



## Women's Issues in Alice Walker's "The Colour Purple"

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### ABSTRACT:

Feminism focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality with the goal of understanding the nature of gender inequality. Alice Walker's "The Colour Purple" (1982) focuses on the life of African and American women in the Southern United States in the early 1900's and it primarily addresses racism, sexual harassment and gender inequality in the American social culture. Alice Walker is an American novelist. "The Colour Purple" is an epistolary novel. She was the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for this novel *The Colour Purple* in 1983. The National Book Award for Fiction was also given to this novel. Alice Walker's works are filled with the strong and emotional experiences of women such as rape, physical abuse and verbal abuse and the oppression of women. This paper attempts to focus on the women issues in the novel "The Colour Purple".

**Key Words:** gender inequality, epistolary novel, oppression of women, culture

Alice Malsenior Tallulah-Kate Walker is an American novelist, short story writer, poet and social activist. Her notable work is "The Colour Purple". She became the first African-American woman to win the 'Pulitzer Prize for Fiction' for her novel 'The Colour Purple'. Alice Walker has published seventeen novels and short story collections, twelve non-fiction works, and collections of essays and poetry. The narrative of Alice Walker is filled with strong and emotional experiences such as rape, physical abuse and verbal abuse, oppression of women and hatred. Nearly all of Alice Walker's central characters are black women. 'The Colour Purple' is an epistolary novel. Through the epistle format, Walker demonstrates the transformation of a mentally, physically and spiritually abused black girl into an independent strong woman.

The Colour Purple vividly depicts the reality that the black women experience both the racial and sexual oppression. Black women must first look out for themselves and their status if they are to survive the dual oppression. In *The Colour Purple*, the various female characters are dealing with their own different issues.

The Colour Purple is an epistolary novel. Writings that take the form of letters or other documents are referred to as epistolary novels. In this novel, Celie writes a letter addressed to God and then to Nettie. Nettie also writes letters to Celie in the novel but Nettie's letters are hidden by Mr. \_\_\_ because he wants to hide it from Celie. Letters become the only way for Celie to express herself and only means by which the reader can have a better understanding of Celie, the protagonist. Alphonso, Celie's father repeatedly beats and rapes her when she is a young child. Celie is pregnant by her father, as a result a girl baby was born and the baby was sold by her father. Then Celie has a second boy child, which was also sold by her father, but she thought that her father had killed her children. Celie's children are adopted by the Samuel and Corrine, a missionary couple and her children are brought up in Africa. Celie suffers so much suffering at such a young age. Celie detailed the problem in a letter to God.

"Dear God. He act like he can't stand me no more say I'm evil an always up to no good. He took my other little baby, a boy this time. But I don't think he kill it. I think he sold it to a man and his wife over Monticello. I got breasts full of milk running down myself. He say why don't you look decent? Put on something but what I'm supposed to put on? I don't have nothing". (pg 13)

Celie has a 12 year old, younger sister named Nettie. Mr. \_\_\_ wants to marry Nettie. But Alphonso refuses to let Nettie marry, instead arranging for Mr. \_\_\_ to marry Celie. Celie also wants to run away from her father's cruelty. So she married Mister. Mister was a widower and he has children. He also needs someone to care for his children and keep his house, so he accepts the offer and marry Celie. But her married life didn't go well. Celie is abused verbally, physically, and sexually by Mr. \_\_\_, and all of his children are cruel to her as well. Celie's father treats women like his servants. Celie's mother also endures more suffering in the hand of Alphonso, Celie's step father. And Celie's sister Nettie was unable to escape the threatening of the unsafe elements on this society. Nettie also sexually harassed by her father and Celie's husband. When Celie's husband has an evil design for her, she runs away from there and overcomes many challenges outside of her home.

Sofia, Harpo's wife was bold girl. Celie is amazed by Sofia's defiant refusal to submit to Harpo's attempts to control her. As Harpo is kinder and gentler than his father, Celie advises him not to try to dominate Sofia. Harpo temporarily follows Celie's advice but falls back under Mister's way. Sometimes he was influenced by his father and he also takes his father's advice and tries to dominate and control Sofia. He both physically and verbally hurt Sofia. But Sofia is bold enough to oppose Harpo's abuses. Sofia says that "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me" (pg 39). At one point she has to go to prison for beating a white person. She is tortured in jail and compelled to work like a professional labourer.

Shug Avery, a jazz and blues singer and Mister's old lover. Compared with other women's in this novel, she may be the one who is outstanding and independent. But she is controlled by the society. Shug Avery also denied her right to marry a man of her choice. This is what she told Celie:

"His Daddy told him I'm trash, my mama trash before me. His brother say the same. Albert try to stand up for us, hit knock down. One reason they give him for not marrying me is cause I have children. But they his, I told old Mr. \_\_\_\_". (pg 117)

When Shug Avery falls ill, Mister takes her into his house. Celie meets Shug Avery. Celie becomes increasingly fascinated by her because of her ability to control the vicious power of Mister. Celie discovers the God in her heart. To get rid of the cruelty and controlling of Mister, Shug Avery and Celie ran away from home and help her building her career and living an independent life. The independence on economy make her own herself and discover herself. She gets too much care and love from Shug Avery. With the help of Shug Avery, Celie discovered hidden letters that Nettie had been sending Her:

"Saturday morning Shug put Nettie letter in my lap. Little fat queen of England stamps on it, plus stamps that got peanuts, coconuts, rubber tress and say Africa... He been keeping your letters, say Shug". (pg 114)

Nettie always fights for her freedom. She didn't behave like Celie. She had resisted against Mr. \_\_\_\_'s need sleep with her. When he ordered her out of his home, Nettie left. But Mr. \_\_\_\_ followed her and tried to rape her. So Nettie fought and defeated the aggressor. Nettie told this in a letter that she wrote to her sister Celie. She said: "Well, I started to fight him, and with God's help, I hurt him bad enough to make him let me alone. But he was some mad" (pg.119).

Later Celie knows about her biological children through the Nettie's letter and she comes to know about that Alphonso is not her biological father but her step-father. Celie has enough of her husband's abuse, decided to leave Mr. \_\_ along with Shug Avery and Squeak, girlfriend of Harpo. She is a mixed race girl and she also endures more suffering in the society. Celie puts a curse on Mr. \_\_ before leaving him for good. Celie settles in Tennessee and supports herself as a seamstress. Celie begins to call Mr. \_\_ by his first name Albert. She earns enough money to live happily at her own house and exclaims "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" (194). In the end, time and fate also favours Celie. She reunites with her loving sister Nettie who brings Celie's children back home. It gives her great feelings of contentment. Thus she finds her own way of life.

To conclude one can find that *The Colour Purple* is very heart touching novel which unravels the rigidity of society where women are always taken as secondary things. Alice Walker shows how little black women have overcome the oppression, and sexual abuse. Her female characters have learnt from the painful experiences of slavery, domination, sexism and racism and become they stand on their own and leads their own life happily.

#### References:

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