An Exploration of Female Empowerment through Sisterhood and Friendship in selected Twentieth-Century English Novels by Women Writers

E. U. A. Perera[1*]
[1]Department of Marketing and Tourism Management, NSBM Green University, Sri Lanka
Corresponding Author E-mail: avishki.p@nsbm.ac.lk

***Abstract*— This research provides a comprehensive study of female friendships as a source of empowerment in the lives of women in the selected twentieth-century English novels written by female authors. This paper examines how female friendships are portrayed in texts from diverse cultural backgrounds that challenge patriarchal oppression, providing the emotional strength and support that the protagonists need. Although existing scholarship has examined female friendships in literature, a gap remains in understanding female friendships as a source of empowerment in twentieth-century English novels. To address this gap, this paper incorporates a comparative textual analysis of "The Color Purple" by Alice Walker, "Their Eyes were Watching God" by Zora Neale Hurston, "The Bell Jar" by Sylvia Plath, and "Wide Sargasso Sea" by Jean Rhys exploring female friendships as a source of strength in women's lives as a resistance to the gendered constraints as depicted in the selected texts from different social and cultural backgrounds. By drawing from theories related to feminism and gender, particularly Judith Butler's, Toni Morrison's, and Bell Hooks's theories, this study analyses the struggles faced by female protagonists in these novels and how female friendships challenge the constraints and oppression imposed on women by the patriarchal society, how this female friendship becomes a source of empowerment in women's journey to autonomy and identity. In conclusion, this paper sheds light on an underexplored area that contributes to feminist literary scholarship.**

Keywords*— *female friendships, modern English novels, empowerment

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, in the world of literature, women are always portrayed as in rivalry and competition with one another. Scholars such as [1] and [2] have depicted the competition between women for social status, attraction, and attention. By sharing her firsthand experiences, Tanenbaum illustrates women's rivalry. She highlighted the way she competed with other women for attention. "I felt…good about getting more attention from the boys than the other girls did" [2, p. 3]. Nevertheless, modern English novels written by female authors have depicted female friendships as a source of empowerment in women's lives. In recent times, there has been a growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of female friendships for women to transcend societal restrictions and limitations. Scholars like [3] have highlighted how female friendships have supported women in terms of their identity. Yet, there is limited research on how female friendships serve as a support system in the lives of women based on modern English novels. By exploring "The Color Purple" [4], "Their Eyes were watching God" [5], "Wide Sargasso Sea" [6], and "The Bell Jar" [7], this paper studies how female friendships empowers women to resist patriarchal restrictions and how female friendships are depicted in texts from different social and cultural backgrounds. From the perspectives of feminist and gender theories, these relationships can be seen either as support systems that support each other or as weak relationships, which are restrained by dominant societies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The literature review and theoretical framework of this paper include three sections. First, the term "female friendships" has been defined based on the existing literature. Second, the employed theories in this paper are outlined, which include Adrianne Rich's Gender Theory, Toni Morrison's feminist theory, and Bell hooks' theory of love and community. Third, it reviews the existing literature on female friendships.

A. Defining the term female friendships

Female friendships refer to social, emotional, and intellectual bonds that exist between women, which include support, trust, understanding, and shared experiences. [9] have depicted female friendships as deep connections where women can express themselves. These friendships help women transform their lives through the emotional support they receive from other women. [10] have depicted how female bonding helps women to be optimistic and to improve the feeling of empowerment through female

friendships. Female friendships go beyond offering mere companionship to women. Often, these bonds serve as sites of transformation, healing, and resistance. As depicted by scholars, women help each other to uplift themselves, providing the necessary support and guidance. Hence, in this research, the term "female friendships" refers to companionships that exist between women.

B. Existing literature on female friendships

Ample research has been conducted on female friendships. The research on female bonds depicts a dual perspective. Studies have shown women having competitions and rivalries with one another. Scholars such as [11], and [12] have also analyzed rivalry among women. Campbell focuses on the competition between women and has depicted how women use indirect methods to show rivalry as they want to protect existing relationships. [11] have explored the rivalry among females in workplaces. However, more recent scholarship has depicted female friendships as a strength, a support system to resist patriarchal restrictions. [13] have depicted how friendships between women function as defenses against societal restrictions in South Asian contexts. [14] and [15] explore friendships and sociological dimensions, especially Benchekroun highlighting the support women receive within interpersonal relationships. [16] have depicted how supportive female friendships have alleviated the emotional trauma of women who have faced racial discrimination.

In addition, scholars have studied the depiction of female companionship in all genres and periods. These female friendships also depict the freedom and suppression that women are undergoing in their respective societies. [17] has highlighted how Elena's Neapolitan novels depict female friendships among women that strengthen them, leading them to growth. Scholars like [18], [19], and [20] have analyzed the friendships between women as depicted in the works of literature. By analyzing a novel called "Conversations with Friends" by [18] has depicted how female friendships become an important aspect in the search for identity and happiness of women. [19] have studied how female friendships strengthen women to find autonomy amid societal constraints in patriarchal societies. Apart from that, [20] has comparatively studied "Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen, and "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Bronte by depicting how female friendships have come across as a supportive force to challenge societal restrictions imposed on women. Apart from these studies, scholars like [21] have depicted how female friendships are affected by patriarchal challenges and societal restrictions.

This paper addresses the gaps in the existing scholarship by studying female bonds in twentieth-century English novels written by female authors from varied cultural and social backgrounds, such as African, American, Caribbean, and post-colonial contexts. Hence, this paper is significant as it explores a less-studied area in female friendships as a source of empowerment among women. The existing scholarship on feminist literature has mostly focused on identity, oppression, and self-autonomy of women.

C. Theoretical framework

This paper draws from feminist and gender theories such as Adrianne Rich's gender theory, Toni Morrison's feminist theory, and Bell hooks' feminist theory. All these theories provide insights into the influence of female friendships in the lives of women as a source of empowerment across different societies.

Adrianne Rich, in her "Compulsory Heterosexuality and lesbian Existence [22] criticizes male-dominant societal structures, and she supports female friendships, which she calls the "lesbian continuum," including a diverse range of relationships among women that defy patriarchal societies. This can be seen in Celie – Shug's relationship in "The Color Purple" and Janie and Pheoby's relationship in "Their Eyes Were Watching God," which come as powerful forces of empowerment emotionally, spiritually, and sexually. They resist the male-dominated societies with their female friendships. In Plath's "The Bell Jar," Doreen's and Joan's interactions with Esther can be seen as avenues of deep feelings to transgress the boundaries of heterosexual norms. However, Esther's emotional imbalance and Joan's suicide can also be analyzed as a result of the denial of female compassion and societal constraints.

Toni Morrison's theory highlights Black women's lives, which provide the theoretical background to analyze three of the selected novels, "The Color Purple," "Their Eyes Were Watching God," and "Wide Sargasso Sea." Smith, in her 1978 essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," has mentioned that Morrison's work brings in about "Black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives" [23]. Morrison also emphasizes the storytelling, women's shared experiences in the construction of their identities as women, and their opposition to patriarchy. In "Their Eyes Were Watching God," Janie describes her life story to Pheoby, which depicts resistance to male male-dominated society through storytelling. Even in the novel, "Wide Sargasso Sea," Jean Rhys gives voice to the silenced woman, Bertha Mason, in Brontë's Jane Eyre through Antoinette's character.

Bell Hook's in her book "Feminism is for Everybody: passionate politics," mentions that feminism is pivotal for the community and refers to it as a political commitment to the oppression in society. Hook's theory is pivotal to examining the female friendships in the selected novels, as it highlights the friendships between women as a revolutionary act. She has also noted that one of the most powerful acts is to create safe spaces where women and grow and support each other spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually [24]. In the selected texts, Shug and Nettie's bonds with Celie provide the space to transform herself from being voiceless to a powerful character towards the end of the novel. In "Their Eyes Were Watching God," Pheoby supports Janie by providing her the space to narrate Janie's stories in her journey to self-autonomy.

D. Situating the novels

These four novels can be studied under African American feminist literature. "The Colour Purple" by Alice Walker was published in 1982, and this novel is set in the "20th century American South", describing the story of Celie, who is the protagonist of the novel, "a Black poor girl" [25]. Jean Rhys's novel "Wide Sargasso Sea" was published in 1966, describing the story of Antoinette. This novel can be seen as a "prequel and postcolonial response" to Brontë's Jane Eyre. [25] "Their Eyes Were Watching God" (1939) recounts the story of "a Black female in her quest for self-identity" [26]. "The Bell Jar" (1963) focuses on "the protagonist Esther Greenwood, who descends into madness" [27].

All these novels can be categorized under three cultural contexts. The novels, "The Colour Purple" and "Their Eyes Were Watching God," can be taken under African American contexts. Both these novels depict how female friendships come as an important source of empowerment in the lives of women, both socio-politically and emotionally. The novel "The Bell Jar" is situated in the middle-class urban America, where female friendships can be seen as few and weak among Western white women after World War II. Celie and Janie receive support from female friendships, unlike Esther in "The Bell Jar." Esther does not have a proper cultural framework to build friendships with other women. They fail to nurture their relationships. This aligns with Bell hooks' criticism of white spaces. "Wide Sargasso Sea" is set in the post-colonial Caribbean society, and even the bonds that they have with others are affected by colonial hierarchies, cultural displacement. Their bonds become fragile in front of the violence and madness that the protagonist must undergo. However, it remains a force of resistance throughout the novel. The power of colonial society hinders their relationship.

III. METHODOLOGY

This paper utilizes a qualitative research approach employing comparative textual analysis as the main method of analyzing the selected texts. In the studies of literature, textual analysis is employed to examine and interpret the texts. The main reason for selecting textual analysis as the methodology is that it helps to get a thorough understanding of the selected novels, which fulfills the objectives of the research. Scholars such as McKee have highlighted the importance of textual analysis as it helps to analyze a text in a descriptive and exploratory way. McKee, in his "A beginner's guide to textual analysis," has mentioned, "When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text" [8, p. 3]. Textual analysis helps to conduct an in-depth analysis of the characters, narrative, and the socio-cultural context. In this paper, female characters, their bonding with the other women, and the way they resist male domination have been analyzed through textual analysis. This research also explores how female friendships contribute to women's identity and autonomy. In addition, a comparative approach is utilized to interpret and analyze multiple texts together. This helps to analyze the similarities and differences, and an in-depth meaning of texts concerning characters and socio-cultural settings, including African, American, Caribbean, Post-Colonial, and Western settings. This enables to depict how female friendships differ from one socio-cultural context to another and to what extent they empower women within these settings. This research focuses on modern English novels written by female authors from diverse backgrounds, such as African, American, and post-colonial contexts. The focus on twentieth-century novels aligns with the study's aim of exploring novels written by female authors from diverse social and cultural backgrounds.

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Both the novels "The Color Purple" and "Their Eyes Were Watching God" highlight the complexities present in African American women's relationships and struggles, Celie's sister empowers her through her letter writing. However, their correspondence is interrupted by Albert, who hides all Nettie's letters from Celie. It is Shug who discovers Albert's act and reveals it to Celie. portraying female bonds not only as an emotional strength but also as a support system. In "The Color Purple," Shug Avery empowers Celie, and in "Their Eyes Were Watching God," Janie's bond with Pheoby allows Janie to reflect on her life. Unlike Celie's and Shug's evolving friendship, which evolves throughout the book, Pheoby and Janie's bond depicts a rich culture of oral traditions. Pheoby becomes a listener and witness to Janie's story. While Shug provides the strength to Celie to stand as an independent woman in the male-dominated society, Pheoby gives the support to reflect on her journey.

In contrast to those two novels, the protagonists in "The Bell Jar" and "Wide Sargasso Sea" face mental and social deterioration in the absence of powerful female friendships. Christophine, the Black servant figure in the novel "Wide Sargasso Sea," extends her help to Antoinette. However, the strained post-colonial societal structure makes these female friendships impossible, which leads Antoinette to become a madwoman in a white man's attic, which can be seen through Bertha Mason's character in Brontë's Jane Eyre. Similarly, Plath's "The Bell Jar" depicts how Esther Greenwood's mental illness worsens in the face of weak female friendships. Though Esther is surrounded by women such as her mother, her colleagues, and roommates, none of these people fulfill her. As the novel is situated in mid-century American society after the war, the novel clearly depicts how female friendships are weakened and neglected by the patriarchal system.

In Alice Walker's novel, "The Color Purple," Celie becomes an immensely powerful character towards the end of the novel due to her female friendships with Nettie, her own sister, and Shug Avery, the past lover of her husband, Albert. When the novel begins, Celie can be seen as a character who undergoes abuse,

isolation under the dominance of male figures in her life. Celie's growth from voicelessness to empowerment happens with the support she gets from Shug and Nettie. Adrianne Rich's theory can be used to analyze Celie's and Shug Avery's relationship. Though their relationship is seen as very intimate, their connection is particularly emotional as well. Adrianne Rich has stated that "the connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic and the most potentially transforming force on the planet" [22]. When Shug comes into Celie's life, she motivates Celie to leave her husband. Later, Celie starts her own sewing business, gaining both economic and emotional independence. Scholars such as Maria have shown how Shug, Nettie, and Sofia helped her to achieve "a new identity and get her self-esteem back" [28]. Celie's empowerment is also nurtured through her correspondence with her sister through letters. According to Toni Morrison's theory, these letters come as a form of rebellion against male dominance.

"Their Eyes Were Watching God" by Zora Neale Hurston shows Janie Crawford's and Pheoby Watson's relationship, where Janie tells her life story to Pheoby and Pheoby listens actively to Janie and promises to share Janie's story. "Pheoby tell "' "' "' em…you must tell'em…" [5, p. 121]. Janie gains control of her life by recounting her life story, which involves three husbands. Pheoby becomes a part of Janie's life by capturing all these stories and helping Janie to come out of all these internal struggles. "Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine." [5, p.134] She becomes a healer in Janie's life as it provides her with the space to reflect on her life through the narratives. "It is uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo papa and yo' mama and nobody else can tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody has gotten tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves." [5, p.226]. This exemplifies female friendships, especially through communication. Toni Morrison's feminist theory can be employed, which says that storytelling can be taken as a tool to empower women. Janie describes her three marriages to Logan, Jody, and Tea Cake. She rebelled against the dominance of males and her experiences of hardship and suffering. Pheoby gives her the space to express herself freely without any judgment, where she experiences respect and compassion.

In contrast to the above two novels, "The Bell Jar" by Sylvia Plath and "Wide Sargasso Sea" by Jean Rhys depict weakened female friendships yet stand against the male domination and societal restrictions.

In "The Bell Jar," Sylvia Plath portrays how female friendships are affected by mental illnesses and patriarchal violence. Doreen, Betsy, and Joan are female friends of Esther Greenwood. Unlike the female friendships in "The Color Purple" and "Their Eyes Were Watching God," these relationships do not offer any kind of empowerment or consolation for the protagonist. These can be seen in line with Rich's argument that patriarchal societies disrupt deep female relationships. Esther's psychological breakdown and her friend Joan's suicide emphasize the lack of proper bonding, which is required for anybody. However, these relationships offer moments of empowerment, resistance against the restrictions placed on women in their society. Even the female characters challenge the prescribed and given gender roles for women. Doreen goes against the stereotypes given to women as she serves as a rebellious, clever character, who is not concerned about the approval of society. She also works as a guest editor in New York, depicting the dynamic roles a woman can play in society. "She used to sit next to me…she'd whisper witty, sarcastic remarks to me under her breath" [7, pg. 5] Doreen becomes a source a strength for Esther to see beyond the society's misleading nature. This can be seen when she says, "I felt wise and cynical as hell" [7, chapter 3]. Apart from Doreen, Betsy is another friend of Esther who is also working as a guest editor. Though she does not appear as a powerful character like Doreen, she embodies the stereotypical ideal American woman and is described as a sweet and feminine character. Even if she does not come across as a dominant character, her presence in Esther's life enables her to perceive the limitations of the feminine ideal, that even fitting in cannot bring fulfillment. In addition, Esther meets several women at the psychiatric hospital and bonds with them who come across shared experiences. Though Esther is isolated at the hospital, she also shares the same experiences with other female characters like Joan. Even Dr. Nolan serves as a supportive and understanding character, unlike other psychiatrists like Dr. Gordon. Dr. Nolan becomes a positive influence and a mother-like figure in Esther's life. "I will tell you beforehand, and I promise you it won't be anything like what you had before" [7, p. 200]. This novel clearly depicts the failure of female friendships to empower women under the influence of patriarchal systems. This critiques the lack of female spaces where male authority is the order of the day. As Antoinette in "Wide Sargasso Sea," Esther experiences mental breakdowns, which lead to institutionalized care for her mental illness. This also depicts how the lack of powerful female friendships has impacted women's lives. Despite Esther being surrounded by women, they are unable to support her. Sylvia Plath brings in the support women need to rise against all the societal barriers. "What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security, and what a man is an arrow into the future and what a woman is the place the arrow shoots off from" [7, p. 115]. These words are uttered by Buddy's mother, Mrs. Willard, in the novel. By using these words, Plath has metaphorically depicted how certain societies and cultures have perceived gender dynamics. She holds a very patriarchal and traditional viewpoint towards gender. Hence, women who empower Esther through supportive female friendships resist the system that Mrs. Willard represents, though they are not powerful enough to empower and transform Esther's life.

Jean Rhys's "Wide Sargasso Sea" reclaims Jane Eyre's Bertha Mason, giving life to Antoinette's story. The novel brings the female friendships between Antoinette and Christophine, a Black female servant of the protagonist Antoinette. She resists the colonial power, which hangs clogs on Antoinette and acts as a maternal figure in her life. When Antoinette asks for help, Christophine states that their emotional bond is much stronger than their relationship, and it is overly complex. "Have spunks and do battle for yourself" [6, p. 105]. Christophine appears as an immensely powerful character in Antoinette's life. When Antoinette goes to get advice from Christophine to win back her husband Rochester's love, Christophine asks her to leave her husband. "I tell you a hard thing, pack up and go" [6, p. 99]. This also depicts Christophine as a very radical character. Though she is depicted as an illiterate character, she is a knowledgeable woman who possesses a good understanding of society, which is clearly shown through the advice she gives to Antoinette. "When a man doesn't love you, the more you try, the more he hates you, a man like that" [6, p. 99]. Though Christophine acts as a marginalized character in the story, she confronts Rochester. She is neither afraid nor shows any concern about going against him. She warns Antoinette to leave Rochester, pushing Antoinette for self-autonomy. "You have no husband now" [6, p. 115]. This statement is a powerful statement as she tries to release Antoinette from all the patriarchal restrictions that tied her down to a marriage where she is ill-treated and unloved. However, despite this, Christophine's actions and words are not enough to protect Antoinette from colonial violence and patriarchy. The impact of colonial and social hierarchies in society becomes strong when rescuing Antoinette from her terrible experiences. Their connection is burdened with colonial tensions and hierarchy. As a result of that, Christophine fails to save Antoinette, and she ends up becoming a madwoman under the dominance of patriarchy and colonialism. Christophine remains a spiritual advisor throughout the novel. Their female friendships become very weak, and society seems not to facilitate such bonds, which empower women. Nevertheless, the female friendships between Christophine and Antoinette remain a resistance to the power of colonialism and male male-dominated social structure.

In both 'Wide Sargasso Sea" and "The Bell Jar," the protagonists descend into madness in the face of failed female relationships under the dominance of patriarchal male authorities.

Collectively, these four novels depict the importance of female friendships in the lives of women. The novels, "Their Eyes Were Watching God" and "The Color Purple," depict how female friendships come as a source of strength in the lives of the protagonists through Janie's and Celie's characters, respectively. However, in the two novels, "The Bell Jar" and "Wide Sargasso Sea," the respective protagonists Esther and Antoinette depict the failure women have to face because of failed female bonds.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper depicts how female bonds are portrayed in contemporary English novels, which can be seen as forms of resistance and empowerment against patriarchal oppression. In "Their Eyes Were Watching God" and "The Color Purple," the protagonists find social, emotional, and spiritual liberation through the bonds they share with other women. Their female friendships come as strong forces of resilience against all the societal barriers that oppress and limit women's movement. The bonds come not only as supportive but also as foundational to their transformation. In contrast, "The Bell Jar" and "Wide Sargasso Sea" depict tense friendships due to societal constraints. The protagonists from "The Bell Jar" and "Wide Sargasso Sea," Esther and Antoinette, respectively, suffer due to the weak female bonds that they have. These female solidarities become delicate within the socio-cultural contexts of the time. Hence, all these four novels depict diverse constructs of connections among women, illustrating that female bonding can function as a resistance to oppression and domination, but its success relies on the societal and cultural environments in which these bonds are built. Through these diverse contexts, the presence or absence of transformative connections among women have changed each protagonist's life in a significant manner. By integrating theories with this literary analysis, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how connections among women can be seen as a source of strength, where their effectiveness depends on the socio-cultural settings in which these bonds exist.

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