

# Problems and Predicaments Faced by Women in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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## Abstract

Alice Malsenior Walker (February 9, 1944) is an African American author and feminist whose most famous novel, *The Color Purple*, focuses on the struggles of African-Americans, particularly African-American women, against societies that are racist, sexist, and often violent. Her most famous work, the award-winning and best-selling novel *The Color Purple*, chronicles the life of a poor and abused southern black woman who eventually triumphs over oppression through affirming female relationships. The novel depicts in an epistolary manner thirty years of struggle in the life of Celie, a poor southern black woman who is victimized physically and emotionally both by her stepfather and her husband, Albert. While in her teen ages, Celie is repeatedly raped by her stepfather who sold the two children she bore of him. Celie is eventually placed into a loveless marriage with Albert, a widower who for the next three decades subjects her to beatings and psychological torments. Celie writes letters describing her ordeal to God and to her sister, Nettie, who escapes a similar fate by serving as a missionary in Africa. At the end of the novel, she begins her journey from powerlessness to the state of full empowerment and from self-abnegation to self-recognition.

**Keywords:** oppression, marginalization, violence, sex, empowerment, identity, freedom.

*The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel written by Alice Walker, a famous contemporary African American writer. In this award-winning novel, Alice Walker is highly praised for her insightful and remarkable portraits of black people's life, especially for the experiences of black women in a sexist and racist society. *The Color Purple* has become a work representative of black communities in the United States. "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender"- Alice Walker. Womanism is a feminist term coined by Alice Walker.

Celie, the protagonist and narrator of *The Color Purple* is a poor, uneducated, fourteen year old black girl living in rural Georgia. Celie starts writing letters to God because her stepfather, Alphonso, beats and rapes her. Alphonso has already impregnated Celie once. Celie gave birth to a girl, whom her father stole and presumably killed in the woods. Celie has a second child, a boy, whom her father steals too. Celie's mother becomes seriously ill and dies. Alphonso brings home a new wife but continues to abuse Celie.

Celie and her bright, pretty younger sister, Nettie, learn that a man known only as Mr., a widower with four children, wants to marry Nettie. Mr. has a lover named Shug Avery, a blues singer whose photograph fascinates Celie.

Alphonso refuses to let Nettie marry, and instead offers Mr. the ugly Celie as a bride. Mr. eventually accepts the offer, and takes Celie into a difficult and joyless married life. Nettie runs away from Alphonso and takes refuge at Celie's house. Mr. still desires Nettie, and when he advances on her she flees for her own safety. Never hearing from Nettie again, Celie assumes she is dead. Mr.'s sister Kate feels sorry for Celie, and advises her about fighting "you got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself" (21). Harpo, Mr's son, falls in love with a large, spunky girl named Sofia. Shug Avery comes to town to sing at a local bar, but Celie is not allowed to go and see her. Sofia becomes pregnant and marries Harpo. Celie is amazed by Sofia's defiance in the face of Harpo's and Mr.'s attempts to treat Sofia as inferior. Harpo's attempts to beat Sofia into submission consistently fail, as Sofia is by far the physically stronger of the two.

Shug falls ill and Mr. takes her into his house. Shug is initially rude to Celie, but the two women become friends as Celie takes charge of nursing Shug. Celie finds herself infatuated with Shug and sexually attracted to her. Frustrated with Harpo's consistent attempts to subordinate her, Sofia moves out taking her children. Several months later, Harpo opens a juke joint where Shug sings nightly. Celie grows confused over her feelings towards Shug.

Shug decides to stay when she learns that Mr. beats Celie when Shug is away. Shug and Celie's relationship grows intimate. Sofia returns for a visit and promptly gets in a fight with Harpo's new girlfriend, Squeak. In town one day, the mayor's wife, Miss Millie, asks Sofia to work as her maid. Sofia answers with a sassy reply. When the mayor slaps Sofia for her insubordination, she returns the blow, knocking the mayor down. Sofia is sent to jail. Squeak's attempts to get Sofia freed are futile. Sofia is sentenced to work for twelve years as the mayor's maid.

Shug returns with a new husband, Grady. One night Shug asks Celie about her sister. Celie assumes Nettie is dead because she promised to write to Celie but never did. Shug says she has seen Mr. hideaway numerous mysterious letters that have arrived in the mail. Shug manages to get her hands on one of these letters, and they find it is from Nettie. Searching through Mr.'strunk, Celie and Shug find dozens of letters that Nettie has sent to Celie over the years. Overcome with emotion, Celie reads the letters in order, wondering how to keep herself from killing Mr.

The letters indicate that Nettie befriended a missionary couple, Samuel and Corrine, and travelled with them to Africa to do missionary work. Samuel and Corrine have two adopted children, Olivia and Adam. Nettie and Corrine become close friends, but Corrine noticing that her adopted children resemble Nettie, wonders if Nettie and Samuel have a secret past. Increasingly suspicious, Corrine tries to limit Nettie's role in her family. Nettie becomes disillusioned with her missionary experience, as she finds the Africans self-centered and obstinate. Corrine becomes ill with a fever. Nettie asks Samuel to tell how he adopted Olivia and Adam. Based on Samuel's story, Nettie realizes that the two children are actually Celie's biological children, alive after all. Nettie also learns that Alphonso is their stepfather, not their real father. Their real father was a storeowner whom white men lynched because they resented his success. Alphonso told Celie and Nettie he was their real father because he wanted to inherit the house and property that was once their mother.

Nettie confesses to Samuel and Corrine that she is in fact their children's biological aunt. The gravely ill Corrine refuses to believe Nettie, but reconciled just before her death. Meanwhile, Celie visits Alphonso, who confirms Nettie's story, admitting that he is only their stepfather. Celie begins to lose some of her faith in God, but Shug tries to get her to reimagining God in her own way, rather than in the traditional image of the old, bearded white man.

The mayor releases Sofia from her servitude six months early. At dinner one night, Celie finally releases her pent-up rage, angrily cursing Mr. for his years of abuse. Shug announces that she and Celie are moving to Tennessee, and Squeak decides to go with them. In Tennessee, Celie spends her time designing and sewing eventually turning her hobby into a business. Celie returns to Georgia for a visit, and finds that Mr. has reformed his ways and Alphonso has died. As Alphonso's house and land are now hers, she moves there.

Meanwhile, Nettie and Samuel marry and prepare to return to America. Before they leave, Samuel's son, Adam, marries Tashi, a native African girl. Following African tradition, Tashi undergoes the painful rituals of female circumcision and facial scarring. In solidarity, Adam undergoes the same facial scarring ritual. Celie and Mr. reconcile and begin to genuinely enjoy each other's company. Now independent financially, spiritually and emotionally, Celie is no longer bothered by Shug's passing flings with younger men. Sofia remarries Harpo and now works in Celie's clothing store. Nettie finally returns to America with Samuel and the children. Emotionally drained but exhilarated by the reunion with her sister, Celie notes that though she and Nettie are now old, she has never in her life felt younger.

*The Colour Purple* thoroughly focuses on the life of Celie, an African American woman who is struggling to develop her sense of selfhood. As a black woman growing up in the Deep South during the 1940's Celie has gone through many difficulties before she could establish herself as an independent woman. All through the story, Celie is presented at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. At the same time with being discriminated against by whites, she is also treated badly by black men like her stepfather and her husband. From the beginning, she is beaten and raped by the man she believes to be her father. She has two children with him but they are quickly taken away from her. After her second pregnancy, she is forced to marry Mr. an old widower with four unruly children. Her life as a wife, unfortunately, shows little difference from her childhood. She is valued only as a sex slave and a caretaker for Mr.'s family. She still has to endure the same kind of cruelty and maltreatment as the one that her stepfather had done to her before. It is obvious that Celie cannot enjoy the basic human rights of self-determination, freedom from violence, and ownership of her own body no matter where she is.

Throughout the story, Celie meets several other black women, who help and contribute to her discovery of selfhood. She survives all difficulties through her strong relationship with other four black women in her extended family Shug Avery, Nettie, Sofia, and Squeak. Each of them, in one way or another, gives Celie an inspiration and moral support to be successfully transformed from a frightened young girl to a successful business woman at the end. The representation of positive female characters in this novel is very powerful and forthright. Women defend their honor, family, and care

for the sick, needy and undeserving and work to ensure their family's livelihood and keep society from moral decay. With this portrayal of powerful female relationships, Walker's *The Color Purple* has eventually been recognized as one of the famous contemporary feminist tales.

Walker suggests through her novel another significant way in which black women can take to escape oppressions and express themselves through certain kinds of feminine activities, including letter writing, singing blues music and doing needle works. Since all these activities have long been seen as associated with women, they are somehow considered trivial and insignificant by most people. Nevertheless, Walker cleverly presents through her novel how these female activities can be seen as a private space in which black women freely use to express their feelings, their sense of intellectuality as well as their sense of creativity. This private space is actually black women's sanctuary, which heals their trauma and shelters them from the threat of racism and sexism.

In all the multiplicity of approaches one can take to understand the richness of Walker's text, this paper then chooses to focus on this remarkable theme of black women's liberation through feminine activities. It aims at discussing the way in which all the activities are used by black women as their means to escape from oppressions and how they all contribute to the liberation of black women in Walker's *The Color Purple*. The entire novel is determined, advanced and resolved through ninety letters written from Celie to God, from Nettie to Celie and finally from Celie to Nettie. The use of this epistolary form can be considered very effective in the novel as the way used by black women to express their feelings towards the oppressions over them.

