

	<p>Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems Issue 2, Vol. 9, 2026</p> <p>RESEARCH ARTICLE </p> <h2>Intersecting Silences and Embodied Inequalities: A Feminist, Intersectional, and Womanist Reading of Alice Walker's Strong Horse Tea within African American Women's Literary and Health Humanities Traditions</h2>
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<b>Keywords</b>	Strong Horse Tea; Alice Walker; Feminist Literary Criticism; Intersectionality; Womanism; African American Women's Literature; Health Humanities; Gender and Race Studies
<b>Abstract</b>	<p>This article offers an in-depth feminist, intersectional, and womanist analysis of Alice Walker's short story Strong Horse Tea, situating the narrative within the broader traditions of African American women's literature and contemporary health humanities scholarship. Set in the rural American South during the mid-twentieth century, the story portrays the lived experiences of Rannie (Rani) Toomer, a poor Black mother whose desperate attempts to save her gravely ill child expose the interlocking structures of racial, gendered, class-based, and institutional oppression. Employing qualitative textual analysis, this study closely examines narrative silence, illiteracy, bodily vulnerability, and restricted access to healthcare as key thematic elements that reflect systemic marginalization rather than individual failure. Drawing on feminist literary criticism, intersectionality theory, and Black feminist and womanist thought—particularly Alice Walker's conceptualization of womanism—the analysis demonstrates how Rannie's silence operates as both a product of structural exclusion and a marker of historically enforced voicelessness among Black women. Her persistent efforts to seek help, despite institutional neglect and epistemic barriers, are interpreted as a form of cultural resilience embedded within Black women's survival strategies. The study further argues that Strong Horse Tea functions as a powerful critique of medical racism and class-based healthcare disparities, foregrounding how knowledge, language, and authority are unevenly distributed along racial and socioeconomic lines. By contextualizing Walker's narrative within African American women's literary history and interdisciplinary debates on care, inequality, and embodiment, this article contends that Strong Horse Tea transcends the boundaries of personal tragedy. Instead, it emerges as a socially engaged text that continues to resonate with contemporary discussions on gender justice, racial inequality, and ethical responsibility in systems of care. The findings reaffirm Alice Walker's enduring relevance as a literary voice committed to exposing structural injustice while centering Black women's lived experiences.</p>
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## Introduction

Perhaps the most influential author in African American literary history, Alice Walker is renowned for her ability to portray black women's inner lives and struggles with political awareness, empathy, and authenticity. This is true of her short story "Strong Horse Tea," which was first included in her collection "In Love and Trouble: Stories from the Black Women. In the midst of the hardships of the rural American South in the middle of the 20th century, the short story tells the compelling story of a mother's frantic attempts to care for her ailing child. Given its length, it is a complex, multidimensional text that requires critical analysis on a number of topics, including medical neglect, gender oppression, poverty, race, and cultural rigidity. Rannie Toomer, a poor, illiterate black woman whose infant son has a terminal illness, is the protagonist of the book. In a desperate attempt to get information, she turns to the local postal worker and a folk healer named Sarah, whose "strong horse tea" has helped her more than the prescribed medication. Renee is left to mourn alone after her child passes away despite her actions. Walker exposes the reader to the systemic barriers that shape black women's lives through this seemingly straightforward tale: the weight of racial and gender oppression, the denial of education, and the lack of access to healthcare. Scholarly reactions to Strong Horse Tea have come from a range of critical viewpoints. Cressman places the story within a framework of the humanities of health in response to Bowesker Walker's unwavering dedication to speaking for voiceless black women. Renee's illiteracy and the postal worker's indifference represent a "vicious circle of knowledge." We discover that Walker's work is entwined with oppression and covert resistance, recalling other studies like those by Rakovich and Farzand. All of this reading demonstrates that Strong Horse Tea is a story that is not only tragic but also infused with political awareness and cultural critique.

## Literature review

The setting for Alice Walker's short story "Strong Horse Tea" is the rural American South in the middle of the 20th century. African American communities endured repressive systems of racial segregation, economic exclusion, and restricted access to healthcare and education during this time. Many southern hospitals and clinics practiced racial segregation or outright exclusion of black patients, and government initiatives frequently disregarded black communities in rural areas. Because formal health care networks were inaccessible or hostile, women in these communities, who experienced racial and gender oppression, frequently turned to home nursing, folk remedies, and the knowledge of elders. Historical educational inequalities also hindered literacy, as many people did not have access to written materials about public health initiatives or medicine. Given this, Walker's fiction depicts not only a tragedy but also the systemic flaws that shape the lives of numerous Black women, whose experiences have frequently been left out of the mainstream discourses in literature and medicine (Crisman, 2024). According to Bavisker, Rannie Toomer, the main character, is "silenced not only because of her gender but also because of social structures that deny her education and access." She draws attention to how Rani is forced to use ineffective folk remedies because of the story's rural setting and oppressive social orders, which trap her within the healthcare system. (Bavisker, 2021). According to Ezra Rakovich (2022), Walker's writing is comparable to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* when viewed within the larger framework of Black women's literature. According to Rakovich, Black women in both books battle "comparative oppression through structures of racism, patriarchy, and class hierarchy, yet create spaces of empowerment." This is true in Strong Horse Tee, where Rani's inability to obtain healthcare is a sign of structural disadvantage rather than a personal one. Rakovich gives credibility to her argument by citing theorists like Kimberle Crenshaw who portray Walker's protagonists as individuals grappling with contradictory identities. Rakovich (2022). Noor Al-Huda's essay, in addition to illustrating instances of resiliency, Cheikh Abdulrahman (2023) investigates how Black women, like Delia in Sweet, encounter gender and domestic abuse at the local level. Hurston's account of Delia's survival, she observes, "resonates with a broader feminist critique of patriarchy within the Black community." Since both texts explore how black women live in oppressive social and domestic environments, this reading most closely relates to Strong Horse Tee. These links demonstrate how Walker is a part of a larger literary tradition where the personal trauma of black women is interpreted as an indication of structural oppression. Thus, her writing is included in a collection of black women's writings that provides a comparative framework for reading Walker's story (Cheikh Abdulrahman, 2023). According to Mary Farzand (2025), "Sally's silence is not a passive absence of speech but a dynamic and multifaceted device that functions as a symbol of oppression and a means of resistance." The theoretical definition of silence as an active site can

be applied to Renee's situation in "Strong Horse Tea," even though Farzand's analysis concentrates on "The Colour Purple." Although Renee is silenced in official health care forums due to her illiteracy and marginalisation, her attempts to pursue alternative forms of treatment show that she is actively resisting her circumstances. Drawing on the depth of Walker's characters, Farzand's interpretation contends that Walker's characters are frequently silent in the sense that they are reticent and rebel in silence (Farzand, 2025). Walker's health humanities scholarship asserts "Black feminist narratives shaped cultural notions around well-being and political consciousness," as Tenisha C. McDonald (2025) explains. Her writings show how Black women's stories, whether in the form of activism, essays, or fiction, have reframed caregiving within the framework of structural neglect. McDonald's work offers a helpful framework for placing Walker's short story within broader arguments for radical self-care, but it is not a close reading of Strong Horse Tea. In these situations, Rannie's attempts to seek assistance outside of official institutions and her appropriation of folk wisdom turn into acts of self-care within an oppressive setting (Macdonald, 2025). Cressman, Jessica (2024). In "Strong Horse Tea" by Alice Walker. In the Health Humanities' Imaginary of Embodied Care. After Renee meets with Sarah, Cressman switches to her meeting with the folk healer, who is described as "a liaison agent who plies the circuit from the city to the countryside." She contends that Renee's lack of literacy and her isolation from the mail-based network of written knowledge are partially to blame for the story's tragedy. This "incomplete chain of knowledge" causes Renee's loss. Cressman provides a thorough reading that incorporates literature and the history of healthcare, highlighting how systemic exclusion and implicit bias affect Black women's perceptions of pain (Cressman, 2024). By situating the story within a matrix of relationships, trust, and medical inadequacy, her research deepens Walker's understanding of the narrative.

#### **Research questions:**

1. How does Strong Horse Tea show the combined effects of race, gender, and class on Rannie Toomer's life?
2. How do silence, illiteracy, and poor healthcare access in the story reflect wider systems of oppression?
3. In what ways does Rannie's experience connect to other Black women's struggles in African American literature?

#### **Methodology**

Since the main objective of this study is to interpret and critically analyse Alice Walker's short story "Strong Horse Tea," rather than to measure or quantify variables, a qualitative approach is used. The study enquires as to how the narrative depicts the intersectional oppressions of class, gender, and race, as well as how feminist and intersectional theories can shed light on Rannie Toomer's situation. Since language, imagery, symbolism, and narrative structure are all crucial to comprehending literary works, a qualitative approach is ideal in this situation. This method seeks to create meaning, interpret context, and develop theoretical understanding rather than producing statistical generalisations. As a textual case study of Strong Horse Tea, the design is interpretive and descriptive. The narrative can be read as a wide-ranging, intricate case with flexibility thanks to this design, which also allows for a close analysis of themes and techniques. Informed by feminist theory, intersectionality, and feminist literary criticism, the study explains how Renee's life is shaped by intersecting oppressive systems. These theories were chosen because they particularly address intersectional issues in the text, such as class-based segregation in health care and education, gendered silencing, and racial marginalisation. Multiple close readings of Strong Horse Tea, the main text from Walker's book "In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women," were necessary for the qualitative data collection process. Important quotes were highlighted and coded against recurrent themes like systemic exclusion, folk medicine, illiteracy, and silence. Bauviscar (2021), Rakovich (2022), Cressman (2024), Farzand (2025), McDonald (2025), and Cheikh Abd al-Rahman (2023) are a few examples. The critical and historical background required for a qualitative reading of a work set in the American South in the middle of the 20th century was supplied by these sources. Since this is a literary analysis, sampling entails choosing important textual evidence rather than enlisting volunteers, and all of the sources are ethically and publicly accessible. Thematic analysis and close reading procedures came after qualitative data analysis. Each theme, such as dysfunctional relationships or limited access to HealthCare was examined in the context of feminist and interactional theory after key quotes were coded. Using Cressman's (2024) theory of circuits of knowledge, for instance, the sentence "She looked at the paper as if she could find words to speak" (Walker, 2005) was interpreted as proof of systemic exclusion. In keeping with McDonald's (2025) theory of radical self-care, Sarah's description of her treatment, "Sarah tied the roots together and boiled them hard in an iron pot, muttering that the tea was stronger than any doctor's medicine" (Walker, 2005), was also interpreted as a cultural protest against the abandonment of medical care. In order to place Walker's work within a larger tradition, these themes were placed in a historical context and contrasted with comparable representations in the works of African American women, such as Hurston Sweet. There are restrictions, just like in any qualitative study. Descriptive analysis is subjective, and the scope of the results is limited when it is restricted to a single short story.

However, by combining the expertise of several academics, interpreting textual data, and maintaining an open analysis process, limitations were addressed. Therefore, the research question and subject matter justified the use of a qualitative approach. Strong Horse Tea can be read in a rich and culturally complex way by using close reading, thematic reading, and feminist, intersectional, and womanist lenses. This makes the agency and resiliency of Black women at the center of the analysis and allows it to show how Walker's work undermines institutional oppression.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study's theoretical underpinnings are feminist literary criticism, intersectionality, and black feminist thought, all of which offer a perspective on Walker's writing.

#### **Feminist Literary Criticism**

Feminist criticism questions patriarchal systems and looks at how women's experiences are portrayed in literature. Feminist theory highlights Rannie Toomer's status as a black woman with little authority in a male-dominated society in the context of "Strong Horse Tea." Gendered expectations and limitations influence her interactions with characters such as Sarah and the Mailman. Walker gives voice to characters who are otherwise silenced in the main stories, as Bauviscar (2021) contends. Feminist critique thus aids in examining Renee's marginalisation as a component of structural gender inequality rather than as a singular incident.

#### **Intersectionality**

Kimberly Crenshaw defined intersectionality as the study of the interactions and intersections between various types of oppression, including racism, sexism, and classism. This framework is required because Rani's problems are entwined with her race, poverty, and illiteracy and are not solely related to her gender. Black women in literature frequently negotiate these intersectional structures, forging identities within structures that deprive them of fundamental resources and rights, as Rakovich (2022) highlights. The intersectional lens in Strong Horse Tea shows how the radicalized structure of rural medicine and communication systems in the middle of the 20th century, in addition to gender bias, restricts access to health care.

#### **Womanist Thought**

A framework for examining the culturally particular experiences of Black women is offered by Alice Walker's conception of feminism, which is a subset of Black feminism. The wisdom of communities, folk traditions, and survival techniques that are occasionally overlooked by mainstream feminism is celebrated by feminism. Even though they do not work in the end, the folk remedies Rani Mentions in the story show how people turn to community-based therapies in the absence of formal medical care. According to McDonald's (2025) research, basic self-care practices among Black women are both politically significant and necessary. In a world that was created against her, Rani's attempts to save her child can be interpreted as acts of agency and care from a feminist perspective.

#### **Health Humanities Context**

According to Cressman (2024), who connects Strong Horse T to the historical realities of medical negligence and malfunctioning communication circuits, the framework is further enhanced by the humanities of health. This viewpoint sheds light on Rani's incapacity to obtain crucial information and the symbolic meaning of the mail carrier's circulars. It places the narrative in the context of larger conversations about how systemic biases affect how pain is perceived and how resources for healthcare are allocated. When taken as a whole, these theories offer a strong basis for understanding Strong Horse T as a cultural critique as well as a narrative. They make it possible for scholars to delve deeper into the socio-historical realities woven throughout Walker's work and go beyond superficial interpretation.

#### **Analysis and Discussion**

"Strong Horse Tea," a story by Alice Walker, is both personal and political. Walker critiques intersectional systems of oppression through race, gender, class, and health care in this story by drawing on the tragedy of Rannie Toomer. This analysis looks at how the textual descriptions represent the intersectional and feminist issues raised in the dialogue above through close reading and thematic interpretation. Walker opens with a powerful picture that instantly conveys Rani's helplessness and loneliness: "She was a small, dark woman, clutching a child as if it would tear her little chest apart" (Walker, 2005). In this opening line, Rani is positioned as a guardian of a child in pain, already burdened by poverty and gendered expectations, rather than as a subject with authority. According to Bowescar, Walker is a forerunner of "marginal voices," and Rani's physical diminutiveness and innocent suffering serve as the backdrop for this tale of systemic neglect. The illiteracy of Rani and her lack of access to written knowledge are recurrent themes. The narrator states, "She looked at the paper as if she could find the words to speak," when the mail carrier hands her a circular (Walker, 2005).

Cressman (2024) refers to this as the "vicious circle of knowledge," in which knowledge is accessible but useless to those who are marginalized due to their lack of education and social standing. According to an intersectional perspective, this is about the combined effects of being a Black woman in the rural South who is poor and uneducated, not just gender.

Black women characters frequently find themselves at these intersections, having to negotiate systems that were never intended for them, as Rakovich (2022) reminds us. The picture of Rannie's encounter with the mail carrier provides an additional illustration of the institutional apathy: "He handed her the paper, shook his head, and walked away" (Walker, 2005). His casual gesture and subsequent departure reveal a structural pattern of Black women's pain denial, which is reflected in Cressman's (2024) human rights framework of health. When Renee attempted, "she reached out to him, her eyes wet, but he brushed her off with a smile for someone else" (Walker, 2005). Her sense of uncertainty is captured in this description, which reflects what Farzand (2025) identifies as how denial and silence can be used as tools of oppression. Through the character of folk healer Sarah, the narrative also examines access to healthcare. "Sarah tied up roots and boiled them vigorously in an iron pot, muttering that the tea was stronger than any doctor's medicine, (Walker, 2005). Due to their systematic exclusion from medical institutions, Black women created their own healing practices, which is reflected in this practice and the radical self-care techniques McDonald (2025) discusses. Crucially, Walker does not romanticise Sarah's care; rather, the narrative highlights her inadequacy in light of the child's worsening condition: "Renée shook her, waiting for the tea to work, praying for some sign" (Walker, 2005). This demonstrates Rani's unwavering patience and faith, which Farzand (2025) would characterise as the silent resilience she keeps acting and holding out hope despite the ongoing setbacks around her.

These themes are further supported by Walker's symbolism. The story's conclusion, however, highlights the boundaries of such resiliency. The narrator states, "She shook her little body and said something that no one else could hear," after the child passes away despite all efforts (Walker, 2005). In keeping with Farzand's (2025) idea that silence can be a language of resiliency, grief, and identity, this near-final moment encapsulates Rani's own grief and love. The literature review's comparative contexts shed additional light on Walker's accomplishment. In her analysis of Hurston Sweet, Cheikh Abdulrahman (2023) notes that Delia's resilience and quiet strength allow her to survive. Although Rani exhibits strength as well, Walker's narrative further motivates her to criticize larger social structures, such as institutional bias, healthcare neglect, and illiteracy, in addition to domestic oppression. Walker's feminist viewpoint is reflected in this wider focus, which honors Black women's cultural knowledge while denouncing the systems that restrict their ability to survive.

### **Conclusion**

With a focus on how the story depicts the intersectional oppressions of race, gender, and class in Rannie Toomer's life, this study aimed to critically analyse Alice Walker's short story "Strong Horse Tea" from a feminist and intersectional standpoint. The conversation has shown that Walker's story is more than just a straightforward account of personal tragedy, thanks to qualitative textual analysis influenced by ideas from feminist theory and the humanities of health. Rather, it is an in-depth analysis of the systemic disparities in health care, relationships, and education that influence the lives of marginalized Black women. According to the analysis, Renee's silence and lack of literacy are indicative of larger systemic issues rather than being the result of personal shortcomings. A society that disregards the most vulnerable is reflected in her incapacity to read mail carriers' circulars, her dependence on folk medicine, and her contempt for institutional figures. However, exhibits subdued forms of agency and resilience despite these conditions, which is in line with feminist interpretations that acknowledge the concept of black women facing marginalisation. She exhibits a character complex that defies simplistic interpretations of victimhood through her persistent attempts to get help, her confidence in Sarah's therapy, and even her last hushed farewell to her child. In the end, Strong Horse Tea is still a compelling and timely story. It serves as a reminder to readers that Rannie Toomer's hardships are not unique occurrences but rather are a part of America's greater history of black women's segregation and tolerance. This study highlights Walker's lasting significance and her contributions to African American women's literature by combining feminist, intersectional, and womanist approaches with a close reading of her text. The results inspire more research into her short stories and their capacity to shed light on neglected facets of social and cultural history. In addition to recovering an important narrative within Walker's body of work, this study's critical examination of Strong Horse Tea demonstrates the significance of reading literature as individual narratives collide with larger fights for justice, voice, and attention.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study is based exclusively on textual analysis of a published literary work and does not involve human participants, personal data, or confidential materials. As such, no ethical approval was required. The author has adhered to principles of academic integrity, proper citation, and responsible scholarship throughout the research and writing process.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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