

## Exploring Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple' as a Feminist Masterpiece"

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### ABSTRACT

'The Color Purple' is referred to as a potent benchmark of modern American literature. The lives of Afro-American women living in early twentieth-century rural Georgia is depicted in this novel. It's the first woman-authored, epistolary novel of Afro-American lives. The novel personifies the womanist views of Walker without being deteriorated to a sheer stand for ideological rhetoric/dogma. The transformative power of female rapport and love is presented in the writing. Written in 1982, the novel won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for Fiction. The censors have frequently targeted and criticized the novel due to its content. Due to the explicitly of the contents, in terms of violence, sometimes it had appeared at number seventeenth on the American Library Association (ALA) list of the most 100 frequently challenged books of from 2000 to 2009. The book was listed as the "best loved novels" on the BBC's The Big Read poll of the UK in 2003. The language of novel resulted in ban all over the country due to its explicit content and violence. This paper will throw a light on feminist perspective of novel.

**Key words:** Modern American literature, epistolary novel, feminism, Feminist literature, Black feminism, African-American literature.

"استكشاف "اللون الأرجواني" لأليس ووكر باعتباره تحفة نسوية"

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## الملخص

يُشار إلى "اللون الأرجواني" على أنه معيار قوي للأدب الأمريكي الحديث. تم تصوير حياة النساء الأمريكيات من أصل أفريقي اللاتي يعشن في ريف جورجيا في أوائل القرن العشرين في هذه الرواية. إنها أول رواية رسائله من تأليف امرأة عن حياة الأمريكيات من أصل أفريقي. تجسد الرواية وجهات نظر ووكر النسوية دون أن تتدهور إلى موقف محض للبلاغة/العقيدة الأيديولوجية. يتم عرض القوة التحويلية للعلاقة والحب الأنثوي في الكتابة. كتبت الرواية عام ١٩٨٢، وفازت بجائزة بوليتزر للرواية عام ١٩٨٣ وجائزة الكتاب الوطني للرواية. كثيرا ما استهدفت الرقابة الرواية وانتقدتها بسبب محتواها. نظراً لصراحة المحتويات، فيما يتعلق بالعنف، فقد ظهر أحياناً في المرتبة السابعة عشرة في قائمة جمعية المكتبات الأمريكية (ALA) لأكثر ١٠٠ كتاب يتم تحديثها بشكل متكرر من عام ٢٠٠٠ إلى عام ٢٠٠٩. وقد تم إدراج الكتاب على أنه ""أفضل الروايات المحبوبة" في استطلاع The Big Read الذي أجرته هيئة الإذاعة البريطانية (BBC) في المملكة المتحدة عام ٢٠٠٣. أدت لغة الرواية إلى الحظر في جميع أنحاء البلاد بسبب محتواها الصريح والعنف. ستلقي هذه الورقة الضوء على المنظور النسوي للرواية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب الأمريكي الحديث، الرواية الرسائلية، النسوية، الأدب النسوي، النسوية السوداء، الأدب الأفريقي الأمريكي.

## Introduction:

Feminism is motivated and concerned to the experiences of women. It is a diverse collection of competing and often opposing social theories, political movements, and moral philosophies. Most feminists are especially concerned with inequality between 'man' and 'woman' on the basis of social, political, and economical aspects. Some have argued "man" and "woman" are gendered and sexed identities that are socially constructed.

Feminists have differing views on issues such as gender and sexual identities, how to achieve equality, and how far those identities should be questioned and criticised. This means that feminism does not represent all feminists with any political movement, ideology or philosophy. Feminism has a larger context. Women's liberation towards

emancipation is guided in a plural way in the way that feminist activists have guided the movements. Unlike Marxism or psychoanalysis, the movement of feminism has not been guided by one single person or body. Feminisms are diverse in different parts of the world and each fight of feminism contributes to our understanding of feminism. Feminism is different in different places and we cannot arrive at a definition for it. Feminism cannot be labelled as one whole. There is a difference between woman writers and feminist writers. Not all women writers are feminist writers.

Feminism is not the only one ideology. In time various sub-types of feminist ideology have developed. The term first-wave feminist is referred to Early and primary feminists, and feminists after 1960 are referred to as the second-wave feminists. The term feminism cannot be loosely associated with women-oriented writing. We have to locate certain theoretical approaches to help us in our understanding of feminism.

Feminist theory challenges many fundamental assumptions about gender, gender difference, and sexuality, including the concept of "woman" as a whole. Women's rights, interests, and issues are supported by most feminist social movements, including feminist philosophy, which recognizes the idea of "woman."

The issue of feminism has been a great influence in woman movements that mirrors women's rise for independence and equality with men. The literary works such as novels have often reflected the idea of feminism.

### **THE COLOR PURPLE:**

"The Color Purple" (1982) is the highly praised novel written by Alice Malsenior Walker, a "American author and activist." In 1982, Walker published her famous work, 'The Color Purple,' which earned her the "National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction." A young,

disturbed black woman struggles to find her way through a patriarchal black culture as well as racism in the white community

Feminism is shown in "The Color Purple" from a female point of view. Millions of people have been affected by Walker's most well-known work, which has transcended issues of gender, race, and homophobia. They say that The Color Purple is an example of a woman's novel because it is written by Alice Walker. In terms of narrative approach, themes, and voice, the book carries the work of women writers. As depicted in "The Color Purple," sexism and gender bias are depicted as a way to break free from oppression based on gender differences. As a result, it's critical to examine the novel's portrayal of black feminism through the eyes of its female protagonist. On the basis of the study, The idea of feminism is reflected by the female characters in the novel The novel covers six views and ideas of black feminism

- 1) "Liberty to break from the patriarchal ideology."
- 2) "Liberty to combat against male sexist oppressors."
- 3) "To obtain freedom by financial independence."
- 4) "To obtain freedom by the means of education."
- 5) "Liberty to engage in sisterhood" and
- 6) "Freedom to determine and choose individuals sexuality".

The female protagonists carry out a series of actions based on their thoughts and ideas of black feminism. Among the acts are –

- 1) To combat the stereotypical oppressors.
- 2) To engage in an occupational activity and work on it.
- 3) engagement towards education
- 4) To engage in sisterly bonding and
- 5) Involvement in lesbian relationships.

Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" attempts to achieve 'the ideals of freedom in full and equality between men and women with all aspects

such as economic, social, political, and sexual aspects, both in the household and public sectors welcomed' through the use of black feminism's beliefs and ideas. The primary goal of the female characters is to break the imposed patriarchy that inhibits women from achieving their full potential.

### **LETTERS– MOTIF:**

All of the novel's text is presented as a series of handwritten letters. Celie's letters to God and to her sister Nettie are a unique way for Celie to express her deepest desires through the written word. Because they are so intimate, she is able to transmit the feelings she want to share through them. These letters are the only way she can communicate her actual sentiments because she is a victim of abuse. Nettie's letters later offer her hope that she and her sister will be together once more.

Celie turns to God for help since she is utterly alone. She is enraged at God and writes to her sister about it because of her past and the people who have been harmed as a result of it. A query she asks God, "Why?" is met with silence. Forgiveness is shown in her final letter to everyone as well as God, indicating that her journey has completed a vast circle of development and maturation.

### **VIOLENCE AND RACISM IN THE NOVEL:**

The tale portrays the horror of domestic violence toward both children and wives. Celie and Sofia are the novel's two main protagonists in terms of violence. Childhood and marriage had an abusive effect on both of them. Sofia, who is a violent person, strives to protect her family from Sofia's abuse. Because of her stature and strength, she is able to stand up to her oppressor.

Furthermore, Celie is depicted as weak and meek towards the beginning of the novel. For the sake of protecting her mother and sister from Fonso's wrath, she succumbs to the incest that he has unleashed.

So she left Fonso and married Albert, a violent and abusive spouse who only sees her as a sex slave and a mother figure for their children. As a way of making himself seem more significant, Albert frequently beats Celie. 'He hit me today for the reason he say I winked at a boy in church. I might have stuck something in my eye but I didn't wink. I don't even glimpse at men.(5.1)'

As she imagines herself, she thinks she's ugly, unworthy of love, and incapable of having a good time. The timing couldn't be better for Celie. Shug breaks the mold of violence and cruelty. Sofia escapes domestic violence by fleeing Harpo. Throughout the book, Celie makes the claim that she faces racism because she is a black woman. Nettie dreads having to bring Olivia and Adam back to the United States, where they will face racism they have never faced. In Sofia's case, it's evident that racism is to blame. A smack from the mayor gets her out of jail, but when she surprises him, she's thrashed and thrown in jail. He knows better than to worry about being accused with rape because he is approached by Mary Agnes, who wants to know if the warden will release Sofia. When Eleanor Jane presents her baby boy to Sofia, Sofia says she cannot bless him since he would, like most white men, grow up to be her oppressor. Eleanor Jane's involvement caring for black Henrietta infuriates the white community. People of European descent believe she would debase herself if she were recruited by an African-American business. Walker's portrayal of racism in this novel demonstrates how difficult it is to overcome it, as depicted by Walker.

### **VARIOUS THEMES IN 'THE COLOR PURPLE':**

#### **1) Theme of Love:**

In "The Color Purple," the word "Love" is used to describe not only romantic love but also love among family members. The protagonist's first encounter with love is a sisterly affection for Nettie, her older sister. Her unselfish sacrifices show how much she cares for the well-being of

her sister. Selflessness, respect, and unconditional care are central to the novel's portrayal of love, which has nothing to do with gender, sexual orientation, or even marriage. No one in Celie's life has ever made her feel loved, and as a result, she is emotionally dead.

"Everyone compliments me on how excellent a father I am to the kids. I'll do my best for them. Then again, I don't have much empathy for them. Like patting a dog, Harpo responds to being patted on the back. Another piece of wood is being rubbed on. A table, a chifferobe, not a living tree. Whatever I do, people don't care for me, no matter how great I am. (17.10)

While Celie watches, Mr. professes his love for Shug. His love for Shug serves as a justification for him to treat everyone else in his life poorly at this time.

"Slowly, Mr. turns his head to see his daddy link. Then he says, "Really sad," since you don't have the capacity to comprehend what he's saying. Shug Avery is one of my favorite authors. It's always been that way, and it always will be. I should have wed her sooner rather than later. (27.11)

## **2) Theme of Race:**

Initially, the protagonist is depicted as someone who is under a great deal of oppression. She has no particular pride in her race as an African-American woman. Pre-Civil Rights South, surrounded by poor and illiterate blacks. In effect, in this book, black women are in frequent victims of violent crimes committed by white men. She gains pride in her ethnic heritage as soon as she learns about the rich cultures and civilizations that existed in Africa Nettie learns that the cruelty she experienced when as a child is simply the way of her father and Celie's husband. not how the world is and nor how the black folks are.

"People of color around the world want to know, Celie! What's your goal for this group? They aren't all nastier than you may think. Like Pa and

Albert, or as depleted as Ma was, both of them. Samuel and Corrine have a beautiful relationship. When they first got married, their sole regret was that they couldn't have kids. Then they claim that "God sent Olivia and Adam to them"(55.13).

### **3) Theme of Family:**

Being removed from everyone she knows has a profound effect on a sister's connection with a protagonist. Celie's sister and two children have been a part of her life for more than 30 years. During her time away from her birth family, the protagonist has developed deep friendships with other people. Family members are the ones that stand by you through good times and bad.

### **4) Theme of Sex:**

Celie's first encounter with sex was a traumatic one, as she was raped by her father when she was just fourteen years old. 'Never did he say anything nice to me. If your mother wouldn't allow it, just say so. He began by placing his belongings on my hip and wiggled them about a bit. Then he snatched my tits from my grasp. After that, he shoved his belongings inside my genitals. It's normal for me to cry when something hurts. The man began to choke me and said, "You best quiet up and get accustomed to it.(1.4)

The protagonist spends a significant portion of the novel considering sex to be a violent act. The uninspired commitment she has to her spouse as a result of the violence she has experienced. Until I met Shug, a truly remarkable woman. He believes that the state of "Virginity" is an emotional one rather than a physical one, as Shug explains. If you haven't had sex, you are still a virgin. In Shug's view, sex is a gift from God, and he encourages people to take advantage of it.

### **5) Theme of Sexuality and Sexual identity:**

It takes a while before the protagonist begins to explain that she avoids males because they make her afraid. Instead, she focuses her



attention on women. Women are the only ones who have ever shown her kindness. The protagonist's sexual identity becomes that of a woman who is in love with another woman. This work has already made the point that sexuality is about loving certain individuals, not about loving a certain sex in particular. The protagonist has a crush on a woman.

It's difficult for Celie to decide whether or not her feelings for Shug are appropriate in her life. To some extent, Celie believes that having feelings for someone of the other gender is both normal and healthy. On the other hand, she can't deny her love for Shug and is envious of Mr. Smith. \_He had a thing for Shug. Shug is so adorable. Shug, on the other hand, is only interested in one of us or him. But that the way it spouse to be. I know that but if that so why my heart hurt me so?"(33.24)

She is apprehensive about guys. Celie's sole male acquaintance is her father, and he abuses her and lies to her mother. This is the first sign that Celie isn't interested in men. Celie eventually blames her father, Pa, for her mother's death.

"After accusing me of winking at a boy in church, he beat me up today. However, I didn't wink at the camera. The reason why I'm not afraid of ladies is because I'm not afraid of them. Because my mother curses at me, you could assume I'm enraged with her. But that's not me. My heart went out to Mama. It killed her trying to trust what he said".(5.1)

#### **6) Theme of Sexism and Racism:**

Throughout the story, misogyny and racism are significant themes, reflecting the societal conditions in which the novel takes place. For Celie, as the protagonist and narrator, it appears to be an internalized oppression. She encouraged Harpo to beat Sofia after witnessing his brutal treatment of her by Mr. Celie, on the other hand, just advised Harpo to do so because she was jealous of Sofia's strong-mindedness

and assertiveness. Celie also begins to gain the strength to reject Mr's violent approaches in the second half of the novel.

For rejecting the white mayor's wife's offer to be her maid Sofia was imprisoned and violently beaten. This is seen as racism. Nettie, in her letter, also reflects the stereotypical racism held towards African counterparts by American Blacks .

### **7) Women and femininity:**

Since Harpo and Mr. believe that women have neither free will or legal rights of their own, they treat women like children. "Ast., Harpo. Why are you so resolute? Then why do you have to be his wife? In my opinion, no one is to blame for that. His methods of punishment were no different than those used on the youngsters he abused. Except that he hasn't beaten them in a long time. He say, Celie, git the belt. Outside the room, youngsters may be seen peering in through the crevices. To keep from crying, I'm doing my best to hold back my tears. The wood I use is my own. 'Celie, you're a tree,' I tell myself. That's how I know that trees are afraid of man."(1.3-1.4).

### **FEMINIST THEMES:**

There are many feminist themes we can find in 'The Color Purple', like female body as a source of creativity, education, silence, self and other, also the vulnerability of the female body. Celie is raped by her father over a span of couple of year and this trope of the vulnerability of the female body is used constantly by many feminist scholars such as Helene Cixous, Elaine Showalter, Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir etc.. We can see in this novel that, Celie is doubly marginalised because she is black and a woman, and as Spivak rightly said that "feminism is different for blacks as they are part of the Third world."

### **1) Education:**

As in the novel ‘The Color Purple’, Celie is an uneducated, black girl, if she were educated she would have been able to raise her voice and known the difference between what is good and what is bad? Therefore Mary Wollstonecraft rightly says in her essay ‘A Vindication of The Rights of Women’, “The most perfect education, in my opinion, is the application of knowledge in a method that is most likely to strengthen the body and form the heart—that is, to help an individual to develop virtue habits that will enable him or her to be self-sufficient.”

She also said that why women are expected to be virtuous? If the domain is the same of God then virtuosity (Both moral and sexual) must not be limited only to women but must be a trait of men as well. Therefore Wollstonecraft justifies the demand for educating women by saying women need to educate and their children too that will be the future. She also talks about how equal opportunities in terms of being a human being are not granted to women. If we’re all created by God (one entity) then we must be equal and women cannot be and must not be secondary. This comes up later in Simone de Beauvoir and in Judith Butler when they speak of Gender performativity. She also says, if a woman has been taught nothing beyond being a wife, then how will a widow go on with her life. How can women stand independently without education? Therefore education is needed.

## **2) Self and Other:**

In ‘The Color Purple’ I noticed that Walker talks about Self v/s other. In this novel we can realize that self is husband and other is Celie. The same we found in Simone de Beauvoir’s ‘The Second Sex’, where she talks of the binary of self v/s other and how it is detrimental to the understanding of women. Women as the other to the self which is men. Spivak also talks about the binary of self and other in her essay ‘French Feminism in an International Frame’. She talks of how the self inevitably imposes his or her own understanding on the other just as Kristeva

imposes her own experiences and understanding on the Chinese woman and the Chinese woman are not portrayed with all their subtleties.

### **3) Body:**

I have also observed that Walker is also talking about body. Celie's father is attracted towards her body and has raped her. This concept of female body we can see in many theories or short stories that we studied like, Simone de Beauvoir in 'The Second Sex' said that, "The body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of project". Helene Cixous also talks about the body in her essay, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' "A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter". Also Katherine Mansfield talks in "Bliss", *Why be given body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?* Ismat Chughtai also talks about it in 'Lihaaf'. She said that the female body is a ground for discourses and a site for contestation and the female body is a site for celebration and site for creativity. She also talks about vulnerability of female body and why is woman the other? Women are spoken of in terms of a lack, because of the lack they considered to be weak, fragile and more prone to hysteria. We can also see male gaze in the novel. This same kind of characteristics we have seen in the movie, "Malena", ie camera, male gaze, objectification as contrasted with freedom or independence. Ismat Chughtai in 'Chauthika Jaura' also talks about marriage, femininity, violence of the female body. Cixous also talks in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' about materiality of the body. The body as an involved entity is seen. Body that creates and thing that is created is important. The material must show expression, ideas, and emotions etc. of the female body. I also found violation of woman body in Mahasveta Devi's Draupadi and The Hunt. The body in its different forms. The body is

spoken of as a land taken by the feudal. Violation of the land in terms of violation of the female body is seen in the novel. The larger metaphor of the first world (Senanayak and other authorities) and third world (Dopadi and her community). In 'The Hunt' also, the body is a prominent metaphor. Mary uses her body to make a living. She knows what she is worth. She is absolutely in control of her life. In this story, Mary warns women to be more careful. Women must be aware of their rights.

#### **4) Silence:**

Silence is another important notable trope in the novel. Celie being a silent and her father raped her again, but at the end she becomes an independent woman and can stand for herself with the help of Shug. This silencing is found in many essays and short stories that we have studied. Showalter says silence itself can be creative discourse to question age-old traditions. Silencing of women writing, silencing is all around. To trace the history of silencing is to trace the history of woman. In Ismatchugtai's Chauthikajaura' I noticed that the mother is silent about the marriage proposal, elder daughter is silent about the marriage and sister is silent about the advances of the man towards her. I found that silence as a trope in all four short stories ie, ChauthiKaJaura, Lihaaf, Her Mother and My Beloved Charioteer. Different levels of silencing, self imposed silence, silencing through social conventions, silencing in the family set up, silencing of sexuality. We have also seen silencing in the movie 'Devi'.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

Thus, the story of two women in love with one man is presented in "The Color Purple. The character of Shug is a transforming force in Celie's life. Shug is a dynamic singer whose real name is Lillie but is called Shug. Walker knows very finely that she was writing a story of two women who marry to the same man. Celie and Shug's love for each

other complete the love triangle in all its symmetry. In the relationship between Celie and Shug womanist consciousness is seen evidently.

A text can be read in multiple ways. And as a reader I have the liberty to interpret the text the way I want. 'The Color Purple' by Alice Walker can be understood at different levels as it is rich with meanings and several influences. So I have tried to highlight the feminist issues in the text and read it in light of Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of The Rights of women', Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex', Helene Cixous 'The laugh of the Medusa', Gayatri Spivak's 'French feminism in an International Frame', Elaine Showalter's 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness'.

Thus, the novel 'The Color Purple' has exquisite examples womanist consciousness that enabled Celie to chronicle black women's journey to self-recognition

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