Beyond the Barricade of Color:
Reclaiming the Feminine Identity in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple

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The African American literary discourses have been dominated by the male writers. Similar to white literature, Afro-American women had only a marginal position in the creation of their writing. Virginia Woolf, a world renowned feminist, writes about the relationship between woman and fiction in A Room Of One's Own: “Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history “(66). This practical exclusion of female writers from the literary process has provoked the emergence of an Afro-American feminist literature by the pen of writers such as Nella Larsen, Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison, just to name a few.

Feminism became too bourgeois, middle-class and academic in the late twentieth century. The movement often excluded participation, life and concerns of ordinary women of lower classes, especially black women. Walker thought it important to involve these silenced women in feminist movement. So, to show distinction between the high feminism and that she wanted to develop, she introduced her own term to denominate a black feminist or ‘feminist of color’ who possesses strength and persistence for personal development. She has described herself as a ‘womanist’ rather than a black feminist, defining the word ‘womanist’ as being "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (“ In Search . . . ” 5, XI). Alice Walker mentions in the same work: "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival of whole of my people. I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women"(5, 250). All her writings reveal womanist features.

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The Color Purple is also an expression of Walker’s coined term ‘womanist,’ which she invented, as literary critic Janet J. Montefaro explains, “from her necessity to inscribe a place for women of color within a feminist culture that she finds overwhelmingly white and middle class” (12). The term, referring to a black feminist or ‘feminist of color,’ not only affirms the need for women to participate in cultural dialogue, but also deepens the dialogue beyond Western feminist thought to embody the richness of heritage belonging to women of color. A womanist appreciates bonds between women and prefers women’s culture, emotions, strength, flexibility and maternity.

The Color Purple by Alice Walker is one of such literary works that depict the coming of age of a black woman in a hostile and suppressive environment. This novel is narrated through the letters that Walker’s heroine Celie writes to, and receives from, her sister Nettie. The novel begins with a threat that is directed at a fourteen-year old Celie: “You better not never tell nobody but God. I’d kill your mammy“(1). Since Celie is forbidden to speak to anybody, her letters are addressed to God as her only confidant. She is caught in a system of patriarchal control that makes resistance difficult. In her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Helene Cixous states, “writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (879) that finds its roots in the maternal desire for a return to the mother’s breast — ‘white ink’. Using her writing and her language as the impetuses, Walker and her female protagonist develops individual techniques of resistance towards the power that gets inflicted upon her. Walker succeeds in producing a discourse that resists both gender and racial stereotypes.

As a womanist text and epistolary novel, The Color Purple illuminates a black woman’s journey to reclaim her identity through the use of poetic language. Driven by the desire to reclaim her maternal bond, both with her mother and with her own children that has been denied her by the white and male-dominated society in which she was raised, Walker’s main character, Celie, through poetic language, simultaneously deconstructs the
patriarchal identity that has been imposed upon her and rewrites her identity to embrace her own, creative self; this essential identity finds completion through Celie’s acceptance of a renewed image of God.

The female characters, or more appropriately, the colored women in Alice’s *The Color Purple* show their destiny in relation to men, society, white people, financial freedom, sexual freedom, and identity. They are symbolic representation of the world of women in pain under the patriarchal subjugation and repression in a colored segment of society which bears the stamp of male domination and patriarchy. It is about being a woman and that too black, living in the frame of male civilization, racist and sexist by definition, being subject to all possible forms of oppression. As Walker writes in her essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” a black woman is “the mule of the world, because (she has) been handed the burdens that everyone else—everyone else—refused to carry” (5, 237).

The novel tells a story of Celie, a barely educated black woman, who is raped by her stepfather and then married off to Mr.____, who needs a good worker on his farm. Threatened by her stepfather after he rapes her: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (1), she starts writing letters to God. She is stigmatized from birth for being born in a poor family. She loses her father. Her mother is bogged down in bed giving birth to multiple children in dirt and squalor and she cannot turn her mind on anything else. These ill-fated midnight’s children become part of Celie’s responsibilities. She herself is deprived of family love, care, attention and the food for the healthy growth of any child. Her worst curse is being a nigger child in a black family where love and care are far away cries especially if she is darkest of the lot and not fortunate to be a good daughter, and under the conspiracy of a step-father. She is totally alone. After her children by her stepfather have been taken away and her sister Nettie has been forced to leave. However eventually, she develops a community, an extended family, including Shug, her husband's mistress who becomes her close friend, and others. She overcomes oppression, maintains her independence through creativity and love. In the end, Nettie and Celie's children come back home and celebrate their happy reunion. Celie is the representative of several women
as found not only in Afro-American literature but also in literature of all other climes and she pictures the naked truth of uncountable oppressed women in several uncivilized societies. Her picture represents not merely a particular territory but is a universal story of all the oppressed women of the world. Celie’s religion is that of a black one, where she is in direct communion with God. God is her very own, her father, her mother, best friend and most importantly her confidante. She feels safe in the haven of God who appears to her as white-skinned. Maimed physically through rape, scarred psychologically through inhuman and beastly treatment, Celie has no one in her life except her sister and friend, Nettie and perhaps also God in whom she can confide and disclose all her emotions. The whole body of the novel's text consists of Celie's letters to God, then to her sister Nettie, and of Nettie's letters to Celie.

Celie’s faith in God undergoes a number of changes as the novel progresses. She realizes that the God she needs is not the one she originally envisages. It is significant that she sees him as white and old like some white man. All the angels are white, too and she comes to realize that this God is useless to her. Nettie's letters begin to show her that Jesus was more like her than a white man with hair like lamb's wool, not white at all. She has been conditioned in her belief by the illustrations in the white interpretations of the bible. Her changing perceptions of God are completed by Shug Avery's unconventional interpretations of God and His purpose. Shug rejects the narrow Church and its false perceptions. He and later Celie admire the natural world and its beauty, in all its richness and variety, including sexuality. In fact there is a strong similarity between sexual satisfaction and worship. Celie comments later in the novel that she and God can also make love just fine. Celie accepts this interpretation as part of her general emancipation and it liberates her as much as her sexual fulfilment with Shug and her economic success both do. By the end of the novel she has found a much more open and relaxed attitude to religious belief and a purpose in her life which was not provided by the narrow faith in the church.

Nettie's religious experience is different to Celie's, being more conventional in the missionary setting in Africa, but she too arrives at a more relaxed and tolerant outlook as the novel ends. Her experiences with the Olinka tribe are educational in that they show her
and Samuel that the conventions of organized religions are often restricting, not liberating as they are meant to be that the message of the Gospel has to be in harmony with the people receiving it. She decorates her hut with native artifacts rather than the stereotypical images of the missionary Jesus and saints. She ends up with a more spiritual and personal relationship with God as a result of her time in Africa, and like her sister comes to realize that the narrowness of conventional belief and practice closes rather than opens the way to a personal contact with the Almighty. Both the sisters complete a personal journey towards a deeper knowledge of God as the novel ends.

One of the major aspects of the novel is that Walker employs a narrative technique of epistolary novel for the story. First, it allows an uneducated, black southern woman to speak for herself. Writing her letters becomes for Celie a means of structuring her identity, her sense of self and others. Celie's letters, her growing ability to express her thoughts and feelings show her spiritual development, mark the way she goes to her independence. As Mae G. Henderson says, “she draw[s] on a form which places her work in a tradition associated with women, allows a feminine narrative voice, and establishes a bond and intimacy between women” (68). Because women had historically been denied artistic expression through popular and commercial print media, they resorted to writing letters between themselves as a release for their repressed creativity. The private, intimate nature of letter writing permits Celie, the novel’s protagonist and author of its letters, to script freely and honestly out of raw emotion and to put into words her conscious and subconscious thoughts, thereby offering to her readers her history through her eyes.

*The Color Purple* presents a socio-historical picture of twentieth-century rural South. Walker shows that racism informs all aspects of black life in the South. All Nettie's experiences as a missionary in West Africa cover a large part of the novel. Initially she is excited at the prospect of returning to her roots in order to convert her ethnic brothers and sisters. A series of disappointments and disillusionments follow, as she realizes that they are uninterested in slavery, the black experience in America, or really in the religion which the missionaries have brought them. Paradoxically, Corinne, Samuel and Nettie are alien outsiders among their own original people. There is no racial unity between the three of
them and the Olinkas despite the color of their skins and their common heritage. Olinka society is at first fascinating and alluring but as the time progresses; Nettie begins to realize that it has deeply disturbing customs. Women are treated abominably, not allowed education or independence and are under the protection of men. This protection is no better than dominance and subservience. Nettie, like many of the women in Georgia is not accepted by the men of the Olinka because they mistrust her independence and spirit. The practice of female circumcision and facial scarring is also revolting to Nettie, who regards it as degrading but understands it to be a custom which enables the Olinka to cling on to its tribal identity in a changing world. It is a barbaric custom and Nettie feels helpless to influence the tribe or to help the victims.

Alice Walker gives a sad portrait of a dying lifestyle and a primitive civilization left unrecognized. There is a strong sense of outrage that people are driven out of their rightful homes for foreign (white) economic gain, forced to pay for the privilege of living in corrugated huts and becoming prey to disease because their yam crops are destroyed. Ultimately Samuel and Nettie are forced to leave and return to America. The link between the people in Georgia and the Africans is that both are victims of white oppression, but tragically, despite their common heritage, they can be of no help to one another. The people of the Olinka tribe are exploited by the white traders who drive their roads into the interior obliterating ancient settlements and destroying lifestyles which have lasted for centuries.

A sense of racial tension runs through every page of the novel alongside the feminist issues. Celie is the daughter of a successful Negro store owner, ruled by white men for no other reason than his financial success. All the characters in Celie's family and the extended family she comes into contact with through Shug and her husband's children are the poor exploited blacks of the American South. They are almost exclusively ill educated, badly housed, and unable to travel or to better themselves. The exceptions to the rule, Nettie's benefactors, Samuel and Corinne, are unable to progress in their homeland, having to travel to Africa to be successful as missionaries. Paradoxically, of course, they are not taken seriously by the Olinka people who they set out to evangelize and save, being
regarded by them in the same way as they see white men—interfering and useless. They are treated with suspicion and unease by the white church elders when they return to Europe.

There is obviously a huge inequality in terms of education. Nettie and Celie go to school but only while they are not needed for domestic toil. As soon as Celie is married, her education stops. Nettie's is carried on as a result of her sister's sacrifice. Most of the characters live in substandard housing, segregated from the white population. They have their own cemetery; church; school and have to wait in line in stores until whites are served. It is common for white residents to treat Negroes as though they were animals. Deeply offensive things are said and done to them. The few characters in the story who manage to change their fortunes only serve to emphasize the plight of the rest. Shug Avery is a successful blues singer with a life of comparative luxury, able to travel and earn money. Nettie is lucky to be fostered by Samuel and Corinne and with their help achieves a career and education, but the majority of the people have to struggle to survive from day to day, trapped by poverty and ignorance.

Even the poorest of the whites consider themselves superior to any black, no matter how successful. The story of Sofia is the main episode in the novel which illustrates the hazards of being black in Georgia in the thirties and later. Sofia is spirited and strong, assertive and independent and yet she is reduced to total helplessness when she dares to answer back to the mayor's wife, a spineless creature who is herself as weak as Sofia is strong. Sofia refuses to be patronized. She makes the mistake of looking different, driving in a car, an unusual thing in those days for anyone, let alone a black woman. The beating she receives is out of all proportion to the offence she committed but the white ruling class shows no mercy to a socially inferior nigger. The fact that all of her friends accept what has happened to her shows the extent of the madness of the society of the time. They are able to save her from the prison sentence by a trick, but it does not condone the fact that there was no justification at all for the severity of what was done to her in the first place, or the ten years domestic service she endures being ordered about and patronized every single day. The incident of the Christmas visit home shows how ignorant the whites really are, since Miss Millie has no idea that she is being unfair when she insists on being driven
home. Slavery in fact was abolished after the Civil war but it lived on in all but name for almost a century.

The effects of a culture dominated by a white racist patriarchy make itself most felt in relationships between blacks, especially in a family. Walker focuses much attention on the ways in which black men brutalize their women. Young women are sexual objects: Celie's body is raped by "Pa", and her spirit, by Mr.______. Nettie must be clever and work hard to escape Cellie's bad fortune. Sofia notes that "(a) girl child ain't safe in a family of men"(1, 38). Also, Walker argues, the sexual and economic oppression of black women by black men is tightly linked. "Pa" robs his wife and her daughters of their inheritance. One of "Pa"'s selling points when he marries Celie off is that Celie "can work like a man"(1,18), and later in the novel Celie is seen to be the only one working hard on the farm. In her essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Walker suggests the universality of oppression:

The African male order, just like its American counterpart, denies the validity of female expression; girl children are not permitted to participate in the education provided by the missionaries, and they are considered the property of first their fathers and then their husbands. As a sign of their entry into womanhood, they undergo a ritual of scarification, which literally marks their role in society (10, 62).

Walker transforms Celie's individual story into an allegory of the black southern struggle for spiritual liberation and for reconciliation to a homeland. The novel's long middle section parallels the black community's lengthy sojourn in the region imposed upon them by slave owners and continued in the twentieth century by oppressive institutions such as sharecropping. Celie's eventual move to Memphis symbolically marks the black community's twentieth century migration to the North with the emphasis both on the economic liberation the North provides through her folkpants business, as well as the threat it presents to black cultural identity in attempts to change Celie's dialect, etc. Finally,
Celie's return to the South through her successful business and attainment of a home represents Walker's argument for black reclamation of a Southern homeland.

At the early stages of her story, Celie is devoid of identity; she is nobody, as Mr._____ puts it: "Who you think you is? You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all"(1, 204). Celie is totally incapable of defining herself. She sees herself, both physically and emotionally, "as living in irreconcilable fragments"(9, 164). She begins her narrative by writing, ‘I am’ which she then negates by crossing out, indicating her lack of self-confidence and self-acceptance. All her life is a series of sacrifices—to Pa's desires, to Nettie's safety, to Mr.____’s brutality. She has been torn into pieces; torn from childhood by Pa's rapes, torn from her children, torn from Nettie. She can identify nothing of her own self; she does not feel she belongs in this world. As Linda Tate asserts the key to Celie’s self-transformation "lies in the ability to take control over defining oneself, naming oneself" (7, 131).

Celie moves toward her own self-acceptance and self-definition on the day she announces that she will leave Mr. ____ to live with Shug in Memphis. She states, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook But I'm here"(1, 205). Later, in a letter to Nettie from Memphis, Celie clearly articulates a new and more positive vision of herself: "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children"(1, 213). And although Celie has never signed her letters before, she does so now emphatically, defining her new identity through her family relationships, her business, her love, her new place in the world. Financially crushed by Mr. Albert very so often, Celie earned financial freedom, by making comfortable ladies pants from any range of light to heavy work and ultimately becoming a name in the common households. She also feels jubilant and liberated, with conquering the soul of Albert’s and making him a bit humane and introspective about his past actions. He ultimately settles with friendship with Celie and even thinks of sharing a man-woman relationship with her. Sophia, the daughter-in-law of Sophia becomes a source of undaunted strength and pillar to Celie and Squeak, which leads them to their development.

The rural South to Memphis opens up a totally new world for Celie: she meets new people,
succeeds in business, and in general has increased access to the larger world. Her Memphis life represents for her not only liberation, but a new level of self-awareness and self-acceptance. She takes a crucial step in developing her concept of self through her business, her love for Shug, her dreams about her own home, visualizing new spaces — physical and spiritual— for herself"(7, 123). Yet, in Memphis her attempts at self-definition and self-acceptance are not fully realized. The North (Memphis) represents for Celie not only liberation but potential loss of identity as well. Thus, her employee, Darlene, tries to improve Celie's dialect, to make a more refined, which means, different, person out of her. However, she is different from what she used to be before she left for Memphis. When she visits Sofia and Harpo, she writes: "I feel different. Look different"(1, 215). Significantly, when she passes Mr____ sitting on his porch, he does not recognize this new Celie: "I pass Mr____ house and him sitting on the porch and he didn't even know who I was" (1,215). Her place at a time "like it round Easter" (1,174) designates renewal, rebirth, and redemption for Celie. She is happy to have a home of her own. She writes to Nettie, "I can't get over having a house I run from one room to another like I'm crazy. Look at this, I say to Shug. Look at that! She look, she grin You doin' all right, Miss Celie, she say. God know where you live"(1,243).

Shug brought in Celie learns the art of psychological freedom through Shug Avery. Retreating few steps back, the long lost letters of Nettie, which Celie thought to be no more as it contained the information of Nettie, and Celie’s only source of strength, warmth, love and inspiration to live her life were really not lost but kept away from Celie by her husband, Mr.____. To Celie the letters were her life-blood which enabled her to live and walk the path of her life alone. The letters acted as a touch stone for all her pains, miseries and sufferings. But it was Shug Avery who helped to unlock the letters hidden in the chest of Mr.____. Shug transformed Celie from the hellish life to the fresh lease of life, as it clearly pronounced that her dear sister was alive in a far away land and is doing well with the missionaries and is to return soon to her native land and meet her. The letters were written despite the fact that Celie was unaware even of her sister’s being to her sister through these letters. After discovering the letters it seemed that Celie identified herself
through her long lost voice by signing in the next series of letters while writing to Nettie from then onwards. She was gradually removing the shackles of her life. A person not even having the liberty to be master of her own body, and dispossessed from her own self, ultimately wins freedom by discovering herself.

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The women characters in the novel—Celie, Nettie, Shug, Sofia, Mary Agnes become involved in a close sisterhood. In fact, Celie's development into a strong and independent person becomes possible because of this sisterhood. Three women—Nettie, Sofia, and Shug particularly go beyond strict southern definitions of Black womanhood. Nettie's education allows her to escape into the larger world, to become a missionary. "Stout and bouncy" (1, 81) Sofia demonstrates "feisty refusal to be controlled by anyone—by whites, regardless of sex, or by men, regardless of race" (8,317). In her relationships with Harpo, her husband, she boldly transcends gender boundaries: she works in the field while Harpo takes care of the domestic chores. They are quite happy until Harpo's socially determined desire to dominate Sofia first causes them to fight "like two mens" (1, 36), and then leads to their long separation. By the end of the novel, however, Harpo and Sofia make their peace, fully accepting each other, regardless of gender conventions.

The characteristic feature of the female characters of Walker’s women is that they know to bear pain, sorrow, burden to an indefinite extent and have patience enough to bear every storm in their life. Some are big-hearted and self-righteous. Some are forbearing and compassionate even to the people (men) who undermine and debase them. Some are unquestioning and unwearied. They know that God is their very own and is within them. Walker’s female characters become supple with passage of time and gradually come to win over their misfortune and to their wonder and to that of the readers they liberate themselves in their own ways.

The main theme of the novel is triumph of good over evil that is the first indication of oppression followed by liberation. Interestingly the novel sailed through, “…..oppressed Afro-American slaves moved from object to subject, from silence into
speech” as is put by Kevin Patrick Mahoney (Web. 2012). Journeying through the novel, one finds there is a sort of inter-connectivity between the characters, where the black woman influences each black woman and they attain liberty through them also. In an interview with Charles Whitaker, Alice Walker said, “The story of Celie, is a simple Southern woman—abused first by her father and then by the man to whom her father eventually marries her off—whose confidence and self-awareness are awakened under the guidance of a free spirited cabaret singer, Shug Avery” (Web. 2012). Again it is this Shug who proves a turning stone for the submissive Mary Agnes to gain her self identity through music. A single free-spirited woman paints colourfully the colourless lives of Celie and Squeak. Walker renders heroism to the lives of the novel’s women, their ability to survive, to triumph over oppression and hardship. The bonding between the black women especially as depicted in the novel, between Celie and Nettie, Sophia and Celie and Squeak, and Celie and Shug Avery, speak a great deal about the liberating possibilities of the bonds between black women and the women characters can be real example who provide warmth in the lives of other women and is a constant urge of liberation from oppression. Jeannine Thyreen believes that Shug provides Celie with a safe and nurturing space in which she can “re(claim) her physical body and sexuality for herself rather than to view them as something taken by others. This (re)claiming of her body leads also to the (re)claiming of the Spirit within her” (57). She encourages Celie to explore her feminine sexuality through both masturbation and a lesbian relationship with her, thereby aiding Celie in the recognition and embracing of her desire, the prerequisites for her process of reconciling with the symbolic world. “Only time I feel something stirring down there is when I think bout Shug” Celie confesses, (69); Shug awakens desire within Celie, most importantly the desire to express her desire, and her masculine identity begins to break down.

Shug reunites, metaphorically, the bond between Celie and her sister, and returns to her a more accurate understanding of her relationship with both Mr. _____ and Nettie; after reading the first few letters, Celie, in conversation with Shug, refers to Mr. _____ by his first name Albert for the first time, a confession of her shedding of a masculine identity. Nettie’s letters also reveal, “Pa is not our Pa!” (182), thereby undermining the hierarchy
that Pa has constructed in order to retain governance over Celie. The knowledge of her true familial history releases Celie from Pa’s lies, therefore restoring and strengthening the bond between Celie and her deceased mother. Moreover, through Nettie’s letters, Celie’s motherhood is restored through the discovery that her children are still alive; Celie thus regains both maternal bonds that were thought to have been lost. Through Shug, Celie is able to deconstruct the masculine-erected story of her past and reconstruct it as her own story, a story that redeems and resurrects the female figures that have been marginalized.

Like Shug, the motherless and childless Celie must, “git man off [her] eyeball, before [she] can see anything a’ tall” (204). “But this is hard work,” she writes, “He been there so long, he don’t want to budge. He threaten lightening, floods and earthquakes. Us fight” (204). Despite Celie’s insistence that she “hardly pray at all now” (204), she closes her letter addressed to Nettie for the first time with ‘Amen’. Her struggle to cast off her masculine view of God mirrors her struggle to shed her masculine identity, but her closing affirmative remark implies that Celie has entered into a process of reconciliation between lingual genders.

A sign of Celie’s reconciliation of her feminine identity with masculinity begins to display itself when, “for the first time in [her] life [she] wanted to see Pa” (184). The fear of patriarchy that once possessed Celie’s self has vanished, and, as Jeannine Thyreen points out, “this trip symbolically takes place on a Sunday around Easter; the spiritual empowerment being fostered in her (largely by Shug) reflects what Easter represents: rebirth, redemption, resurrection, and new life” (61).

Masculine history ultimately dies with Pa’s death, an event that liberates Celie’s maternal bonds and allows her to fully settle into her renewed feminine identity. Upon Alphonso’s death, Celie discovers that the house in which she grew up in belongs to her, for it was left to her and Nettie upon her mother’s death. Thus, Celie’s acquisition of the house reinstates her link to her mother and displaces Alphonso from the history of the house and Celie’s history. As Alphonso is now declared homeless, Celie now finds herself home, both physically and metaphorically. The house as a structure supplies Celie with a
place to welcome Nettie and her children when they return from Africa. Figuratively, the home represents Celie’s reclamation of her past and of her maternal bond, and she is now “home” in her identity. With firm foundations established, Celie can reconcile her relationship with Mr._____ , who visits her at her house, and, accordingly, with patriarchy.

Celie’s recognition of God as both desire and symbol celebrates the shift she makes in viewing herself in a feminine identity, and allows Celie to finally love herself unabashedly. For Celie to recognize desire in God that mirror her own liberates her imagination and grants her the ability to envision herself as she would like. Celie’s ultimate return to the maternal— her renewed story of her mother, the knowledge that her children are alive, and, essentially, a view of God that embodies feminine qualities— births Celie into the courageous, wild, and loving womanist. No longer a shadow in the light, she has rejoined the community of men and women; she has found herself, her own place in the great chain of being and is able to marvel at the creation, at life itself.

*The Color People* deals with the struggle, both in Africa and America, of women to gain recognition as individuals who deserve fair and equal treatment. Male dominance is the norm in both countries. It takes various forms, not least of which is sexual aggression. The novel thus focuses on the theme of double repression of the black woman in the American experience. Walker contends that the black women suffer from discrimination by the white community and from a second repression from black males, who impose the double standard of white society on women. In the very first letter, Celie tells of the abuse she suffers at the hands of the man she believes for a long time is her father. Mary Agnes is raped by the white uncle whom she approaches for help to get Sofia out of prison and Albert also tries to force Nettie to submit to him before she leaves the house after fighting him off.

Celie's sexual encounters with her husband, Mr._____ are sordid and unloving. Physical violence also seems to be a common occurrence, even in relationships which are quite loving, like that between Harpo and his wife Sofia. He beats her because he believes that it is a respectable thing for a man to dominate his wife. Women are exploited very
seriously, especially Celie, who is married off to Albert to look after his children and is expected to work on the farm and submit without objection to all of Albert's demands and those of the children. She is also meant to accept Albert's affair with Shug Avery, which extends even to him sleeping with her under the same roof. In fact fidelity is not seen as an important quality by men, although the same behaviour in females is cause for comment. Notice how the preacher attacks Shug by implication because of her loose lifestyle, but men are allowed to behave as they wish.

The novel's message is that women must stand up against the unfair treatment they receive at the hands of men and that they must do this by helping one another. The women in the novel, even those who have interests in the same men, nevertheless band together to support and sustain one another throughout the novel. The bond of sisterhood is important, both literally in the persons of Nettie and Celie, Sofia and Odessa and metaphorically in the persons of Mary Agnes and Sofia, Albert's sister and Celie, Tashi and Olivia and of course Shug Avery and Celie, who embody the twin roles of sisters and lovers in their relationship.

Some of the women in the novel have learned to fight for themselves. Sofia is powerful and physically strong. She is not subservient and has great strength of character as well. She can and does fight for what she wants, but of course her aggression results in her dreadful experience at the hands of the police after she dares to talk back to the white mayor, and her subsequent sentence to drudgery as the mayor's servant lasts for many years. The bond between her and Mary Agnes is stronger than their mutual claim on Harpo's affections. Mary Agnes endures rape for Sofia's sake in order to get her released from prison, and when Mary Agnes goes off to be a singer it is Sofia who looks after her child.

The most liberated of the women in the novel is Shug Avery, although she also suffers verbal attack from the church elders because of her lifestyle. Her career as a blues' singer enables her to experience much more freedom than the other women whose lives are bound by home, work and child care. She is also much more sexually liberated than many
other females, having numerous affairs and enjoying her sexuality with no restraints or false guilt. She has, also, a strong belief in God which is unfettered by convention and her relationship with Celie is a central theme of the novel. It is Shug who liberates Celie in all aspects of her life, guiding her into emotional, sexual and financial independence and combining the roles of sister, friend and lover. Shug possesses equality because of her own integrity as a person, and she passes this on to Celie.

Masculine and feminine temperament is also addressed in the novel. Shug is described by Albert as being manlier than most men, but as Celie rightly points out to him, those qualities of independence, honesty and integrity are equally valid as womanly qualities. What the novel asserts is that people are weak and strong, and gender should not dictate perceptions of qualities which are essentially human.

The equal treatment of the sexes was also an important issue in Walker’s life and is one of the primary elements in *The Color Purple*. In the 1970s the Supreme Court started invoking the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment (due process of law and guaranteed citizenship for slaves) to invalidate government discrimination based on sex. Controlled and mastered by their husbands, women go through the secondary enslavement and silence represented in being beaten, subjugated, and governed mentally and physically. Each character uses his or her own methods to break through silence imposed on them.

Walker creates a utopic vision of new southern community by concluding her novel with a happy ending. The joyousness and happiness in the end balance the misery and suffering with which the novel begins. Nettie and her family return to their homeland to find integration into their true community. Celie, reunited with her two children, her sister, with all her family and friends, celebrates her new world full of love and happiness. The reunion event appropriately takes place on July 4, Independence Day. Traditionally, it is a day for white Americans to celebrate their independence from England; black Americans used to spend the day celebrating each other. In a clever twist, Walker uses this traditionally white holiday to mark the emotional, social, economic, and spiritual independence of Celie.
Alice Walker manages to show that it is possible for black and white to mend relationships and begin to understand and accept one another in the character of Eleanor Jane. By the end of the novel, Eleanor Jane and Sofia are able to relate like equal women rather than black servant and mistress, but only after Sofia has been brutally honest with the younger woman about the reality of the way she feels about her and her child. Eleanor Jane begins to realize that Sofia is a woman, not a faceless black person like all the rest of her race and even turns on her own parents, demanding to know how a woman like Sofia could work for trash.

Alice Walker wants to convey by her novel that it is time to transcend the feelings of guilt, anger, hate on both parts—African and American. It's time for healing, forgiving, reconciliation with the past, not only in terms of race and class in the United States, but internationally, in terms of nations and peoples. Placing Nettie in West Africa, and fashioning her book as a correspondence between the sisters, Walker created an internal dialogue, comparing and contrasting, and finally reconciling poor and middle class, educated and uneducated, African and Afro-American heritage. From vastly different points of view the two sisters gradually come to identical realizations about the nature of life, blackness, and men and women, nature and God. At the conclusion of the novel, Nettie returns to America, and Celie is reunited not only with her sister but with her grown son and daughter as well. In addition to bringing Celie physically home to the South, the final quarter of the novel also stresses the need of spiritual and emotional homecoming, the eagerness to make peace with and accept the South. Linda Tate writes: "To heal itself and make peace with the South, the black community needs to work toward new definition of the relations between the races and the sexes" (7, 126).

Through the novel, Walker refers to the wholeness one can achieve when reconciling with one's past and identity. Celie not only finds her place in her community but also helps others, for example, Albert, to engage in the process of getting themselves together, of creating a circle of individual voices, a whole of community. Walker explores in The Color Purple the modern search for wholeness, connection of people in an age of
exploitation, alienation and fragmentation. She challenges racial boundaries, portraying new ways for blacks and whites to create a shared sense of community.

References


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