

## Female Consciousness in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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**Abstract:** African American literature has been predominantly a male preserve in the task of narrating the experience of slavery and its relics of denigration before the advent of reactionary literature by black female writers. Studies on female-authored African American literary works have concentrated on responding to male-authored representations of the tensions of racism, internal crisis of man-woman relationships and the challenges of empowering the black female character. This paper focuses on the exploration of assertive female characters through a concerted consciousness-awakening among African American women within a cycle of oppression. This study, therefore, investigates the narrative thrust of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* against the back drop of the Civil Rights era on female character portrayal. The study adopts Alice Walker's womanist theory which accounts for the construction of black women consciousness and advocates for a more integrative societal structure. A close reading of the novel, *The Color Purple* (1982) reveals that Alice Walker's narrative keeps within the womanist tradition and exemplifies the Civil Rights era while situating the novel within specific historical, socio-political, economic, gendered and literary context.

**Keywords:** Consciousness-awakening, Womanism, African American literature, Civil Rights, Alice Walker

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of female consciousness is part of the process of redefining the woman's place within her society and culture and this re-definition has been the concern of many female writers including Black female writers in Africa and in the Diaspora. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* (1990:1)

One muffled strain in the south a jarring chord and a vague and uncomprehended cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant black woman.... And not many can more sensibly realize and more accurately tell the weight and fret of the "long dull pain" than the open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America.

Gates observation remains valid in that in the United States, African American people have been consistently relegated to a 'second fiddle' position in the scheme of things since the days of slavery and colonialism. In this regard, black women perceived themselves to be further relegated to what Francis Mogu (2002:128) describes as a "third fiddle position" The earliest of this harrowing historical reality was the transportation of twenty indentured labourers in a Dutch vessel and their arrival in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. With this historical trauma, black female writers have sought over time to reassert the rightful place of woman in the society. Of note is the epoch making Seneca Women Convention of 1848.

As whites in America looked down on blacks, black women perceived that their men folk in turn looked down on them, corresponding to what Francis Mogu (2002:128) describes as a "third fiddle position". The prejudice against sex is often balanced by the prejudice against colour in the American society and these concerns have become the focus of the feminist ideology. It is a task that fosters the creation of unique feminine consciousness in a bid to re-examine and re-write the political history of women. This prompts us to re-evaluate Sharon Spencer's (1982:157) stance that feminism is all about "the conviction that 'traditional definitions of women are inadequate' and that 'women suffer injustices because of their sex' ". The above explication does not make a

feminist anti-men but one who agrees that women have historically been oppressed within culture and society and also believes that such oppression is unacceptable. It is not surprising then to find models of the ideal, independent women figure marking the pages of Black women's work. The essence is that feminism is concerned with combating cultural stereotypes of female experience. These stereotypes are confronted and hopefully discredited by the creation of new, alternative images in the bid to expand women's consciousness.

Black female writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Jude Jordan, Toni Morrison, Terry McMillan, Rita Dove, Ntozake Shange in America and their counterparts in Africa like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ifeoma Okoye, project women in their fiction whose process of development show a rejection of the constraining demands of a former order and as such promote female consciousness. However, this exploration of female consciousness in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* will follow the Womanist criteria rather than the radical feminist approach.

In the United States of America, the dogged commitment of black women and their consistent self-application to the project of making women visible in a society that breeds deeper invisibility marked the beginnings of black feminism. Francis Mogu (2002:2) opines that the serious reservations expressed about black male writings by feminist critics prompted black women writers such as Alice Walker to initiate an approach which seeks to foster unity, peace and progress in the black community in America. Womanism as an alternative to feminism represents the black women's response to gender discrimination in the United States. Unlike mainstream feminism which is perceived to be decidedly against men, womanism argues for a union of males and females in joint tasks. Thus, the promotion of dialogue as an avenue for resolving differences and disputes between men and women in the society is central to Walker's concept.

## 2. FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Alice Walker's novels have shown a combination of the struggle for civil rights of Black citizens and the struggle for women's rights in the African American community and family. Her efforts to combine these two struggles draw attention to internalized racism that feeds sexism in Black families. Her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) is a perfect example of the fine balance of the two struggles. The text depicts the cycle of oppression of a share cropping family with oppressed children turning oppressive adults and men oppressed by their white bosses who become oppressive husbands. As a frontier member of the Civil Rights Movement, Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) expresses an undertone of the Civil Rights perspective. Simply put, 'Civil Rights' means that people have the right to be treated the same regardless of their race, gender or religion. These rights though guaranteed by law only became more successful in the 1950s and 1960s Martin Luther King Jr. led non-violent Civil Rights Movement. The movement is marked by unprecedented energy against the second class citizenship accorded African Americans in many parts of the nation. It is from this perspective, therefore that the novel under study depicts brutality, racism, and gender issues in the rural South but concludes with an optimistic note.

The story of Celie, the major character, begins in despair and frustration but ends positively as she becomes aware of her humanity as a totality of her self-expression and self-realization. Initially, Celie is unable to resist those that abuse her. Her step father, Alphonso, a man she calls Pa, rapes her at age 14, exploits her by selling her children and then tells her "you better not tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy"(1). In despair she believes him and begins telling her story through letters to God. Thus, the novel begins with "Dear God". She becomes the tool of her step father's insatiable desires, but soon, he gets tired of her and sells her off in marriage to Mr. \_\_\_\_ Albert. "Fact is, he say, I got to git rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. And she a bad influence on my other girls" (18). Her letters to God become her only outlet. What Celie experiences in Mr. \_\_\_\_'s house is twice as depressive as her former home. Her step-son injures her on her wedding day and escapes almost with no reprimand. Mr. \_\_\_\_ victimizes her and keeps her sister's (Nettie) letters away from Celie. The arrival of Shug Avery makes the turning point in Celie's life and their friendship affords Celie a process of growth and self-discovery. It is only when Celie and Shug discover Nettie's letters that Celie finally has enough knowledge of herself to form her own powerful narrative.

Walker uses the incident between Squeak (Mary Agnes) and her white uncle, the warden at Sofia's prison, to illustrate how sexism and racism were expressed. The warden has no qualms about raping his own niece, which reflects a Southern, white, male disregard for the dignity of black women. This follows the period in which the novel is set. During the period, it was a commonly held view among white males that they could do whatever they pleased with black women, a view that many black males shared as well. The picture Walker paints of black life is not one sided. While Celie and Albert are tied to the land and the harsh life it represents, Nettie escapes into a black middle-class life through her missionary friends. Religion in the south played an important role in liberating many African Americans from poverty. Celie is embracing a religious literacy through her letters to God, and in her letters to Nettie she comes to grips with the larger world, including Africa, outside her small community. By making the connection to Africa, Walker emphasizes the importance of African Americans' roots. The novel echoes the relevance of the ability to express one's thoughts and feelings as crucial to developing a sense of self. Therefore, patterns of female consciousness follow a progressive trend manifesting in different forms in completing the full cycle of self-assertion.

### 3. FORMS AND PATTERNS OF FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

#### 3.1. The Search for Equality of Rights

Female consciousness in *The Color Purple* follows a pattern of liberation from what may be termed as a post slavery kind of oppression with emphasis on women who are denied their rights within the home and the larger society. By assessing the marital life of Walker's major character – Celie – one could easily notice a contrast between her life and the provisions of the 1956 “Code of Personal Status” in America – that the organization of the family be based on equality of rights. Indeed, Celie is more or less a slave in Mr. \_\_\_\_'s house which underscores his reason for marrying her, “.... My poor little ones sure could use a mother” (17). What Walker is doing in *The Color Purple* is to draw attention to the second class treatment of women in America. By doing this, she joins other women of the Civil Rights Movement in criticizing the manner in which the society has been structured and run, and the alleged dominant roles of males in all spheres and strata of the society. Therefore Francis Mogu (2002:13) argues that these women “seek to create a society, which will accord more rights, privileges and equity to females in particular, and ultimately more humane conditions for the nurture of all”. On this basis, self-assertion is not undermined since it is an energetic move towards the reclamation of one's suppressed rights.

#### 4. FEMALE FRIENDSHIP AND FEMALE TIES

Alice Walker's construction of female consciousness in *The Colour Purple* follows a form of consciousness awakening through female friendship. Basically the victim of oppression needs a kind of consciousness-raising move to realize that “the personal is political” like what Shug does for Celie. Sara Mills (1989:52) posits that there was a forum in the 1970s for women to discuss their experiences called the “Consciousness Raising Movement”. The forum encouraged sharing individual experiences as a means to defeat a patriarchal oppression. The central relationships for Celie are those she has with her sister Nettie and with Shug Avery. Celie describes Shug Avery as “the most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my Mama. She bout ten times more prettier than me. I see her in furs. Her face rouge.... She be dressed to kill, whirling and laughing”. (16). Women support each other through trials and help in managing their challenges. For instance, Mr. \_\_\_\_ Albert's sister, Kate, gets him to buy Celie clothes and forces Harpo to do more work around the house. Shug Avery will not consider leaving Celie “until I know Albert won't even think of beating you” (67). Sofia claims that her ability to fight comes from her strong relationship with her sisters. The above examples inevitably imply that the road to liberation is cushioned by an awareness of one's situation and then the possibility of making efforts towards correcting such a situation through female bonding. Mary Helen Washington (1990:35) validates that female friendships are vital to black women's growth and the well-being of others. Also, Lorraine Bethel (1982:179) reinforces the inclination of bonding and argues that “women in this

country have defied the dominant sexist society by developing a type of folk culture and oral literature based on the use of gender solidarity and female bonding as self-affirming rituals”.

## 5. JOURNEY AS A FORM OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC UPLIFT

The concept of female character journeys has been employed by many African American women writers as a means promoting self-awareness. According to Grace Okereke (1997:91) “mobility is fundamental in the construction of consciousness”. Deborah E. McDowell (1993) observes that one recurrent theme in the novels of Black women writers is the motif of the journey. Equally, Mary Helen Washington (1980:43) argues that the female character in the works of Black women is in a state of becoming “part of an evolutionary spiral, moving from victimization to consciousness”. In *The Color Purple*, Walker inscribes aspects of physical and psychological mobility as a major trend in female consciousness. Celie’s movement to Memphis coincides with her economic independence as she turns her erstwhile passivity to creativity in making pants of all sizes and colours. Thus, she declares:

I got pants now in every color and size under the sun.... I ain’t been able to stop. I change the cloth, I change the print, I change the waist, I change the pocket, I change the hem, I change fullness of the leg. I make so many pants Shug tease me. I didn’t know what I was starting, she say, laughing. (190).

It appears that Celie’s self-assertion equals self-development as she transforms from timidity to a proficient industrious woman. Besides, Nettie’s movement to Africa affords her the opportunity of being a missionary and at the same time gives her a chance to reclaim Celie’s children who were sold out. Also, as Celie discovers herself, her narrative changes. Celie’s first letters simply related events without really attempting to understand or interpret them. Gradually, she begins to make observations and articulate her own feelings. She discovers her identity and signs her letters with “Amen”, “Your Sister, Celie/Folks pants, Unlimited/Sugar Avery Drive/Memphis, Tennessee” (192). These phrases emerge as expressions of ratification, assertion and validation of self. This new perception prepares her for the wealth of experience in Memphis, as she declares: “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m still here”. (187).

## 6. WRITING AS A MEANS OF FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS

Structurally, *The Color Purple* seems primarily designed to fit a private paradigm suggested by its choice of the epistolary mode. In the novel, it is Celie’s point of view that dominates the narrative and the reader identifies with her. Walker uses the epistolary style to tell the story from an authentic narrative voice. As the novel begins and the narrator gets raped by her father, Walker sets the stage for a deliberate and radical shock while setting up the conditions under which Celie has to exist. However, by making the act of writing a key element in the process of Celie’s redemption, Walker underlines the importance of literacy and makes implicit reference to the slave experience and its oppressive illiteracy. Celie and Nettie use writing to combat oppression by remaining committed to the act of writing as it sustains their link. In this way, Walker seems to be affirming that writing is crucial and redeeming. It is worth pointing out that what makes *The Color Purple* unique is the language. The novel’s power is in the vivid folksy language used by the characters. Celie’s letters are written in folk language (English) and it records her personal traits and near defeat. Walker uses Celie’s uneducated grammar to help the reader perceive the pain of abuse Celie is experiencing:

Dear God,  
He beat me today cause he say  
I winked at a boy in church  
I may have got something  
In my eye but I didn’t wink  
I don’t even look at men’s. (15)

In contrast, Nettie’s letters are written in more formal language. Following this, Walker seems to be exhibiting a variety of voice: a voice that identifies with the folk culture in the language of

Celie and the one that makes the authorial comment in the language of Nettie. Sara Mills (1989:70) argues that the novel is full of conversations rather than the narration of events. In this way, conversations are reported through the medium of Celie's writing. Mills further affirms that "the narrative voice is based on the model of spoken language: the sentences are short and reflect the way sentences are constructed in conversations".

### 7. CHOICE OF CLOTHING

McDowell (1993) observes that the use of 'clothing as iconography' is central to writings by Black women. The imagery of clothing is adequately crafted in *The Color Purple*. Celie is portrayed in rags and in dull colour clothing to coincide with her period of oppression. And as Celie journeys to freedom, her colour options become brighter and flamboyant, setting up the scene for Celie to exhibit self worth by creating pants out of clothes. However, the symbolism of colours is explored in heightening self consciousness. Throughout the novel, the appearance of brighter colours indicates the liberation various characters experience. Walker uses colour to signal renewals and rebirths at several points in the novel. When Kate takes Celie shopping for a new dress, the only colour options are dull ones – brown, maroon, and dark blue. Later, Celie and Sofia use bright yellow fabric from Shug's dress to make a quilt. When Celie describes her religious awakening, she marvels how she never noticed the wonders that God has made such as "The Color Purple". Primarily, the significance of the color purple is its representation of human hope and the miracle of the human spirit.

However, the achievement of *The Color Purple* remains valid, that Walker has taken Celie through a process of utter hopelessness to full recognition and equality. Through Celie, and of course, other assertive female characters like Shug Avery, Sofia, Alice Walker has shown that women can rewrite their history. This generation of assertive female characters is what Christel Temple (2012:27) describes as "African American post-enslavement generations" who "capture the hopes, dreams, and promise that enslavement denied to their parents and generations that came before". Infact Sue Spaul (1989:142) concludes that *The Color Purple* can be read in terms of "the definition of women as revisers of traditional themes, as well as interrogation of the damaging images imposed on Black family relationships". On the other hand, Sara Mills (1989:73) position that "women become aware that the problems they face are not simply individual problems but are ones faced by other women" is an example of the mission of female consciousness in *The Color Purple*. Thus, the novel serves as vehicle for consciousness-raising for many women. On his part, Daniel Taylor (1992:109) views *The Color Purple* as Alice Walker's attempt to embody her own particular vision of black feminism in a work that transcends ideology and that the work draws from what it advocates rather than from what it condemns.

### 8. CONCLUSION

However, African American women have overcome huge obstacles and cycles of oppression in order to get to where they are today. Black women have, and are still, overcoming racism, lack of education, and the myth that women are inferior. Indeed, black female novelists have made various responses to the initial and present situation of the Black woman in America. Walker makes great use of the slave image in the early part of *The Color Purple* to show this progression. Basically what Walker is doing is to trace the rough paths Black women have had to follow in the journey to liberation and self-actualization and to point the way forward for the liberated woman. This liberation becomes valid in keeping with Walker's womanist orientation. The central position of this orientation according to Mogu (2002:97) is that "the quest for economic emancipation of African American women would be better pursued in the community and family instead of gender or sex". Following this model, Walker's *The Color Purple* in exploring female consciousness has met the womanist criteria. By the end of the novel, Celie has achieved a certain level of equality with Mr. \_\_\_ Albert. Mr. \_\_\_ acknowledges his faults and accepts the blame for his mistakes. They maintain a cordial relationship which affords them the opportunity to re-assess their past and project for the future. This leads them to appreciate each other's unique personality and brings them to a true equal opportunity relationship. Infact, Sherley Anne Williams (1990:69) a womanist scholar and critic, argues that what black women need most from black men is dialogue, that is, mutually beneficial dialogue that serves to unite African Americans instead of separating them further. She opines that "black women writers have been urging men not so much

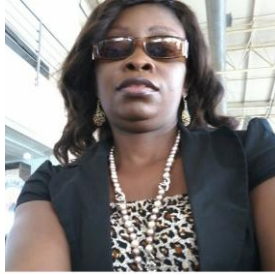
to “come down (and) fight,” as to come down and talk”. Thus, inspite of manifestations of female oppression, black female writers are optimistic as their narratives conclude on a positive reconstruction of the female self within the structure of the family and community.

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