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**Interweaving: Cultural Trauma And Collective Memory Of
Slavery In Alice Walker’s Selective Poems**

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Abstract

This paper analyses two poems from Alice Walker’s poetry collection, *Taking the Arrow out of the Heart* (2018) namely, “Welcome to the Picnic” and “Gather”. It looks at the poems through the lens of trauma theory. It attempts to identify and traces the cultural trauma of slavery faced by African Americans. Also, an attempt to examine the effects of cultural trauma on the

collective memory of African Americans from the perspective of identity. It also highlights the trans-generational nature of the cultural trauma of slavery. For this purpose, this paper uses Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma and Jeffrey C. Alexander, Neil J. Smelser's definitions of cultural trauma. It also refers Ron Eyerman's work on the cultural trauma of slavery faced by African Americans as a foundation to analyse the selective poems.

Keywords: Cultural trauma, Slavery, African Americans, Collective Memory, Identity.

In African American literature Alice Walker is a renowned and influenced personality. She received Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Color Purple* in 1982. Like most of her works, her major novels like *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), and *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), etc. expressed the experiences and the issues of African American identities. She was known primarily for her novels, her short stories, poems, and her works of non-fiction also form an important and influential part of African American literature. This paper intends to refer to Alice Walker's poetry collection, *Taking the Arrow out of the Heart* (2018), and aims to analyse two poems from the collection through the lens of cultural trauma. However, the selected poems like "Welcome to the Picnic" and "Gather" will be assessed from the perspective of cultural trauma, collective memory, and issues of identity. It implies Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma and Jeffrey C. Alexander's concept of cultural trauma and issues on African American memories. As a critical trend, Trauma Studies began in the late twentieth century in the United States with an aim of "assessing the overwhelming presence of testimonial and autobiographical narratives with a strong traumatic component that seemed to have flooded every type of artistic expression" (Romero-Jodar 20). Trauma Studies initially focused solely on the experiences of the Holocaust and the resulting trauma. However, soon, it

was extended to other types of traumatic situations and conditions that individual(s) or group(s) may encounter.

The word 'trauma' means 'wound' and was originally referred to as a physical wound. However, psychiatrists and psychologists began to identify wounds that go beyond physical experiences and harm. According to Sigmund Freud trauma is "a wound inflicted not upon the body but the mind" (Caruth 3). Cathay Caruth, one of the leading and influential proponents of Trauma Studies, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (2010) views trauma as a 'wound' that is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4). She exemplifies trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). Also as per her opinion trauma as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena..." (91). However traumatic experiences and childhood memories never easily eradicate from day-to-day life. It turns into fear and subjugates the mindset which harms the body.

There are different types of trauma(s) that an individual/s, group/s, community, or communities and nation/s may experience. Personal traumas like traumas of abuse, sexual violence, harassment, etc. that are intimate and personal and are experienced generally by a single individual are called personal traumas. Traumas experienced by a group are referred to as collective trauma. As per as concerned with Cultural trauma, according to Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1). In Neil Smelser's opinion, it is "a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation that is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible,

and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions.” (Alexander et al. 44)

Ron Eyerman, in his chapter on “Cultural Trauma Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, depicts slavery as trauma and its effects on the African American identity and memory. According to Eyerman et al., “Resolving cultural trauma can involve the articulation of collective identity and collective memory, as individual stories meld into collective history through forms and processes of collective representation” (74). Thus, for generations of African Americans who did not experience slavery themselves but retained their memories of the white dominance “[i]t was the memory of slavery and its representation through speech and artworks that grounded African American identity”. This representation seeks to bring forward marginalised and repressed stories, experiences, and events to reclaim the traumatic events that African Americans experienced and begin healing. Although the memory of slavery is an important part of the African American identity, it is also important to note that the persistent racism and race-based violence that is forced upon African Americans till the present day also form a part of the traumatic events that African Americans as a collective undergo, remember, and pass on.

Alice Walker's poems in her collection *Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart* (2018) attempt to represent the cultural trauma that generations of African Americans face and continue to face even today. Walker's poem, “Welcome to the Picnic” begins with the description of a scene in which a “defenseless” man is “manacled between two psychopaths” and is beaten to death (Walker 42). The poem moves on to describe the brutalities the man faces as he is beaten by “soulless creatures” who enjoy “beating [him] / to the ground”. The defencelessness of the man is highlighted when Walker tells the readers that the man's hands “are not only tied” but are also “fastened behind [his] back” (42) It is crucial to note that this scene reminds the poet of:

the enslaved men worked to death in
seven years their heads bashed in when
they could no longer work their bodies,
their bones, turning up white with time;

and directly underneath where they fell:
Where, but Wall Street. Or the
plantations
and hundreds of years of this. (42)

The poet is forced to remember the numerous generations of African Americans that were once enslaved and worked to death or killed if they could no longer work. They were treated as a utility, as something less than human with their ability to work as their only reason for staying alive. The line “and hundreds of years of this” hints at the trans-generational nature of the cultural trauma of slavery. The poet draws a parallel to show how even after slavery has been abolished, racism is still rampant and African Americans are still suffering. It includes men women children and their community with the various atrocities on black bodies.

Walker has discussed her friend who “never uses the word “picnic” because it reminds her of “beating, hanging, quartering/ eviscerations” of African Americans irrespective of their age as a form of entertainment for families who would bring “baskets of food/ to enjoy with the show” (42). She then explores “the torture of Pickaninny” being an “eagerly anticipated attraction” (4343). “Pickaninny”, here, is “an offensive word for a small black child.” (“Pickaninny Noun”) This underlines the fact that not even African American children were excused from such inhuman brutality. African Americans were tortured and sometimes burnt for fun and their charred remains were taken as “trophies” by the “picnicking families” (43). These memories do not indicate a firsthand personal trauma but a cultural trauma of racism and race-based cruelty that African Americans as a collective have faced. The memories of these traumas are seared into their psyche and passed down from one generation to the next, making it a crucial part of the African American identity. The collective memory of the cultural trauma is suggested in the lines “We have lived within the soul / of brutality from the beginning of our connections here” (43). This line mentions the cultural trauma of slavery and brutality being the ‘primal scene for the African Americans which unites them all as a collective. Though the poem ends on a hopeful and inspiring note, it never disregards the trauma that African Americans continue to face.

The theme of cultural trauma and collective memory also plays an important role in another poem by Walker, "Gather". She begins this poem by describing the death of Eric Garner, an African American man who was beaten to death in broad daylight by policemen on 17th July 2014. He choked to death as the policemen pinned him down in a chokehold on a sidewalk in Staten Island on mere suspicion. His final words "I can't breathe" became a war cry against racism and police brutality. ("Beyond the Chokehold") The poet wonders in horror how "a big man" like Garner was killed by the "clumsy midgets" that dragged him down, "twisting and crushing" his "head and neck." (103)

Watching the video of Garner's death reminds the poet of an incident she heard of as a child where another African American man was attacked by "a mob / of white men" and was "battered to death" using blocks of heavy wood (103). As Walker then wonders then what kind of hatred for different races "drives the white lynch mob/mentality?" She applauds the African American people for their "courage to survive" and "resist conformity" even during the times in which they were enslaved and worked to death (104). Walker then invites the reader to-

Think how many black men said:

"Cracker, you're not the boss of
me"; even enslaved. (104)

"Cracker" refers to "the crack of the whip wielded by slave drivers" (105). The poet asks the readers to think, to remember the brutalities the African Americans faced while enslaved. She calls the readers to recall Nat Turner, an enslaved African American preacher who led the four-day rebellion of enslaved and free African Americans in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831. He was eventually arrested, tried, and hanged and his body was then dissected and flayed. Christine Gibson writes: "His skin was made into a purse, his flesh turned to grease, his bones divvied up as souvenirs. His head was permanently separated from his body and made the rounds as a curio, reportedly spending much of the twentieth century at the College of Wooster, in Ohio." ("Nat Turner, Lightning Rod") Turner's flaying, dissection, and severing of his head also

symbolises the fragmented nature of the African American identity that is wrapped in racial hatred and violence.

Walker then asks “Who are these people / that kill our children in the night? / Murder our brothers in broad daylight?” (104-105). The use of “these people”, “our children” and “our brothers” indicates the binary that racism has created between White and non-White people. This Othering also hints at the African American identity being a collective separate from their “bosses” or ‘masters’ Walker appeals to all the African Americans to “Gather”, unite and understand what they, as a group, must do to “cherish” and love themselves, irrespective of who attempts to enslave them. She urges her readers to put their “sacrificed / beloveds to rest” in “profound and ample caring” that is as “broad, ever moving, and holy, / as the sea” (105). This can be seen as the poet’s attempt to urge her fellows to move on and heal from their original cultural trauma of slavery but not forgetting those who sacrificed themselves for justice. The circling back to “the sea” can be seen as a reference to the seas that brought the African Americans to America in the first place, indicating that the primal memories of the cultural trauma of slavery might never be forgotten but, for the betterment of the community, must be put to rest.

Both of Walker’s poems, “Welcome to the Picnic” and “Gather” therefore highlight the cultural trauma of slavery by referencing past events of slavery and drawing a parallel between the past and the present. This indicates that the cultural trauma of slavery is enmeshed in the collective memory of African Americans and their identity. Also coming together defeats the trauma and brings hope for the development of the community and future generations. However, hatred towards Black differentiated them from white, and culturally excluded them from the sphere. Even though Walker urges her people to fight for justice.

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