

---

# Configuring Discourses on Black Women's Power in the Novels, *Waiting to Exhale* and *The Color Purple*

---

R.B. Edi Pramono<sup>1\*</sup>, Ida Rohani Adi<sup>2</sup>, Muh Arif Rokhman<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> English Department, Universitas Teknologi Yogyakarta, Indonesia  
Jl. Siliwangi, Jombor, Sleman, D.I. Yogyakarta 55285

<sup>2</sup> Department of Interculture, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia  
Jl. Nusantara 1, Bulaksumur, Depok, Sleman, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta 55281

\*Corresponding Author: [edipramono@uty.ac.id](mailto:edipramono@uty.ac.id)

---

## ABSTRACT

The discourses of the novels, *Waiting to Exhale* and *The Color Purple*, show the main characters exercising power in their social power relations, then gaining knowledge, and with knowledge, gaining power. In the former novel, the characters Robin and Bernadine gain knowledge through their relationship with Savannah and Gloria, while in the latter Celie gains knowledge through Nettie's letters and her intensive acquaintance with Shug. This study aimed to analyze how Black women acquire power transformation, and what state of power Black women have before and after this transformation. Our findings showed, first, that they acquire support and help from close friends and families. Second, they gained knowledge and awareness about their positions and weaknesses. Third, they begin determining their wills, passions, and choices. Then, they transform their endurance into power over and power to change from being powerless and submissive into a powerful and self-determining personality. Using Foucault's theory of power and Foucault's discourse analysis method, the discourse shows that besides knowledge, self-determination, and the supporting milieu are essential factors in gaining power transformation in power relations.

**Keywords:** *Black women; power change; power relations; power-knowledge; supporting milieu*

---

## INTRODUCTION

Experiencing centuries of slavery and the lowest level of social stratum below White men, White women, and Black men, many Black women suffer double and even triple oppression. First, they suffer from a patriarchal society which positions women under men's domination. Second, Black women suffer from becoming an ethnic minority referring to their ethnicity or skin color. Concerning this ethnicity, American Black women suffer from two societies, i.e., White people in common and White women. Beal, (2008) says that Black women take on hostile burdens since they are still used to being

the scapegoats for some evil incidents. They have been undergoing sexual harassment from Whites, suffering from dreadful manners of economic abuse, and neglecting their children in famine while nursing and caring for the Whites' descendants. Black women have been socially manipulated and physically raped. It is a terrible disgrace for Black women to undermine their families and to be frail to overturn the condition. Unfortunately, Perry et al. (2013) confirm that Black women also suffer from oppression by their sisters, the American Black woman activists. Those who have authority in decision-making through Black women

forums have created unfair systems to silence the ordinary Black women. This emphasizes the fact that Black women are the powerless party in all power relations, in that they are undergoing what Jennifer C. Nash says, "multiply marginalized" life (Jackson, 2018).

The historical narratives around Black Power have also often portrayed Black women merely as a supporting party. Black women strive hard to gain more power. In the black power movement, through many negotiations and discussions, it is then accepted that Black Power cannot be understood without examining the contributions of Black women (Nadasen, 2015).

Black women must empower themselves to obtain a more bargaining position for a more just treatment in society because the reality of unfair power and gender relations, racial and sexual oppressions, racial inferiority and superiority, gender discrimination, and imaginative literary stories on such wicked conditions keep running. Naila Kabeer (2005) says that education, employment, and political participation are vital to empowering women to enabling them to achieve gender equality. Kabeer also observes that women's power denotes the women's ability to make choices. This can be seen in the development of American Black people during and after the Harlem Renaissance. Many schools are established to educate Black people, including women. Education empowers Black women and leads them to have various jobs, higher dreams, and more rights. With education they can attain knowledge in dealing with the racial and gender injustice they are experiencing. This kind of empowerment not only produces power for Black women, but also enables them to make choices. However, in general notorious societies, the social structure has given women narrower access to valuable resources, less value, lower status, and less free opportunity for choice-making than it has given to men (Revenge & Shetty, 2012; Sapiro, 1986; United Nations, 2009). Therefore, Black women's empowerment means that they are altered from not having an opportunity to make choices to having ability to make choices. Nevertheless, since empowerment refers to the "power to", Black women are supposed to also have the "power over" through exercising their power in power relations (Wrong, 2017). Empowerment and power exercise are required to result in a transformation, a

mental change. Transformation is a need in women's empowerment that women have to truly be committed to. Rebecca Walker furthermore believes that women must search for personal intelligibility in the middle of the systemic destruction and collective sisterhoods (in Caterine, 2018) so that they will have more power in their social power relations. Black women create their narratives and discourses to make others understand their thought and their will, for example in the #MeToo movement with the #MeToo narratives. The #MeToo narratives, which use social media to reach global readers, construct personal intelligibility, gain power, and ultimately to change their subordinate position (Hu et al., 2020).

African-American women's literature presents such bitter conditions through the publication of Black women's writings (Xu, 2021). African-American women are transforming the US literary world as writers, academics, publishers, and magazine editors (Kirschner, 2022), and their literary works appear in all genres of literature, i.e., plays, poetry, and prose. *The Color Purple* and *Waiting to Exhale* are two such works, by Alice Walker and Terry McMillan, respectively, and both of which were later adapted into movies. The setting of *Waiting to Exhale* is the 1990s, the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while the setting of *The Color Purple* is the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, despite the very different atmosphere of the setting, the essence of African-American women as the powerless party and their efforts to be more powerful show similarities. This study observed and analyzed African-American women experiencing the exercise of power in gender and power relations in literary works, based on the two novels, *The Color Purple* and *Waiting to Exhale*, written by African-American women.

*The Color Purple* and *Waiting to Exhale*, subsequently referred to as *TCP* and *W2E*, respectively, when they are used as citations for quotations therein, tell stories of women dealing with and solving their problems both as women and Black people. Women are stereotyped as powerless and even subjugated in relation to men. Celie, the main character of *The Color Purple*, obviously shows this powerlessness before she finally gains power and respect. She writes to God about being beaten by her husband, whom she married due to her husband's force, although she does not love him (*TCP*, 28). A similar condition but with a different atmosphere occurs with Bernadine, one

of the characters in *Waiting to Exhale*. Her mother warns her how her husband, in fact, majorly controls her. Her mother insists that there will be nothing left in Bernadine except being obedient to her husband, and thus, she expects that soon Bernadine will divorce him (W2E, 93). To a certain extent, Robin, another character in *Waiting to Exhale*, is also a picture of a powerless woman. This is clearly seen when Robin articulates her total efforts of making Russel keep loving her (W2E, 43) and thus, this drives one of her close friends, Savannah, to remind her that being alone does not mean loneliness (W2E, 218). Savannah openly derides Robin for persisting in her affection for a man who has consistently mistreated her and for allowing him to re-enter her life. Savannah finds Robin's apparent powerlessness and lack of discernment perplexing (W2E, 181).

There is a process of Black women from not having power to having it. It does not take place instantly. Celie does not suddenly turn into a woman with power; neither do Bernadine and Robin. Through discourse analysis, this study intended to configure the processes of those characters changing from being ordinary Black women into the ones having power.

Foucault (1981) recommends that discourse can manifest into power because it is the desire by which and for which the struggles come into existence against systems of domination. He closely connects discourse with power relations that power is vented through language and actions. Foucault also proposes the idea that power is closely related to knowledge. He often uses the French words *savoir* and *connaissance* that are transferred into English as knowledge with some meanings like know-how, wisdom, learning, recognition, and expertise (Faubion, 2001). This study applies this meaning as Foucault's definition of knowledge in all the analyses and discussions.

Foucault believes that within knowledge comes power and in power there rises knowledge. Thus, someone having knowledge can be understood to have learnt something or many things that give wisdom, expertise, recognition, and know-how. Moreover, discourse is not only in the sense of linguistic facts but also in the sense of strategic games of question and answer, action and reaction, domination and evasion, struggles, and strategic and polemical facts. Hence, anything other than language can also be a discourse, and a validating larger pattern of discourses produces knowledge (Schneck, 1987). In

other words, knowledge is a production of discourse. There is truth in knowledge and discourse. Truth is a system of ordered procedures to produce, regulate, distribute, circulate, and operate the statements, and it is linked in a reciprocal relation with the power systems (Faubion, 2001). Therefore, discourse and knowledge are powerful and create power for the bearers. Exercising power will constantly create knowledge, while knowledge perpetually stimulates the effects of power. It can be then understood that without knowledge and discourse, power is less likely to become apparent. In other words, people without knowledge are those without power.

This concept of power-knowledge also denotes that power gains its significant meaning through the accepted forms of knowledge, scientific comprehension, and truth (Gaventa, 2003). It can be obviously seen from the characters Nettie, Shug, and Sofia in *The Color Purple* and from Savannah and Gloria in *Waiting to Exhale*. These characters, through their discourses, create a "regime of truth" (Faubion, 2001) since they have knowledge. They share it with Celie, Bernadine, and Robin, and therefore, the latter three characters may have a power transformation. It is also believed that from everywhere comes power, and consequently, it exists everywhere, and is always alert (Foucault, 1978, 1995). Thus, power is neither a structure nor an agency, suggests (Gaventa, 2003). However, it is attached to a structure or agency or individual that can influence others through the manipulation of the collective material setting so that the others will not otherwise do (Dahl, 1957; Dowding, 2008; Keohane, 2020; Leisey, 2016; Popitz, 2017; Weber, 1978; Wrong, 2017). That is why power relations exist everywhere and everyone can perform power.

Moreover, Dennis Wrong (2017) highlights that power relations can be extensive, comprehensive, and intensive as these connote asymmetrical power relations implying unequal positions or power to hold. Power relation establishes the opposing values and the number of differences between the opposing forces, and it sets up a complex of obstacle-signs so that one may seek to manifest one's superiority over others through exercising power relations (Faubion, 2001; Foucault, 1978, 1995). Power must be internalized within the individual, and it can socially manifest in any forms by individuals or institutions to others. Power refers to what is shown and manifested in

discourses by the holder while being seen by other parties interacting with the power holder (Foucault, 1981, 1995). Discourse is the power to seize and power is the strength and the ability of an individual to exercise one's will over others (Foucault, 1981; Weber, 1978; Wrong, 2017).

What happens to the characters in both novels is the portrayal of power relations between them and the people around them or their societies in discursive discourses. Power is exercised by someone to another and over another and vice versa. Black women as the characters in the novels consciously and unconsciously exercise their power that later on change their positions in dealing with power relations. Thus, in this novel, power relations are determined by the actions of the characters, the Black women, in their running life, and it is not the natural manifestation of a compromise Foucault (in J. D. Faubion, 2001) confirms that the exercise of power is not plainly a connection between partners, either individual or collective; it is a way where some people act on others. Power appears only when people exercise it on others, and only when it is transformed into action. Therefore, the main characters in both novels conduct actions as their way to exercise power to produce a transformation of power. Within the framework of Foucault's theory of discourse analysis and power, the study of the novels was conducted.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

When interviewed by The Washington Post, Alice Walker, the author of *The Color Purple*, says that every three minutes, there is a woman raped in the US. She continues by saying that among three women has been raped during their lifetimes, where sadly, a quarter of the number is little girls under 12 years old (Rosenfeld, 1982). Walker wants to show that what she puts in *The Color Purple* reflects what is happening in society. Black women, including Black female children, are vulnerable of having sexually oppressed due to being powerless in society. The research shows that in the US, about 1 in 4 girls experience distressing sexual abuse, and 91% of children's sexual abuse is managed by those who are known and trusted by the children or family members and in 2015, it was estimated that the children's sexual abuse total lifetime economic burden would be at least \$9.3 billion (CDC, 2022). From time to time, from the slavery era to this modern age, Black

women have never stopped suffering from any kinds of oppression, discriminations, and humiliation in many different ways referring to the eras.

On one side, history tells that Black women have grown up with preparations to encounter a harrowing and brutal life as enslaved people, so that they become strong enough to bear all the painful burdens. Subsequently, there comes a stereotype that Black women are strong, and this "strong Black woman" stereotype drives many Black women in America to feel pressured. They have to behave like superwomen, showing themselves as resilient, self-sacrificing, and away from emotion when coping with the stress of racial and gendered discrimination they are having. Allen even argues that Black women must feel and be strong to prepare themselves to undergo racial discrimination daily. These efforts even intensify the stress burdens they have to bear (Manke, 2019). Through Celie, the main character in *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker seems to present this stereotype. Celie becomes a superwoman by doing all of the backbreaking household chores, while being subjugated as a woman by her husband, whose name she does not want to say. It is a paradox in that Black women are strong but weak, mighty but chained, and super woman but subordinated. The system of social patriarchy and the latent feudalistic values as the remains of slavery seem to be perpetuated. Even at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such a situation, though to a lesser degree, emerges through the character Bernadine in *Waiting to Exhale*. Bernadine's mother says to her not to be a superwoman just because Bernadine does all the domestic affairs, including her children's homework. Her marriage shall not consume all her time, sacrificing time supposed to be for herself. "When do you have time for yourself?" [...] "But in this day and age, women do too much" (*W2E*, 150). Black women cannot define themselves, but others define them as strong workhorses to carry all the burdens including the family burdens; they need and want nothing, says Nelson (in Thompson, 2012). Household matter is one of the domestic issues that women in Black Power struggle to change. Many domestic chores done by women are considered as the continuity of exploitation and racism rooted in slavery, and it is one of the forms to wiped out by Black liberation (Nadasen, 2015). Families are therefore the discourses of politics and power (Koester, 2015). This image suits both Celie's and Bernadine's lives during their being wives.



A black woman is raised with the belief in their strength to withstand their miseries. West (2008) even states that during the slavery era, the enslaved mothers taught their female offspring to be really strong as their preparation for the violent and brutal life on plantations. This drives White people to justify the inhuman treatment and enslavement of Black people (Liao et al., 2020). During and after the enslavement era, discriminations and oppressions towards Black women and their families have restrained them from accessing various resources (Collins, 2004), and this even motivates Black women to stay strong. What Celie does by keeping her pains deep inside her heart and making herself “a tree” (*TCP*, 28) and Bernadine does to endure her being forced by her husband to devote herself only to domestic affairs find their lines in the history of Black slavery. These two women’s strength is more than enough to endure all the miseries and burdens to bear. In enduring all those burdens, Celie hands in to God, “But it ain’t easy, trying to do without God. Even if you know he ain’t there, trying to do without him is a strain” (*TCP*, 176). At the same time, Bernadine relies on her trust in her husband, even ignoring her mother’s advices.

A statistic shows that by 1990, the economic conditions of African-Americans had dramatically changed. They had entered the white-collar sector and better blue-collar jobs rather than farming jobs in rural South regions. The ownership of houses increased almost twice as in 1900. The rate of African Americans attending schools of all ages also rose sharply (Maloney, 2002). Many Black women have somewhat similar opportunities in various sectors of job fields to Black men. With such an atmosphere, it is unsurprising that the four Black characters in *Waiting to Exhale* are educated working women, and the two are even the breadwinners of their families. However, in their social power relations, especially concerning the relationship between man and woman, they still show their less power or their being under domination.

With the progress of technology and borderless global communication and information, it can be understood that the level of racism and sexual discrimination has been moderated but the unjust relationship has not vanished. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African-American women did not lose their domestic affairs even though they worked out-doors, as did Black men do. The worst is that Black women

earn less than men, and in relation to men, they are as poor as ever or poorer than Black men. Still, many educated Black women end up as house wives in their marriages. It does not negate the fact that many Black women make achievements to be respected and treated equally as men.

This study finds out that two opposing states show the transformation of power experienced by the three female characters, i.e., Celie, Bernadine, and Robin. In one state, Walker and McMillan present them as powerless, dependent, and subordinated to their men. Social patriarchy strongly overwhelms them, which accentuates their undergoing “psychological oppressions” (Cudd & Andreasen, 2007). It is the concepts and thoughts that men’s superiority and women’s inferiority are retained by men and accepted as true by women. This situation is where Celie, Bernadine, and Robin undergo self-oppressive conduct through their internalization of inferiority (Cudd & Andreasen, 2007) beyond their awareness. On the opposite state, by the end of the story, Walker and McMillan present their characters as newborn individuals with new personalities having power. They are not subordinated, submissive, and under the control of other parties. Instead, they decide based on their self-confidence, independence, and power. This state is achieved through supporting milieu, knowledge, and self-determination.

The journey of the three women’s live does represent empowerment in which their power is to make not only choices or to do things on their freedom, but also a “power over” (Wrong, 2017) others, in which they are respected by their Black society. This directs to the existence of numerous and diverse bases, such as knowledge, endurance, freedom, and determination on which they may exercise their power over their men, which may include persuasion, prestige considerations, manipulation, habit, sense of duty, and fear of physical or economic sanctions. Those three women obtain two essential things within a discourse, i.e., events and chances (Foucault, 1981) and they use them well. The following discourses confirm these findings along with its power transformation process.

### **Discourse on Powerless State**

Celie, Bernadine, and Robin can be described as submissive and easily controlled Black women under the will the of Black community e.g.; families and spouses. Celie is a weak, obedient, and give-in girl

who does not reject anything even the painful ones to her. The only reason Albert marries Celie is to make her look after his children, while Celie accepts the marriage because her stepfather makes her so. There is no love between them. "My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me. I'm big. I can't move fast enough" (TCP, 9). "He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church" (TCP, 12). "He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them" (TCP, 28). Bernadine obeys whatever her husband tells her, even she puts down her passion for running a catering business because she trusts her husband that she cannot be herself but gives in to her husband. Her total support, or obedience to be more exact, to her husband has placed her as a dominated or subordinated woman, a woman of no power. "He knew you had always wanted to start a catering business, but John said to wait" (W2E, 32). "Every single time you said you were ready to start your catering business, John would think of something else for you" (W2E, 35). Robin positions herself dependently on Russel and dreams to make him her husband. She completely endeavours and devotes all her might to making Russel, her boyfriend, keep loving her. She cannot move on when he leaves her and takes another girl to marry. Robin falls after Russel deserts her out. "So, like a fool, [...] I didn't wanna lose Russell. I did everything in my power to make sure Russell would keep loving me" (W2E, 43). "And on top of everything else, I gave him as much pussy as he wanted, whenever he wanted it, even when I was dead tired. What more could a man ask for?" (W2E, 44) "so I tried harder and harder and even harder than that to please him" (W2E, 45). It shows that consciously or unconsciously, these three Black women have positioned themselves as women who are dependent on men, and they undergo psychological oppression.

Like most people do when being so powerless with nobody to ask for help or care to only listen to the burden, someone goes to the divine realm and that is what Celie does. She writes to and shares her story and misery with God. All her letters are to God, with the opening "DEAR GOD". However, Bernadine and Robin are not as pious as Celie, and it can be understood that different eras related to the development of technology bring different degrees of people's piety. What occurs to Bernadine and Robin has a similar condition to that of Celie's but with a

different atmosphere. Robin shares her burdens with her friends, and Bernadine shares her burdens with her friends and mother. Her mother warns her how her husband, in fact, majorly controls her. She also insists that there will be nothing left in Bernadine except being obedient to her husband, and thus she expects that soon Bernadine will divorce him. "Some women just let a man take over their mind. If you do that, what's left? I'm just waiting for the day to come when you tell me you're divorcing him" (W2E, 93).

Bernadine's emotional behaviours for quite a long time after the divorce emphasize her powerlessness due to her devoting her life to her husband during her marriage. That is why she feels like she drowns without any help when her husband files for divorce to her. She totally feels helpless and stoned. She is shocked when her husband suddenly files for divorce after 11 years of marriage.

When her husband files a divorce, Bernadine gets truly shocked and is emotionally down. This emphasizes her powerlessness to her husband.

But then again, Bernadine really couldn't be sure, because she felt stoned, as if she'd smoked a good joint. But she hadn't. Still, something was pushing her shoulders down, while what felt like helium was escaping inside her head. She couldn't move. She was sinking and floating. Felt heavy, then light.

(W2E, 27)

Although Bernadine lives a luxurious life since her husband is a wealthy Black man, her being bound and dependent on her husband's words shows that she is like Celie to her husband. To a certain extent, Robin is also a picture of a powerless woman. It is clearly seen when Robin articulates her total efforts of making Russel keep loving her, "I did everything in my power to make sure Russell would keep loving me" (W2E, 43). She even loses 8 pounds of her weight in two weeks sadness after Russel deserts her. Robin, in such a situation is undergoing a psychological oppression (Cudd & Andreasen, 2007) as what Celie does in Walker's *The Color Purple*.

This powerless state of the three women emphasizes the unequal position between the two sexes as implied by the tradition of patriarchy. In other words, there is a gender power inequality. In inequalities between women and men are one of the most persevering models in gender power distribution.

To support this statement, Koester (2015) states "Gender relations are power relations," and that is why being a woman means being powerless, meaning being obedient, quiet, and accommodating to men. As the opposite of this stigma, a man is powerful, in control, outspoken, and able to enforce his will, especially in relation to a woman. These gender role inequalities tend to maintain the power disparity between the two sexes.

### Discourse of Supporting Milieu

All through Celie's life, she has been exposed to malicious forms of male dominance. Celie then upholds freedom from the control of her husband and asserts her right to enforce her existence. In all her acceptance towards her life, Celie proves her endurance and determination leading to power. Bernadine and Robin also experience power transformation in that they have changed from being powerless to being powerful and submissive to being decisive. The word transformation requires a process as the prerequisite for Black women's power change.

Moreover, people need external factors such as family or friends who are attentive, concerned, responsive, and supportive to change. Gloria's call to Bernadine proves a friend's speedy response, deep concern, and significant support to another friend's problem. "Look, Bernie. I hope you're all right. Joseph told me what happened, so call me. I'm worried as hell about you, and I won't be able to rest until I know you're okay. So call me. I don't care how late it is" (W2E, 81). This study finds that a supportive milieu plays a vital role in these three women's process of changing power. Bernadine and Robin have two strong and determinant friends, Savannah and Gloria, while Celie has Avery Shug, Sofia, and her sister, Nettie. Bernadine also has her mother's support for her and her two children.

Gloria and Savannah are always there with their motivating attention and words to care for and support Bernadine and Robin. The following verbal discourses show how these two friends are decisively important for Bernadine and Robin to open their awareness to stay strong and move on. Some statements from Savannah for Robin are as follows:

It was amazing to her how some women could be so stupid. They make up all kinds of excuses for a man after he's treated them like dirt;

apologize for his revolting behavior; and take him back after he's broken their fucking hearts." (W2E, 181)

This is the nineties, Robin. Eating by yourself is not an admission of loneliness. And who gives a shit if it is. So go. (W2E, 218)

Gloria gives more activities to Bernadine and Robin by bringing them to join Black Women on the Move. Robin also believes that Gloria gives her excellent and strong advice. Gloria also tells Robin to be aware of herself, see the realities, and stop acting as if she is blind (W2E, 45). Friends are the top priority for these four women, so through the words uttered by Savannah, they agree that men shall never be above friends. It can be understood that Savannah, besides Gloria, becomes the person her best friends can rely on when they are having big troubles in their lives.

If I had a man and it was your birthday and you were going to be over here by yourself all lonely and shit and Robin and Bernie called me up to come over here to help you celebrate, I'd still be here, girl. So don't ever think a man would have that much power over me that I'd stop caring about my friends. And that's the truth. (W2E, 347)

In *The Color Purple*, the supporting milieu is obviously presented by Alice Walker. Walker seems to want to deliver her message to Black women readers that change and progress cannot be done alone. Black women must support each other and work together to lift the quality of their lives, to increase the power of Black women, and to empower the powerless Black women. Her belief that Nettie, her sibling, is alive gives her the spirit to stay alive, and they will meet again one day. "Nettie mean everything in the world to me" (TCP, 111). "Now I know Nettie alive, I begin to strut a little bit" (TCP, 136). For Celie, her sister makes her able to read, a decisive ability that brings her to awareness, understanding, and most importantly, knowledge in which Celie is able to create her discourse. The process of Celie learning how to read words, "Helping me with spelling and everything else she think I need to know. [...] And she a good teacher too" (TCP, 23), emphasizes the undeniable role of Nettie toward later on the speed progress of Celie's personal power and development.

Furthermore, the strength and power possessed and presented by Sofia inspire Celie to have a dream of becoming like Sofia, i.e., strong and brave. "All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble bout the house crazy for Mr. \_\_\_\_ blood" (TCP, 112). Sofia's firmness and courage influence to Celie's thoughts even though she cannot be against Albert as she is to her husband. However, after her long relationship with Avery Shug, she understands how to cope with Sofia's power as a Black woman. Even then, she understands how White people treat Black people as Sofia says that White people never listen to Black people except when they think they must make Black people do (TCP, 179). These discourses confirm that exercising power can be operated with the help of surrounding people in power relations.

### Knowledge and Empowerment

As already presented, there is a tight connection among discourse, knowledge, and power. Individuals with knowledge can then be inferred to be empowered. Someone learning to gain knowledge can also be understood as exercising power. That is why, since the abolishment era, many Black people have sent their children to private and state schools. Education is believed to be the gate to knowledge and, thus, the way to Black empowerment. In a tiny point within a huge frame of Black power, the female characters in these two novels can portray how knowledge and empowerment are related and important in the transformation of power.

While Terry McMillan in *Waiting to Exhale* presents the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century so that the characters are educated. Alice Walker presents almost a hundred years earlier when many Black women began their education, so it makes sense that the main character in *The Color Purple*, Celie, learns how to read and write from her sister, Nettie. Then she befriends Avery Shug who teaches her about her body and being a woman. It shows a sharp opposing condition to Bernadine and Robin, who have not only learnt sex and sexuality, but also explored sex for bodily pleasures. However, this philosophically brings extremely different outputs, where knowledge about the body and the pleasure of sex is the gate for Celie to intellectuality and intellectual freedom, resulting in inner power.

Shug makes Celie know and understand the mysteries of her own body and sexual experience,

thus making it possible for Celie to both discover her speech ability and her freedom from the brutality of men. Celie's finding of bunches of Nettie's letters becomes another gate to knowledge development because she has to start reading again and understand the meaning of words. Shug plays a significant role at this point. "What with being shocked, crying and blowing my nose, and trying to puzzle out words us don't know, it took a long time to read just the first two or three letters" (TCP, 132). Celie's finding and reading the letters from Nettie and her being taught by Avery Shug about her own body and dreams have thus given her knowledge and self-awareness. Celie begins to learn other places, as shown by the stamps on Nettie's letters, and she also starts to understand any social issues as written by Nettie in the letters.

Foucault (1995) proposes that knowledge or intellectuality is one of the sources of power, and he says that knowledge follows the improvements of power. Reading Nettie's letters can be meant as learning new things for Celie, and this constructs intellectuality in Celie's mind that subsequently gives power, both power to or the capacity of individuals to satisfy their wants and power over or having the capacity bigger or higher than others. On the other side, pain and broken heart have forced Bernadine and Robin to open their awareness, which triggers new understanding, knowledge, and motivation. The improved power through the exercise of power discovers new objects of knowledge. Both the formation and accumulation of new forms of knowledge multiply the effects of power, and this is what then occurs in Celie, Bernadine, and Robin.

Celie is now capable enough of applying her power to determine her choices by living separately from Albert, her husband. She also has power over him that he cannot do to Celie what he used to do to her. "Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble. [...] Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say. [...] The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say" (TCP, 190). Celie then turns out to become a woman with knowledge and power. This is also signed with the change of the letter address. Celie does not write to God anymore but to Nettie.

DEAR NETTIE,

I don't write to God no more. I write to you.

Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, a



crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown.

Let 'im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you.

(TCP, 176)

Bernadine and Robin experience new things that make them learn a lot and gain knowledge that subsequently produces power for them. The pains and griefs of being left by their men and piece of advice from their friends and family teach them to think and raise their knowledge. "So what?" Gloria said. "Men ain't everything. When are you gonna realize that? (W2E, 347). Their efforts to understand men, not vice versa, is a real justification for the running patriarchy. Thus, they shall not continue the efforts as advised by Savannah, "when you finally come to understand the man you love, that's when you realize you don't love him anymore." Gloria motivates them to have determination in repositioning gender power relations. "How are we supposed to feel beautiful and loving and soft and caring and gentle and tender and compassionate and sensitive, when they treat us like shit after we surrender ourselves to them? Would somebody tell me that?" (W2E, 407). Support, advice, and companionship have empowered Robin and Bernadine, which subsequently gives them understanding and awareness of their subordinated position as women. As what occurs to Celie, this study also perceives that Robin and Bernadine gain both power to and power over.

### Self-determination

Self-determination contributes notably to the expected positive results in various areas like community living, employment, education, and the improved quality of life. It is the innate desire of any individual to reach or achieve the set goals. Self-determined individuals are those performing activities with solid motivations. Bernadine, Robin, and Celie are constructing their self-determination along with the emergence of their self-awareness and new knowledge through their bitter experiences.

Self-determination rises in those three women along with inner purpose and desire to redefine their

life in social or personal relations. Being driven by self-determination, Robin, Celie, and Bernadine create their discourses to intensify their power and be more assertive in their dealing with their problems. These women are tired of being handled as disposable merchandise by men. Some following statements by the three women confirm the discourses of their self-determination leading to the increase of their power. Bernadine says, "Well, I'm about to make some changes in my life." (W2E, 150); Robin says, "All I want to do is feel worked up. To be excited about somebody. To have something to look forward to. To meet somebody to fill in the blank. Somebody I can trust" (W2E, 216), and Celie says to her husband, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly, and can't cook. But I'm here" (TCP, 190). By firmly saying it, Celie confidently confirms her existence. In all her acceptance towards her life, Celie has proven her endurance and determination, leading to a power over her husband, and she afterwards decides to live separately, convincing him that their relationship is no more than just friends (TCP, 261). Robin can fully release Russel and Bernadine let her husband go with a White woman.

Three conditions are driving Celie to exercise her power both unconsciously and consciously. The first and the basic one is missing her beloved sister, Nettie. All her letters to God obviously present this feeling. Her talks with Sofia and especially many long talks with Avery Shug are the second situation triggering Celie to find Nettie's letters hidden by her husband. The last one is Celie's awareness of her being oppressed by her mother, stepfather, and finally, her husband, that consequently gives her a strong motivation. These three conditions impel Celie to understand, discern, and decide to make a change in her life. These have given her knowledge and empowerment. Thus, this generates and advances power within herself. Then, Celie believes she can live by herself. In both Robin and Bernadine, there are also three basic conditions, i.e., their pains and broken hearts, their talks with friends and family, and finally, their awareness of their subordinated position as women to men.

Self-determination becomes crucial for those three in obtaining power in the frame of power relations. This self-determination, supported by a supportive environment such as friends and family, then overwhelms Robin, Celie, and Bernadine and leads them to be Black women with power. Gloria's

words nicely and precisely apply to the three women, "The answer to everything is inside me" (W2E, 423). Pramono (2013) says that women are essentially powerful within their being powerless. They settle a power transformation after running a period of hard life.

## CONCLUSION

This research found that power exercises take place with the support of external parties. Celie learns about her body, her sexuality, and her life from Avery Shug, and she learns many more things from Nettie. Celie also learns the power of Sofia. This learning becomes discourses that give her knowledge and consequently build her power. She is not submissive, controlled, and subjugated, but strong enough to decide or choose what she wants. A similar situation occurs with Bernadine and Robin as they get help and support from Gloria and Savannah. Both are not controlled by men anymore, and even Robin is strong enough to leave Russel while carrying his baby in her womb. The analysis also shows that Celie, Bernadine, and Robin have self-determination. This thing becomes the fuel to burn their spirit to engender change, even though the difference is initially not intended for power. Thus, the three Black women become newborn people.

The discourses in the novels have taught us that nothing occurs instantly. A process, including events, chances, length of time, and level of hardness, must be undergone to accomplish goals. Through long, challenging, and winding times, Black women attain more power in their power relations. Through their characters, Celie, Bernadine, and Robin, both novels depict the realities of Black women in America and how their power develops. However, despite their achievement of power in various fields of life, the present realities in America show that there are still considerable gaps between Black and White Americans regarding wealth, unemployment, income, and life expectancy. Therefore, any topics about African-American women and their power remain vast and immense to discuss.

## COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

The author(s) herewith declare that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the data collection, analysis, and editorial process, and the publication process in general. The authors also

do not have any competing interests regarding the publication in *Poetika: Jurnal Ilmu Sastra*. All authors in this article were not involved in any step of the editorial review and editors' decision at all costs.

## REFERENCES

- Beal, F. M. (2008). Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female. *Source: Meridians*, 8(2), 166–176. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40338758>
- Caterine, E. (2018). Aesthetic Politics - Chapter 2: Performing Riots. In *Medium*. <https://emmacaterine.medium.com/aesthetic-politics-chapter-2-performing-riots-4ebbe32594a2>
- CDC. (2022). *About Child Sexual Abuse: Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention*. CDC - Center for Disease Control and Prevention. [https://www.cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/about/about-child-sexual-abuse.html?CDC\\_AAref\\_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childsexualabuse/fastfact.html](https://www.cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/about/about-child-sexual-abuse.html?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childsexualabuse/fastfact.html)
- Collins, P. H. (2004). *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Routledge.
- Cudd, E. A., & Andreasen, R. O. (2007). *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Dahl, R. A. (1957). The Concept of Power. *Behavioral Science*, 2, 201–215. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830020303>
- Dowding, K. (2008). Agency and structure: Interpreting power relationships. *Journal of Power*, 1(1), 21–36. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17540290801943380>
- Faubion, J. D. (Ed.). (2001). *Michel Foucault, Power: Essential Works of Foucault (1954-1984) #3* (Vol. 3). The New Press. <http://thenewpress.com/books/power>
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will To Knowledge* (Vol. 1). Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1981). The Order of Discourse. In R. Young (Ed.), *Untying The Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (pp. 48–78). Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books.
- Gaventa, J. (2003). *Power after Lukes: An overview of theories of power since Lukes and their application to development*. [https://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/power\\_after\\_lukes.pdf](https://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/power_after_lukes.pdf)
- Hu, Y., Mu, Y., & Huang, Y. (2020). The #MeToo narrative: Reconstructing the cultural intelligibility of female subjects. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 80. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2020.102365>
- Jackson, J. M. (2018, July 9). Black Women Are Not Your Superheroes. *Teen Vogue*. <https://www.teen.com>

- teenvogue.com/story/black-women-are-not-your-superheroes
- Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: a critical analysis of the third Millennium Development Goal. *Gender and Development*, 13(1), 13–24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20053132>
- Keohane, N. O. (2020). Women, Power & Leadership. *Daedalus*, 149(1), 236–250. [https://doi.org/10.1162/daed\\_a\\_01785](https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01785)
- Kirschner, N. (2022). Black women transform contemporary literature. In *U.S. Embassy in Georgia*. <https://ge.usembassy.gov/black-women-transform-contemporary-literature/>
- Koester, D. (2015). Gender and power: six links and one big opportunity. In *The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP)*. <https://dlprog.org/opinions/gender-and-power-six-links-and-one-big-opportunity/>
- Leisey, D. T. (2016). Power and Influence. In *Leadership*. PennState. <https://sites.psu.edu/leadership/2016/06/12/power-and-influence-8/>
- Liao, K. Y.-H., Wei, M., & Yin, M. (2020). The Misunderstood Schema of the Strong Black Woman: Exploring Its Mental Health Consequences and Coping Responses Among African American Women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 44(1), 84–104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319883198>
- Maloney, T. N. (2002). African Americans in the Twentieth Century. In R. Whaples (Ed.), *EH.Net Encyclopedia*. EHA. <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/african-americans-in-the-twentieth-century/>
- Manke, K. (2019, September 30). *Does being a "superwoman" protect African American women's health?* - Berkeley News. Berkeley News. <https://news.berkeley.edu/2019/09/30/does-being-a-superwoman-protect-african-american-womens-health/>
- Nadasen, P. (2015). Black Power, Gender, and Transformational Politics. *Journal of Civil and Human Rights*, 1(2), 236–240. <https://doi.org/10.5406/JCIVIHUMARIGH.1.2.0236>
- Perry, B. L., Harp, K. L. H., & Oser, C. B. (2013). Racial and Gender Discrimination in the Stress Process: Implications for African American Women's Health and Well-Being. *Sociological Perspectives*, 56(1), 25–48. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2012.56.1.25>
- Popitz, H. (2017). *Phenomena of Power: Authority, Domination, and Violence* (G. Poggi, Ed.). Columbia University Press.
- Pramono, RB. E. (2013). Female's Silent Resistance against Hegemony in The Scarlet Letter, Bekisar Merah, and Belantik: A Comparative Analysis. *Humaniora*, 25(2), 151–162. <https://doi.org/10.22146/JH.2358>
- Revenga, A., & Shetty, Sudhir. (2012). Empowering Women Is Smart Economics -- Finance & Development, March 2012. *Finance & Development*, 49(1), 40–43. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2012/03/revenga.htm>
- Rosenfeld, M. (1982, October 15). Profiles in Purple & Black: "Womanist" Alice Walker and the Love of Life. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1982/10/15/profiles-in-purple-38/1ac0cefc-d304-4b07-90c1-f952891f3f4f/>
- Sapiro, Virginia. (1986). *Women in American society: an introduction to women's studies* (Vol. 1). Mayfield Publishing Company. [https://books.google.com/books/about/Women\\_in\\_American\\_Society.html?id=UUTLnQEACAAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/Women_in_American_Society.html?id=UUTLnQEACAAJ)
- Schneck, S. F. (1987). Michel Foucault on Power/Discourse, Theory and Practice. *Human Studies*, 10(1), 15–33. <https://about.jstor.org/terms>
- Thompson, K. (2012, January 12). Survey paints portrait of black women in America. *The Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/survey-paints-portrait-of-black-women-in-america/2011/12/22/gIQAvxFcJQ\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/survey-paints-portrait-of-black-women-in-america/2011/12/22/gIQAvxFcJQ_story.html)
- United Nations. (2009). *Women's Control over Economic Resources and Access to Financial Resources, including Microfinance*. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/WorldSurvey2009.pdf>
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). University of California Press. <https://archive.org/details/MaxWeberEconomyAndSociety>
- West, C. M. (2008). Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and their homegirls: Developing an "oppositional" gaze toward the images of Black women. In J. Christer, C. Golden, & P. Rozee (Eds.), *Lectures on the Psychology of Women* (4th ed., pp. 286–299). McGraw-Hill. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2007-00385-018>
- Wrong, D. H. (2017). *Power: its forms, bases, and uses*. Routledge.
- Xu, Q. (2021). Different Images of Black Women in American Literature: From the Eyes of Black and White Female Writers. *OALib*, 08(04), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1107329>