

**The Collective Consciousness of Women's Rights in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Nuruddin Farrah's *From A Crooked Rib***

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**ABSTRACT**

*This study evaluated the collective consciousness of women's rights in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Nuruddin Farrah's *From A Crooked Rib*. The study's objective was to compare and contrast the milestones in attaining women's rights in contemporary society with Walker's and Nuruddin's texts. The study utilized the qualitative research design in data collection. The research involved critical reading of primary texts and comparing the texts by akin analysis of the secondary sources. The research utilized peer-reviewed journals for its analysis. Therefore, the overall analysis was content analysis which productively, through the Black Feminist lenses, revealed ideologies that have enabled male dominance and gender-based violence as the study's findings. Walker and Nuruddin [clearly] brought out regressive aspects and painful scenarios elucidating women's struggles in society. Some of the aspects include early/forced marriages, female genital cutting/mutilation, gender violence, and objectification of women. The study concluded that there is a need for continued sensitization of women's rights due to the still-standing practices. The study had two recommendations. The policymakers should strive to make policies that ensure gender parity and prevent violence against women. Future researchers should engage in the further study of the various standpoints for black women, primarily in the African setting apart from Somalia, whose standpoints are clear as expressed in the text.*

*Key words: Women, rights, conscious, Black feminism, male dominance, Literature*

## Introduction

Literature is continually playing its critical role in educating society on various life aspects. More specifically, through feministic writings, literature reveals aspects that society still may be adamant about yet are significant. Two such writings are Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Nuruddin Farah's *From A Crooked Rib*. In these two texts, the authors strive to make conscious women's rights through the various characters, stylistic devices, and scenarios that reveal profound and disturbing issues revolving around gender imbalance, exploitation and male dominance that unfortunately have placed women's lives in jeopardy.

The push for women's rights has persisted for decades, and the most complicated fight has been changing the patriarchal perception of women as inferior to men. According to Gbaguidi (2018), in his article *The Representation of the African Woman in Male-Dominated Society: A Study of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, and Amma Darko's Beyond the Horizon*, the various culture and traditions in the male-dominated society have preconceived notions of what a woman should be which are flawed. Gbagudi (2018) writes that the many societies [majority are patriarchal] condition women to be tender, submissive and ever available to serve their "superior" husbands, making them subservient and objects for manipulation by men. Similarly, Adekiitan (2019), in *Problems and prospects of gender parity in Nigeria*, also links gender imbalance to the dominant culture and traditions that unfortunately affect women and girls deleteriously, raising the need for continued sensitization of women's rights because it propagates gender imbalance. So what, are there substantial efforts to save and advocate the rights of women?

Feminist writers have been at the forefront in raising the issues negatively affecting women due to male dominance, and their activism has *primarily* been through the texts they publish, which make conscious women's rights. Some of the feminist writers include Adichie Chimamanda in her *Headstrong Historian* (2008), *Second Class Citizen* (1974) by Buchi Emecheta, Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) and Nuruddin Farah's *From A Crooked Rib* (1970), to mention a few. In her text, *The Color Purple*, Walker (1983) relates the story of Celie, an African American woman who suffers abuse at the hands of her stepfather and husband before the rise to an independent and financially stable woman because of support and encouragement from Shug Avery, a fellow woman. In the text, Walker cites instances that make a woman captive, primarily the black woman, making her a slave and dependent on men who abuse and take advantage of their weaknesses. However, through self-determination as advocated by Black feminists, and help from fellow women, she rises in her society in terms of status and position.

Nuruddin Farrah, like Walker also gives wings to his protagonist Ebla who, after female cutting, is given out to a man fit enough to be her father as a husband. Ebla defies the odds and flees home only to find herself in the same predicament at her cousin's house. Nevertheless, through the help of women like the Widow and Asha, her life takes a positive turn, and Nuruddin culminates his story by portraying Ebla and her husband Awill agreeing to live a life of complementarity with no inferiority or superiority between them. This study focused on the collective consciousness of women's rights as made apparent by Walker and Nuruddin in their texts. The study consequently argues that while there have been efforts in the push for gender parity and overall rights of women, which are essentially human rights, there is [still] a growing need for sensitization of women's rights for a balanced and improved society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research on the collective consciousness of women's rights in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Nuruddin Farah's *From A Crooked Rib* adopted the Black Feminist perspective for its analysis. The theory, officially birthed through the Combahee River Collective statement, has principles that aptly explain Nuruddin and Walker's efforts to make women's rights conscious. The following are the tenets of this perspective: The first tenet, as Richie (2012) writes, is the interlocking oppression of black women due to their race, gender, the color of their skin, class, and other elements responsible for the oppression they face. Black Feminists' second principle is that the group better positioned to address black women's oppression is those who understand black women's struggles/oppression. The other guiding principle of this perspective, also applicable in this research, is Black Feminists' focus on dialectical images describing black women. According to Richie (2012), society uses terms such as jezebel to imply that black women are hypersexual, Sapphire to mean that they are domineering, mammy to suggest that they are motherly and servant-like, and others purely as criminals. Black feminists have also prioritized challenging hierarchies in society and mobilizing people to push for social change to ensure that women, primarily black women, also enjoy their rights. Assessing what Walker in *The Color Purple* and Nuruddin in *From A Crooked Rib* have addressed through the Black feminist lenses reveals their efforts as black feminists in making conscious women's rights.

### **Literature Review**

Scholars like Adekiitan, Ahmad, Batobara, and Saleem, to mention a few, have assessed the gender aspect in the two primary texts by Nuruddin and Walker. Ahmad (2017) in *Nuruddin Farah's Women: A Challenge to Somalian patriarchal system* explicitly writes that the Somali culture and society is atrocious and biased towards women in diverse ways to the point of exposing them to practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), objectification and even rape, thus denying them their rights. Adekiitan (2019) writes that while the black women [with Nigeria as the focus] are affected by gender discrimination, these cases also extend to countries like China, Bangladesh, and Saudi Arabia. Women are the affected gender, and the patriarchal society has stayed adamant about women's values and rights.

Gender imbalance has caused many deleterious impacts in the lives of women. The aftermath of gender imbalance has caused many societies to overlook education for girls, have encouraged early and forced marriages, have led to women's objectification and wife battering. Specifically, Ahmad (2017) cites that there is notorious objectification of women to the point of equating them beasts, an aspect that Nuruddin also cites through a reflection that the Widow has while conversing with Ebla:

'I don't like this sort of marriage.' [Ebla]

'What do you mean?' [The Widow]

'I don't want to be sold like cattle.'

'But that is what we women are—just like cattle, properties of someone or other, either your parents or your husband,'" (Nuruddin, 1970).

According to Ahmad (2017), the society that Nuruddin reflects in his book is infamous for dictatorship, polygamy, male chauvinism, and "clannish" attitude that makes women rebel to attain their rights which the society has denied them.

Gender imbalance and early marriages are also profoundly covered in Allanana's (2013) *Patriarchy and gender inequality in Nigeria: the way forward* and Adekiitan's (2017) work. According to

Allanana (2013), women in African countries like Nigeria are like second-class citizens or infidels who belong in the kitchen. Gbaguidi (2018) agrees with Allanana and adds that society also perceives women as naïve reproducers, objects of commodification, sexual addicts, and second-class people. To this assertion, Adekiitan (2018) backs Allanana and adds that the lack of education for the girl child adverse the struggles that many women go through primarily in Nigeria, which represent a significant number of African cultures.

Scholars like Batobara and Saleem also have addressed the disparities of black women [Afro-American Women] in the patriarchal society. Ahmad (2017) mentions that the Somali women are slowly rebelling because the atrocities are becoming unbearable, which shows their determination to outgrow the repressive and flawed ideologies/practices causing their regression. Botabora & Saleem (2019) in *Gender, class, and identity in Alice Walker's The Color Purple And Suzan-Lori Parks' In The Blood*, write that [black] women can challenge the repressive tendencies by realizing their strength, refusing to submit, just like what Somali women are now doing and striving to tighten sisterhood bonds as a way of gaining their rights. But are the strategies mentioned earlier enough to move a society so stuck on their cultures and traditions?

The society Nuruddin portrays in his *From A Crooked Rib* reflects most of what scholars who have assessed the struggles of black women in a male-dominated society write about. Nuruddin suggests that while all people were created equally, male chauvinism has tipped the scale, causing women to suffer and receive treatment befitting a slave or a beast. In the text, Nuruddin (1970), women get treated with inferiority which reflects that they are not enjoying their rights as they deserve. The protagonist, for instance, flees home because her grandfather gives out her hand in marriage to an older man who could be her father's age. Thinking that she had found a safer haven at Gheddi, her cousin, he also does the same by giving her hand in marriage to Dirir, his broker in the settlement, for the much he owed him. They do so without seeking her consent or involving her in any plans as if she were any commodity awaiting sale.

The struggles do not end in forced marriages. Nuruddin (1970) exposes the FGM practices in which Ebla, the protagonist, and other women like Aowralla, are victims. He pinpoints the struggles Aowralla undergoes as an FGM victim, which includes struggles in giving birth. This elucidation is Nuruddin's way of suggesting that while society may rigidly be holding to such practices, they are injurious. Besides FGM, Nuruddin also shows women's financial dependence on their men, being their husband's or parents' property.

Walker suggests that women suffer as wives due to gender imbalances by pointing out the plight of black women. Through her protagonist, Celie, Walker (1983) reveals how women are rape victims, get battered, lack financial independence, and even the primary education to enable them to grow in various capacities. Walker presents even the suffering of black women in the context of the African setting by referencing the Olinka tribe and the practices that deny women the right to education and push them into early and polygamous marriages that cause more misery. Walker suggests that women cannot find a stable position of [their] own as independent people without society's criticism. For the Olinka women in *The Color Purple*, the failure to have a husband or children is enough to condemn a woman to a good-for-nothing fellow, unfit to take any vital position in society. Like the one Allanana (2013) mentions, this community condemns women to positions not beyond the kitchen, which is unfair. Women are beyond the degrading positions assigned by many of these societies, and there is a need for increased sensitization of women's rights and a push for the same.

The studies mentioned above and reviews show that women are vulnerable because of cultural practices and flawed ideologies that unfortunately deny them their rights. While there is substantial literature on the struggles of women in society and the two books, none has assessed the collective consciousness of women's rights in Nuruddin's and Walker's texts and contrasted these two contexts with contemporary society. This study contrasts the two authors' efforts in making society aware of women's rights and the trends of women's treatment in contemporary society. Essentially, through contrast, the study gauges the milestones made in making conscious women's rights and helping them attain them. The study thus fills the gap by making apparent the milestones [if any] and adds to the vast literature body that addresses women's rights.

### **Methodology**

The study of the collective consciousness of women's rights in Nuruddin Farah's *From A Crooked Rib* and Walker's *The Color purple* called for a thorough study and the analysis of primary and secondary sources for synthesized research work. The study, therefore, utilized the qualitative research design for data collection and analysis. Specifically, the study used content analysis calling for a dedicated and keen reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Nuruddin Farah's *From A Crooked Rib* which are the primary texts. The study also involved exhaustive analysis of secondary sources accessed from the library that proved worthwhile in providing data fit for this research's completion. Most of the secondary sources assessed are peer-reviewed journals to ensure credibility. The study adopted the Black Feminist lenses in the critical analysis of the author's tactics in making conscious women's rights and in comparing the trends in contemporary society. The research's validity was ensured through the guidance of supervisors who provided tips on making the research credible.

### **Research Findings**

Both Nuruddin Farah and Alice Walker make women's rights as is apparent in *From A Crooked Rib* and *The Color Purple*, respectively. The authors seem to argue that while there are cultures and practices that the conventional society embraces, some are oppressive and rob women of their rights, which should end because they are oppressive and one-sided. Various themes emerge from these author's primary texts, including forced and early marriages, the battering of women, objectification of women, deprivation of their education rights, female genital mutilation, and overall subjugation of wives.

#### ***Sexual violence and forced/early marriages in the textual contexts and contemporary society***

Both Nuruddin and Walker show that the patriarchal society forces women into unions they are not prepared for, consequently condemning them to a life of suffering. In Walker's *The Color Purple*, the protagonist Celie gets raped by her stepfather, leading to two subsequent pregnancies. While this may show great animosity, her stepfather, Alfonso, worsened it by also taking away the children and giving them out for adoption. Walker reveals that no one even realizes Alfonso's plan condemning Celie to suffering and pain, for he tells her to shut up and only tell God about her suffering. He says, "You better not never tell nobody but God. Ifd killyour. Mammy"? [Walker, pp. 4]. Just a teen then, the poor woman resorted to letter-writing venting to God because only Him could see her struggles and her hurt. This is the first instance of rape, a form of sexual violence.



In subsequent letters, Walker (1983) suggests that women also may get exposed to marital rape and other forms of sexual violence. Celie confesses to Shug that she is uncomfortable with getting intimate with her husband because she does not love him. All that happens is due to their official union as husband and wife though there is no actual intimacy in their marriage. Retracing back Celie's journey to her present life, it becomes apparent that Celie's marriage to Albert was a forced marriage. In the text, Alphonso coerces Albert to take in Celie and even promises him a cow. When Albert decides to get Celie as his wife, he makes a point to confirm "That cow still coming?" before accepting Celie as his wife. Even though Celie marries Albert, Walker reveals that her sister Nettie slightly escaped the forced marriage because of Albert's constant pursuits despite her young age. Frustrated by the constant rejection, he banishes Nettie from his home and the latter, fortunately, finds refuge at Samuel. In addition to these instances, Squeaks also gets exposed to sexual violence when the correctional officer molests her while out to help Sofia leave the prison. Through these instances, Walker (1983) revealed that women are neither safe at home nor their husband's place and thus need protection from sexual abuse.

Nuruddin suggests that forced marriages are a common practice in the Somali community. Nuruddin does not shy away from exposing forced marriages right from the prologue, Nuruddin first exposes Ebla's grandfather's plan gone haywire. Ebla realized in advance his deliberate plan to marry her off to an older man that she neither loved nor consented to. Therefore, by making her flee, Nuruddin suggests that decisions involving women, especially critical ones like marriage, should not be forceful but consented. Unfortunately, as a common practice, Gheddi repeats the same by planning to marry Ebla off to Dirrir, a plan that also goes awry because Ebla eloped with Awill, whom she loved and resonated with because of the minor age difference between them, which was reasonable for her.

In comparing and contrasting these instances of forced marriages in contemporary society, studies show that some cultures like those in Nigeria (Adekitaan, 2019 & Allanana, 2013) and Somali communities (Ahmad, 2017) are still common. At no instance does this overlook the progress made in women attaining their rights but establishes that there is a big vacuum before we get to gender parity. Black feminism acknowledges that black women are vulnerable to sexual abuse, which is why black feminists have been proactive in sexual politics (2000). Some Somali women are following what the Black Feminist suggests—fighting for self-definition as the best way to enable change. According to Collins (2000):

"Black women intellectuals from all walks of life must aggressively push the theme of self-definition because speaking for oneself and crafting one's own agenda is essential to empowerment," (Collins, p. 36)

Therefore, as a vulnerable population and due to the ever-growing number of sexual violence in terms of rape and early marriages, there is a need for continued sensitization of women's rights.

### ***Objectification of women***

Walker and Nuruddin's writings suggest that women still get objectified. In Walker's *The Color Purple*, many instances point to women's objectification. The first instance is Alphonso's objectification of Celie as a sexual object. In the text, Walker reveals how Alphonso uses Celie for his sexual escapades, and after giving birth twice, he gets rid of her and warns her against revealing the act to anyone by marrying her to Albert. Albert, desperate to have someone to take care of his

kids, accepts Alphonso's proposal and takes Celie in as wife and slave. He even convinces her that she can work like a man, suggesting that she is a wife and a slave. Countless times, he makes Celie work in the field and do chores around the house. He even influences Harpo, his son, against doing house chores claiming that it is women's work. Celie is not the only victim of objectification. Millie and her husband also objectify Sofia by perceiving her as their excellent servant because of her cleanliness. Even though she possessed other attributes, they objectified her by perceiving her as a mere maid. Black feminism links such character to objectification which is inhumane and thus have strived to fight against it. According to Collins, the mere perception of domestic workers as "girls" is outright objectification which Millie and the mayor are guilty of.

Walker also suggests that the patriarchal society has allowed objectification of women as sex objects. The use of women as sexual objects also persists in Walker's *The Color Purple*. In the text, Walker (1983) reveals how Albert took Shug in to fulfill his sexual urges despite being married to Celie. As Nettie noted in her letters, the men, primarily the chiefs, indulged in polygamy in Africa, for they took pride in having many wives. After all, their cultural practices and ideologies have made women feel inferior and incomplete without having a husband who was their superior.

Nuruddin suggests that the Somali community is fond of objectifying women. In the text, Ebla's grandfather does not hesitate to trade her to Giumaleh without consulting her as if she were a commodity. The commodification also extends to Gheddi's house, where her cousin also tried to give her hand in marriage to Dirir, his broker, to settle his debt. As custom dictates, this community exchanges women like beasts or any other goods, and that is why the Widow sympathetically tells Ebla that they either belong to their parents or husbands. At some point, Ebla even chose to feed the cows before attending to Aowrolla, his cousin's wife, because she compared herself to the animals saying "I am as much a beast as they are" (Nuruddin, 27) due to the neglectful treatment they underwent. On this same stem, Gheddi also goes about his business and even does not make an effort of finding a midwife to help his wife give birth to his child, suggesting that some men treat women lesser than animals. Consequently, Aowrolla stayed soaked in clotted blood after birth because her husband neglected the primary treatment that every pregnant woman needs. Like in *The Color Purple*, Nuruddin (1970) makes the objectification of women as sexual objects apparent. In *From A Crooked Rib*, Tiffo pays to sleep with Ebla, yet he is officially married. Nuruddin also reveals that Awill, before his marriage to Ebla, also paid to sleep with women to fulfill his sexual desires. These instances reduce women to mere commodities that people can easily purchase to fulfill their [individual] desires.

Objectification and commodification of women in contemporary society are still not alien phenomena. According to Gbaguidi (2018), some communities are still pushing women into acquiring traditional education and marrying them early. Some of the advanced practices and qualities are passivity, gentleness, men-pleasing, and submission, which prevent them from having standpoints when mistreated by men. Gbaguidi (2018) takes a feministic stance by saying that different activists should now focus on social change that sensitizes perceptual change about women's social position. According to Gbaguidi, "feminism wants society to change its ideas on patriarchy and accept women as valuable and part of society" (p.45)

### ***Deprivation of educational rights***

Nothing robs women of their power like the lack of education. In both texts, Walker and Nuruddin expose the lack of schooling for both protagonists. Few of the women like Olivia and Nettie (partly)

enjoy their rights to education. In *The Color Purple*, Walker (1983) suggests that the lack of education is what disempowered most women disposing them to abuse and ill-treatment. For example, Celie ends up as Albert's slave because her father took her away from school prematurely. The women in the Olinka tribe also strived to gain a name or position by getting married to polygamous men because they could not harness educational benefits due to the flawed perception that married women and mothers have a more elevated position in society than those without both. Also, the perception/belief that boys need extra education while women do not require any causes many women to lose the chance to learn. Even though it pained Olivia to see Tashi deprived of the chance to study, she made an effort to teach her, which reveals Walker's tactic and intention of making her audience aware that women need an education. Walker suggests that women want to get educated and society, like Olivia, should pave the way.

Few of Nuruddin's (1970) characters have an education. In *From A Crooked Rib*, Ebla struggles to understand even the [very] fundamental aspects such as the government. She prodes further in wanting to know what independence is, not because she was foolish in any way or had intellectual issues but because she lacked an education. Collins (2000) asserts that the male dominated society condemns women to illiteracy. She says: "...African-American women whose minds and talents have been suppressed by the pots and kettles symbolic of Black women's subordination..." (Collins, pp.2)

The lack of education deprives her of the chance to explore and even gain independence, and the same applies to Aowrolla, forcing them to stay and wait for their husbands to provide. This dependence disposes them to other more significant risks that could otherwise be avoidable.

A peek into contemporary society reveals that some women still struggle to attain an education despite the various global changes in the push for primary education for all genders. According to Adekiitan (2019), some tribes in Africa, like the Hausa of Nigeria, are still naïve about the idea of educating women because they perceive their education as a waste of resources. This mentality does not depart from the Olinka community cited by Walker, meaning there is a need for increased sensitization about the right to education. Adekiitan further mentions other benefits of educating women, which this tribe deprives of their women. Most condemn their women to early marriages instead of education. Some communities outside Nigeria also do the same.

### ***Female genital mutilation and other gender violence practices***

Nuruddin and Walker suggests that some aspects apart from the ones already mentioned are outdated practices are still holding women hostage. In Walker's *The Color Purple*, Walker (1983) exposes women battering and slavery as practices that cause women's suffering, thus raising the awareness that society should respect women's rights. In the text, Celie reveals to Shug Avery that she has persistently been a victim of gender violence, and Albert's battering only ceased because she was around. By using Shug Avery as Celie's helper/hero, Walker establishes a standpoint that wife-beating was no longer acceptable and chooses to stay to make Albert know it is wrong and change his ways. Besides that, the prison warden's move to molest Squeak also reveals gender violence against women. Female genital mutilation [cutting], as Walker (1983) reveals in the story about Olinka tribe also pinpoints the practice as a form of gender violence that the Olinka community practiced. Even though she was uncomfortable pursuing the cut, Walker reveals that Tashi unwillingly underwent it because it was part of their culture.

Nuruddin similarly reveals female genital cutting and forced marriage as forms of gender violence against women. In *From A Crooked Rib*, Nuruddin (1970) pinpoints the struggles Aowralla goes



through because of the mutilation, particularly at the birth of her child. In addition to the cutting, Ebla suffers psychologically and risks her life by escaping while still dark because of the threat to marry Giumaleh forcefully. That certainly is gender violence, and by prompting Ebla to run away, Nuruddin seemingly suggests that women should have the freedom to choose their life partners and decide over issues affecting them without feeling inferior, which essentially is Black Feminism's idea. In the text, Nuruddin (1970) writes: "Escape! To get free from all restraints, from being the wife of Giumaleh. To get away from unpleasantries. To break the ropes society had wrapped around her and to be free and be herself. Ebla thought of all this and much else." [Nuruddin, pp. 13].

The comparison and contrast of the Nuruddin's *From A Crooked Rib* and Walker's *The Color Purple* contexts and current society show that some practices still stand in these communities. Ahmad (2017) expressly point out that this community still practices female cutting, exposing women to many health-related risks. Besides the cutting, Hazel & Kleyman (2020) add that lately, gender violence manifests in human trafficking, intimate partner violence, rape, and femicide. These aspects show that in as much as progress in the fight for women's rights is becoming visible; there is still a growing need for further sensitization of women's rights to ensure gender parity and the end of violence against women.

### Conclusion

This study concluded that Nuruddin Farrah in *From A Crooked Rib* and Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* made conscious women's rights by explicitly showing instances of male dominance and subsequently correcting and setting the victims free. Their writing made their audiences aware that women have individual rights, need freedom, education, and protection against violence. The primary reason linked to the suffering the characters go through is male dominance and flawed cultural practices. In comparing and contrasting the different contexts and the current society, findings show that some communities still hold on to flawed practices as revealed in the secondary sources. The substantial changes that have taken place are only a handful. Though counted as milestones, the findings show that the progress in acknowledging and granting women their rights is painfully slow and, therefore, the great need for increased sensitization of women's rights..

### Recommendation

Based on the study's findings, the following are the recommendations to the policymakers and future researchers. While we may still be living in a patriarchal society, the policies should consider women as equal and able society members. Therefore, they should make policies that restrict violence against women and advocate for gender parity. The second recommendation is for future researchers. This research tackled the collective consciousness of women's rights in Nuruddin Farrah's *From A Crooked Rib* and Walker's *The Color Purple* and contrasted the author's efforts to make conscious women's rights with the advancements made in doing the same today. Essentially, it compared and contrasted the different contexts, including the current society and concluded that there is still a greater need to make conscious women's rights because most of the regressive and exploitive practices are still fresh even today while some, like gender violence, have evolved. Therefore, future researchers may consider evaluating women's standpoints concerning gender imbalance especially in other African countries other than Somalia whose standdpoint is clear as elaborated in this research.

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