Impact Factor (QJIF): 8.47 **E-ISSN: 2583-1615, P-ISSN: 3049-3498**

International Journal of Research in Academic World

Received: 09/March/2026 **IJRAW:** 2026; 5(5):71-73 **Accepted:** 21/April/2026

Reclaiming Self, Space and Story: Black Feminist Consciousness, Trauma and Resistance in Walker, Morrison and Hansberry

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Abstract

This article examines Black female resistance and consciousness in three landmark works of twentieth-century African American literature: Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and her womanist essays, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Although these texts belong to different literary and historical moments, they are connected by a common concern with the struggles of Black women against racism, gender discrimination, poverty, and historical suffering. This paper suggests that Black feminist consciousness develops through three important experiences: the struggle for social space, the search for emotional and personal wholeness, and the need to confront painful historical memory. Hansberry locates resistance in the public, spatial realm—claiming the American Dream by desegregating housing and refusing liberal, bureaucratic racism. Walker develops womanism as an integrative, earthy, and reconciliatory consciousness that prioritizes voice, sexuality, pragmatic creativity (sewing, gardening, letter-writing), and the reclamation of self-authorship. Morrison, in contrast, insists that before any integration or wholeness is possible, the trauma of slavery must be confronted as a haunting, embodied memory that defies linear narrative and resides in the body, the ghost, and the very fabric of domestic space. Through close comparative analysis of the epistolary form in *The Color Purple*, the spatial politics of *A Raisin in the Sun*, and the narrative fragmentation and rememory of *Beloved*, this paper demonstrates that these authors are not contradictory but cumulative. Hansberry focuses on the struggle to gain social acceptance and equality, Walker questions the values behind that social structure, and Morrison examines the painful historical foundations on which it was built. Together, they offer an ethics and an aesthetics of survival that moves from public protest to intimate self-possession to haunted witness—arguing that authentic freedom is neither linear nor singular, but an ongoing, threefold process of claiming space, crafting voice, and bearing memory.

Keywords: Black feminist consciousness, womanism, trauma, rememory, spatial resistance, epistolary narrative, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Color Purple*, *Beloved*.

Introduction

The African American literary tradition of the twentieth century is marked by a sustained interrogation of how Black subjects—particularly Black women—navigate, survive, and resist interlocking systems of oppression. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and her womanist essays, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) collectively stage a multigenerational conversation about the nature of freedom. While each work emerges from a distinct historical moment (pre-Civil Rights, post-Civil Rights/feminist, and postmodern respectively), they share a central preoccupation.

This paper argues that these three authors offer complementary rather than contradictory models. Hansberry locates resistance in public, spatial integration—claiming the American Dream by desegregating a neighbourhood. Walker develops womanism as an integrative, earthy, and reconciliatory consciousness that prioritizes wholeness over victimhood. Morrison, in *Beloved*, insists that before any integration or wholeness is possible, the trauma of slavery must be confronted as a haunting, embodied memory that defies linear narrative. Taken together, these writers show different stages of Black feminist resistance. Hansberry focuses on social access and equality, Walker emphasizes emotional and communal healing, while Morrison turns attention toward the unresolved trauma beneath both.

Black Feminist Consciousness between Walker and Morrison: Wholeness vs. Haunting

A comparative reading of Walker and Morrison reveals two distinct but resonant modes of Black feminist consciousness. Walker's womanism, as articulated in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* and dramatized in *The Color Purple*, is fundamentally utopian and integrative. Walker defines a womanist as one who "loves the spirit. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless." Womanism refuses hierarchies of oppression; it insists that liberation must include sexuality, spirituality, work, and community. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's consciousness emerges not through rejecting men entirely but through outgrowing abusive ones.

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Albert, her former tormentor, learns to sew, grieve, and sit beside her in companionship. Shug Avery teaches Celie that God is not a white-bearded patriarch but an "It" that delights in colour, movement, and pleasure. The novel ends not with revenge but with sisterhood: Celie, Nettie, and their children reunited on a porch, sewing pants. Walker's consciousness is reparative—it believes in healing.

Morrison's *Beloved* offers a starker, more tragic vision. Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman, killed her infant daughter rather than see her returned to slavery. That daughter returns as the ghost Beloved, who literalizes the return of repressed trauma. Morrison's Black feminist consciousness is not about wholeness but about rememory—a term she coins to describe how places and bodies hold trauma independently of conscious recall. Sethe cannot simply "move on." Her scarred back (the "chokecherry tree"), her stolen breast milk, and her murdered child are not events to be processed; they are inhabitants of her flesh. Where Walker's Celie learns to write letters that eventually reach her sister, Morrison's Sethe learns that some stories "were not to pass on." And yet the novel itself passes them on, forcing the reader to bear witness.

The key difference lies in temporality. Walker writes from the hopeful vantage of the late twentieth century, assuming slavery is past and the struggle is now about love and work. Morrison insists that slavery is not past—it lives as a ghost in the house, a set of teeth in the floorboard. A full Black feminist consciousness, Morrison implies, must include the capacity to be haunted.

Voice and Identity in *The Color Purple*: From Silent Object to Authoring Subject

Walker's most precise technical achievement in *The Color Purple* is the use of the epistolary form to dramatize the emergence of voice and identity. Celie begins as a girl who has been told by her stepfather, "You better not never tell nobody but God." Her first letters are addressed to God—a silent, male, presumably white authority who never answers. This phase represents alienated consciousness: Celie exists only as an object of others' use, and her writing is a secret diary that changes nothing.

The turning point occurs when Shug Avery teaches Celie that God is not a judge but an appreciator. Shug says, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." This theological shift is also a literary one. Celie stops writing to God and begins to write to her lost sister Nettie, even though she cannot mail the letters. The act of addressing a real, beloved, female other transforms the letters from confession into testimony. Celie is no longer reporting her suffering; she is preserving it for a future reunion.

By the novel's end, Celie has inherited a house, started a business making pants (a symbol of mobility and freedom from gendered dress), and receives Nettie's return. The final letters are no longer supplications but declarations. She writes, "I thank everybody in this book for coming." She has become the author of her own narrative. Identity, for Walker, is not found but composed—letter by letter, stitch by stitch, act of defiance by act of defiance. Voice is not innate; it is earned through the accumulation of small resistances.

Racism and the American Dream in *A Raisin in the Sun*: The Spatial Guarding of Hope

Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* predates both Walker and Morrison but sets a crucial precedent. The Younger family's struggle is not against slavery's ghost but against liberal, bureaucratic racism. Mr. Lindner, who arrives from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, does not wear a hood or carry a whip. He offers money—a buyout—to prevent the Youngers from moving into a white neighbourhood. He speaks politely, even paternally. This is racism as real estate covenant, as zoning law, as "neighbourhood character."

Hansberry's genius is to show that the American Dream is not equally accessible but spatially segregated. The dream of home ownership, of a garden (Lena's potted plant), of a window that lets in sunlight—these are not universal aspirations. They are guarded by covenants, by mob violence implied just offstage, by the quiet threat of economic suffocation. Walter Younger's failed liquor store investment is not just bad luck; it is the predictable outcome of a system that denies Black men credit, mentorship, and second chances.

The family's final act of resistance is not violence but movement. They choose to move into Clybourne Park anyway. Walter tells Lindner: "We come from people who had a lot of pride. I mean, we are very proud people." He rejects the buyout. This is a public, performative, and spatial resistance. Hansberry argues that dignity is not abstract; it is located in where you are allowed to sleep, to raise children, to plant a garden. The American Dream is worth pursuing, but only if you integrate the neighbourhood and change what the dream means—from accumulation to communion.

Womanism in Alice Walker's Works: Four Pillars of an Integrative Ethic

Walker's womanism, as distinct from white feminism or even Black feminism as then-conceived, rests on four pillars that *The Color Purple* dramatizes. First, wholeness: Walker refuses to separate the spiritual from the sexual, the political from the personal. Celie's liberation includes discovering clitoral orgasm with Shug—a scene that scandalized some early readers but that Walker insists is holy. Second, pragmatism: Womanists "act rather than discourse." Celie does not write a manifesto; she sews pants. The pants business is not a symbol of capitalism but of autonomy: pants allow women to move freely, to work, to sit without spreading their knees. Third, love of the Folk: Walker grounds her work in Black vernacular traditions—blues (Shug's songs), quilting (the narrative structure itself), and oral storytelling (Sofia's sass, Harpo's bewilderment). High theory is absent; wisdom is found in the kitchen, the field, the porch. Fourth, inclusivity of men: Unlike some radical feminisms that see men as irredeemable, Walker allows Albert to transform. He does not deserve Celie's forgiveness, but she gives it—not because she is weak, but because her wholeness requires, she not carry hatred. Womanism, then, is not a closed doctrine but a disposition: one that loves struggle, loves the folk, and loves the color purple in the field.

Trauma and Memory in *Beloved*: The Body as Archive and Haunting as Ethics

Where Walker builds, Morrison excavates. *Beloved* is a novel about what must be remembered even when remembering destroys. Sethe's act of infanticide is not pathological; it is, in the logic of slavery, a desperate act of love. She tells Paul D, "I couldn't let her [Schoolteacher] have her. … She wouldn't understand that. She wouldn't understand that I had to do it." Morrison forces the reader to sit with that impossibility: the only way to save your child from slavery is to kill her.

Memory in *Beloved* operates through three registers.

First, rememory: Sethe explains that memories are not inside you; they are in places, objects, and other people. "Even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there." This is a radical externalization of trauma—it cannot be cured because it is not a psychological condition; it is a stain on the world. Second, the body as archive: Sethe's scarred back, her stolen milk, her swollen feet—the flesh records what words cannot. Paul D's "tobacco tin" heart, where he has locked his emotions, eventually rusts open. Third, the ghost as literal return: Beloved is not a metaphor. She eats, she sleeps, she grows teeth, she becomes pregnant. The supernatural is not decorative; it is Morrison's argument that trauma refuses to remain symbolic. It demands embodiment.

The novel's famous final line "This is not a story to pass on" is paradoxical. The novel itself is a story passed on to millions of readers. Morrison's point is ethical: to tell trauma properly is to admit that telling is impossible, that the story always exceeds the teller, that the ghost always remains. Unlike Walker's Celie, who achieves closure on a porch, Morrison's Sethe achieves only a fragile, partial stillness. Beloved is exorcised but not forgotten. The final line of the novel is "Beloved." Just the name. That is the shape of traumatic memory: irreducible, haunting, and necessary.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Black Feminist Consciousness, Temporality, and Resistance across Hansberry, Walker, and Morrison

Framework	Hansberry	Walker	Morrison
Temporality	Forward-looking (the future house)	Circular (reunion, return to porch)	Traumatic (the past erupts into present)
Audience of resistance	White neighbours, white employers	God, then sister, then self	The dead child, the ghost, the reader
Primary metaphor	Gardening (Lena's plant)	Sewing (pants, quilts)	Scarring (chokecherry tree, bitten tongue)
Role of Black men	Redeemable (Walter's final speech)	Transformable (Albert learns)	Broken (Paul D's tobacco tin heart)
Ending emotion	Exhausted hope	Joyful reconciliation	Ambivalent mourning

Conclusion: An Arc of Resistance

When read together, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison offer a layered understanding of Black women's resistance, survival, and selfhood. Although their works emerge from different literary and historical contexts, they are connected by a shared concern with how Black women struggle to preserve dignity in societies shaped by racism, patriarchy, and historical violence.

In A Raisin in the Sun, Hansberry presents resistance through the struggle for space, equality, and social recognition. The Younger family's attempt to move into a white neighbourhood represents a refusal to accept the limitations imposed by racial segregation. Their decision reflects a desire not only for economic progress but also for dignity and belonging.

Walker's The Color Purple focuses more closely on emotional healing and personal transformation. Through Celie's journey, Walker shows how voice, creativity, friendship, and self-love become important forms of resistance. Her concept of womanism encourages wholeness, mutual care, and spiritual growth rather than anger alone.

In contrast, Toni Morrison, through Beloved, reminds readers that freedom cannot exist without confronting the painful legacy of slavery. Morrison portrays trauma as something that continues to live within memory, the body, and domestic space. Sethe's experiences reveal that the past cannot simply be forgotten because it continues to shape the present.

Taken together, these writers demonstrate that Black feminist consciousness is formed through multiple forms of struggle. It involves demanding social justice, recovering personal identity, and acknowledging historical pain. Their works ultimately suggest that survival is not merely about endurance but also about reclaiming voice, preserving memory, and creating spaces of healing and community.

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