

Internal and External Oppression: An Afrocentric Study of Some Selected Poems by Alice Walker and Ben Okri

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Abstract

The present study tackles the marginalization and exploitation of Africans inside and outside Africa, particularly in America and Nigeria. Not only does it explore African people's oppression, but it also reflects how the selected poets, Alice Walker and Ben Okri, resist this oppression through the theory of Afrocentricity. Walker demonstrates internal and external oppression forced upon African-American women and external oppression forced upon African-American men in her selected poems: "Women" (1973), "Be Nobody's Darling" (1973), "She" (2013), "Occupying Mumia's Cell" (2013), and "Is Celie Actually Ugly?" (2018). Moreover, she manifests how African-American women and men are able to transcend their marginalization and become at the center. Okri reveals internal and external oppression of Nigerians in Nigeria and external oppression of African-Americans in America in his selected poems: "An African Elegy" (1992), "Africa is a Reality Not Seen" (2021), "A Broken Song" (2021), "Diallo's Testament" (2021), and "Breathing the Light" (2021). Furthermore, he calls Africans to break their constraints and speak about their power because they have tremendous culture and history. This is the only way for them to be transcended and centralized, not marginalized. The selected poems will be examined from an Afrocentric perspective. The study is thus meant to criticize both internal and external oppressive structures in America and Nigeria. The main finding contents that African-Americans and Nigerians in the selected poems transcend their marginalization and become at the center of the universe through the theory of Afrocentricity.

Keywords: Alice Walker, Ben Okri, Marginalized, Centralized, Internal Oppression, External Oppression

القمع الداخلي و الخارجي: دراسة مركزية إفريقية لبعض قصائد مختارة لأليس

ووكر وبن أوكري

الملخص:

تُركز هذه الدراسة على مظاهر تهيمش الأفارقة واستغلالهم داخل قارة أفريقيا وخارجها، خاصةً في مجتمعات الأفارقة بأمريكا وكذا في نيجيريا. وفي مواضع أخرى، توضح الدراسة أشكال القمع التي يتعرض لها الأفارقة، كما توضح أشكال المقاومة الأدبية في الأعمال المختارة للشاعرة أليس ووكر والشاعر بن أوكري في ضوء نظرية المركزية الإفريقية. حيث تستعرض الشاعرة ووكر أشكال القمع الداخلي والخارجي التي تتعرض إليها السيدات الأمريكيات ذوات الأصول الإفريقية، وكذا أشكال القمع الخارجي التي يتعرض إليها الرجال الأمريكيين ذوي الأصول الإفريقية، وذلك في قصائدها المختارة: "السيدات" (١٩٧٣)، "كن حبيبي لا حد" (١٩٧٣)، "هي" (٢٠١٣)، "في زنانة موميا" (٢٠١٣)، "هل سيلي قبيحة حقاً؟" (٢٠١٨). كما توضح الشاعرة في هذه القصائد كيف يستطيع الأمريكيون ذوو الأصول الإفريقية تجاوز محاولات تهيمشهم ليضعوا أنفسهم في قلب المشهد المجتمعي. وفي ذات السياق، يكشف الشاعر أوكري أشكال القمع الداخلي والخارجي التي يتعرض لها النيجيريين، وكذا القمع الخارجي الذي تشهده مجتمعات الأفارقة في أمريكا، وذلك في قصائده المختارة: "رثاء من أفريقيا" (١٩٩٢)، "أفريقيا حقيقة منسية" (٢٠٢١)، "أغنية مكسورة" (٢٠٢١)، "شهادة ديالو" (٢٠٢١)، "نتنفس النور" (٢٠٢١). حيث يدعو الشاعر الأفارقة لكسر القيود والاحتفاء بثقافتهم وتاريخهم الحافل والغني، فهذا هو سبيلهم الوحيد لتجاوز التهيمش الذي يتعرضون له. وتتبنى الدراسة نظرية المركزية الإفريقية لتحليل أشكال القمع الداخلي والخارجي في مجتمعات الأفارقة بأمريكا وكذا في نيجيريا. وقد أوضح البحث أن مجتمعات الأمريكيين ذوي الأصول الإفريقية والنيجيريين استطاعوا تجاوز محاولات التهيمش ووضع أنفسهم في قلب المشهد العالمي من خلال التمسك بالمركزية الإفريقية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أليس ووكر، بن أوكري، التهيمش، المركزية، القمع الداخلي، القمع الخارجي

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1. Introduction

The present study tackles the marginalization and exploitation of Africans inside and outside Africa, especially in America and Nigeria. Not only does it explore African people's oppression, but it also reflects how poets resist this oppression through the theory of Afrocentricity. Afrocentricity strives for the centeredness of Africans and places them as subjects rather than objects on the fringes of Europe. Alice Walker (1944-), the prominent African-American writer, novelist, short story writer, poetess, and social and political activist, not only reacts against internal and external oppression that are forced upon African-American women, but also, external oppression that is imposed upon African-American men. Moreover, Ben Okri (1959-), one of the most famous Nigerian-British poet and novelist in the post-modern and post-colonial era, reacts against both internal and external oppression of Nigerians in Nigeria and external oppression of African-Americans in America. Africans still encounter all these problems and struggle to put an end to them. African-Americans have confronted racism, discrimination, oppression, marginalization, violence, and social inequality, moreover, Nigerians have suffered from racism, discrimination, corruption, injustice, poverty, ethnic marginalization, exploitation, and brutal dictatorship, caused by the Europeans. In addition, Chinua Achebe explores, in his book, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983), the factors that led to the internal oppression of Nigerians. They are tribalism, false image of Nigerians, leadership, patriotism, and corruption. Okri tackles some of these issues in his selected poems. In this research, Afrocentricity is a paradigm of resistance which provides a space to eliminate hegemony of any kind inside and outside Africa, especially in African-American and Nigerian societies.

This study stresses the rejection of African-American and Nigerian poets for oppression and marginalization. Therefore, they attempt to write poems symbolizing power, energy, and emancipation as Walker did in her five poems. In "Women", Walker emphasizes African-American

women's fight for the education of their children because this is the only way for their freedom from their oppressors. In "Be Nobody's Darling", she encourages African-American women to believe in themselves and ignore what other people think about them. In "She", Walker dedicates this poem to the world figure Gloria Steinem (1934-), the American writer and social activist, who calls for African-American women rights without fear. In "Occupying Mumia's Cell", she tackles the injustice that Mumia's Abu-Jamal (1954-), American political activist and journalist, has suffered from in prison thirty years ago. In "Is Celie Actually Ugly?", she reveals how Celie, the protagonist of her prominent novel *The Color Purple*, confronts racism and sexism, and stands against all the constraints that are forced upon her by the society and culture. Okri's first selected poem is "An African Elegy" which tackles Africans' endurance of grief, "suffering", and "pain", and at the same time he reveals their hope. The second selected poems are from his book *A Fire in My Head* which was written in 2021. In "Africa is a Reality Not Seen" and "A Broken Song", Okri sheds light on how external oppression is the reason behind internal oppression. External oppression is represented through noncontemporary and contemporary figures, such as Amadou Diallo in Okri's poem "Diallo's Testament", and George Floyd in Okri's poem "Breathing the Light". These poems represent both the marginalization and resistance of Africans during several years of oppression.

2. Objectives of this Study

This research aims at four objectives. The first one is to resist internal and external oppressive structures inside and outside Africa in an attempt to create a new African society without any dominant oppression. The second one is to reveal that the selected poets are centralized in their cultures and poems, not marginalized. The third one unfolds that the selected poets are correcting the falsification of African history that was denigrated by Europeans hundred years ago. The last one manifests that contemporary Afrocentric poets have been resisting racism, oppression, slavery, and marginalization from the past till now through their power of speech to emancipate themselves from white domination, patriarchal society, and tyrannical African rulers.

3. Theoretical Framework

Afrocentricity was originally introduced in the 1930s, with the goal of introducing the African world experience. This term was first introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) in his notable works: *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *The World and Africa* (1964), and *Africa in Battle Against Colonialism, Racism, Imperialism* (1960), to depict African

experiences. Moreover, Afrocentricity was coined by the African-American scholar and activist Molefi Kete Asante (1942-). In 1980, he published a book *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* which shifted this term to a theory that examines the Africans' place in history and culture. According to Asante, "Afrocentricity, ..., is a theory of agency, that is, the idea that African people must be viewed and view themselves as agents rather than spectators to historical revolution and change" (*An Afrocentric Manifesto*, 30). Furthermore, Asante states, "Afrocentricity is the most complete philosophical totalization of the African being-at-the-center of his or her existence. It is not merely an artistic or literary movement, or an individual or collective quest for authenticity; it is above all the total use of method to affect psychological, political, social, cultural, and economic change" (*The Afrocentric Idea*, 137). These two statements place Afrocentricity as an ideology that opposes the marginalization of Africans, positions African history and culture at the center of the investigation, situates Africans as subjects rather than objects, and aims at causing a change in every African aspect. Thus, Afrocentricity is a theory against western marginalizing structures, especially cultural and ideological ones towards Africa.

Afrocentricity is divided into four developing phases: the early mission of Afrocentricity, the debate on civilization, Africa as the source of all Black identity, and the contemporary exploration of Afrocentricity (Mgbeadichie 5). In the first phase, the goal of early Afrocentrists is to reject colonialism and western domination over Africans and emphasizes that Africa has a tremendous history and culture. In the second phase, the goal is to explore Africa's contribution to world's civilization. In the third phase, the goal is to demonstrate how Africa is used as the source of all Black identity not slavery. In the last phase, the goal of contemporary Afrocentrists is to criticize both racist oppressive structures inside and outside Africa. Some advocates argue that Afrocentricity not only opposes racist oppressive structures, but also, dominant hierarchies whether they are classist, racist or sexist (Chowdhury 50). Hence, this research sheds light on the last phase; not many critics embrace such contemporary view of Afrocentricity, only a few have given much attention to place African internal oppression as an area of study in Afrocentricity. Chike Mgbeadichie concentrates on internal oppressive traditional practices, but this research focuses mainly on both internal and external oppressive structures that must be abolished in America and Nigeria. Furthermore, Tunde Adeleke represents contemporary issues that reflect internal and external oppression which Walker and Okri tackle in their ten selected poems, "Afrocentricity emphasizes similarities in the

historical and cultural experiences of black Americans and Africans and implores both to unite in the spirit of Pan-Africanism. Advocates of this Pan-African strategy maintain that black Americans and Africans confront similar problems and challenges”. In the United States, African-Americans encounter “economic marginalization, political domination, and cultural alienation”. In Africa, Africans confront “political instability, poverty, and neocolonialism”. Hence, external and internal oppression are directly or indirectly related to Eurocentrism (97). Therefore, in the contemporary period, according to Chowdhury and Adeleke, the goal of Afrocentricity should criticize both oppressive structures inside and outside Africa. Ultimately, Africa will meet renewal and revival if these structures have ended firmly. Therefore, Walker and Okri criticize internal and external oppression and strive for emancipating African-Americans and Nigerians from all oppressive structures and centralizing them.

There are some tenets of Afrocentricity, such as “an interest in psychological location; a commitment to finding the African subject place; the defense of African cultural elements; a commitment to lexical refinement; and a commitment to correct the dislocations in the history of Africa” (Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto*, 64). The first tenet emphasizes that the African writer is centralized, not marginalized, in his works. The second tenet demonstrates that Africans must see themselves as agents or subjects rather than objects. The third tenet manifests that the African writer must protect all African values, customs, traditions, beliefs, religions, habits, and behaviors from devastation and erase all the interpretations created by non-Africans (Pellerin 151). The fourth tenet implies that diction used in texts is based upon the idea of Africans as subjects and not created by Europeans. The last tenet reveals that the writer should correct the history of African people without falsifying it and should attempt to promote a culturally centered African history (Pellerin 152). Walker and Okri use some of these tenets in their ten selected poems to emphasize their Afrocentric embrace. Moreover, Afrocentric themes are “the contribution of ancient Africa and Africans to world civilization, colonialism, slavery, racism, and the reinterpretation of African history” (Chawane 86). Some Afrocentric themes are pertinent in their selection of poems.

Therefore, this research reveals how Walker and Okri resist internal and external oppression through the theory of Afrocentricity by revealing Africans’ power, resistance, wisdom, and hope to shift their roles within their societies from the margins to the center.

4. Analysis

4.1 Literary and Afrocentric Themes in Alice Walker and Ben Okri's Selected Poems

4.1.1 Power, Perseverance, and Resistance of African-American Women in "Women" by Alice Walker

As an Afrocentric and womanist poet, Walker presents in her poems African-American women who oppose both internal and external oppression forced upon them. In the first cycle, African-American women "are victims of both racial and sexual oppression" (Nanaware 143). In "Women", Walker's mother generation is internally and externally oppressed because they were deprived of their right to get educated. This complies with the contemporary exploration of Afrocentricity as this phase opposes internal and external oppression. Carolette Norwood mentions, "[i]n the past, the political dimension denied Black women the right to an education and to fully participate in American democracy as voters as well as public officials" (231). Therefore, they strived to ensure better education and future for their daughters because "African-American women have long realized that ignorance doomed Black people to powerlessness" (Collins 147), so Walker reveals how these women possessed power and perseverance by saying:

With fists as well as
Hands
How they battered down
Doors
And ironed
Starched white
Shirts. (lines 5-11)

These African-American women broke down barriers and dealt with domestic work simultaneously, with "fists" and "[h]ands". Norwood states, "[a]cross Africa and her diaspora, Africana women share a rich and powerful history of resistance, despite attempts to silence and make them invisible" (225). This conveys how Walker has "a commitment to correct the dislocations in the history of Africa" (Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto*, 64) as African men attempt to dislocate African women in the African history, but Walker corrects this by proving how her mothers' generation contributed to this history by resisting patriarchal society. In fact, they resisted all kinds of oppression to provide "books", "[d]esks",

and seats for their daughters in schools. This demonstrates “a fundamental dimension of Black women’s political activism” (Collins 147), and “... the importance of education as a liberating force in African-American communities, but they also portray the centrality of Black women as everyday political activists” (148). This reveals how African-American women have always been at the center, not on the margins. In addition, this sheds light on the representation of African-American women in the third cycle as they “will not sit back and bear the injustice instead they will raise their voices to bring positive societal changes in the lives of the Black people” (Nanaware 144). These powerful mothers had an awareness about the education’s important role in the life of their daughters, so they raised their voices to cause a change in the society. Moreover, they were influenced by Maria W. Stewart (1803-1879), an American teacher and abolitionist, who called for African-American women’s rights in education in the United States. Maria Stewart in her book with Marilyn Richardson says, “[s]ue for your rights and privileges” (38). Moreover, she states, “turn your attention to knowledge and improvement; for knowledge is power” (41). This manifests also how education has a genuine importance in African-American women’s life, particularly Walker’s mother generation. Therefore, Walker is a real Afrocentrist and an activist because she represents African-American women who contemplated about finding “[a] place for us [black women]” (line 21) in the African-American society, especially in education by resisting and raising their voices because they believed that gaining their educational rights would be the only way towards their transcendence, emancipation, and centrality.

4.1.2 Individualism and Resistance in “Be Nobody’s Darling” by Alice Walker

In this poem, themes of individualism and resistance are pertinent as African-American women suffered not only from racial segregation that was imposed by the American society but also from patriarchy during the 1930s and 1950s. This manifests how Walker depicts African-American women in the first cycle. Therefore, she urges them to focus on individualism and resistance and ignore these racist and sexist societies that externally and internally oppress them because they are precious. She mentions in the second stanza:

Watch the people succumb
To madness
With ample cheer;
Let them look askance at you
And you askance reply. (lines 9-13)

This stanza demonstrates Walker's insistence on encouraging African-American women to deal with those oppressors, with a smile even if they look suspiciously at them, and if they ask a question in a humiliating way, they will suspiciously answer without being annoyed because they have a faith that they possess an intelligent mind and beauty internally and externally. During this time, African-American women felt ashamed of their blackness in the American society as a result of racial segregation, so they started to embrace American identity (Khokholkova 112). In this poem, Walker has a determination to motivate African-American women to embrace African identity without any fear and rebel and resist against internal and external oppression to relocate them from the margins to the center. Thus, Walker is an Afrocentric poet who is so much influenced by the Afrocentric scholars, namely James W.C. Pennington, Martin Delany, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Cater G. Woodson. In the 19th century, these scholars encouraged Africans to maintain their roots and regain their lost identity as Walker did in this poem. As a womanist, Walker represents African-American women in the second cycle in this poem. According to Nanaware, "the women in the second cycle are victims of physical and psychic violence that alienates them from their roots, cutting them off from real contact. As a writer, Walker is concerned with the need for the Black Women to acknowledge and respect their roots" (144). In other words, African-American women are compelled to abandon their roots as a result of "physical and psychic violence", but Walker urges them towards embracing their roots because it is a part of them. Simphiwe Sesanti also believes that "[d]ecolonized and Afrocentric education is a prerequisite in helping Africans remember what they were forced to forget, remember themselves to what they were cut from, and rebirth themselves after European colonialists acts of physical and spiritual murder and destruction—an act of a meaningful African Renaissance" (17). "Decolonized and Afrocentric education" paves the way towards Africans' centricity and Renaissance because it encourages Africans to return to the roots and reawakens them after many years of colonialism. Patricia Hill Collins (1948-), an American woman specializing in writing about race and gender notes, "Fannie Barrier Williams viewed the African-American woman not as a defenseless victim but as a strong-

willed resister” (92) as Walker who valiantly resists internal and external oppressive structures that hamper African-American women from possessing an identity. Undoubtedly, Walker is a centralized poet because she has “an interest in psychological location” (Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto*, 64). Hence, Walker has a strong belief that individualism and resistance are the only ways towards African-American women’s transcendence, liberation from any dominant oppression, and centrality.

4.1.3 The Power of Voice and Narrative in “She” by Alice Walker

This poem was dedicated to the powerful American journalist and activist, Gloria Steinem for her 75th birthday. This white feminist and advocate to the rights of African-American women in every aspect of life has no doubt that “... women of color have not always been included in the narrative” (Vinopal 2020). Gloria Steinem replies to David Marchese in an interview asserting how she defends African-American women’s rights by saying, “[s]o I do my best as a normal procedure not to show up unless I am speaking as a partner with women of color” (Marchese 2020). In this poem, Walker demonstrates how this American woman has the power of voice and courage to speak faithfully and frankly about the internal and external oppression that are practiced upon African-American women by African-American men and Americans to return African-American women back to the narrative by saying in the eleventh and thirteenth stanzas:

She is the one
Speaking
the truth
from her heart. (lines 49-52)

She is the one
with courage.
She is the one
who speaks
her bright mind;. (lines 58-62)

Steinem certainly believes that black women have always been more activists and leaders than white women since the beginning of the women’s movement. Furthermore, white women have “a pretty racist view of history, and we tend to see white people, including white women,

as leaders when the opposite has been the case. Black women have been more in the leadership of the civil rights movement too, ...”, so Steinem calls for correcting the reality of black women (Marchese 2020). This emphasizes Steinem’s words, “...black women have always been more likely to be feminist than white women” (Fessler 2017). Hence, she believes that African-American women are worthy of being leaders of women’s movement rather than white women, and all Americans must admit of this reality. This demonstrates that she has “a commitment to correct the dislocations in the history of Africa” (Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto*, 64) because she vehemently supports African-American women and attempts to correct their history that is falsified by Americans through her power of speech. Indeed, Americans are extremely affected by Eurocentrism in falsifying African history and proving to the whole world their centrality in every crucial aspect of life and their preeminence of history and civilization, but Asante believes that Afrocentricity must resist the views of Eurocentrism. Indeed, Steinem has a strong alliance with the Afrocentric poet Walker and all African-American women in resisting Eurocentric ideology that is the reason behind internal and external oppression because she believes that these women are worthy of being at the center of the investigation more than white women, who have racist views and always strive for marginalizing African-American women.

4.1.4 Racism and Injustice in “Occupying Mumia’s Cell” by Alice Walker

Mumia Abu-Jamal is an African-American activist and a victim to police violence and jurors’ injustice. Partisan Defense Committee says, “a former Black Panther Party spokesman ... and award-winning journalist known as ‘the voice of the voiceless’ for his championing the rights of the oppressed, Jamal has been in the cross hairs of Philadelphia's racist killer cops for 26 years” (52). This poem revolves around the external oppression, especially racism and injustice that this man has encountered. Monteiro-Ferreira states, “[t]he experiences of enslavement and racism in American society have most certainly created the conditions for the emergence of the Afrocentric theory” (5). As an Afrocentrist, Walker manifests how racism and injustice are continually oppressing African-Americans in the fourth stanza, “[i]s anything more persecuted/ in this land?” (lines 24-25). Abu-Jamal has witnessed severe persecution in America as he is charged of a crime, murdering the white police officer, Daniel Faulkner, that is not committed by him because of his race and his

activist life. Partisan Defense Committee declares, “[o]n 3 July 1982, the prosecutor secured the death sentence with the argument that Jamal should be condemned to death simply because his membership in the Black Panther Party and use of the slogan ‘power to the people’ 12 years earlier proved he was a committed cop-killer!” (52). This clarifies drastic external oppression and injustice because his activism leads him to be a “cop-killer”. In addition, when police officers arrested him, they extremely brutalized him as Ian Macdonald underscores, “[o]ther witnesses interviewed by Mr Bryan confirm that the treatment of Mr Abu-Jamal by the police was markedly racist. The police were heard by more than one witness to have referred to Mr Abu-Jamal as ‘nigger’, and after his arrest they ground his head into a post even though he was badly wounded, having been shot in the chest” (10). This statement uncovers the violence and brutality of this system. Moreover, this oppressive system attempted to silence him by incarcerating him in a cell in prison, not dealing with anybody, but only himself to terrorize him and repress his activism and resistance towards this oppressive system that only protected whites’ rights. In *Death Blossoms* (1996), Abu-Jamal mentions, “[c]learly, what the government wants is not just death, but silence” (1-2). Walker conveys this in the seventh stanza as she says:

...
but to let you continue
to die slowly
creating and singing
your own songs
as you pace
alone, sometimes terrorized,
for decades of long nights
in your small cage
of a cell. (lines 45-53)

This demonstrates how Abu-Jamal has tolerated racism, injustice, and persecution. In his prominent book, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?* (2017), Abu-Jamal expresses his outrage by saying, “[f]ar from free or equal, Blacks found themselves condemned to a new life where the state took the place of the slave master, and did everything in its power to control Black labor in the interests of the landowner’s class” (22). This book reveals how this courageous and powerful man will not be silenced, but he will resist and speak about racial injustice and police violence till their black lives matter to those white oppressors. In addition, Walker conveys to the readers at the end of this poem that Abu-Jamal will not

lose hope and will keep resisting till he finds his transcendence and salvation from external oppression.

4.1.5 Objectification of African-American Woman in “Is Celie Actually Ugly?” by Alice Walker

From an early age, Celie, the protagonist of *The Color Purple*, suffers from being an object and being marginalized as a result of external and internal oppression that are compelled by white and black societies. Walker starts this poem by expressing her anger towards asking the world several times about the ugliness of Celie that oppressive people destroy her identity to the extent, she believes that she is an ugly woman:

Is Celie actually ugly?
Asks the charismatic star playing her
on Broadway.
How many times over the years
I have explained
this. (lines 1-6)

In the beginning, Celie believes that she is an ugly woman because she is surrounded by many oppressive people who convince her that she is the ugliest woman in the universe. Rima Namhata mentions:

Celie is the representation of several women as found not only in Afro-American literature but also in literature of all other climes...she pictures the naked truth of uncountable oppressed women in several un‘civilised’ societies. Her picture represents not merely a particular territory but is a universal story of all the oppressed women of the world. (2-3)

In fact, Walker represents Celie’s character in this poem to show the lives of many oppressed women living in “un‘civilised’ societies” and their suffering from both external and internal oppression. Moreover, Bülent Tanritanir and Yasemin Aydemir emphasize, “[t]hey are separated from the society. They have to endure all the violent and racist behaviors of both white men and women. In addition to these, colored women not only struggle against racist society, but also she has to suffer at the hands of black men” (437). In this poem, racism is revealed when Walker compares Celie to the “the most queenly slave” to white men and women for emphasizing how this oppressed woman harshly suffers from “violent and racist behaviors” in society. This highlights the severe external

oppression that the African-American woman must deal with. Moreover, Walker represents Celie's confrontation to sexism as she tolerates not only "repeated rape" (Walker, line 14) from her stepfather who always mocks her for being an ugly woman, but also, from Mr. Albert, her cruel husband, who sexually abuses and objectifies her. Tanritanir and Aydemir say, "Celie is black and her stepfather [and her husband are] black, as well. This incident displays that being a member of a black family is dangerous for a female" (438). This shows the intense internal oppression that African-American women confront in a "black family" to an extent, African-American men destroy women's identity and treat them as objects deprived of all their rights. Sesanti mentions:

The reduction of African women, once the recipients of veneration in African culture, into objects of denigration by European colonialism, continued to be the case beyond "independence" because African males, not only inherited political power, but also oppressive cultural attitudes from their colonial masters. This exercise argues that for the African Renaissance project to succeed, a decolonized and Afrocentric education, which would enable Africans to rediscover traditional African education. (1-2)

"Decolonized and Afrocentric education" is the only way towards African women's transcendence of marginalization, "African Renaissance", and African women's centrality. Furthermore, Walker manifests Celie's maturity and development to an independent African-American woman as she says:

...Love of Herself
lights the dreariness of Celie's existence,
that
the beauty of her
resilient spirit
has become one with the compassionate
loveliness
of
her face. (lines 40-48)

At this point in Celie's life, she changes from an object to a subject as "[a]fter so many years of racial oppression, sexual abuse and brutality, she encourages herself to object all these hard conditions of black woman's life. She starts to struggle for liberation from the hands of men,

both black and white” (Tanritanir and Aydemir 443). Ultimately, she “learns to love” and accept herself; she recognizes that she possesses beauty internally and externally. This reveals how Walker is a real Afrocentrist who has “a commitment to finding the African subject place” (Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto*, 64), particularly African-American women, and succeeds in relocating Celie from the margins to the center and retrieving her lost identity.

4.1.6 Hope in “An African Elegy” by Ben Okri

In “An African Elegy”, Okri uses the theme of hope to spark optimism within Africans who have severely suffered from internal and external oppression. Nelson S. Ratau notes:

Okri’s poetry is rich with the theme of hope. By implicating the theme of hope in his poetry, Okri writes for deeper and essential purposes of uplifting the human spirit...; he writes for hope of a better life for the African people, a greater future for all humanity. His poem *An African Elegy*, for example, defies the meaning and purpose of an ‘elegy’ (which is mourning), and is a good example of writing for hope. (8)

In fact, Okri uses this theme for cultivating “hope” within Africans and conveying that a “better life” is forthcoming. Although Africans have tolerated “suffering”, “pain”, and “poverty”, they “are able to sing and dream sweet things” (Okri, line 10). Moreover, Okri says in the fourth stanza, “[t]here are secret miracles at work/ That only Time will bring forth” (lines 18-19) to emphasize that “Time” or life will prepare many blessings for them and heal their wounds that are caused by internal and external oppression. In addition, the poet listens to the voices of his ancestors in the fifth stanza:

And they tell me that
This life is good
They tell me to live it gently
With fire, and always with hope.
There is wonder here. (lines 21-25)

His ancestors advise him to live his life smoothly and freely, with power and “hope” because “there is wonder here” in Africa, and this “wonder” glorifies this gigantic continent. In fact, all Africans must resist all kinds of oppression and never surrender because there is always “hope”.

Moreover, in the last stanza, the speaker states, “[t]he ocean is full of songs. / The sky is not an enemy. / Destiny is our friend” (lines 28-30). These lines highlight that they will witness bright future and new stories that are void of oppression and marginalization as God will always be at their side. Hence, through this poem, Okri represents Africans’ resistance by having “hope” inside their hearts, and he is a real Afrocentrist who has faith that Africans will get their emancipation, transcendence, and centrality in the end.

4.1.7 The Antiquity of Africa, The Contribution of Ancient Africa to World Civilization, and The Reinterpretation of African history in “Africa is a Reality Not Seen” by Ben Okri

In the second and third stanzas, Okri reveals the antiquity of African continent, the contribution of ancient Africa to world civilization, and the reinterpretation of African history as he says:

[I]ts soul’s older than atlantis
and like all things old,
it’s being reborn,
.... (lines 7-10)

“[C]ountless cycles of civilization/ and destruction are lost in its memory/ but not in its myths” (lines 11-13). Africa has existed since hundreds of years even before the fictional island, “atlantis”. According to Toyin Falola and Tyler Fleming, “[p]eople have lived in Africa for more than three million years, and thus it possesses a rich and varied history” (124). This affirms the antiquity of the African continent and its diverse history which Europeans have always been denying. This evidence complies with Afrocentric scholars’ belief in “the antiquity of history and civilization in Africa, the superiority and influence of African civilization over European” (Adeleke 90). Falola and Fleming add, “African civilizations, cultures, and traditions are often assumed by outsiders to be static and unchanging. This belief, however, is untrue as African ‘tradition’ has constantly been in a state of flux. Societies from the ancient to the modern day have changed, adapted, and evolved as time progressed” (124). This statement asserts also the distortion of African heritage by “outsiders” or external oppressors who attribute false images to Africans because they consider them as “savage, unintelligent, uncivilized, and inferior”, but Okri emphasizes both its antiquity and reawakening in order to correct the distortion and falsification that are committed deliberately

by Europe to be at the center and marginalize Africa. In addition, this colossal continent witness both “countless cycles of civilisation” and “destruction”. On the one hand, Falola and Fleming note, “[p]rominent pre-colonial African civilizations were Egypt, Nubia, Ghana, Mali, Carthage, Zimbabwe, and Kongo... In Southern Africa, Great Zimbabwe emerged as the most complex civilization throughout Southern Africa” (124). They proceed, “[a]ncient Egypt though was the first major African civilization... From the building of massive pyramids that still stand today to the development of hieroglyphics..., it profoundly shaped world civilization” (125). All these gigantic civilizations prove how Africa contributes to world civilization, and how Okri is an Afrocentrist who corrects the African history that was denigrated by Europe hundreds of years ago like Walker who does the same in her selected poems. Monteiro-Ferreira mentions, “Afrocentricity is a philosophical formulation committed to the reconstruction of ancient African classical civilizations as the place for interpreting and understanding the history and culture of African peoples, narratives, myths, ...” (104). The reinterpretation of African history will be the only way towards Africans’ transcendence, emancipation, and centrality. On the other hand, Okri sheds light on “destruction” that is caused in the African continent by “wars”, “famine”, and African “dictatorships” as he states in the first stanza:

....
its wars are the scab of a wound
its famine the cracking of seeds
its dictatorships a child torturing
beetles in a field. (lines 3-6)

This stanza manifests internal oppression that is the root cause of civil wars, famine, and brutal dictatorship. In fact, African dictators may not understand the value of Africa and treat Africans as being inferiors and objects because in the past they were subordinators to their colonial masters, so they followed them in ruling the nation. Asante says:

All distorted or otherwise negative understandings of it are rooted in the society’s manner of viewing Africans. This is not to say that all who reject the Afrocentric idea are racists, but rather that their failure to appreciate its context and objectives suggests their seduction by the [oppressive] structural elements [of former colonial rulers] ... that fails to recognize African agency. (8)

This reveals that African dictators have inherited negative thoughts from their former colonial masters to an extent, fail to recognize their immense history and culture and marginalize themselves and their people. Okri declares in his interview with James Ogude, “[t]here is still much for Africa to do, and there are still some invisible shackles to throw off, but Africa's potential is huge. It is tremendous” (29). Thus, Okri discloses external oppression that is used by Europeans to denigrate African history and internal oppression that is propagated in Africa to convey his opposition towards these kinds of oppression that hamper Africa from being at the center, but this massive continent will break all “shackles” to be shifted from the margins to the center because of its antiquity and its contribution to world civilization.

4.1.8 Oppression, Exploitation, and Ethnic Marginalization in “A Broken Song” by Ben Okri

In this poem, external and internal oppression are relevant because of “... the annihilation of human rights and the clear presence of racism (or even of attempts at ‘ethnic cleansing’) that was manifested by the oil companies with the support of the military dictatorship of Nigeria were more than a particularly lethal case of environmental racism” (Westra 157). Okri mentions in the third stanza:

...
while they poison the lands
rape her for gain
bleed her for oil
and not even attempt
to heal her wounds. (lines 26-30)

He emphasizes how the military dictatorial ruling system of Sani Abacha, a Nigerian military officer and a former president of Nigeria from 1993 till 1998, “poison[ed] the [Ogoni] lands”, plundered its wealth, and exploited its oil, with the support of western oil company, Shell, to an extent “Ogoni air had been fouled by the flaring of natural gas, their croplands scarred by oil spills, their drinking and fishing waters poisoned” (Nixon 107). This manifests the brutal and violent ruling system of Sani Abacha. Moreover, Okri emphasizes, “[t]he quest for power and resources means we pollute, we devastate, we rape the earth” (“To Heal the Planet, We Must Heal Ourselves”, 2023). This environmental degradation and exploitation led to the death of Ken Saro-

Wiwa, who sacrificed his soul to ensure a better and secured life for the environment and Ogoni people, who are ethnic minorities in Nigeria. This man was hanged on November 10 in 1995 “for loving his homeland” (Okri, line 4) at the hands of the brutal ruler, Abacha. Onookome Okome declares, “[t]his act was the culmination of the eroding evil of the Abacha’s dictatorship” (198). Abacha murdered Wiwa because he posed threats to him, so he decided to get rid of him. Moreover, Laura Seay demonstrates that Saro-Wiwa, “... linked economic exploitation to genocide so successfully” (2016). In fact, the dismantling of Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, that has been founded by Saro-Wiwa since 1990s for protecting environment and Ogoni people under the tyrannical ruling system, and removing Abacha from the political scene are the reasons behind his incarceration and murder because the world began to observe Abacha’s intimidating and violent rule towards his people and nation. Furthermore, Abacha was hugely affected by colonialism, as his ruling system in marginalizing minorities in Nigeria resembled colonial ruling system in oppressing Africans brutally in Africa. Actually, Afrocentricity is not only a historical reaction against years of colonialism and imperialist violence, but it also responds directly to Eurocentrism and attempts not to imitate the Eurocentric ideology. As an Afrocentrist, Okri opposes military oppressive system, which resembles colonial oppressive system and imitates the Eurocentric ideology, by uncovering internal oppression inside his nation that is caused as a result of external oppression by saying in the second stanza:

...
that is why the nations
today ring out
with injustice
with lies
with prejudice
made nature. (lines 17- 22)

“[I]njustice”, “lies”, and “prejudice” are propagated as a result of the brutal ruling system in Nigeria to an extent it becomes Nigeria’s normal way of life. Additionally, Nigerian’s “silence” is the root cause behind Nigeria’s corruption. For this reason, Okri determines on opposing this system and rebelling, especially after many years of Saro-Wiwa’s ghastly murder till eliminating this environmental degradation. Moreover, Seay manifests Wiwa’s view towards the Nigerian ruling system:

The Ogoni are a very small ethnic group within Nigeria, numbering less than a million in a country of nearly 200 million. Saro-Wiwa developed the idea of indigenous imperialism, claiming that Nigerian domination of the Ogoni was no different than British rule over Nigeria. Both were two faces of the same type of exploitation. (2016)

He also attempted to define the meaning of being Nigerian, and he believed that ‘being Nigerian’ implies transcendence of ethnic marginalization (2016). For this reason, Nigerian tyrannical rulers become a real version of colonial rulers in oppressing their own people, markedly in marginalizing minorities and contributing with Europe in exploiting Nigeria’s natural resources for satisfying their own needs. According to Harold Cruse (1916-2005), an African-American academic and social critic who specializes in African-American studies, “the real issue was the lack of Afrocentricity in the African” (83). Undeniably, Sani Abacha had “the lack of Afrocentricity” because he treated environment and Ogoni people as objects who deserved to be on the fringes and paved the way for Europeans to exploit his own nation and kill his own people, and even the one, Saro-Wiwa, who “call[ed] upon the Ogoni people, the peoples of the Niger delta, and the oppressed ethnic minorities of Nigeria to stand up now and fight fearlessly and peacefully for their rights” (81) murdered him brutally, with no mercy. Okri is an Afrocentrist who has “a commitment to finding the African subject place” (Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto*, 64), especially Ogoni people, who are marginalized by Nigerian tyrannical rulers and western oil companies, and he calls all Nigerians to resist and strive for equality for all ethnic minorities. Hence, if African rulers have commitment towards protecting and centralizing their nature and people, their lands will witness reform. At that point, Africa’s role will shift from the margins to the center.

4.1.9 Racism and Injustice in “Diallo’s Testament” by Ben Okri

Amadou Diallo had encountered external oppression, particularly racism and injustice since his arrival to New York City. Nadezhda Khokholkova mentions, “Afrocentricity became a response to racism ...” (111). In this poem, Okri handles racism and injustice as the main themes as Walker did in her poem “Occupying Mumia’s Cell”. He says:

I have sipped the language of death
I have shaped my canvas of earth
I’ve crossed a sea of fires

And seen what not even empires
Nor great.... (lines 9-13)

These lines imply how Diallo had “crossed a sea of fires” to live in an oppressive country deceiving the world by its greatest power and its diversity and claiming justice and peace for all people regardless of their backgrounds. Abu-Jamal opines, “Black America, despite its glitter and pop, is an oppressed community” (Abu-Jamal, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?*, 150). This innocent man confronted injustice not only at the hands of four white police officers who violently murdered him, with cold blood but also at the court. After his murder, the court blamed Diallo for forcing the policemen to fire the guns to protect themselves. Abu-Jamal states, “[t]he U.S. justice system is constructed to protect police, no matter how outrageous their behavior. That’s just a fact” (Abu-Jamal, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?*, 142). This demonstrates how the unjust American system protects only white people by giving them the right to murder other races and oppress them. Moreover, Geoff Edgers mentions that four police officers, Kenneth Boss, Sean Carroll, Richard Murphy, and Edward McMellon, shot Diallo 19 times on 4th February in 1999 in New York City because they had a suspicion that this man was a rapist. He adds, “[t]hey began shooting, they said later in court, because they thought a wallet Diallo held to offer identification was a gun” (2021). This shows the severe racism and injustice because these officers murdered Diallo who attempted to disclose his real identity. Hence, this oppressive structure violates all African-Americans’ rights, stereotypes them as criminals who deserve to be killed because of their different race, and even when they try to uncover their identities, they meet a miserable fate. Furthermore, Edgers declares, “[t]he four police officers who shot and killed Amadou Diallo in his doorway 21 years ago were acquitted. One of them, Kenneth Boss, eventually got his gun back and earned a promotion” (2021). After his death, oppression prevails because the court dealt with Diallo’s murder as an accident that was committed by mistake, and at the same time they glorified their police officers by promoting “[o]ne of them”. This court has a belief, “...[a]pparently, when the homicide is perpetuated by police. When police kill, it is an accident, a “mistake,” an “oops!”” (Abu-Jamal, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?*, 38). This emphasizes how this brutal system insists on oppressing African-Americans. What happened to Amadou Diallo sheds light on the “inferential racism” which is viewed by Stuart Hall (1932-2014), the Jamaican British cultural theorist and political activist, as “a much more complex form of racism as it is largely invisible. Inferential racism is

often the reason why many whites will sincerely ... declare, ‘I’m not a racist.’” (Marubuci 2000). Thus, this oppressive structure in America has an extreme “inferential racism” towards African-Americans as they brutalize and murder them only for their race. Kadiatou Diallo announces, “[o]ur sons haven’t received justice that they deserve to have. All we want is good policies, good laws to be passed and if someone did wrong — they have to be accountable for what they did” (Red 2019). Diallo’s mother seeks towards living in a community that respects African-Americans’ rights and penalizes the criminals. Abu-Jamal assures, “[w]e must unite to build a movement to end police violence—and the prison-industrial complex that criminalizes communities of color—once and for all!” (Abu-Jamal, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?*, 117). Through this poem, Okri laments the death of this acquitted man and tries to awaken all African-Americans to unite and fight non-violently against police brutality and its system that only defends Americans and oppresses African-Americans. Thus, he is a real Afrocentrist who uncovers racism and injustice that are intentionally forced by the American society upon African-Americans. He also has a faith “...from oppression comes solidarity, resistance, rebellion, and change” (Abu-Jamal, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?*, 2). Therefore, he is a centralized, not a marginalized poet; he resists racism, oppression, and marginalization as he believes that African-Americans’ faith in God, power of speech, rebellion, and unity will pave the way towards their transcendence and emancipation from white domination.

4.1.10 Racism, Brutality, and Violence in “Breathing the Light” by Ben Okri

Ratau mentions, “[i]n another poem entitled ‘Breathing the Light’, specifically based on George Floyd’s demise, Okri criticises many issues that poison our times, and racism features in the poem as a classic theme of the world’s problems” (16). In this poem, Okri handles the theme of racism as Walker did in her selected poem “Occupying Mumia’s Cell”. Floyd’s murder stresses the external oppression, especially oppression that is caused by police brutality. Afrocentricity is a theory against western marginalizing structures such as police brutality. In this poem, themes of racism, brutality, and violence are apparent in the third stanza:

...as the
police manhandled you,
twisted your arm

behind your back,
forced you to the
ground, and one of
them, the weirdest
of them, stuck his
knee on your wind-
pipe and took no
notice as you
whispered something
sixteen time, (Okri, lines 31-43)

Furthermore, Kevin K. Gains comments in his journal article, “Reflections on Ben Okri, Goenawan Mohamed, and the 2020 Global Uprisings”, about the atrocious murder of Floyd, “George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer, who knelt on Floyd’s neck for more than nine minutes, ignoring Floyd’s repeated statements—twenty-seven in all—that he could not breathe...” (9). These two quotes represent the brutality of white police officers who use their authority to oppress, marginalize, and kill African-Americans in a violent way. According to Ratau, Okri uses this dreadful scene to shed light on “all the suffering that human beings suffer under their governments, poverty, and the poor’s inadequate access to health care” (20). This oppressive structure not only violates human rights by violently killing African-Americans in a humiliating way like slaves, but also, they fail to provide health care for them because they have a black skin. Furthermore, Okri announces, “‘I can’t breathe’ suddenly equates racism with the deprivation of air, ... ‘I can’t breathe’ goes beyond saying that you are depriving me of freedom, of humanity, of respect. It says: ‘You are depriving me of the right to air itself’” (“I Can’t Breathe”, 2020). Indeed, “I can’t breathe” becomes a symbol for the deprivation of the right to breathe the air. This shows the severe external oppression because Americans deprive African-Americans of all their rights even the right to breathe the air. In addition, Okri says in the ninth stanza:

...let the heart of
america reveal
itself that was
the greatest way
of speaking, the
greater way of
dying, (lines 143-149)

In fact, this gruesome murder discloses the real face of America, and even if African-Americans attempt to speak about their rights, they will meet death in the end. African-Americans are not only oppressed when they are alive, but also after their death “[b]ecause across America, Black lives, as with Black votes, didn’t matter” (Abu-Jamal, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?*, 6). This statement asserts the blackness, injustice, and violence that prevail in America because they deprive African-Americans of all their right even to speak about the severe oppression. Moreover, Okri states, “[t]he names of those who have died unjustly at the hands of the police are legion. And the police officers have mostly always gotten off entirely free” (“I Can’t Breathe”, 2020) because “European colonialism and imperialism created a predatory ethics that conferred on them the alleged right to kill, displace, persecute, enslave, and exterminate the ‘uncivilized,’ [and] ‘savage ...’” (Monteiro-Ferreira 72). However, Afrocentricity opposes this colonialist and imperialist thinking and attempts to put an end to it. Through this poem, Okri laments the death of Floyd as he did in his previous poem, “Diallo’s Testament”. He declares to the whole world how America is still an oppressive country, normally practicing racism, brutality, and violence on African-Americans like Walker did in her selected poem “Occupying Mumia’s Cell”. Okri declares, “[r]acism is a failure of humanity. It is a failure to be human” (“I Can’t Breathe”, 2020). He opposes this system like Walker who is also against external oppression that is compelled on African-American activists, especially white police brutality and unjust courts. In the last stanzas, Okri shows how Floyd’s dreadful murder awakens all people as he says in the eleventh stanza, “you died into silence/ but the big world/ rose up in speech” (lines 179-181). Hence, Floyd’s murder forces all races from all over the world to centrally investigate his case and protest, so Floyd’s case reveals how Africans’ roles changed from the margins to the center.

5. Conclusion

This research aims at disclosing, criticizing, and rejecting internal and external oppression in African-American and Nigerian societies through using the theory of Afrocentricity. Alice Walker and Ben Okri resist these oppressive structures and attempt to relocate Africans from the margins to the center in their ten selected poems. Moreover, these two selected poets use their courageous voices as weapons against oppression, marginalization, injustice, racism, and discrimination that are forced upon African-Americans and Nigerians. In their selected poems, shedding light on such oppressive structures paves the way towards causing a change in

African-American and Nigerian societies. By analyzing ten selected poems, Walker and Okri meet the four objectives of this study.

Walker and Okri resisted internal and external oppressive structures inside and outside Africa in an attempt to create a new African society without any dominant oppression. In Walker's selected poems, she succeeded in resisting internal and external oppression that are forced by the patriarchal society and white oppressive structures. In Okri's selected poems, he succeeded in resisting internal and external oppression that tyrannical African rulers and white oppressive structures force.

Walker and Okri are real Afrocentrists who are centralized in their culture and poems, not marginalized, as they attempted to shift Africans' roles, in the African-American and Nigerian societies, from the margins to the center. In the ten selected poems, they shed light on how Africans encounter many struggles that hamper them from being at the center, such as deprivation of African-American women's rights of education, loss of African-American women's identity, objectification of African-American women, pain and suffering of all Africans, distortion of African history, civil wars, famine, corruption, exploitation, tyrannical African rulers, ethnic marginalization, racism, injustice, and American police brutality, and how they transcend their marginalization and treat themselves as objects. In Walker's selected poems, she illustrates how African-Americans relocate themselves from the margins to the center by raising their voices, accepting themselves, and retrieving their lost identity. In Okri's selected poems, he conveys how Nigerians and African-Americans relocate themselves from the margins to the center by having hope, possessing tremendous history and culture, raising their voices, having faith in God, and uniting together. Thus, obliterating all oppressive structures inside and outside Africa will be the only way towards Africa's centrality.

Walker and Okri corrected the falsification of African history that was denigrated by Europeans several hundred years ago. In Walker's selected poems, she tried to correct the falsification of African-American women's history as she proved how African-American women contribute to this history by resisting patriarchal society and white racists and presenting influential figures such as Gloria Steinem who strongly defends African-American women's rights and corrects the distorted image about their history. In Okri's selected poems, he attempted to correct the distortion that is committed deliberately by Europe in African history, particularly in his poem "Africa is a Reality Not Seen" by defying all false definitions and redefining Africa as he presented how Africa possesses numerous

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and gigantic civilizations and is renowned for its antiquity and its centrality.

In their ten selected poems, Walker and Okri have been resisting racism, oppression, slavery, and marginalization from the past till now through their power of speech to emancipate themselves from white domination, patriarchal society, and tyrannical African rulers. They demonstrated how African-Americans and Nigerians' resistance and power of speech are the only ways to their emancipation from all oppressive structures in their selected poems.

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