

Citation: Javed, N., Shakil, E., & Saeed, S. A. (2021). Loss of Innocence and Onset of Maturation: A Feminist Study of Alice Walker's *The Flowers*. *Global Language Review*, VI(I), 178-185. [https://doi.org/10.31703/glr.2021\(VI-I\).19](https://doi.org/10.31703/glr.2021(VI-I).19)



Loss of Innocence and Onset of Maturation: A Feminist Study of Alice Walker's *The Flowers*

Novreen Javed *

Ezzah Shakil †

Sohail Ahmad Saeed ‡

Abstract

This study plans to tour the different stages of the loss of innocence in the character of MYOP, a feeling conjured by Alice Walker in her short story "The Flowers". This paper encompasses the qualitative research approach and insights taken from the basic postulates of "traditional gender roles" situated within the theoretical framework of Feminists Criticism by Lois Tyson. Significant findings of the study are that a patriarchal society ceases the mental and emotional growth of a girl. When that girl is exposed to the outer environment, it leads to the onset of her maturity. It is hoped that my work will contribute to the expansion of episteme regarding the drastic influences of chauvinism and maximizing female society's potential.

Key Words: Gender Roles, Patriarchy, Mental Growth, Onset of Maturity, Episteme, Feminists

Introduction

This paper intends to scrutinize the whole scenario of the loss of innocence in Myop's character. MYOP is a character that Alice Walker portrayed in her short story "The Flower". The author of the story "Alice Walker" was the child of sharecroppers. She was the eighth child of her parents. She was dedicated to her education despite all the economic hardships she had in her childhood. She was graduated from two colleges, Sara Lawrence College and Spelman college (Barbara, 1985). She became very disappointed in school when she realized that there is a lack of literature on the culture and history of the black experience. So to create a representative curriculum, she challenged educational institutions. Walker became involved in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. *The Colour Purple* is one of her most distinguished novels. Walker's *The Colour Purple* (1982) attempts to portray racial and gender discrimination because such

segregation highly prevails in African-American society.

The Flowers is a short story published in 1973 as a part of a collection of *"In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women"*. The story is only two pages long, with 505 words. The story is considered a classic example of flash fiction. However, flash fiction includes concise length stories that are not more than 500 to 1000 words long. *The Flowers* is often taught in a literature course. After the Reconstruction in the south, the story was written, and this short story has a third-person narrative voice. Reconstruction in the South ranged from 1865 to 1877. The story entails the timeframe of sharecropping that came to the forefront after the Jim Crow Law Era that lasted from the mid-1860s to the 1960s. [Tyson \(1950\)](#) opines that Walker pronounced herself as a "womanist" instead of "feminist" because the literal translation of "womanist" according to her is a "black female".

* Assistant Professor, Department of English Linguistics, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.

Email: noveens@yahoo.com

† Visiting Faculty, Department of English, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.

‡ Assistant Professor, Department of English, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.

Because Walker advocated the fact that multicultural feminism exists where a black female is subjugated not only on the grounds of her gender but also on the grounds of her race, Alice Walker has worked for the survival and wholeness of people.

The chosen text is all about the fact that in a patriarchal society, the mental growth and development of the minds of the female are prohibited. When they face reality, it is tough for them to accept its acridness. It's complicated for a little girl who lives in a patriarchal society where she is only bound to her household chores and doesn't know life's strangeness. The girl who only learns about love and beauty of nature, when she faced the bad side of nature, suddenly she lost her innocence. She became mature enough to understand the situation (Summer-Jet, 2019). This also depicts that the patriarchal constraints bound a woman or a girl to a very limited circle that she never comes to know about society's hypocrisy. But when she undergoes some kind of bad experience, the onset of maturation begins, and all her innocence of mind has perished.

Myop skipped from her house to the smokehouse. It seemed to Myop that the days had never been as beautiful as this. The omniscient narrator described Myop's feelings in the story later on with some other words like that she felt light and reasonable under the sun. While the narrator described all her feelings of joy and innocence, in the end, we come to know that the little girl faced the dead man who had been murdered long ago violently. The protagonist of the story Myop, was a ten-year-old girl who skipped around the property where she lived. She tapped a tune in the fence with a stick which she held in her dark brown hand (this description indicates the race of the girl that she is an African American, and it reinforces racist ideology as well).

According to the narrator, she headed deeper into the woods near her house and found a beautiful bunch of blue flowers, a very unusual discovery. Myop was about to go back to her home, but suddenly, she walked through the dead body of a man. She stepped through his skull. Monica (1996) opines that he had been dead a long time ago because much of his clothes were rotted off, and only the dry remains of his body were there. The dead man was

very tall, and his teeth were broken before death. This also symbolizes the brutal practice of lynching. She discerned an unusual ring around the skull, and she realized that it is the remnant of a noose. She looked around and then looked up and found another scrap of rope hanging on the tree.

She joined all the chains in her mind, and the picture was clear that the man was murdered by someone very ferociously long ago. He was hung with the rope on the tree. After realizing the bitter reality, the story ends with her laying down her flowers and declaring that summer is over with this stark reality (Scott, 2019). The last line of the story, "The summer was over", is also symbolic that the colourful period of playfulness was over, and this was a journey from innocence to experience.

This also depicts that the patriarchal constraints bound a woman or a girl to a minimal circle that she never knows about society's hypocrisy. But when she undergoes some kind of bad experience, the onset of maturation begins, and all her innocence of mind perishes.

The problem discussed in this article is that patriarchy is dispersed in every stratum of society. We are dealing with how maturity came face-to-face with Myop when she crossed the boundaries of her home. She was an unblemished girl, but when the corrupt face of society and nature was shown to her, she lost all her naivety of soul and innocence of mind. The maturity of her mind and soul began there.

Research Questions

Two research questions are devised. The study is conducted to explore the maturity inhibition of an innocent girl in a patriarchal society, and how she comes face to face with reality and all her fantasies fizzled into thin vapour. The questions are as follows.

- 1) How is the process of maturation of an innocent girl portrayed in the text?
- 2) What does the story reveal about the operations of patriarchy?

Literature Review

For the present study, it is mandatory to review the notions of various writers about the struggles of a woman in a chauvinistic and male-dominating

society and have a brief overview of the idea of racial pride and death in the story "The Flowers". This story also shows the amalgamation of race, class and cultural factors and their effect on women's experience. Men are generally regarded as rational, powerful in contrast with women, who are always considered as fragile. Men and women are considered binary opposites, with men having positive qualities and negative attributes. The traditional gender roles have always been used to justify inequalities like the exclusion of women, depriving them of leadership domain and decision-making positions. [Tyson \(1950\)](#) writes, "It is a patriarchal assumption, rather than a fact, that more women than men suffer from hysteria" (New Critical Theory, p.86).

[Mills \(1997\)](#) states, "The discursive framework of femininity may determine the type of clothes she chooses to wear, the type of bodily stance she adopts and ways of thinking about herself" (Discourse, p.18). Patriarchal society has constructed gender roles to keep women to a lower status. As compared to men, lesser important roles are given to women to justify their subjugation. For instance, girls are told since their early childhood that Mathematics is not their field, but she is considered an exception if she finds proficiency in Maths.

The element of classism and racism are highlighted in the story "The Flowers". [Shihada \(2007\)](#) claims that class is the major factor that precipitates patriarchy and promotes the violation of the rights of women. *Walker* reminds us of the permeating racial discrimination during the epoch of the 1970s. The protagonist of the story, Myop, is a black girl who lives in a village with her family. Her family worked at a farm, and there is a mention of a sharecropper's cabin. This specific detail is reminiscent of the American civil war during the Jim Crow Law era from the mid-1860s to the 1960s. *Bethel*(1979) states, "Black feminist literary criticism offer a framework for identifying the common socio-aesthetic problems of authors who attempt to fashion literature of cultured identity amid racial/sexual oppression (cited in Critical Theory Today, 2006: 106). It is a general observation that a black woman is dually oppressed, being a woman as well as belonging to the black race.

Myop lost her innocence when she saw the dead body. This reminds us of the story "Everyday Use", which was also written by *Walker*. In this story, the protagonist Maggie depicts the same loss of innocence. Maggie had a small frame and scars on her arms and legs, which resulted from a fire that burned down the family house. "Maggie is very shy and walks with her chin on chest, eyes on the ground, feet in the shuffle" (Everyday Use, p. 283). Maggie stepped towards maturation after the fire incident. She realized that life is not as flowery as it seems to be. She found functionality and emotional worth in the quilts and used them for the right purpose rather than merely using them for the sake of embellishment.

The patriarchal society inhibits the mental growth of women. Virginia Woolf illuminated the same inhibition of mental growth in her renowned essay *A Room Of One's Own* (1929). The thesis statement says, "A woman must have money and a room of one's own if she is to write fiction". A woman is always occupied with the responsibilities of her homely chores. She is deprived of all the opportunities and funds. An escape from the shackles of patriarchy and provision of finance and secrecy can trigger her development and maturity.

For centuries women have always been regarded as inferior physically and mentally. They have attributed the inferior characteristics and then criticized for this inferiority. Providing her with emancipation and permitting her to broaden her exposure and vision in the external universe will prevent interruptions in the emotional, mental and moral growth of a woman.

There have been four waves of feminism. The roots of feminism are buried in ancient Greece. The three waves mostly recognize the feminist movement. However, a new era of women empowerment has begun with the help of the internet, having full of passion, social influencing, power and demanding change.

The first wave of feminism (1830's-early 1900s) was about the fighting of women for equal contract and property rights ([Beasley, 1992](#)). In the late 19th to early 20th centuries, women realized that they must gain political power, right to vote to bring some change. They extended their political agenda by

adding the issues concerning sexual, reproductive and economic matters.

To broaden the debate, the second wave of feminism (the 1960s-1980s) spread its feathers after World War II. It focused on the family, reproductive rights, sexuality and workplace. Women cared so much about their issues, so they wanted to strengthen their voices by fighting for gender equality so they should be heard.

The third wave of feminism (1990's-early 2000s) was about the micropolitics of gender equality. The term "feminism" became less critical, unlike the former movements. There are ego-cultural feminists, the liberal/reforms, the electoral, academic, ecofeminists, the radical ones, and the list goes on. The work of previous waves highlighted the main issues. The battle continued to vanquish the difference between male and female pay and the reproductive rights of women. It continues to fight to end violence against women at the national as well as abroad level. This wave had the elements of acceptance and true understanding of the term feminism.

A new wave of feminism hit the coast; the fourth wave, or post-feminism, began around 2012 and is characterized as the empowerment of women ([Abrahams, Jessica. 14-August, 2017](#)) and its reliance on the internet. The main focus of this wave is intersectionality and interlocking systems of power that contributes to the stratification of traditionally marginalized groups in society.

In this section, the viewpoints of various writers regarding feminism were highlighted, specifically elaborating *Walker's* art of conjuring the feminine characters, the idea of death and the theme of racism that appears in the text. Next section deals with the data analysis of the story.

Research Methodology

The study in hand is descriptive qualitative research. [O'Leary \(2004\)](#) states that qualitative research inductively explores data, then spots or identify themes, patterns and concepts and then interprets those categories. Insights have been taken from the theoretical framework of Feminists Criticism by Lois Tyson. The researcher has basically borrowed the insights from the notion of "traditional gender roles"

that are situated within the main rubric of feminist criticism. The study will highlight the heartrending effects of patriarchal society on the innocent mind of a young girl. When that innocent girl is exposed to the harsh environment, it leads to the inception of her maturity. The researcher herself is the research tool. For data interpretation, the methodology of closed analysis has been adopted, keeping in mind the feministic approach.

Theoretical Framework

The paper in hand is situated within the footsteps of feminist criticism. Feminist criticism scrutinizes the ways in which literary works strengthen or demean the economic, political, social and mental subjugation of women. From the theory of feminist criticism, I will focus upon the postulates of "traditional gender roles". The traditional roles of gender describe men as strong, rational, decisive and protective while women are depicted as irrational, fragile, nurturing, and their sole duty is to serve as an angel in the house, merely as an object of beauty. Patriarchy exerts emphasis or force that undermines a girls self-confidence (Tyson, 1950). Then due to this deficiency of self confidence, patriarchal men claim that women are innately submissive. Little girls are inculcated since their early childhood that they are fragile, they are supposed to do household chores, they are supposed to restrict themselves within the four walls of the house, while boys are always dictated that they are the decision-makers and the breadwinners of the family and thus are the acting heads in a household. Gender stereotypes have existed for centuries where males and females are taught (since their early childhood) the demarcation between good girls and bad girls. Plus, they are shown a list of characteristics peculiar to males and a list of characteristics that females are not supposed to do.

Data Analysis

The present study aims to analyze the short story '*The Flowers*' by Alice Walker with reference to the feministic approach. [Tyson \(1950\)](#) explains that there are traditional gender roles that are assigned to women, and they are supposed to follow these roles in order to be safe and respectful in society.

According to feminist theory, women are safe and untainted within the boundaries of the house. When they cross these boundaries, they are exposed to the harsh realities of this world, and their innocence fades away.

The Flowers' is the story of a young girl who is unaware of the terrible certainties of the world and is very happy in the world of her own fantasies. When she encounters the deceased body of a man, all her illusions of the beautiful world vanished, and her innocence is altered by maturity.

The protagonist of the story, Myop, is a young girl of age 10 and has her own world of imagination and fantasies. She is contented and elated with what she has and celebrates the beauty of her life. [Walker \(1973\)](#) says, "The harvesting of the corn and cotton, peanuts and squash, made each day a golden surprise that caused excited little tremors to run up her jaws". This line shows that the source of her joy is limited to her surroundings, and she enjoys the innocence of her childhood to the full extent. [Walker \(1973\)](#) further adds, "She felt light and good in the warm sun. She was ten, and nothing existed for her but her song, the stick clutched in her dark brown hand, and the tat-de-ta-ta-ta of accompaniment". This depicts that her life is as peaceful as any sweet melody, and she adores the music of that melody with wholeheartedness.

But life is beautiful for Myop until she is restricted to the boundaries of her limited world, and exposure to the outer world is known to her. "She had explored the woods behind the house many times. Often, in late autumn, her mother took her to gather nuts among the fallen leaves" ([Walker, 1973](#)). She is never allowed to explore the world on her own but under the guidance of her mother, who leads her on the paths of her own choice. Myop is never free to choose her path, and her family does not want her to expose to the horrible realistic world because they are aware that if she comes in contact with the realities of the world, her innocence may lose.

Alice Walker has used various elements in the story in order to show the contrast between innocence and the realities of society through the protagonist of the story. In the beginning, she has depicted the imagery of innocence versus reality. Myop chooses a new path instead of going on the

path she used to go with her mother daily. "Today she made her own path, bouncing this way and that way, vaguely keeping an eye out for snakes" ([Walker, 1973](#)). This action is symbolic as it shows the onset of growth and development in her character that she is no more a child; rather, she can choose her own path and is capable enough to take care of herself on her own without any guidance.

Although the story is used to narrate the decline of innocence of a young girl, this story also strongly disapproves and condemns the classically build societal ideas and standards—specifically, principles and models set for females in patriarchal societies. According to which women are expected to play a submissive role, on the other hand, men are the dominant beings of society.

At another point in the story, the author describes a scene through the imagery of juxtaposition, which includes white bubbles disturbing the black soil, "Myop watched the tiny white bubbles disrupt the thin black scale of soil and the water that silently rose and slid away down the stream". Here the white bubbles symbolizes what is considered good and acceptable by society, while "black" is considered as something evil or bad. It can be apprehended from the above picture that just like these white bubbles disturb the dirty black soil, in the same way, societal conventions are always affecting the lives of people, and those who are really hit hard by these conventions, are females. This society snatches their freedom and tries to bound them within certain limits.

Likewise, the picture of life which is shown to the females by their family heads is that of pure and bright flowers. They are confined in the boundaries of their home, so they remain ignorant to the harsh realities of the world outside their home.

Alice Walker uses another important imagery of rotting white noose with which that dead man was lynched, "It was the rotted remains of a noose, a bit of shredding plowline, now blending benignly into the soil". This rotting noose symbolizes the breakdown of so-called good and white conventions of the society, which are, in fact, the darkest part of women's life.

Ewart and Humm (2002) state that feminism covers the social roles assigned to women in a

patriarchal society which includes bearing children and looking after their homes and husbands. In this way, these roles are actually strengthened to subjugate women and to put them in a powerless position. According to [Bhasin and Nighat \(1999\)](#), feminism struggles to achieve equal status for men and women. It aims at demolishing traditional roles, patriarchy and women's oppression by male domination. According to historical evidences, women were confined to the domestic sphere, while public life was reserved for men. Women had no right to cast a vote and own property.

The protagonist of *The Flowers*, Myop, was raised on her farm as she belonged to a sharecropper family; it also shows that the role assigned to females was restricted to household chores. The prevailing element in that society was patriarchy, in which men were considered superior as compared to women. According to [Simon de Beauvoir \(2000\)](#), men are considered important and independent subjects in a male-dominated society while women are considered dependent subjects. As per the gender roles that are assigned to a woman, she is compelled to stay at home, and she is also not allowed to express her feelings and opinions. As depicted in the text, Myop almost accompanies her mother every time she steps out of her house. As narrated in *The Flowers*:

She had explored the woods behind the house many times. Often, in late autumn, her mother took her to gather nuts among the fallen leaves. Today she made her own path, bouncing this way and that way, vaguely keeping an eye out for snakes (*The Flowers*, p.119-120).

These lines are symbolic of the notion that when a woman aloof comes out to face the outer world and decides to choose her own path, it is then that she becomes aware of the heavy workings of life. Through the analysis of this work, an important aspect related to double oppression or subjugation of females is also observed as multicultural feminism. The major themes of Walker's work mainly revolve around the problems and experiences of black women, and the protagonist of *The Flowers* is also depicted as a negro girl. According to Lois Tyson, multicultural feminism deals with the issue of black women's oppression at two main levels as they are not only oppressed by patriarchy but they are also

mistreated on the basis of their black race ([Tyson, 1950](#)).

The name of the protagonist "Myop" originates from "myopia". This condition is regarded as vision abrasion or disorder in which a person cannot see distant objects, so considered a near or short-sighted person. Protagonist Myop is painted as naive and carefree who also lacks the ability to see beyond the peacefulness and beauty of her childhood till the moment when she so closely confronts a decaying dead body of a man, which results in the loss of her childhood innocence. The carefree nature of Myop is being illustrated in the text, "She was ten, and nothing existed for her but her song, the stick clutched in her dark brown hand, and the tat-de-ta-ta-ta of accompaniment" (*The Flowers*, p.119). It shows that these childhood days were the most beautiful days of her life, and she could enjoy the beat produced by that stick.

The purpose of the current study is to examine how a little girl realizes the harsh realities of the outer world in her mind, which ultimately deprives her of her innocence. At another instance in the text, Myop's exposure to the outer world is depicted:

By twelve o'clock, her arms laden with sprigs of her findings, she was a mile or more from home. She had often been as far before, but the strangeness of the land made it not as pleasant as her usual haunts. It seemed gloomy in the little cove in which she found herself (*The Flowers*, p.120).

Here, her experience of the external world left her astonished and in a state of melancholy, which is symbolic of the coming obstacles and difficulties in her life as her encounter with the dead body of a black man is shown in these words, "Myop began to circle back to the house, back to the peacefulness of the morning. It was then she stepped smack into his eyes" (p. 119). Her clash with the dead body symbolizes her encounter with the grim realities of life.

This also points to the notion of the psychological oppression of females. As described by Lois Tyson, women have less or no exposure to the external world in patriarchal societies. In this way, women are oppressed at the economic or social level and the psychological level. This limitation forbids women to understand the intricacies of the cruel

world by affecting their abilities of imagination and creativity (Tyson,1950).

According to feminist studies, more women are admitted to mental hospitals than men due to the evidence that states of mental illness and depression are strongly associated with females (Showalter, 1987). Women are forced by society to behave, dress and talk in a specific manner. And when women disobey these rules set by males, although she is considered a bad human being or deviant, it is then that she enters into the state of enlightenment by freeing herself from the psychological pressures of that society. This state of epiphany in her character is depicted in the story after encountering the dead body of a black man, "Myop laid down her flowers. And the summer was over" (*The Flowers*, p.120). This act of throwing flowers in the closing lines of the story refers to Myop's loss of innocence as a child and the beginning of her maturation.

Findings

The study's major findings are that only those females fall under the category of good girls who devote their whole life serving their families and making their homes worth living by confining themselves inside the premises of their homes. Moreover, patriarchy and traditional gender roles clearly bifurcate men and women into entirely different human beings with distinct potentials, as a good girl is supposed to be the commodity in the house performing the feminine duties of caregiving and nurturing.

The woman is deprived of the experiences of the external universe. In this way, Myop's central character, *The Flowers*, enters into a new world of acknowledgement and awareness while she was carelessly strolling around colourful flowers, totally

unaware of the ruthless realities of life. Her confrontation with the black dead body helps in her entrance from the state of innocence into a state of realization and awareness. In addition, Myop's loss of innocence takes place due to the collapse of psychological barriers, and she passes through stages of mental, emotional and psychological modifications. The theme of this piece of work by Walker is based on a journey from innocence to experience.

The story has a feminist agenda because this text seems to undermine patriarchal ideology because the upbringing of a girl is always based upon the psychological endorsing of naivety and innocence. She is heedless towards the barbaric circumstances of the external environment. But when a naive girl encounters the animal-like scenarios of the outer world, all of a girl's imagination fizzle into the air.

Conclusion

The patriarchal and chauvinistic assumptions about gender roles continue to subjugate and oppress women. In a typical patriarchal culture, most of the women's marginalization or oppression occurs in psychological repression. The only duty is to make her home a safe paradise for her family members and not to step out of the house to experience the outer world. This phenomenon badly prohibits the mental and emotional growth of a woman. In a black community, feminism is a divisive force. This research also implies that an African American woman is subjugated based on gender, but the element of race is also involved. In addition, Myop's loss of innocence takes place due to the collapse of psychological barriers, and she passes through stages of mental, emotional and psychological modifications.

References

- Abrahams, J. (14 August 2017). Everything you wanted to know about fourth wave feminism—but were afraid to ask. *Prospect*.
- Beasley, C. (1999). What is Feminism? New York: *Sage*.
- Beauvoir, S. d. (1949). The Second Sex. New York: *Vintage Books*.
- Bhasin, K., & Nighat, S. K. (1999). Feminisme dan Relevansinya. Jakarta: *Gramedia Pustaka Utama*.
- Christian, B. (1980). Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976. Westport, Conn: *Greenwood Press*.
- Cliff, T. (1984). Class Struggle and Women's Liberation: 1640 to the Present Day. Bookmarks: *London*.
- Echols, A. (1989). Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975. Minneapolis: *University of Minnesota Press*.
- Gates, H. & Alice, W. (1993). Critical Perspectives Past and Present. New York: *Amistad Press*.
- Hooks, B. (2000). Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics. Cambridge, Massachusetts: *South End Press*.
- Loeb, M. (1996). Walker's The Flowers. *The Explicator, Fall*. 55(1), p.61(3).
- Mills, S. (1997). Discourse. New York and London: *Routledge*.
- Mitchell, J. (1974). Psychoanalysis and Feminism. New York: *Vintage*.
- Munro, E. (5 September 2013). Feminism: A fourth wave. *The Political Studies Association*. (1 December 2018).
- O'Leary, Z. (2004). The Essential Guide to Doing Research. London: *Sage*.
- Rion, A. S. (2/12/2019). Flashback: Alice Walker's The Flowers. *Smoke Long Quarterly*.
- Shihada, I. (2007). The Patriarchal Class System in Nawal El Saadawi's God Dies by the Nile. *Nebula*.
- Showalter, E. (1987). The Female Malady: Woman, Madness and English culture. Virago: *London*.
- Tyson, L. (1950). Critical theory today: a user-friendly guide (2nd Ed.). New York and London: *Routledge*.
- Walker, A. (1973). In Love and Trouble. Wilmington: *Mariner Books*.
- Woolf, V. (1929). A Room of One's Own. London: *Hogarth*.