



# LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

## **Quest for Selfhood and Self-Realization in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple***

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### **Abstract**

Alice Walker deals with the oppression of black women and men. Her quest is a new identify for black women, a self – awareness which will make them self-dependent socially, emotionally and spiritually. Racial discrimination, self-identity, self-realization, violence, sexism, ancestry and civil rights – all these form the sum and substance of her work. Alice walker is the brightest star in a galaxy of black American women writers. As a fighter against social injustice, Alice walker is inspirational; as a black woman struggling with divorce and motherhood, she is engaging and emphatic. She is also the author of several collections of short stories, essays and poetry as well as children's books. Her books have been translated into more than two dozen languages. She is regarded as a striving persona for suppressed peoples.

### **Keywords**

Selfhood; Self-Realization; Alice Walker; *The Color Purple*.

Alice Walker's early novels explicitly addresses the difficulties faced by the Afro – Americans. In *The Color Purple* Alice Walker writes about people she has known, people who lived in the part of the country where she was raised and she reflects the conditions of those people and the values they represented within the larger context of American society. They constitute a subculture shaped by particular economic and social forces. In *The Color Purple*, the action is narrated through letters. Letters have been one of the few means of expressions of the oppressed women for many years.

Walker's authorial voice in *The Color Purple* is by identifying her obsessions. Walker is obviously committed to exposing the oppression of black women. Walker's voice explores women's roles within the patriarchal system, emphasizing their desires for freedom and creativity. Walker is especially preoccupied with the subject of the psychic and physical oppression of women.

The novel's inclusive, holistic consciousness also manifests itself in its form. Whereas Hurston's novel takes its form from the storytelling traditions of black culture, *The Color Purple* is more consciously literary. Written as a series of letters from Celie first to God and then to Nettie, the novel asserts its kinship both with the traditional literary form open to women – letters and journals – and with the 18<sup>th</sup> century epistolary narratives out of which the English novel arose. Unlike Hurston, Walker links her novel to the larger literary tradition. The great achievement of both writers, however, has been to open that tradition to black women's voices and to the transforming spiritual power of their vision. Beautifully imagined and deeply compassionate, this classic novel of American literature is rich with passion, pain, inspiration, and an indomitable love of life.

The identity Crisis that grows from the violence within the family during Celie's childhood is "explained", traced to its origin, in two significantly different ways. The first narrative installs the greed of patriarchal sexual practice in the unflattering mirror of the "private" family; the injustices manifested in the world outside that central core. For instance why Celie writes to God is that would like to tell her mother what happened, but Celie's father has warned her not to – to

tell “nobody but God”. Especially not to Celie’s mother because, according to him, “It’d kill your mommy”. She bears everything, because Celie is too scared to tell her mother, or her ‘mammy’, what her father has done, so she has told no one. She wants to be a good girl, and she knows that if she lets her father rape her, he will leave her sick mother alone. Celie abhors her father’s rough, sexual brutality, but by submitting to it, she spares her mother.

Celie is troubled in terrible pain, and is deeply confused. And in addition, she feels utterly alone. Therefore, she writes to someone whom she trusts-God, asking for understanding and explanation. *The Color Purple* articulates the complexity of the struggle of black women in America and illuminates their indomitable will, which enables them to burgeon as individuals, defying the exploitative constraints of a society dominated and conditioned by white people and black men. Despite the shabbiness, brutality and humiliation of their lives the women in *The Color Purple* remain contumacious and refuse to function as servants to men. When women try to assert themselves they get beaten.

The character of Celie is central to the female network; through Celie, Walker has aimed to present a process of emancipation of a woman’s body and soul, from the domination of men. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* weaves an intricate mosaic of women joined by their love for each other, the men who abuse them and the children they care for. Celie’s crisis of subjectivity has both textual and historical implications: her status as a subject is clarified, in the course of the novel, by her emergence from the enforced privacy of a prayer-letter to God sometime in her fourteenth year. *The Color Purple* stages, in its journey to this final day, an instance of black America’s struggle to clarify its own national identity from the point of view of American populism.

The horrifying account of Celie’s sexual abuse presented on the very first page of the novel is a sad commentary on the androcentric culture which condemns women to a subordinate state. Defenseless and threatened Celie cannot share her trauma with other members of her family. Her step-father denies her the benefit of education, rapes her repeatedly and systematically

shatters her self-confidence. She herself is the victim, yet feels defiled and corrupt. She interprets her position from the view-point of male supremacy and is not able to overcome her feelings of guilt.

Celie's diffidence aggravates her sufferings, but Sofia is victimized for her confident zeal towards life. Harpo, who was initially attracted towards her for her independence, wants her to fit in the traditional mode of wifehood after marriage. "I want her to do what I say, like you do for pa" (66) is his only desire. Sofia is able to escape gender discrimination by leaving her husband, but is unable to fight away the racial cruelty which is a more systematic evil force. At last, Sofia was punished for assaulting the Mayor and his wife, she is made to serve as a maid in the same family. Separated from her children for twelve years she buries her sentiments deep, yet retains a selfhood which is evident in her rejection of Reynold, "I don't have nothing to offer him" (272). Sofia protests against sexual and racial exploitations. There is no justice for blacks in the white system of "law and justice" and yet, despite those odds, Squeak, Shug, Celie and Odessa (Sofia's sister) make plans to try and defy "the system". By using cunning and deviousness, they hope to keep Sofia from serving twelve years in a prison that is already making her a broken and helpless emotional and psychological cripple.

Celie accepts her narrowly defined, sexist, racist black woman's role almost willingly, so long as she can dream of the glamorous Shug Avery and Shug's clothes, hair and makeup. Celie even knows that Shug and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ have children, but she is not jealous—"it bees that way". Having access to Shug through Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is enough. Celie and Shug have the relationship of picture and viewer, book and reader, and performer and audience. In fact, to Celie, Shug seems like a character in a familiar fairy tale.

Sofia acts as a catalyst in Celie understanding of her own plight. Her awareness of the self is enhanced further by her strange relationship with Shug Avery. The role model for the women in their creative endeavor is Shug Avery, the blues singer whose power and independence is also derived from her creative

talent. Shug Avery's singing gives her the authority and self-esteem that the other women lack, but it is a form of singing, the blues, which has its origins in suffering. Significantly, when Shug sings the song about Celie it is "all about some no count man doing her wrong" (77); and it is a song inspired by Celie which was written while Celie was attending to Shug's hair, hence the multiple references of Shug's phrase, "Something I made up. Something you help scratch out my head" (55).

Shug Avery embodies the classic blues aesthetic which black women are uniquely positioned to articulate. Celie always wanted to be confident, sexy, assured, glamorous, and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s lover-sick and homeless, she comes to stay with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Celie, exuding a power of evil. Celie's nursing gradually wins her over from death and a bond is gradually forged between them. Halfway between sick and well, halfway between good and evil she melts down a little and accepts Celie's companionship (59). The motif of quilt making symbolizing a commonality of perception is repeated again to suggest the evaporating, hostility and emerging kinship. The relationship between Celie and Shug does have lesbian strains.

The acts of creative discovery and self affirmation by which the women of *The Color Purple* liberate themselves from oppression are closely associated with their sexual identities as well as their racial identity. Shug teaches Celie self-confidence by telling her about the clitoris or 'little button' (81) which Celie was unaware of even though she has had children; this is why in Shug's estimation Celie is 'still virgin' (81). Celie's discovery about her own body and the pleasures of masturbation (83) is a crucial stage in her learning her own values as a person, and her sexual relationship with Shug is a liberating and an empowering one. Similarly, when Mary Agnes blushes Shug asks her rhetorically "What, too shamefaced to put singing and dancing and fucking together" (120)? Creativity and sexuality are intimately connected because they are both deeply personal and self/affirmative. When Celie begins making Folks pants, she writes that "Every stitch I sew will be a kiss"(221).

The inner strength of Nettie and Shug is contrasted with whimpering dependence syndrome of Mary Agnes, nicknamed Squeak. She lives with Harpo and is moulded into the stereotyped role of a housewife. Deprived of her identity, even of her name, she works and suffers mutely till Shug and Celie discover her talent for singing. Her attempts to live a happy family life are not successful, but she ultimately understands the value of possessing selfhood. When Harpo is reluctant to let her go to Memphis, she assertively identifies her need and wants it be fulfilled. When a small group of women succeed in establishing healing circles, these circles begin to interest and become more and more inclusive. By the novel's end, even Eleanor Jane, the white manor's daughter, has begun to enter woman-centered community as an equal.

The elements of realism and naturalism as illustrated in Walker's fiction are studied and analysed. To sum up, Alice walker is an Afro-American Black women writer dealing with oppression, racism and sexism in America. Alice Walker expresses her personality, views and opinions on the subjects of her concern. She is an autobiographical novelist. Alice Walker's black womanist consciousness is characterized by sexual, racial, cultural, national, economic and political considerations.

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**MLA (7th Edition) Citation:**

Kumar, E. "Quest for Selfhood and Self-Realization in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *Literary Quest* 1.6 (2014): 200-206. Web. DoA.

**DoA – Date of Access**

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.