

## IDENTITY, TRAUMA, AND LIBERATION: WOMEN'S EXISTENTIAL DILEMMAS IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED AND ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE

*\*Bazila Ehsan and \*\*Sheenam*

*\* Research Scholars, Department of English, Central University of Kashmir*

### Abstract

*This research endeavours to explore the existential crises experienced by the female characters in Toni Morrison's "Beloved" and Alice Walker's "The Color Purple." An existentialist lens is employed to explore the existential dilemmas faced by these women, encompassing questions of authenticity, agency, and the search for meaning amidst adversity. Through a comprehensive analysis that encompasses protagonists and supporting characters alike, the paper seeks to elucidate the subtle complexities of female subjectivity and existential struggle within the context of historical and cultural frameworks. Drawing upon a feminist literary perspective, this research explores the experiences of female characters, interrogating the intersections of race, gender, and power dynamics. Furthermore, Employing a comparative approach, this study delves into the collective experiences of women across both texts, examining themes of identity, trauma, and societal oppression. Also, by addressing the collective experiences of women across both texts, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of the complexities of female existence and the enduring pursuit of agency and liberation amidst oppressive societal structures.*

**Keywords:** *Existentialism, Feminism, Race, Gender, Resistance, Afro-American fiction, inter-generational trauma.*

**Copyright © 2024 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

Existential crisis, within the context of existentialist philosophy and literature, denotes a profound state of psychological turmoil and philosophical introspection experienced by individuals when confronting fundamental questions about the nature of existence, purpose, and meaning in life. It is characterised by a pervasive sense of disorientation, anxiety, and alienation stemming from the realisation of one's own mortality, the limitations of human knowledge, and the absence of inherent meaning or purpose in the universe. Existential crises often arise in response to existential themes such as freedom, responsibility, authenticity, and the confrontation of existential givens, such as death and isolation. Individuals grappling with existential crises may undergo a process of existential questioning and self-examination, seeking to reconcile their subjective experiences with the existential absurdity and uncertainty inherent in human existence.

Within the African American experience, existential crisis takes on unique dimensions, influenced by the historical context of systemic oppression, racial discrimination, and intergenerational trauma. For African Americans, existential crises are often compounded by the pervasive realities of racial injustice, economic marginalisation, and cultural erasure, leading to heightened feelings of existential disorientation and alienation. The legacy of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and ongoing struggles for civil rights imbue African American existential crises with a profound sense of collective trauma and existential angst. Moreover, the intersectionality of race, gender, and class further complicates the existential dilemmas faced by African American women, who navigate the intersecting forces of racism, sexism, and socio-economic disparities. Despite these challenges, African Americans' existential crises also serve as catalysts for

cultural resilience, collective resistance, and existential transformation, as individuals and communities confront existential absurdity and existential uncertainty with resilience, creativity, and a steadfast commitment to social justice and liberation. Through existential introspection and philosophical inquiry, African Americans grapple with questions of identity, agency, and belonging, ultimately seeking to reclaim their humanity and assert their existential autonomy in the face of systemic oppression and existential adversity.

The experience of existential crisis among African women diverges from that of men due to the condition of being doubly marginalised and the intersectionality of gender with other axes of identity such as race, class, and ethnicity. African women encounter unique existential dilemmas shaped by patriarchal structures, gendered violence, and cultural expectations that intersect with broader socio-political contexts. Historically, African women have faced systemic oppression and marginalisation, stemming from colonialism, slavery, and patriarchy, which have profoundly shaped their existential experiences. The imposition of colonial rule and patriarchal norms subjected African women to multiple layers of oppression, relegating them to subordinate roles within both colonial and indigenous societies. The legacy of colonialism, apartheid, and structural racism has entrenched socio-economic inequalities that disproportionately affect African women, exacerbating feelings of existential insecurity and existential uncertainty. Additionally, the impacts of globalisation, neoliberalism, and environmental degradation pose existential threats to African women's livelihoods and well-being, further heightening their vulnerability to existential crises.

Gender-based violence, economic exploitation, and social exclusion exacerbate existential dislocation among African women, leading to heightened feelings

of alienation, existential angst, and existential absurdity. The persistence of gender disparities in access to education, healthcare, and economic resources further constrains African women's opportunities for self-realisation and existential fulfilment. Additionally, cultural expectations and traditional gender roles dictate women's behaviour, limiting their agency and autonomy and perpetuating existential crises related to identity, authenticity, and purpose. Despite these challenges, African women's existential crises also serve as sites of resilience, resistance, and existential transformation. Through collective action, feminist organising, and cultural expression, African women mobilise to challenge systems of oppression, reclaim their agency, and assert their existential autonomy. By engaging in processes of existential questioning and philosophical inquiry, African women contest dominant narratives, interrogate oppressive structures, and envision alternative futures grounded in principles of justice, equity, and liberation. Through their resilience, creativity, and collective solidarity, African women navigate existential crises with determination, dignity, and a steadfast commitment to realising their full humanity and reclaiming their rightful place in shaping the destiny of the continent and the world. African American women authors have deeply explored the theme of existential crisis in their novels, offering substantial narratives that exposes the intersections between race, gender, and existential angst within the African American community. Through a diverse range of characters and stories, these authors delve into the existential dilemmas faced by African American women, shedding light on historical trauma, systemic oppression, and cultural expectations on women's individual and collective identity. Authors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Octavia Butler, Nella Larsen, and Jesmyn Ward have made significant contributions towards this exploration.

Toni Morrison, born Chloe Ardelia Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, was a prolific and celebrated African American author, essayist, and literary scholar. Growing up as an African American woman in the racially segregated Midwest during the mid-20th century, Morrison encountered firsthand the adverse effects of systemic racism and racial prejudice. As a child, she witnessed racial segregation in her community and experienced the indignities of racial discrimination, which left an indelible mark on her consciousness. Throughout her life, Morrison drew upon these experiences to inform her understanding of race, identity, and power dynamics in American society. Her novels often explore the complexities of racial oppression, cultural erasure, and the enduring legacy of slavery on African American lives. Throughout her illustrious career, Morrison authored numerous seminal works that left an indelible mark on American literature and cultural discourse. Morrison's body of work encompasses a diverse range of genres and themes, including historical fiction, magical realism, and social commentary. Her novels, such as "Song of Solomon" (1977), "Sula" (1973), and "Jazz" (1992), interrogate the complexities of African American experience, offering nuanced portrayals of love, loss, and resilience amidst adversity.

Her magnum opus, "Beloved" (1987), won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and solidified her reputation as one of the foremost literary voices of her generation. Drawing upon themes of slavery, memory, and trauma, "Beloved" delves into the haunting legacy of slavery on individual and collective consciousness, offering a searing critique of America's racial past and its enduring impact on African American lives.

Toni Morrison's "Beloved" stands as a seminal work in African American literature, renowned for its profound exploration of the legacy of slavery, trauma, and the search for identity. Set in the post-Civil War era, the

novel centers on the character of Sethe, an escaped slave haunted by the trauma of her past and the ghostly presence of her deceased daughter, Beloved. Through a nonlinear narrative structure and rich symbolism, Morrison delves into the psychological and emotional depths of her characters, illuminating the complexities of their experiences with slavery's dehumanizing effects. "Beloved" confronts themes of memory, remembrance, and the enduring impact of historical trauma on individual and collective consciousness. In *Beloved*, the existential crisis faced by women is intricately woven into the fabric of the narrative, reflecting the profound psychological and philosophical turmoil arising from their lived experiences under slavery and its aftermath. The novel delves into the fundamental existential themes of identity, memory, and the search for meaning, illustrating how the historical and systemic oppression of slavery disrupts the women's sense of self and agency. The trauma of enslavement leads to a fragmented and often painful self-perception, where the past continuously intrudes upon the present, challenging the characters' ability to forge coherent and autonomous identities. Morrison's portrayal of women underscores the struggle to reconcile their humanity with the dehumanising forces that sought to reduce them to mere property. The existential crisis manifests in the way they grapple with haunting memories, the loss of loved ones, and the necessity to find purpose and meaning in a world that has been profoundly altered by violence and oppression. Through lyrical prose and symbolic depth, Morrison captures the existential dread and resilience of these women, highlighting their enduring quest for self-definition, empowerment, and healing within a legacy of trauma that seeks to erase their individuality and reduce them to sub-human entities. "Beloved" thus serves as a powerful meditation on the existential dimensions of

suffering, memory, and the indomitable will to reclaim one's identity and purpose amidst the enduring shadows of historical atrocities.

There are multiple women characters in Morrison's *Beloved* that particularly deal with the theme of existential crisis. Characters like Sethe, Beloved, Denver, Baby Suggs, Ella and Lady Jones, confront the trauma of slavery and its lingering effects on their identities and relationships. Their struggles to reconcile their pasts with their presents reflect the profound existential dilemmas inherent in the legacy of slavery and oppression. Sethe's existential crisis, for example, is an exploration of identity, memory, and the quest for self-definition amidst the enduring scars of slavery. Throughout the novel, Sethe grapples with the haunting legacy of her traumatic past, which shapes her sense of self and her interactions with the world around her. Her existential crisis is deeply rooted in the psychological and emotional turmoil resulting from her experiences as an enslaved woman and the extreme measures she took to protect her children from the horrors of that institution. Central to Sethe's existential crisis is the act of infanticide she commits, killing her daughter Beloved to prevent her from being recaptured and subjected to the brutalities of slavery. This act, while driven by a profound maternal instinct to protect, leaves Sethe in a perpetual state of guilt and self-recrimination. The memory of this event is a constant presence in her life, symbolized by the haunting figure of Beloved, who returns to disrupt Sethe's tenuous grasp on reality and force her to confront the suppressed traumas of her past. Sethe's struggle with her identity is compounded by the dehumanizing effects of slavery, which sought to strip her of her individuality and reduce her to mere property. In response, Sethe's fierce determination to assert her agency and protect her children can be seen as an attempt to reclaim her humanity and autonomy. However, this assertion of agency comes at a great

personal cost, leading to a fractured sense of self as she oscillates between viewing herself as a nurturing mother and a perpetrator of violence. However, the return of *Beloved* acts as a catalyst for Sethe's existential crisis, compelling her to engage in a painful process of memory and reconciliation. *Beloved's* presence forces Sethe to confront the unresolved aspects of her past, including the traumatic memories she has tried to suppress. This confrontation is both cathartic and destructive, as it allows Sethe to acknowledge her suffering but also threatens to engulf her in a cycle of guilt and despair.

The character of *Beloved* is a complex and enigmatic figure who embodies the physical and spiritual manifestations of unresolved trauma and existential crisis. *Beloved's* presence in the narrative is both a literal and symbolic return of the past, compelling the characters, particularly Sethe, to confront the haunting memories of slavery and the profound existential questions these memories evoke. Through *Beloved*, Morrison explores themes of identity, memory, and the search for meaning within the fractured context of a post-slavery existence. *Beloved's* existential crisis is intrinsically linked to her ambiguous ontological status. As a character who exists between life and death, past and present, *Beloved's* identity is marked by an inherent instability and fluidity. This liminal existence reflects the broader existential condition of those who have been denied a coherent and stable sense of self by the dehumanising forces of slavery. *Beloved's* return to 124 Bluestone Road is not merely a haunting but a visceral manifestation of the past's unresolved trauma that continues to shape the present. Her interactions with Sethe and Denver reveal a deep-seated need for recognition, belonging, and affirmation of her existence. *Beloved's* repeated demands for Sethe's attention and affection can be interpreted as a desperate attempt to anchor her identity and find meaning in a world that has rendered her existence uncertain and

ephemeral. This need for validation is evident in her physical and emotional dependence on Sethe, symbolising a yearning to reconnect with her lost humanity and history.

The existential crisis of Beloved is further compounded by her fragmented memories and the disjointed nature of her consciousness. Her recollections of the Middle Passage and the traumatic experiences of slavery are conveyed through disjointed and poetic language, reflecting the disintegration of her sense of self and time. These fragmented memories underscore the disorienting effects of trauma, which disrupt the continuity of identity and the ability to find coherent meaning in one's experiences. Beloved's struggle to articulate her past and her identity highlights the existential dilemma of reconstructing a self that has been irrevocably shattered by historical violence. Also, Beloved's interactions with other characters also reveals her existential plight. Her relationship with Denver, for instance, is marked by a complex dynamic of need and dependency. Denver's initial fascination with Beloved and subsequent realisation of the destructive nature of her presence reflect the broader tension between memory and survival. Denver's eventual decision to seek help from the community signifies a break from the paralysing grip of the past, contrasting with Beloved's entrapment in her existential crisis. Moreover, Beloved's influence on Sethe reveals the cyclical nature of trauma and the difficulty of breaking free from its hold. Sethe's obsession with Beloved represents an attempt to atone for past sins and reclaim a lost part of herself, yet it also traps her in a cycle of guilt and self-destruction. Beloved's existence becomes a conduit through which Sethe's unresolved trauma and existential questions are continuously revisited, preventing her from achieving a sense of closure or forward movement. Therefore, Beloved serves multiple purposes in the text, indicating how Morrison uses the character of Beloved to delve

into the profound existential crises faced by those who have been subjected to the brutalities of slavery. Beloved's fragmented identity, her insatiable need for validation, and her disjointed memories encapsulate the disorienting effects of trauma and the struggle to find meaning in a world marked by historical atrocities.

Next to Beloved is Denver's journey which is an exploration of identity, isolation, and self-discovery. Born in the traumatic aftermath of her mother Sethe's escape from slavery, Denver's life is deeply entangled with the shadows of her family's past. Her existential crisis is marked by a struggle to define herself independently of the haunting legacy of slavery and the pervasive presence of her deceased sister, Beloved. Initially, Denver's existential crisis is characterized by profound isolation. Physically and emotionally secluded at 124 Bluestone Road, she grows up in an environment overshadowed by her mother's trauma and the community's ostracism. This isolation exacerbates Denver's feelings of alienation and uncertainty about her place in the world. Her identity is inextricably linked to her family's painful history, and she grapples with a deep-seated fear of abandonment and loss. The arrival of Beloved intensifies Denver's existential turmoil. Initially, she perceives Beloved's return as a chance to reconnect with a lost part of her family, viewing her as both a sibling and a companion. However, this relationship quickly becomes a source of further existential conflict. Denver's initial enchantment with Beloved transforms into a realisation of the destructive influence Beloved exerts on their household. As Beloved's demands and presence grow increasingly oppressive, Denver is forced to confront the reality that her sister's return is not a restorative event but a manifestation of their unresolved traumas. Denver's path to resolving her existential crisis begins with her decision to seek help from the outside world. This act marks a pivotal moment of self-assertion and independence. By leaving the confines of 124



Bluestone Road, Denver embarks on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. Her engagement with the community, particularly her interactions with Lady Jones and other supportive figures, allows her to step out of her mother's shadow and carve out her own identity. This transition from isolation to community involvement signifies Denver's movement towards self-actualisation. Furthermore, Denver's existential crisis is deeply tied to her relationship with her mother. As she matures, Denver begins to understand the depth of Sethe's suffering and the motivations behind her actions. This understanding fosters a complex blend of empathy, responsibility, and the desire for autonomy. Denver's growing awareness of her mother's humanity and the historical weight she carries leads her to take on a protective role, culminating in her decision to seek help when Sethe becomes consumed by her guilt and Beloved's influence. Morrison, therefore, uses Denver's character to illustrate the transformative power of resilience and the search for identity amidst historical trauma. Her movement from isolation to community involvement symbolises the potential for healing and growth through connection and support. By stepping beyond the confines of her family's past, Denver begins to forge a new path for herself, one that acknowledges but is not wholly defined by the legacy of slavery.

Baby Suggs emerges as a pivotal character whose existential crisis encapsulates the deep seated psychological and spiritual turmoil faced by formerly enslaved individuals seeking to reclaim their humanity in a post-slavery society. Having been separated from all but one of her children and enduring the brutal realities of slavery, she confronts a profound sense of loss and dislocation. Her release from slavery, while ostensibly a moment of liberation, also marks the beginning of a deep and painful journey toward self-discovery and healing. Freed by her son Halle, Baby Suggs moves to Cincinnati, where she becomes a spiritual leader in her community, known for her

gatherings in the Clearing where she encourages former slaves to love their bodies and selves—actions that serve as radical acts of self-affirmation in defiance of the dehumanising forces they endured. In the Clearing, Baby Suggs' sermons are a direct response to her existential crisis. By urging her community to love themselves, she attempts to restore a sense of dignity and humanity that slavery sought to strip away. These gatherings are cathartic, allowing both Baby Suggs and her community to confront and process their collective trauma. This communal act of reclamation and affirmation is a crucial aspect of her existential struggle, highlighting her role as a healer and a symbol of resistance against the erasure of their identities. However, the existential crisis deepens when Baby Suggs is confronted with the violent consequences of Sethe's act of infanticide. The murder of her granddaughter Beloved and the subsequent ostracism by the community devastate her. Baby Suggs retreats into a state of profound spiritual and existential desolation, symbolised by her withdrawal into bed, where she spends her days contemplating colours. This retreat signifies her disillusionment and exhaustion, as she grapples with the weight of her past and the apparent futility of her efforts to heal and uplift her community. Her focus on colours during this period of retreat is emblematic of her search for meaning in a world that has been rendered senseless by suffering and loss. The simplicity of the colours offers a form of solace and a way to cope with the overwhelming trauma that words and traditional religious practices fail to address. This act of focusing on colours can be seen as an attempt to find beauty and order in a world marred by chaos and brutality, reflecting a deeply personal and quiet form of resistance against despair. Through Baby Suggs, Morrison illustrates the intricate and painful process of confronting and attempting to heal from the legacies of slavery. Her existential crisis encapsulates the broader struggle of formerly enslaved

individuals to rebuild their identities and lives in the aftermath of such profound dehumanisation. In conclusion, Baby Suggs' journey from spiritual leader to a disillusioned elder highlight the profound challenges of healing and finding meaning amidst relentless trauma and loss.

Ella, a character shaped by the brutal experiences of slavery, embodies the struggle to reclaim a sense of identity and autonomy in a world that has systematically sought to obliterate her humanity. Her existential crisis is characterised by a profound confrontation with her past, an enduring search for personal agency, and a complex relationship with the concepts of justice and forgiveness. Ella's traumatic history as an enslaved woman is the foundational element of her existential crisis. She endured severe sexual abuse and exploitation at the hands of a white man and his son, an experience that left her with deep psychological scars and a profound sense of anger and disillusionment. This trauma has a lasting impact on her sense of self and her perception of the world around her, fuelling a hardened exterior and a relentless determination to never be subjugated again. Ella's crisis is marked by a struggle to reconcile these experiences with her need for personal agency and dignity. A significant aspect of Ella's existential crisis is her vehement rejection of any form of dependence or vulnerability. Her past experiences have taught her that vulnerability is dangerous, leading to a guarded and often harsh demeanour. This protective armour is both a source of strength and a barrier to genuine emotional connection and healing. Ella's insistence on self-reliance and her refusal to be victimised again are central to her identity, but they also isolate her from potential sources of support and community. Her decision to lead the women in an exorcism of *Beloved* signifies a crucial moment of action and empowerment. This act can be seen as a way for Ella to exert control over the remnants of slavery's legacy, confronting and

attempting to eradicate the ghost of the past that haunts Sethe and her family. By organising this communal effort, Ella asserts her agency and takes a stand against the lingering effects of trauma and oppression. However, this also reflects her complex relationship with forgiveness and justice, as she channels her unresolved anger and pain into this act of communal intervention. Furthermore, Ella's interactions with Sethe highlight her internal conflicts and the broader themes of forgiveness and redemption. While she initially judges Sethe harshly for her act of infanticide, Ella ultimately participates in the community's effort to support and redeem Sethe. This shift reflects a nuanced understanding of the complexities of trauma and the ways in which individuals cope with unbearable choices. Ella's participation in the exorcism is a testament to her recognition of the need for collective action and solidarity, despite her own personal reservations and pain. Through Ella, Morrison explores the intricate interplay between personal healing and communal solidarity, highlighting the complexities of navigating an existence marked by both profound suffering and remarkable strength.

Lady Jones is a character whose existential crisis is intricately connected to her mixed-race identity and her role within the African American community. Her experiences reflect the broader struggles of identity formation, belonging, and self-worth amidst the racial and social hierarchies of post-slavery America. Through Lady Jones, Morrison delves into the complexities of racial discrimination and the quest for personal and communal validation. Lady Jones' existential crisis is rooted in her identity as a mixed-race woman. Born to a black mother and a white father, she occupies a liminal space within a society that rigidly categorises individuals based on race. This biracial heritage subjects her to rejection from both the black and white communities, leaving her in a state of profound alienation and identity confusion. The

constant sense of not belonging anywhere profoundly impacts her self-perception and contributes to an ongoing struggle with feelings of inadequacy and rejection. Her work as a schoolteacher is a significant aspect of how Lady Jones confronts her existential crisis. Despite the societal limitations imposed on her, she dedicates herself to educating the children in her community. This role provides her with a sense of purpose and an avenue through which she can assert her value and identity. By empowering others through education, Lady Jones attempts to transcend her own feelings of marginalisation and create a positive impact on the lives of those who share her experiences of racial discrimination and social exclusion. However, Lady Jones' existential crisis is compounded by the internalised racism and colourism within the African American community itself. Her lighter skin makes her a target of suspicion and resentment among some members of the community, further complicating her efforts to establish a sense of belonging. This internal conflict is a reflection of the broader societal tensions and the insidious ways in which racial hierarchies infiltrate and undermine solidarity within marginalised communities. Her crisis is further highlighted through her relationship with Denver. When Denver seeks her help, Lady Jones is initially surprised but ultimately provides support, demonstrating her commitment to the well-being of the community despite her personal struggles. This act of kindness signifies a moment of resolution in her existential journey, where she transcends her feelings of alienation to fulfil her role as a nurturer and educator. It is through these acts of service and connection that Lady Jones finds a measure of solace and validation, reinforcing her sense of purpose.

Morrison uses Lady Jones to explore the themes of resilience and agency amidst systemic oppression. Despite her marginalised position, Lady Jones' dedication to teaching and her willingness to support

Denver illustrate her capacity to find meaning and assert her identity through acts of kindness and empowerment. Her existential crisis, while deeply personal, also serves as a broader commentary on the ways in which marginalised individuals navigate and resist the oppressive structures that seek to define and limit them.

Alice Walker, born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia, is a distinguished African American author, poet, and activist whose literary contributions have impacted American literature and cultural discourse. Alice Walker's literary works span a diverse range of genres and themes, each characterised by her distinctive voice, deep insight, and unwavering commitment to social justice. From her early novels, such as "The Third Life of Grange Copeland" (1970) and "Meridian" (1976), which explore the complexities of race, gender, and identity in the American South, to her seminal novel "The Color Purple" (1982), which earned her the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and remains a landmark achievement in African American literature, Walker's oeuvre embodies a profound exploration of the African American experience. Additionally, Walker's nonfiction works, including "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose" (1983) and "Living by the Word" (1988), illuminate her commitment to feminism, social activism, and the power of storytelling to enact social change. Through her literary contributions, Alice Walker has left an indelible mark on American literature and cultural discourse, inspiring readers and activists to confront injustice, celebrate diversity, and strive for a more just and compassionate world.

Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" is a seminal work of literature that delves into the lives of African American women in the early 20th century South. Set against the backdrop of systemic racism, sexism, and poverty, the novel follows the journey of Celie, a young African American woman, as she navigates through the



complexities of love, identity, and self-discovery. Through a series of letters addressed to God, Celie chronicles her experiences of abuse, exploitation, and resilience, ultimately finding her voice and reclaiming her agency. The novel also explores the bonds of sisterhood and friendship, particularly through Celie's relationship with the vibrant and independent Shug Avery. However, "The Color Purple" particularly deals with existential crises through its exploration of the African American female experience in the early 20th century South. The novel delves into the psychological and philosophical turmoil faced by its characters as they confront questions of identity, purpose, and belonging. Through the interconnected stories of Celie, Shug Avery, and other women in the narrative, Walker examines the ways in which individuals navigate the existential absurdity and uncertainty inherent in human existence.

For example, Celie's journey in "The Color Purple" is an exploration of existential crisis, as she grapples with questions of identity, purpose, and belonging amidst a life marked by abuse, oppression, and isolation. Celie's existential crisis is deeply rooted in her experiences of trauma and dehumanisation, beginning in childhood and continuing into adulthood. Through her letters to God, Celie chronicles her inner turmoil and quest for meaning. One aspect of Celie's existential crisis is her struggle with self-worth and agency. From a young age, Celie is subjected to physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather and later her husband, Albert. This relentless mistreatment erodes Celie's sense of self and leaves her feeling powerless and insignificant. Her letters to God serve as a desperate plea for validation and understanding, as she grapples with feelings of worthlessness and despair. Celie's existential crisis is compounded by her lack of agency in a society that denies her autonomy and marginalises her based on her race and gender.

Another dimension of Celie's existential crisis is her

search for love and connection. Denied the opportunity for authentic relationships, Celie finds solace in her bond with her sister Nettie and later in her relationship with Shug Avery. Shug's arrival in Celie's life marks a turning point in her existential journey, as she experiences love and intimacy for the first time. Through her connection with Shug, Celie begins to question the oppressive beliefs and norms that have governed her life, opening herself up to new possibilities and ways of being. Celie's existential crisis is also shaped by her quest for self-expression and identity. Despite the limitations placed on her by society, Celie finds empowerment through her letters and eventually through her business ventures and newfound independence. Her ability to reclaim her voice and assert her identity represents a triumph over the existential despair that has plagued her for much of her life. Through her letters, Celie learns to articulate her desires, fears, and dreams, ultimately finding a sense of purpose and belonging in the world.

Shug Avery's existential crisis is deeply intertwined with her search for authenticity and fulfilment, as she deals with the conflicting demands of society and her own inner desires. One aspect of Shug's existential crisis is her struggle with societal expectations and gender roles. As a woman in the early 20th century South, Shug is expected to conform to traditional notions of femininity and propriety. However, her independent spirit and unconventional lifestyle set her apart from societal norms, leading to ostracism and judgment from others. Shug's existential crisis is rooted in her desire to assert her autonomy and authenticity in the face of societal pressure to conform. Another dimension of Shug's existential crisis is her quest for love and connection. Despite her outward confidence and charisma, Shug grapples with feelings of loneliness and emptiness, as she struggles to find genuine intimacy and emotional fulfilment in her relationships. Her affair with Celie's husband, Albert, initially serves

as a form of escape from her own existential despair, but ultimately leaves her feeling unfulfilled and disconnected. Shug's existential crisis is characterised by a longing for deeper connection and meaningful relationships, as she searches for love and acceptance amidst a world marked by superficiality and exploitation. Shug's existential crisis is also shaped by her search for spiritual meaning and enlightenment. Raised in a religious household, Shug grapples with questions of faith and belief throughout the novel. Her relationship with God is complex and evolving, as she struggles to reconcile her own experiences with the teachings of organised religion. Through her struggles with existential crisis, Shug emerges as a complex and multifaceted character, grappling with questions of identity, love, and spirituality in a world marked by adversity and uncertainty.

Sofia's existential crisis is her struggle against societal expectations and gender roles. As an African American woman, Sofia is doubly marginalised, facing discrimination based both on her race and her gender. Despite her strength and resilience, Sofia is forced to navigate a world that seeks to confine her to limited roles and deny her autonomy. Her refusal to conform to societal norms and her outspoken defiance of authority reflect her ongoing struggle to assert her identity and agency in the face of oppression. Another dimension of Sofia's existential crisis is her quest for justice and equality. Throughout the novel, Sofia is subjected to various forms of injustice, including physical abuse, exploitation, and imprisonment. Her experiences highlight the systemic racism and sexism that pervade society, leaving Sofia disillusioned and embittered. Sofia's existential crisis is marked by a sense of outrage and indignation at the injustices she and others face, driving her to fight for dignity, respect, and equality. Sofia's existential crisis is also shaped by her relationships with others, particularly her family and community. Despite her fierce independence, Sofia

finds strength and support in her relationships with her children, her husband Harpo, and her extended family. Her commitment to her loved ones serves as a source of resilience and purpose, anchoring her in the face of adversity. Through her struggles with existential crisis, Sofia emerges as a symbol of strength, defiance, and dignity, challenging societal norms and advocating for justice and equality.

Nettie's existential crisis is deeply rooted in her experiences of displacement, cultural identity, and the search for meaning. Her existential crisis is her struggle with displacement and cultural identity. As an African American woman living in America and later as a missionary in Africa, Nettie grapples with questions of belonging and cultural heritage. Her experiences in Africa force her to confront the complexities of colonialism and cultural imperialism, as she witnesses the devastating impact of European colonisation on indigenous communities. Nettie's existential crisis is marked by a quest for self-discovery and cultural affirmation, as she seeks to reclaim her African heritage and identity amidst a world that seeks to erase and marginalise it. Another dimension of Nettie's existential crisis is her quest for justice and equality. Throughout the novel, Nettie is confronted with the harsh realities of racism and sexism, both in America and Africa. Her experiences as a missionary in Africa expose her to the brutalities of colonialism and the struggles of indigenous peoples to resist oppression and reclaim their autonomy. Nettie's existential crisis is characterised by a deep sense of moral outrage and a commitment to social justice, driving her to advocate for the rights and dignity of marginalised communities. Nettie's existential crisis is also shaped by her relationships with others, particularly her family and community. Despite being separated from her sister Celie for much of the novel, Nettie's love and concern for her sister serve as a guiding force in her life. Her letters to Celie serve as a lifeline, connecting them

across continents and decades and providing a source of solace and support in the face of adversity. Nettie's existential crisis is complicated by her sense of duty and responsibility towards her family, as she struggles to reconcile her own desires with the needs and expectations placed upon her by others.

Squeak's existential crisis is deeply rooted in her experiences of marginalization and oppression and her struggle with self-worth and identity. Born as Mary Agnes, Squeak is given the derogatory nickname by Harpo, Celie's son. This name symbolises her diminished sense of self and her internalised belief in her own worthlessness. Throughout the novel, Squeak is subjected to objectification and exploitation, particularly by Harpo and his father Albert. Her experiences of abuse and mistreatment leave her feeling powerless and trapped, fuelling her existential crisis and driving her to seek validation and recognition from others. Also, Squeak's existential crisis is about her quest for agency and autonomy. Despite her marginalised position, Squeak longs to assert her independence and reclaim her voice. Her decision to confront Harpo about his mistreatment of her reflects her growing sense of empowerment and self-awareness. Squeak's existential crisis is characterised by a desire to break free from the constraints imposed upon her by society and to forge her own path in life. Squeak's existential crisis is also shaped by her relationships with others, particularly her family and community. Despite her strained relationship with Harpo, Squeak finds strength and support in her bond with Sofia, Celie, and other women in the novel. Her connection with Sofia, in particular, serves as a source of inspiration and empowerment, as she witnesses Sofia's unwavering resilience and defiance. Through

her struggles with existential crisis, Squeak emerges as a symbol of strength, determination, and self-discovery, challenging societal norms and advocating for agency and autonomy.

Therefore, women characters in "Beloved" and "The Color Purple" deal with existential crises stemming from different but intersecting sources of oppression and trauma. In "Beloved," characters like Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs confront the existential abyss of slavery's legacy, haunted by memories of violence, separation, and dehumanisation. Their existential crises are rooted in the trauma of slavery, as they struggle to reconcile their pasts with their present identities and futures. In contrast, the women characters in "The Color Purple" face existential crises shaped by racism, sexism, and poverty in the early 20th century South. Celie, Shug Avery, Sofia, and others navigate questions of identity and agency. While the women characters in both novels confront different forms of oppression and trauma, they share a common quest for self-discovery, empowerment, and liberation. Sethe's journey towards self-forgiveness and reconciliation in "Beloved" parallels Celie's quest for self-expression and agency in "The Color Purple." Similarly, characters like Denver and Sofia embody resilience and defiance in the face of adversity, challenging societal norms and advocating for justice and equality.

#### **Bibliography:**

- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, 2007
- Shamim, Amna and Rupali Saran Mirza. *The Dialectics of Feminist Politics in African/Afro-American Literature*. Idea Publishing, 2017
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Washington Square Press, 1982

#### **Cite This Article:**

**Ehsan B. and Sheenam (2024)**. *Identity, Trauma, and Liberation: Women's Existential Dilemmas in Toni Morrison's Beloved and Alice Walker's The Color Purple*. In *Aarhat Multidisciplinary International Education Research Journal: Vol. XIII (Number III, pp. 32–42)*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11633641>