstrate that sexual violence is an instrument of domination, silencing and psychological control that is frequently coupled with economic and physical violence. The strength, agency, and eventual reclaiming of the voice of female characters underscores the transformational effectiveness of resistance and empowerment. In discussing the problem of sexual violence in literature, this research fills a knowledge gap on how stories reflect the complex effects of sexual abuse on women's identity, independence, and social status.

Trauma

Trauma, as a direct consequence of violence and a lasting psychological, emotional, and social impact, is displayed in the chosen novels as a long-term outcome of violence. The initial incidences of sexual and physical abuse imposed on Celie at an early age have caused her emotional devastation, and her trauma is absorbed in silence and self-blame. In *The Color Purple*, "I think of Nettie sometimes. I wonder what she thinks of me. I know I'm not the same. I hate my body. I hate my life" (Walker, 1982, p. 45). Walker describes trauma not as a personal struggle but as an embodiment of systemic oppression where race, gender, and economic oppression are all contributing factors to the psychological effect. The fact that Celie heals slowly through relations with Shug Avery and Sofia indicates the adaptability of trauma when survivors of it reclaim agency and support systems (Walker, 1982, p.112).

In *Purple Hibiscus*, authoritarianism in the family and religious strictness are interconnected with the trauma. Both Kambili and Jaja are in a constant psychological stress that their violent father can impose: "I feel pressure everywhere I look, the pressure of Papa, I feel the pressure of Papa, his anger... I am not able to breathe, I am not able to talk" (Adichie, 2003, p. 36). The silent suffering of Beatrice and the ultimate emotional awakening of Kambili. represent the passing of trauma across generations, and its alleviation through caring, secure conditions (Adichie, 2003, p. 101). According to the novel, the trauma manifests in many forms: it is fear, guilt, repression, and voice struggle within oppressive systems of domestic and societal organization.

In *The God of Small Things*, we encounter trauma through caste oppression, sexual oppression, and forbidden love. Ammu and Velutha's relationship have some horrendous consequences to society and family, and the children, Estha and Rahel, internalize these violations: "It is forbidden. Leave about speech, and we cannot speak of it. . . the silence is heavier than the punishment" (Roy, 1997, p. 177). Roy addresses the personal and social mediated aspect of trauma and how identity and memory were shaped in generations. The novel's fragmented narrative reflects the fractured consciousness of traumatized characters and the deprivation of continuity and agency as a result of their unprocessed experiences of loss, shame, and fear.

These narratives together show that trauma is not an individual but a collective experience that is embedded in systems of multiple oppression, including patriarchy, caste, race, and religion. Literary representations expose psychological and social aspects of trauma as well as sublimation of trauma and the possibility of recovery through resiliency, relational support, and self-expression. By examining trauma in these works, the current study contributes to the research knowledge surrounding the representation of the long-term psychological consequences of violence, the women's survival and empowering strategies they implement.

Conclusion

The analysis of *The Color Purple*, *Purple Hibiscus*, and *The God of Small Things* shows how domestic violence, including sexual, physical, psychological, and economic abuse, is a systemic mechanism of patriarchal control rather than an isolated act of cruelty. These readings demonstrate the exposure of women and children to multifaceted oppression, its resultant trauma and effect on the identity, memory, and agency of women. Sexual violence turns into a trigger of broader emotional and mental trauma, and exposure to frailty is worsened by economic dependence and social inequalities.

Furthermore, the novels show the importance of relational and social support, education, and acts of resistance in countering the impacts of trauma and in claiming agency. Narrative strategies such as non-linear timelines, fragmented memory, epistolary forms, and symbolic imagery can effectively reflect the complexity of trauma and the process of healing. This is not to say that systemic oppression and intimate abuse are without examination in literary scholarship. Still, their intersection has been characterized by significant gaps, and the authors

make an important observation: literature can provide critical illumination of survivors' experiences and of social structures that enable violence. Ultimately, these narratives lead to an understanding of the importance of agency, resilience, and empowering processes in times of patriarchal domination in their claims for promoting recovery from trauma.

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