

## Postcolonial Space and Identity in African American Women Writers' Selected Writings

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**Abstract:** This study expounds on African American women writers' fidelity to their ancestral legacy, and manipulation of the White master to the blacks in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, and *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison. For this purpose, this study claims that these writers create a space, very much similar to the postcolonial space, where their characters exercise freedom, reshape their independent identities, inscribe their brutal experiences, and rebuttal to White masters. This textual analysis takes the postcolonial dimension with the significant perspectives of Andrew Teverson and Sara Upstone's *Postcolonial Spaces*, interlinked with Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space Theory. The study sums up that it was the keenness of the Afro-American women writers that they, through the postcolonial space, wrote about the dark legacy of the past, for the socio-political changes, to regain their identity, and liberated themselves through their stories.

**Keywords:** postcolonial space, identity, Third Space, ethnicity, African American writers

### INTRODUCTION

Black women writers have continued the practice of creating literature that becomes the voice for the oppressed and exploited women, and thereby rejects the misogynistic standards claimed by the patriarchal mindsets. Furthermore, they defy the restrictions set by the old canon; instead, they add, sometimes, mystical experiences, and on the other, their writings are the conjunction of experiences including gender, class, and racial conflicts. To have a look at Afro-American's those hideous experiences of racial politics, which started with the slave trade and which is both history and memory, is a poignant task. Though the slave trade was not new in America, yet, a strange

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migration occurred in American history when European mariners brought and auctioned West African slaves to America in the mid-1500s. Most of them were war prisoners or criminals, therefore they were treated brutally. They were exposed to Christianity; thus, they worshipped in their ways what can be called Spiritual - the 'music of worship' with the addition of lyrics carrying the hope of freedom and resisting injustices.

It was only in the 1800s that Fredric Douglas, a black laborer, later on, a great writer and activist for the abolitionist movement started reading and writing, and escaped to Massachusetts. In a civil war, blacks fought for the liberation of their people and defeated the confederacy. Some southern tribes supported by Ku Klux Klan rebelled against blacks' emancipation with lynching and terrorist attacks on Northern blacks who stayed in the South and did massive destruction by dissolving churches, schools, and homes. They succeeded in expelling the Northern in 1877 and the White power structure got dominant again to suppress blacks. They were excluded from voting and these Southern states introduced Jim Crow Laws which segregated blacks from the White community and threatened them with constant violence (Ash 2010, 23). It was institutional segregation and racial disparity that led to depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in blacks, of which rural Southern blacks are still victims. It is a violation of human rights.

Southern blacks oppressed by the Whites moved to the North in the 1890s to have jobs in factories, steel mills, and meat plants in Detroit, Chicago, and Omaha. There black urban culture advanced, and musicians like King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and many others became the celebrities of the Roaring 20s or the Jazz Age. These blacks brought an air of racial separation, black pride, and return to Africa, but Harlem brought black migrants from the South, and the gathering of emerging but powerful voices, artists, and philosophers to describe American experiences, what was known as Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes was one of them, who wrote to bring sociopolitical changes as Du Bois (1998, 55) declared, "All art is propaganda and ever must be". In making and developing America, blacks have contributed and sacrificed a lot, by giving their lives, rights, culture, and identity. Richard Wright, whose book *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1947) talks about the 'inheritors of slavery' and 'death on the city pavements' sums up as:

We black folk, our history, and our present being are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, and what we endure is what America is... The differences between black folk and white folk are not blood or color, and the ties that bind us are deeper than those that separate us. The common road of hope which we all traveled has brought us into a stronger kinship than any words, laws, or legal claims (Wright 1947, 67).

He talks about what, Albert J. Raboteau calls, inclusiveness of all in a country, where American meant White and everybody else was hyphenated. Discrimination is still there, but they sustain spiritual and physical ravages and lift themselves with strength, talent, or luck to 'endure, achieve and lead' (Wright 1947, 55). Another critic, Kenneth Warren (2003, 45) puts their struggle in these words, "it is a historical record of the debates, paradoxes, triumphs, and challenges of 'establishing presence' within the American social landscape".

Furthermore, Ball Edward writes that the plantation record (or the history written on paper) was taken away from them and burnt in front of them. Likewise, McQuin, who was raised in Richmond, Virginia, writes about the same happenings, "you see, our history is often buried," and "you have to unearth it" (see Ball 1998, 196). In 1919, an armed White mob sent Black residents out of Corbin, Kentucky. It was the horrific massacre of Oklahoma in 1921 also known as the Tulsa race massacre which left a great number of people homeless, and the White mob's burning of the black enclave in Greenwood, all were tried to erase from Black history. Robinson adds that America came into being on White supremacy, and blacks were slaves; since, laws could not free even the child who was born after the rape of White-master. These were the legacies of black dispossession and injustices that Whites explicitly tried to hide in history (Christensen 2017, 88).

Similarly, black writings are the records of the dark legacy of the past, which inform that the cause of their late ancestors is voiced through creative practice. Pre-revolutionary black literature also called 'Slave Narratives' was with the subject matter of slavery - atrocities, callousness and dehumanization, resistance to its abolition, and freedom. While literature after Civil War, until 1919 or the Reconstruction Period addressed the issues of lynching, exploitation of black bodies, segregation - especially by color, migration, identity, homelessness, poverty, trauma (of slavery), nostalgia for the lost homeland, and the women's suffragette movement (Foner 2005, 45). The flowering of Negro Literature or Harlem Literature delved into the

history and the heart-rending experiences, and after 1945 these writers talked about black nationalism, post-racial identities, and modernist high art. Overall, these narratives are trials of tears (Miller 2016, 34). Art is the harbinger of future possibilities for Afro-American intellectuals. The black arts movement was a significant addition to bringing a brilliant future for blacks by giving response to Euro-Americans' oppressive cultural sensibility. This sensibility was anti-human and dominated the psyches of the Black intellectuals and artists who devised ways to destroy it so that they bring a meaningful variation to society. In this way, the purpose of this black aesthetic, which is based on ethics, was the devastation of White ideas, and ways to look at the world. They questioned those ways, like, "whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressor?" It is a profound re-evaluation of the black's presence in America through this art movement. Moreover, the movement re-evolves the idea of black nationalism that has been suppressed since the 1920s. The black arts movement replaces the idea that the Harlem Renaissance was concretely linked to the struggles of the black people but their voice and spirit were not deep-rooted in it. It also suggests that black history is full of creative possibilities that would find a way through this movement (Neal 1968).

I state the issue that African American people were forcefully sent to the South, a place where White landowners' worst acts of violence brought racial terror, degradation, and homelessness; thereby placed them into perpetual tears. Further, White Americans alienated them from their previous dwellings/space, tortured them psychologically and physically, and lost their culture, and identity in the process of slavery, which took them a long time to regain. In this way, this research explores the abuse of blacks by the White masters through the particular markers of postcolonial space, the third space, which they created, and where they were living underprivileged without the facility of education and other basic rights, along with the concept of (concocted) identity, which was lost in this whole process of slavery. However, their constructive use of this postcolonial space marks these blacks' fidelity to their ancestors, because they developed their narratives and discourses there. Hence, the study addresses the calamities and exploitations, they faced in a neglected zone, where diversity was not accepted, but through their efforts in the third space, they re-wrote history which, however, was tried to be erased. Furthermore, the postcolonial angle highlights what happens to the

culture, literature, identity, and history of the group/ethnicity/country which is dominated by the other, and how this field helps to rebuttal, spring back and reclaim the loss, as Frantz Fanon argued that the first thing that colonized people can do for finding identity and voice is to “reclaim their past” (Barry 1995, 122). However, ethnically segregated zones and the concept of margins facilitated the growth of the idea of postcolonial space, though, Teverson and Upstone’s idea of postcolonial space also helps to elaborate the inclusiveness of all in the country, America; nevertheless, instead of this concept, the American is the White (only), and every other ethnicity is hyphenated.

Yet despite their grave problems, African-Americans promote solidarity among their people for the uplift of their culture, intellectual discourse, and artistic expression which makes their efforts very much similar to the postcolonial rebuttal. In relating blacks’ efforts to postcolonial efforts, I add what I would like to say the period after the ‘dark legacy of slavery’ as the postcolonial era in the case of this study. In this period, blacks are not defined by the colonial principles of the slavery era, which again makes clear that they have not left any stone unturned to shape their destiny. Adding further, these writers have been discussed in previous literature from diverse angles including motherhood, slavery, trauma, memory, racial justice, freedom, etc., nonetheless, their experiences have rarely been taken as postcolonial. Thereby, as my argument recounts that all my selected writers allow their characters to speak through the space that may be admittedly called postcolonial space. In the case of this study, 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati house in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, pear tree in Zora Neal Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and vernacular English/communication/reading and writing in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* act as postcolonial spaces where characters reshape their identities and speak up for their rights.

Additionally, this study is a significant contribution to highlighting blacks’ hard work for equality and justice, intellectual and creative contributions, and revolutionary ideas in the form of diverse movements while living in a postcolonial space. They have proved that they are not less human or as in White discourse ‘Others’. Similarly, this study is a stark reminder for actual postcolonial nations to embrace the struggles of their ancestors for the cause of independent nations, show fidelity towards them, and write rebuttals to reclaim their loss, since the love of writing is the only way of curing trauma and regain the lost identity and past.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This qualitative research falls under the umbrella of Postcolonialism with the defining perspectives of 'Postcolonial space', interlinked with 'Third Space' and Identity. The idea of postcolonial space has been taken from the book, *Postcolonial Spaces: The Politics of Place in Contemporary Culture* (2011), while, the concepts of Third Space and Identity take their position from Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994). Postcolonialism prominently deals with the works of literature written by the natives of those countries which were colonized once. It is taken as a kind of reaction against the cultural imposition and values of the colonizers. Similarly, the process was not limited to the Third World countries and their people but it was applicable to other contexts as well. Though it is not the case with the blacks, their experiences are very much similar to the colonized people; and in a very similar manner, their writings are either exposing those unpleasant happenings or are a response to them.

The idea of postcolonial space originated from the margins. Center can be defined in connection with the margin; therefore, paradoxically, the 'Others' or who are at the margins are also given some places like the ghetto, the slum, the harem, the zenana, the colony, the third world the private or the South in case of blacks. Further, these spaces and the behavior of those living there are entwined. Physical and geographical borders aside, there are other invisible hurdles to affect human psychology and to stuck individuals inside that place like boundaries circling the colony, or ethnically segregated zones (see Teverson and Upstone 2011).

Adding further, Bhabha calls this postcolonial space a 'third space' where colonized people are forced to live but they rewrite their history and recover their identity there. It is quite relevant to my topic to analyze the texts under Bhabha's concept of 'third space', because it speaks about the 'politics of change', to those ways in which the landscape of postcolonial settings might be put under question for alteration. Secondly, it has 'intellectual purpose' because of a strong spatial metaphor (for space's political and epistemological coherence); it talks about something extraordinary instead of the colonizer/colonized binary as Edward Soja puts that spatial metaphors provide a reconsidering approach to know the analytical and political meaning of 'third space' within the broader perspective of spatial theory (see Bhabha 1994, 35).

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of third space energizes the idea of the construction of hybrid identities. He suggests that accepting cultural diversity shows the acceptance of liberal tradition appreciated by every civilized person. It is associated with multiculturalism and later on to equality with no challenge to the one in power, hence, the dominance of the no one. He delineates further, that in the West, it is often under the mask of racism, and a concept of cultural difference rests in a place called liminality, alterity, or otherness. So, the third space favors the subjugated with a different cultural production, and it relocates the histories of its constitution, and sets a new authority, with new political beginnings (Bhabha 1994, 39).

#### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

*Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, a literary classic, Pulitzer Prize winner novel ranges from history to feminism and from home to characterization in the world of research. However, the concept of postcolonial space and third space needs more exploration. Similarly, the concept of home has seldomly been focused upon by critics except for Justine Tally, and Danielle Russell. Theodor O' Mason Jr. states that Morrison's stories unite communities. She writes with ache and sensitivity. She sympathizes with the powerless plight of her female characters and advocates for their case by giving them a voice. Women's power is to speak to the opponent and to influence them through actions. Morrison has done both; she has spoken eloquently and influenced all by her writings. This focus also seems a part of mourning where she addresses those uncontrollable forces and supplicates for their rights. *Beloved* is taken as the trail of tears and a searing tale while putting in context the true story of Margaret Garner who ran from Kentucky's uncanny and haunted house to take refuge in Ohio.

Morrison shows, very much like postcolonial writers, the protagonist's struggle with cultural in-betweenness by using the motif of the home.

I see Toni Morrison's *Beloved* with its primary setting 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati house very much similar to the postcolonial space where White masters-imposed objectivity is questioned, inflictions are re-engraved, and then metamorphosed. All - the families, children, the names, the ancestors, the future and the community - have been lost in the process of slavery, when they have been subjugated to others, exploited, and inflicted by the Masters, as

Bhabha (1994, 56) explains that “the purpose of colonial discourse is to explain the colonized as perverted types based on racial origins, so that they may justify their power and conquest”. House 124, Cincinnati, Ohio state in the North, (as blacks were put in North and South for Plantation purposes) is the third space as well, where these blacks are open to creating a hegemonic discourse for their voice, which is otherwise, suppressed and listened no more. Black characters are free to create an independent discourse which signifies individual empowerment and the development of subjectivity. Even Sweet Home was not a safe place under the surveillance of cruel school teachers; rather it was with a deepened sense of homelessness where Sixo, Paul F, and Halle perished and others escaped like Sethe by refusing the enslaving project.

House 124 is the only safe place where the ‘Other’ has freed itself from the supremacy of the master and colonial ideology. It is the place where they revisit their past, as Morrison speaks in an interview, “Black people have a story and that story has to be heard. There was oral literature before there was print. There were griots. They memorized it. People heard it. It is important that there is sound in my books- that you can hear it”. Moreover, she adds that “white people are not part of my literary world since they have denounced us” (Morrison 1995, xx). Morrison’s characters are embraced, like Sethe and Paul D., but first, they are thrown into the hostile realm of the masters. When these slaves break the silence in the third space, they write the discourses of oppressed colonial history, which was denied otherwise; and their right to body and soul was also snatched. Hence, the story of *Beloved* signifies the community within that postcolonial space, where they react against the White traditions to preserve their own tradition, culture, and history.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a lyrical account of Janie Crawford’s passive life while living with problematic family history and toxic masculinity. Within her subservient life is the incessant struggle to reach self-actualization. It is understood that colonial structures have a compact control over the identity of the colonized others, who are at the margins through their Eurocentric worldview. The third space is very much relevant to Hurston’s powerful narrative, for it has a significant role in deconstructing male authority. Her novel asserts that separate and independent female identity is essential for self-empowerment, as Bhabha (1994, 39) claims, that we exist “in relation to others its look or locus”. So, Homi



Bhabha also forces us to claim an identity, which is important for a being. Janie's journey in the novel is a quest for a true identity for which she needs to counterattack and reject all the hurdles that disrupt her intuitive acuity. She attains a complex sense of self through the long journey of gender politics of marriage in the South. It is not the shifting marriages that enable her to get empowered but rather engaging in rebellious activities while living in a third space. Her vision inspired under the pear tree may indicate innate fear of her decolonized self in a relationship with Johny Taylor, a hybrid male, (as Bhabha argues that colonialism ends in hybridity) but also 'Other', in the novel, whom Jennie transforms into an 'glorious being' as Nanny says, "she bolted upright and peered out of the window and saw Johnny Taylor lacerating her Janie with a kiss" (Hurston 1937, 44).

In a Postcolonial sense, he is appropriating Janie's body by adding up to her intuitive revelation through the patriarchal world of sexuality. Nanny is worried that she might not be forced to take the same role as her mother and grandmother were forced to take during slavery. That's why she forces her to marry for her protection. Jennie, out of that patriarchal and colonial control prefers to opt for a third space, where she liberates herself. From Washburn's house to Nanny's house to Killicks, she starts her journey in space for the first time after leaving Kellick's farm, and feelings of "sudden newness and change" (Hurston 1937, 56) come. Though she interacts with different models of the dominant culture, she does not become a victim and goes on to develop an identity and makes her own voice dominant. In her third space, she is an empowered woman.

The idea of 'politics of space' enables us to understand why she embraces rebellious behavior which brings an evolution in her, her journey "tuh de horizon and back" (Hurston 1937, 191). It is through this space that she cultivates her vision, agency, and voice. Hurston praises Janie's potential for bringing a productive change to generate and sustain the space of empowerment in her while inhabiting the interior and exterior spaces.

My third selected work *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker is an award-winning novel. Colonial oppression also includes politics of location encompassing the territorial, including the physical location of the person and proprietorship of the land in Walker's *The Color Purple*. In the case of these blacks, they were taken away from their land and pushed to the South to live in ghettos. Colonial oppression has suppressed the voice of Walker's narrator, other and the inferior -

Celie from the very beginning, “you better not never tell nobody but God, It’d kill your mammy” (Walker 1982, 3). Celie is without identity. I am/ I have always been a good girl (Ibid, 1). Alice Walker is preserving black culture while introducing some native words and gains success in attaining the identity of her protagonist through her continuous struggle and rejection of atrocities. Walker manages to expose colonial language in relation to power with which they commit violence to cure Africans - who are with Master’s given identity and whom they think uncivilized and barbaric. Olinka’s whole tribe’s identity signifies brutality, exclusion, and degradation with the death of their language. This is what one of the White inspectors foreshadows during his visit to the place.

Celie, as a colonized does not have the freedom to utter what she herself wants. She is isolated. However, Celie’s letter to God, the unnamed step-father manages to hide with the help of her sister, Nettie. Celie comes, from the world of slavery to the world of freedom, when she is exposed to the world with the help of Sofia, quite the opposite, who has experienced colonial harshness in the rural south until she manages to find postcolonial space. She attacks the town’s white Mayor for his injustices, she is beaten in response and is sent to jail for twelve years. She has a traumatized memory and is continuously abashed. Shug is another character, who helps Celie to build a worldview when Celie reveals her decision of leaving Mr. Albert, who has been shown as Mr. ... throughout the text. He is the subject in this White system who is accepted as (Mr. ...) without any further question. He can be called the privileged male of the White community (he considers himself privileged, though he is black. He has internalized Whiteman’s privileges and acts like him). He shouts upon his rejection, “Who do you think you are? (...) You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you poor, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam... you nothing at all!” (Walker 1982, 187). His words clearly construct an othering discourse to suppress Celie, whom he took as the colonized other. Mr.... ’s verbal assault on Celie’s race, class, and gender respectively put him in the White man’s norm to act as a master, disgrace the subjugated other, and make them marginalized. Celie is nothing to him, whom he disqualifies with a range of insulting remarks, which indirectly also signify that he is oppressing his own race. He himself is oppressed in fact, as he is without any identity in the novel.

Shug, whom men of the society have labeled as a tramp due to her sexual poise, is the woman who helps and influences Celie to react against her husband's Western ideology. She is the woman who changes Celie's worldview as well, "us talk and talk about God, but I'm still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking about him I never truly notice nothing God makes. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it comes from?)" (Walker 1982, 167). Celie brings to Shug's notice that she has stopped writing to God because she has lost her belief in God. Shug advises her to re-imagine God as non-white or as Celie thinks. Now, Celie believes that God is an incorporeal body with no gender, race, or color. For Celie, God is not a paternal authority now, which helps her resist Mr..... She outbursts his rejection, an outburst which was due to repressed longings deeply embedded in silence, and passivity, which are no more silent or passive now. She outbursts with power and authority. She frees herself from the false powers, that control her independence and self, first in the form of her father and then in the form of her husband.

Additionally, Celie finds the place now, which acts as a postcolonial space (because in that space she is free to do what she wants), when she writes in vernacular English, first of all. "Every time I say something the way I say it, she corrects me until I say it some other way" (Walker 1982, 215). When Celie expresses herself in that postcolonial space, she tries to gain freedom and an independent voice. First, she was repressed by a superior power, but now she understands that she would not lose her identity. Now, letter writing has become the way of her independent expression without the interference of any dominant power. It is a way to articulate blacks' dreams, ideas, and opinions. Walker, through this letter-writing approach, puts forward her idea of freely expressing oneself as a crucial point to developing a sense of individuality and freedom, as Celie utters, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice says to everything listening. But I'm here" (Ibid., 214). This sense of individuality and freedom comes when she takes letters from her sister Nettie and transforms herself from a writer to a reader. Despite being colonized, and inferior, she gets to know that she has a voice and an expression due to her ability of reading and writing. This literary freedom makes her more confident further helping her toward preserving her space in her own culture. She preserves her culture to shape and regain her identity, and later she learns the art of sewing and finds a respectable

place in society by sewing pants. It is the point when she gets freedom from Albert; and finds her third space, an independent world in having her dream job of sewing pants for men and women equally. It is through Alice Walker's writings that the perspective of women's exploitation has been exposed and Celie is able to regain her identity in the postcolonial space, where she is able to utter whatever, she wants and act freely.

## CONCLUSION

This research concludes through the selected literary texts, that America operates under the mask of racism. The cultural difference rests on the bases of the allocation of particular places to marginalized groups, taken as 'Other'. It is only through the third space or postcolonial space, that subjugated characters of all these selected writers, either caged by the masters or in the control of noxious masculinity get favor to produce a new culture, redefine themselves, and give themselves a new identity in this new world. This research has also concluded that it is not only a matter of redefining themselves, but they evoke their traumatic memories of killings and vicious slavery, rewrite their past, and, in so doing, do justice to the legacy of their forefathers. Moreover, studies of secondary literature have shown their continuous literary efforts to question White oppressions and to show how blacks' history is filled with creative possibilities, and this ingenuity is a harbinger of a brilliant future, where they hope for complete freedom, equality, and justice for them.

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