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Intersectionality in Girlhood Studies: Analysing the Denied and Reclaimed Journeys of Agency in Diverse Societal Milieus

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ABSTRACT

The transition from girlhood to womanhood is a fundamental and often natural phase in a young woman's life, marked by self-discovery and growth. However, for a vast sea of girls across various regions and races, this process is unnaturalised and tainted by violence, abuse and suppression of identity. Their girlhood is stifled by a patriarchal society expecting them to conform to conventional gender roles, leaving them no room for joyful self-exploration. Therefore, girlhood studies becomes a crucial field of research to understand and highlight the resilience, agency, and creativity of girls while acknowledging the myriad systemic challenges they face, serving as poignant reminders of the need to nurture the girlhood of all young women, allowing them to flourish and discover their own unique paths to womanhood. This paper herein proposes to delve into this theme, seeking to understand how these dynamics influence the lived realities of girls who are denied a free girlhood, while exploring how they reclaim their voice in their fight against oppression. This study draws insights from Alice Walker's coming of age novel 'The Color Purple' along with selected sections from Rassundari Devi's autobiography 'Amar Jiban,' as these literary works illuminate the harrowing experiences of female characters forced into premature adulthood. Additionally, the study references 'To Kill a Mockingbird' in order to compare the nuances of stifled girlhood experiences across the boundaries of race, region and ethnicity. Scholarly voices such as Tanika

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Sarkar and Martha J. Cutter, etc. will also be cited simultaneously to enrich the analysis by encompassing aspects of feminist literary theories.

Keywords: *Girlhood, Womanhood, Abuse, Self-discovery, Agency, Transition*

INTRODUCTION

Literature, which serves as a social commentary mirror, frequently highlights the painful realities of girlhood denied, illuminating the hardships, injustices, and tenacity of young female protagonists as they navigate the turbulent transition from girlhood to womanhood. This theme appears time and again in a wide range of literary works, reflecting systematic oppression, societal norms, and the loss of girls' innocent exploration of their tender years. Literature's representation of denied girlhood provides a rich prism through which to view the many issues that young women confront. It highlights the striking differences between the romanticised vision of a happy and loving childhood versus the difficult realities that many girls must live with. These stories document the imposition of societal expectations, the suppression of identity, and the premature assumption of duties, highlighting the fundamental injustice of depriving girls of their proper transition. These literary depictions go beyond a simple narrative; they are significant monuments to the intricacies and iniquities ingrained in social structures, inspiring reflection, and support for the reestablishment of girlhood's sanctity.

As is correctly noted by Angela Y. Davis, "Our histories never unfold in isolation. We cannot truly tell what we consider to be our own histories without knowing the other stories. And often we discover that those other stories are actually our own stories" (135). It becomes understandable that because of the many parallels in oppressive experiences that represent the same reality in radically diverse geographic and cultural contexts, it is imperative to research the issue of denied girlhood across racial and regional divides.

So, to highlight the voices and experiences of these marginalised young women within the literary landscape and observe how girls overcome the denial of girlhood, this research will analyse a few rich literary fabrics, including but not limited to influential texts and diverse cultural narratives.

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The Color Purple

The Color Purple traces the trajectory of Celie, a fictional character representing the life stories of real black women stuck in a patriarchal setup. In this society, we see how, in addition to people of white race, even the Black males get to violate Celie and treat her as an inferior since she is a 'woman' of black race. Celie has to suffer multiple offences against herself and is robbed of her girlhood and innocent years in the process. "I thought it was only white folks do freakish things like that" (Walker 103) — Shug's ignorant statement stands in stark contrast to Celie's dark reality. The very beginning of the novel shows Celie being threatened by her stepfather not to reveal her being raped by him to anybody. As Martha J. Cutter points out, she is robbed of her speech, hereby invoking the ancient myth of Philomela whose tongue is cut off in an attempt to silence her forever, after she is raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus (163). The whole occurrence becomes even more tragic since Celie is only fourteen years of age. In her diary entry, we see her questioning her worth and character based on this single incident when she strikes off "I am" and replaces it with "I have always been a good girl (Walker 3), but just like how Philomela weaves a tapestry as an alternative to her lost speech, we see how towards the end, Celie fights back and reclaims her voice.

"You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker 3)— These words are spoken by Celie's "Pa" to Celie. It becomes important to note how the patriarch asserts his power over his daughter first by silencing her through the use of threatening, and second by affirming that the consequences of the heinous act committed by him would rather befall on his wife! Daniel W. Ross brings our attention to how:

> "Celie writes, addressing her letters to God because she has no one else to write to and because she knows she must never tell no "body". But even then, Celie addresses her letters to the orthodox Christian God, another version of the father. In short, Celie's language exists through much of the book without a body or audience, just as she exists without a self or identity" (69).

She also tells her mother that the child she is bearing is God's. It is vital to take note of Alice Walker's use of language to depict a child's limited understanding of her assault. "First he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around" (3). In her recollection of the incident's memory, she tells Shug, "I never even thought about men having nothing down there so big. It scare me just to see it" (Walker 102). The stepfather's brutality is evident in— "When that hurt, I cry. He starts to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it" (Walker 3). Her heart is scarred with trauma forever. She asks God, "Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (Walker 3). Peter Barry observes how the phallus in males works as

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"an emblem of social power" and has certain "advantages" associated with it (125). Both her children are also taken away from Celie and sold off by her "Pa" without her consent. The society gives him the right to do anything he wishes, just because he has a functioning penis.

Apart from being raped, Celie also must undergo the burden of managing the entire household, all the while handling the frustrations and curses of her ailing mother at her becoming pregnant at an unusual age. Celie's childhood is crumpled by expectations of her taking up her mother's role. "I'm big. I can't move fast enough. By time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By time I git the tray ready the food be cold…By time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time" (Walker 4). Celie, upon having lactating breasts, is asked by her father, "Why don't you look decent?" (Walker 5), but Celie mentions her inability to cover herself because of the lack of clothes. She is beaten up for presumably winking at a boy in church but she claims she has no interest in boys and rather looks at women for they do not seem frightening to her (Walker 7).

Celie is denied agency over her own body through acts of both psychological and physical violence, which she internalises. It is shocking how she is made to come to terms with the incident of her own body's hysterectomy via another girl at church. She is also denied access to education. "The first time I got big Pa took me out of school. He never care that I love it…You too dumb to keep going to school" (Walker 11). We must draw our attention to how even the school teacher, Miss Addie Beasley, *a woman*, who earlier believed Celie to be smart and willing to learn, judges her at this point. "But when Pa calls me out and she see how tight my dress is, she stop talking and go" (Walker 12). This highlights the internalisation of patriarchal notions in society, but Celie and Nettie, young as they are, are unable to comprehend all of this in entirety. "Nettie still don't understand. I don't neither. All of us notice how is I'm all the time sick and fat" (ibid). This clearly shows us their innocence as children. Celie speaks and writes in broken language depicting her broken state and her unmoulded personality, for she is still in her girlhood in her mind, though bodily she is forced into womanhood quite early.

When Celie notices the step father having eyes on her younger sister, Nettie, as well, she takes up the role of a motherly figure, a protector, for her. "I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick" (Walker 9). The response she receives is a good beating for dressing "trampy", "but he do it me anyway" (Walker 9). Despite all this, he claims that "she a bad influence on my other girls" (Walker 10). Her story is completely discredited when she is

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told to have a habit of lying, but Mr— finally settles for her instead of Nettie on their father's pressing that "she can work like a man" (Walker 10).

Mr—, Celie's husband, is another patriarch who abuses Celie and violates her sense of self in numerous ways. On her wedding day, instead of being able to celebrate like any normal woman, Celie's head is laid open by his son. Still, she has to cook dinner and clean his children. He even has sex with her without making any attempt to get to understand her first. He thinks it is his right to beat her up just because she is his wife.

Susan Griffin asserts that:

> "More than rape itself, the fear of rape permeates our lives.... and the best defense against this is not to be, to deny being in the body, as a self; . . . to avert your gaze, make yourself, as a presence in this world, less felt" (qtd. in Cutter 164).

Griffin's observation is apparent in Celie's imagining herself as a tree upon being beaten, in order to avoid suffering — "I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree" (Walker 23). Her husband spends his days away from Celie with his lover Shug Avery instead, telling her, "You better git back to the field. Don't wait for me" (Walker 27). He brings Shug home only to continue this, burdening Celie even more by reducing her to the status of a servant. Celie suffers internally on seeing her husband laugh and sleep with his mistress but is completely unable to vocalise her dissent due to her lack of self-confidence which resulted from the snatching away of her voice, earlier. Quite ironically, it is Mr— and other males who have multiple partners but he says "young womens no good these days" since they "got they legs open to every Tom, Dick and Harry" (Walker 31) while scrutinising Sofia for Harpo's marriage. He does not even take a stand for even his beloved Shug when the priest hurls insults directed at her.

It is also revealed through Nettie's letters that he chased Nettie on her way after she departed from his house, trying to force himself on her, dragging her "back in the woods" (Walker 114). On being refused a chance, he threatened to never let her letters reach Celie. He also makes both the sisters uncomfortable during Nettie's stay at their house by eyeing Nettie and showering praises on her. This is evident through Nettie's response of clinging closely to her sister and redirecting the words of praise to her instead (Walker 19).

Harpo, Mr—'s son puts up a similar attitude like his father. When Mr—'s sister asks him to help Celie bring water, he retorts by saying, "Woman work. I'm a man" (Walker 22). He even

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tries gaining weight by eating in abnormally high quantities to get an upper hand over his wife, Sofia, to help him use physical violence against her but becomes eventually frustrated by his inability to do so. "Alice Walker's novel contains examples of men holding considerable social power, but this power can also, in some instance, be observed as unstable when faced with female power" (Wahlstrom 2). The weight of societal expectations concerning the role of women is clear in Albert's sisters' remarks that "when a woman marry she spose to keep a decent house and a clean family" (Walker 20).

The environment that Celie had grown up in makes her internalise misogyny, clearly reflected in the manner she enviously advises Harpo to beat Sofia to "make her mind", but upon being confronted by her, she realises her grave mistake, expresses remorse, and immediately mends her ways, unlike the men in her life. The life-affirming skill of quilt making brings the two closers. And finally, when Shug Avery befriends her and teaches her new ways of thinking and living, she gradually let's go of the chains binding her to the patriarchal setup she had been suffering from her whole life.

Consequently, the novel takes a turn and Celie goes from "But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (Walker 18) to "I jab my case knife in his hand" (Walker 181) when Mr— tries slapping her upon her declaration of leaving his house. She even goes on to call him "a lowdown dog" (Walker 180). Ross argues that the crucial scene "in initiating this process is the mirror scene. In this scene Celie first comes to terms with her own body, thus changing her life forever." (70). Her journey of claiming back her agency starts from this moment onwards. "It mine, I say" (Walker 75). She even describes the inside of her private part as "a wet rose" (ibid). Here onwards, we see a sexual awakening and self-acceptance in Celie, Shug being the catalyst for the same. On an emotional level too, Celie starts asserting her freedom, gradually stepping into liberation. For the stretch of her lifespan, Celie had undergone all sorts of suffering of beating and loveless intercourse silently—"Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (Walker 74) but when it is revealed that Albert had been hiding Nettie's letters away from her reach, to separate the two, Celie finally decides she cannot take it anymore. From here on, she rises like a Phoenix from the ashes of her past. Instead of addressing her letters to the orthodox patriarchal God, she now starts writing to Nettie, an actual 'body'. She declares her emancipation and her right to exist: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly, and can't cook... But I'm here" (Walker 187).

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She wants to kill her husband but is prevented from doing so by Shug who makes her redirect her energy into the production of pants, which also goes on to become her source of living later. The 'needle' replacing the 'razor' in her hand portrays how these women, even when oppressed, did not choose similar methods of violence against men, but rather set foot on creative paths to channelise their negativity into life propelling fuel. Celie finally finds the courage to leave her abusive husband and starts to address him by his first name, Albert. It is only at this point that she gets to know about the identity of her stepfather, Alphonso, after whose death she inherits a house of her own and a shop in her name.

She gets heartbroken when she learns of her beloved Shug's "fling" with a nineteen-year-old boy named Germaine, but at this point she feels liberated enough to love her from a distance and not associate her worth with Shug's reciprocal of the same. Although she still condemns her looks, she calls her heart "young and fresh" (Walker 235). It is during this time that she befriends Albert, while still maintaining that she dislikes men and finds them frog-like. She even teaches him how to sew, while securing his admiration both for her looks, as well as her success. "Took me long enough to notice you such good company" (Walker 250). Alber tells Celie “You use to remind me of a bird…you looked about to fly away" (Walker 220). Here again, we see a reference to the myth of Philomela who metamorphosizes into a bird but unlike the negative connotation there, here it is "a positive symbol to Celie of how nature persists in displaying its beauty despite the despoiling patterns of humanity (Cutter 165). It may be critically seen as an insight into the fact that Celie always had the ability to fly right from the start, she only needed her healing to realise that. And, at last, being united with Nettie makes her feel "the youngest" she "ever felt" (Walker 261) — a closure to the suffering caused by the stripping away of all her girlhood years.

Besides Celie, each of the other women characters in *The Color Purple* reclaim their lost agency by finding empowerment, independence, and self-acceptance despite their struggles. As Pinckney articulates, "Physical and psychological sufferings merge in The Color Purple, and the righteous black women are called upon to heal themselves and by their examples, their people. Celie does not turn to the church but to the temple of herself for sanction" (qtd. in Hajare 36).

Nettie reclaims her girlhood through education and preserving her voice in the letters she writes to her sister, Celie. Despite being separated from Celie for several years, Nettie continues to share her experiences, thoughts, and knowledge through her letters, affirming her identity and

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presence. She finds her purpose in educating tribal children dwelling in the unfavourable conditions of Africa, exploring the world and taking care of Celie's children, Adam and Olivia. Celie serves as a form of inspiration to her— "And whether God will read letters or no, I know you will go on writing them; which is guidance enough for me" (Walker 117). The hope of being united with Celie does not let Nettie give up in the face of difficult circumstances. Her life seems better in comparison to Celie because of Celie's protectiveness in her younger days, and Samuel's support later.

Sofia rediscovers her strength and assertiveness despite enduring oppression and abusive treatment. She refuses to be subjugated by the social norms of the time and her resilience lies in standing up against injustice. "I loves Harpo…. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me" (Walker 39). She maintains her agency by asserting her dignity and independence. This is demonstrated well when she refuses to submit to the mayor and his wife. Though circumstances treat her harshly, she still stands in confidence. She is kind enough to treat the mayor's daughter, Miss Elanor Jane, nicely, though she is treated harshly by her parents. Here, we get to see the problems caused to her because of racial differences and prejudice. Martha J Cutter observes that "the strong-willed Sofia implies that she has learned to fight mainly to ward off unwanted sexual assaults by her male relatives" (178).

Shug Avery embraces her sexuality and personal freedom, breaking away from societal expectations. She lives life on her own terms, unapologetically pursuing her passions and relationships regardless of societal judgment, serving as an inspiration to Celie. Her ability to love freely and be true to herself showcases her reclamation of her girlhood. She develops her own idea of God, different from the orthodox patriarchal notion of *Him*, and introduces Celie to the same. She also helps her get to know and explore her body guiltlessly. She protests Albert's beating of Celie and confronts him, eventually freeing her from his clutches and helping her establish a business of her own. It is in loving Celie that Shug finds true happiness and new ways of loving herself more fiercely.

Tashi, one of Nettie's students from the Olinka tribe, succumbs herself to her tribe's cultural practices of female circumcision under societal pressure, but regrets at Adam's protest. She is hesitant in marrying Adam because of the same reason but eventually Adam accepts her with open arms. We see how though girls of her community were not allowed to study, Tashi actively participates in learning. She finished off all the household work more quickly than ever before to spend her days with Olivia, learning about new things.

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Tashi's mother protests her education first but once she is widowed, she wants Tashi to continue her studies and become. Through Nettie, we come to know— "The boys now accept Olivia and Tashi in class and more mothers are sending their daughters to school. The men don't like it…But the women have their ways, and they love their children, *even their girls*" (Walker 154).

Mary Agnes, though initially silenced and objectified by others, eventually asserts herself and demands respect, transforming from a submissive character into someone who takes charge of her life decisions. She moves away from Harpo in search of better life opportunities, and ultimately establishes her career in singing. Martha J. Cutter rightly compares Mary's rape to that of Celie's and puts forth the idea that "Walker may be rewriting the mythic text, for after her rape Squeak becomes vocal, insisting that Harpo call her by real name" (178).

Thus, towards the end, each of Alice Walker's characters, despite facing uncountable hardships and challenges, ultimately reclaims aspects of their girlhood by asserting their individuality, embracing their identities, and finding strength in their own unique ways. They move "away from violence and victimization and into self- empowerment and subjectivity" (Cutter 163). Alice's concept of 'womanism' comes beautifully out in the scene where all women sit together and laugh openly in the face of their oppressors, resisting male opposition and reflecting female solidarity, grace, and strength.

Amar Jiban

Amar Jiban is an extraordinary autobiography penned by Rassundari Devi, a trailblazing 19th-century Bengali writer. This compelling narrative stands as one of the earliest autobiographies by an Indian woman. Rassundari Devi fearlessly shares her life experiences, challenges, and triumphs, offering a poignant insight into the societal norms, struggles, and aspirations of women in colonial India. Her remarkable journey makes *Amar Jiban* a significant testament to female empowerment and the quest for self-expression in a conservative era.

Rassundari Devi was writing at a time when women's education was not a subject usually advocated for. Even in cases when women were permitted to attend schools, they majorly received instruction in tactful housekeeping, raising children, and modelling the principles of companionate marriage (Malhotra 112). Rassundari's attempt at reading and writing was an act

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of transgression and she further transgressed in publicising her life events and inner intimate thoughts. Meenakshi Malhotra puts forth that "this is possibly the only "dramatic" event in her life—a daring departure in an otherwise humdrum conventional domestic existence" (111). That educated women were sure to bring misery to their households and were further destined to be widows was a deeply entrenched belief in society back then.

In the third composition of her autobiography, Rasssundari expresses "the news made me very happy indeed" (Devi 192). This showcases the innocent mindset of a young girl. She had probably dreamed about a fairytale prince coming and savouring her, an idea rampant in children's stories. "Yet I felt scared at the same time" and "the unspoken agony in my mind did not lift" (ibid). Perhaps this apprehension of hers was because she had seen her mother and other females working like machines all day. Also, the pain of being separated from her mother and being forced out of her own house into "the other family" was too much for her to bear. In her own words, "It was very much like the sacrificial goat being dragged to the altar, the same hopeless situation, the same agonized screams" (Devi 193).

As per customs, she is married off and sent to an alien soil at the early age of just twelve. At her in-laws' house, she is completely robbed of the joy of her girlhood in multiple ways. She prematurely has to take up the role of a 'woman', a typical housewife, hiding her face under the veil of her sari, shedding tears, with her plight unknown to anybody else because of her hidden face— a marker of her suppressed identity and sense of self. She recalls the earlier days of her childhood when any attempt to help in the household chores would bring in a shower of praise from her mother, but all her endless servitude went unnoticed now. Samita Sen talks of how the idealised aesthetic portrayal of the grihlaksmi's immediate locale, the antahpur, and the concept of 'home' merge to become interchangeable, forming a sacred haven separated from the public sphere; this association establishes the household women's role as a core aspect of her "moral identity," making her contributions to the household seem "natural" and almost "invisible" (qtd. in Moitra 166).

Rassundari shares that her first child was born to her when she was only eighteen years old, and the last when she was forty-one. "Rashsundari herein echoes the voices of countless young brides in nineteenth-century India, who found themselves abruptly thrust into sexual awakening— often with devastating consequences—at puberty, and along with it, adult responsibilities: from child's play to 'woman's work' ", writes Swati Moitra (161). Rassundari had to work in the Antahpura right from early dawn till late midnight, all the while rearing an

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army of children. On many days, she was even forced to fast due to the immense pressure of work and lack of time for herself. It is ironic that she, the sole cook, and server of three to four meals for an extensively large family, had to go without a single meal for days in succession. There were instances where she held out her uneaten meal to unexpected guests, which, Tanika Sarkar points out, society proclaims as "the supreme test of the good wife" (147). There was absolutely no time left for her leisure, her education and her self-exploration.

She felt herself to be "a virtual prisoner" at her in-laws' house (Devi 198). She was never sent to her mother except on rare occasions on the condition that she would return in a few days "like a slave", as "the household work here would suffer" (Devi 199). She could not even visit her mother on the latter's deathbed which forced her to regret her life as a woman— "Why was I ever born a woman? Shame on my life!... If I were a son I would have flown directly to my mother's bedside. But I am helpless. I am a caged bird" (ibid). Rassundari's life was confined to the four walls of the kitchen, working in heat and smoke. Her identity was limited to that of being the ideal housewife and mother. But as she was ageing, she began resenting the denial of education to her. Tanika Sarkar writes,"Rashsundari's conscious choice, it seems, was to will into being an identity separate from her prescribed roles of housewife and mother, centring around the axis of reading and writing" (qtd. in Malhotra 116**)**. Meenakshi Malhotra asserts that though moved by her first experience of childbirth, "She later regrets subsumation of all other aspects of identity into the role of a mother" (117).

Rassundari's desire to read and write could only be attempted in utmost secrecy, lest she be criticised and outcast. She hid the piece of paper of *Chaitanya Bhagavata* and tried to read from it, all underneath the veil of her sari. She hid the palm leaf for writing purposes in the khori of her kitchen, now turned into a laboratory to kickstart the journey of her hard-won literacy. Tanika Sarkar proposes:

> "The secrecy ensured the autonomy of her mind" while also indicating "her capacity for opposition". "More importantly, it is indicated that she— despite a lifetime's reputation as the good wife— never had a secure place, a real home anywhere except in her own mind" (142).

Her girlhood is crushed under the weight of gender-marked expectations and gender-appropriate behaviour of silence and shame as ornamental qualities in women, suggestive in her own words, “I was a woman, and a married one at that, and was not supposed to talk to anyone" (Devi 199). The sixth composition reads, "I was angry with myself for wanting to read. Girls did not read" (ibid). Here, we see a sense of shame and guilt in Rassundari,

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depicting, to some extent, her internalisation of the patriarchal norms of the day, as is also evident in her admitting that she was subservient to all customs considered befitting for women of her times. So as a mechanism to pacify her fears and escape criticism, she believed that it was divine intent and God who consigned her to read by making her "dream" about it. Like Celie in *The Color Purple*, we see how Rassundari too continuously prays and talks to God, the sole knowledge-holder of her pitiful plight.

One must note how the notion of the housewife being considered *Grihalakshmi* is contradicted starkly by Rassundari's account of her daily routine, her mistreatment, and her standing testimony to the fact that "women of our time were hapless creatures, like mere animals" (qtd. in Moitra 163). She critiques the situation regarding women's education in her time: "Wasn't it a matter to be regretted, that I had to go through all this humiliation just because I was a woman? Shut up like a thief, even trying to learn was considered an offence" (Devi 201), and views the freedom provided to modern day daughters with a lens of envy— a result of stored resentment because of the opportunities denied to her.

But despite all the challenges and hardships, Rashsundari ultimately does learn how to read and write, no matter how slowly. Referring to Tanika Sarkar's words, Swati Moitra writes—

> "The hero's journey of Rashsundari's life-narrative is one defined by the rejection of the so-called "blinkers" —it is marked by a gaze "outwards", outrageously laying claim to 'the world' forbidden to her as she participates in the "public act" of writing her life, and in the process laying claim to the very humanity denied to the housewife as a 'domestic goddess' " (174).

This was Rassundari's way of breaking free from the situation of being "completely under the control of men" (Devi 200).

To Kill A Mockingbird

Although women of white race enjoy certain privileges in terms of race, they suffer more or less the same fate as women of colour when it comes to gender-based oppression. Their wings of freedom and desire for free flight is crushed under the weight of societal expectations pertaining to femininity. Just like other parts of the world, they too face systemic challenges surrounding gender norms and imposed limitations. Consequently, they are denied their agency, and their experience of learning and independence are compromised, inhibiting development possibilities.

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One can find an almost unending list of literary pieces covering these relevant issues by a plethora of white women writers such as Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Mary Wollstonecraft, Emily Dickinson, among many more. I propose to include and briefly look at Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* in my study, to be able to showcase how social expectations limit the possibility of a free girlhood to the girls of white race in particular.

*'To Kill a Mockingbird' i*s set in the southern town of Alabama, United States. The county Maycomb is a place where “ladies bathed before noon, after their three o’clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum” (Lee 5). These lines appearing very early in Scout's narration give us an insight into the presumed roles of the men and women of Maycomb, which foreshadows the typical ways of their gender discriminatory society and its stifling of the free childhood of its youngsters, especially girls. But as we move forward in the story, we see how the character of Scout Finch refuses to submit to these preconceived notions of femininity, and does not let loose her agency, standing as a rebel in her determination to remain tomboyish, as opposed to the wishes of her motherly figures.

Scout's aunt, Alexandra presses her to act like a lady by wearing a dress which, according to her, would enable Scout to be "a ray of sunshine" in her "father's lonely life", but Scout rejects this idea completely and vehemently by stating she can "be a ray of sunshine in pants just as well” (Lee 90). It becomes crucial to note how Scout has a broader scope for femininity and a broader inclusivity for 'females', rather than her aunt who is "fanatical" about these notions but presents the idea that one can only be of help to one's father by succumbing to gender roles and following gender-appropriate mannerisms set by the social at large.

Alexandra desires for her to develop into *a genteel Southern belle*, but Scout does not seem to like this idea, against which she protests. Scout intimates the readers about the rigid conventions of her society:

> "I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches; when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn’t supposed to be doing things that required pants. Aunt Alexandra’s vision of my deportment involved playing with small stoves, tea sets, and wearing the Add-A-Pearl necklace she gave me when I was born" (Lee 90).

In the eyes of Alexandra, Scout "was born good but had grown progressively worse every year" (ibid), for not submitting to the order of domesticity.

We further see the same strangling force against freedom in Mrs. Dubose as well, when upon meeting Scout for the first time, she exclaims, "What are you doing in those overalls? You

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should be in a dress and camisole, young lady! You'll grow up waiting on tables if somebody doesn't change your ways" (Lee 112). Scout admits being "terrified" here, but her brother, Jem, supports her by saying, "Don't pay any attention to her, just hold your head high and *be a gentleman*" (ibid**)**. Mrs. Dubose disgraces Jem, and also Atticus for presumably going "against his raising" (Lee 113). She tells Scout and Jem, "Your father's no better than the niggers and trash he works for" (ibid). Here, we see how the complexities of race and gender intermingle and intertwine when it comes to marginalization and suppression. Atticus Finch is ridiculed all over the town for fighting in favour of a coloured man. It can be no coincidence that he supports his daughter's tomboyish ways. In Scout's own words, "he didn't mind me much the way I was" (Lee 90).

Quoting Kathryn Lee Seidel becomes relevant here. In her book titled *The Southern Belle in the American Novel*, Seidel talks about how:

> "The patriarchal South had made white men the dominant group… Women and blacks, on the other hand, were deemed subordinate in status, role, and temperament; a woman's status depended upon her father or husband, her economic role was that of a marriage alliance-maker before marriage and a homemaker after marriage, her sexual role was that of a chaste maiden or a faithful wife…and her ideal temperament was passive, docile, ignorant, and virtuous" (147).

Scout's father, Atticus Finch, is a liberal man and provides more space for the joyful exploration of her girlhood to Scout, as compared to all the other female characters, who, instead of defying, have rather deeply internalised the patriarchal norms of the day and want their progeny to follow the same. Atticus refuses to gift his daughter a girly present on Christmas, and rather purchases an air-rifle for both of his children. There are several similar instances in the novel to prove that he does not wish his children, especially Scout, to live up to the society's expectations pertaining to gender. This liberality, however, is not necessarily exuded in other males of the society. The idea becomes clear in the episode where Jem discusses Mayella Ewell's alleged rape by Tom Robinson, in the presence of his sister, Scout, to which, Reverend Sykes, who is also present in the scene, remarks, "This ain't a polite thing for little ladies to hear" (Lee 230). Here, Harper Lee makes Reverend Sykes act as a representative of the general male mindset in the West. It is profoundly ironic that the male dominated society does not allow for a discussion on the topic of violation of a female's body in the presence of females. Reverend Sykes' remark can be compared to Calpurnia's who is more gender-neutral in her approach —"Ain't fittin' for *children* to hear…" (Lee 229).

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The novel also has the instance of the Finch family's Afro-American cook, Calpurnia's unconventional conduct as a lady of colour, highlighting her denial of preconceptions and stereotypes in general. She debunks these standards in her capacity both as a woman, and a person of colour. She can read far more fluently than Bob Ewell, which calls into question the pre-assumption of her society that men need to be more educated than women (Hakala 45).

We must mark how Scout maintains her identity and takes hold of her agency by resisting the patriarchal pressure and refusing conformity to the paradigms of feminine behaviour which restrict her free attempts in self-discovery. She refuses to be "a soft teacake." Scout has a negative reaction to everything that is perceived feminine— she would rather read than sew, play outside with her brother, Jem, and friend, Dill, instead of playing games meant for girls, inside the household, and she prefers being called by the moniker "Scout" over the girlish name "Jean Louise."

Comparatively, Scout's childhood, though frustrated with unwelcome lectures and instructions on femininity by her motherly figures, is much more free, happier, and safer than the childhood of the figures of Celie and Rassundari Devi, because of the presence of a supportive and understanding male figure in her life, her father, and to some extent, her brother, which stand absent in Celie's or Rassundari Devi's account**,** making us ponder over the need of supporting girls in their fight against the systematic snatching away of their girlhood. The effect of such a support is well reflected in Laura Hakala's statement:

> "In a world that seems filled with restrictions, Scout and her parental figures cross gender boundaries and choose to exhibit whatever behaviors they desire. Scout can run down the sidewalk in her overalls, knowing that her parental figures will always support her gender-bending decisions" (80).

Thus, by letting Scout be her tomboyish self even in a repressive culture and society, it is demonstrated to us how the concepts of gender can be flexible, fluctuating and fluid.

Conclusion

Reading works like *The Colour Purple*, *Amar Jiban*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which explore the issues of denied girlhood and its reclamation, helps us understand the hardships that women of all races and regions experience. These stories highlight the systemic oppressions that limit girls' agency and sense of self, especially in marginalised communities. Through an analysis of the experiences of figures such as Celie and Scout and the real-life instances of Rassundari, we

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are able to mind the process of recovering agency, identity, and empowerment when confronted with hardship.

These narratives act as a mirror for the larger racialized society mechanisms that oppress women of many ethnicities. Women from a variety of racial backgrounds frequently experience the overarching themes of patriarchal control, gender-based discrimination, and cultural norms that stifle female autonomy, even though the precise manifestations may vary. These literary works' exploration of denied girlhoods prompts critical analysis of the interconnectedness of women's oppression and emphasises the need of group actions towards gender equality and empowerment for people of all ethnic identities. It highlights how crucial it is to identify and remove structural obstacles that prevent girls from reaching their full potential.

Conclusively, the examination of suppressed adolescence and its reclaiming in *The Colour Purple*, *Amar Jiban*, and comparable experiences in *To Kill a Mockingbird* highlight the perseverance and common challenges in the quest for independence and self-actualization. In order to create a world where all girls can flourish and reclaim their identities without restriction, this study exhorts society to work towards inclusivity, equity, and the demolition of repressive structures.

Limitations

In the end, like any other research, this research too suffers from certain limitations. It generalises experiences for an entire region and race, overlooking individual variations within communities, as seen in the case of Nettie and Celie. The usage of the word "Black" might come off as offensive to some people but that is purely unintentional and solely for the purpose of denoting race. The concept of Alice Walker's 'womanism' and feminism debates could have been discussed in more depth, along with the historical context of social reforms in Rassundari's times. More instances and characters from To Kill a Mockingbird could have been examined for a broader audience approach. These limitations offer opportunities for further study.

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