

## From Victimhood to Self-Assertiveness: Emancipation and Empowerment through Self-Discovery in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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### ARTICLE INFO

**Received:** May 10, 2024

**Accepted:** June 5, 2024

**Volume:** 5

**Issue:** 1

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### KEYWORDS

fiction, emancipation, empowerment, self discovery, sisterhood, feminism, Alice Walker

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### ABSTRACT

This study navigates through Celie's development and emancipation from a voiceless victim of abuse to a self-assertive woman. Through an analysis of Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, this study argues that her journey towards self-discovery and independence is achieved through a combination of supportive relationships with other women, a rejection of patriarchal norms, and the exploration of her own desires. This study is situated within the feminist and intersectionality frameworks and it contributes to the ongoing conversation about the place of race, gender, and class in the struggle for social justice. Celie's journey from a voiceless victim of abuse to a self-assertive woman serves as a symbol of the transformative power of self-discovery and solidarity. Ultimately, it demonstrates how the novel challenges and subverts dominant narratives and celebrates the power and resilience of African American women and therefore concludes that *The Color Purple* is a powerful portrayal of the transformative power and journey towards self-discovery as well as the imperatives of women's relationships and support systems in achieving empowerment for marginalized women.

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### 1.1 Introduction

*The Color Purple* does not only describe the pathetic condition of black women but even goes beyond that purpose. In fact, Alice Walker's true intention from writing this novel is not only to give voice to black women but also to provide them with a path to follow in order to emancipate and get their freedom. Walker shows us the evolution of her major character, Celie, from being a sexually abused child to a passive wife and finally to an emancipated woman (Padhi 1)

In the crucible of American history, the plight of Black women enslaved in America undoubtedly stands as a harrowing testament to the depths of human suffering and resilience. Their experiences which are often relegated to the backgrounds of historical narratives, are a haunting reminder of the systems of oppression that have shaped the fabric of society. Against this backdrop of systemic brutality and dehumanization, Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple* stands as a beacon of hope and empowerment and therefore offers a profound exploration of emancipation and empowerment through self-discovery.

The journey of Celie, a Black woman whose life has been marred by horrific trauma and abuse, is at the centre of Alice Walker's story of struggle and triumph. Throughout history, many Black women have faced stifled voices and denied freedom. Celie's

story therefore offers a powerful representation of these realities. She becomes a representation of tenacity and defiance, stepping outside the box of victimization to take her proper place as a confident woman. At the heart of Celie's transformation is a journey of self-discovery which is fueled by her relationships with other women who serve as beacons of strength and solidarity in a world rife with oppression. Through her bond with Shug Avery, a blues singer, Celie learns to reclaim her body, her desires, and her autonomy, thereby defying the patriarchal forces that seek to diminish her. Similarly, her friendship with Sofia, a fiercely independent woman, inspires Celie to challenge the oppressive structures that constrain her. It goes a long way in empowering her to assert her own freedom and voice. This gives insight on the significance of sisterhood and supportive relationships with other women in Celie's emancipation. The novel portrays sisterhood as "a means of collective resistance to systemic oppression" (St. Jean 126). Celie's relationships with other women in the novel, particularly Sofia and Mary Agnes, provide her with a support system and a sense of community that empowers her to resist the patriarchy.

In this captivating narrative of emancipation and empowerment, Walker offers a powerful meditation on the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative power of self-discovery. From the perspectives of Celie's journey, readers are invited to bear witness to the indomitable strength of Black women, whose voices, though often silenced, refuse to be extinguished. *The Color Purple* is more than a novel; it is a testament to the enduring power of hope, resilience, and self-assertion in the face of adversity.

### 1.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The broad aim of the study is analyze how self-discovery contributes to the emancipation and empowerment of the major character in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Some of the objectives are as follow:

- i. To analyze the process of self-discovery as portrayed through the character development of Celie as well as the place of sisterhood.
- ii. To examine the ways in which self-discovery connects with themes of gender, race, and spirituality in the context of the early 20th-century South.
- iii. To investigate the broader implications of self-discovery for individual freedom, community-building, and social change within the narrative of *The Color Purple*.

### 1.3 Background to the Novelist

Alice Walker is an American novelist, poet, and social activist, born on February 9, 1944, in Putnam County, Georgia. Her works often explore themes of race, gender, and sexuality, and she is best known for her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*. The novel was published in 1982 and tells the story of Celie, a young Black woman in the early 1900s South who struggles to find her voice and assert her independence in a world dominated by men. According to Bloom's Literature, *The Color Purple* has been praised for its powerful portrayal of Black women's experiences and its exploration of themes such as identity, self-discovery, and empowerment (Bloom n.p). The novel has been widely translated and has won numerous awards, including the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

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Walker's activism and writing have been influential in the feminist and civil rights movements. She has been recognized for her contributions to literature and social justice with numerous awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Lillian Smith Book Award.

#### **1.4 Background to Women Enslavement in American**

A comprehensive review of the developmental trend of black women's enslavement in America reveals a harrowing narrative marked by systemic oppression, exploitation, and resistance. From the early days of colonialism to the abolition of slavery and beyond, black women endured various forms of oppression that shaped their experiences and identities. For instance, in the early colonial period, the enslavement of black women in America was intricately interwoven with the growth of the transatlantic slave trade. Works such as Angela Y. Davis' *Women, Race, & Class* (1981) and Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985) gave insights on the ways in which black women were subjected to both racial and gender-based violence and exploitation. White's analysis particularly emphasizes the double burden of slavery and patriarchy faced by black women. This apparently, highlights their contributions to plantation economies while also challenging traditional gender roles.

Black women's enslavement assumed new forms as America grew and slavery solidified in the Southern economy. Books like *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) by Bell Hooks and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs offer firsthand accounts and critical analysis of the particular types of sexual abuse and reproductive exploitation that enslavement black women endured. The narrative of Jacobs, in particular, shows the cruelty of slavery via the perspective of a black woman fighting for independence and self-determination. It is noteworthy that black women were not guaranteed freedom or equality when slavery was abolished, despite hopes for emancipation being raised by the abolitionist movement and the Civil War. The works of Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1997) and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) demonstrate how oppressive structures survived the Jim Crow era and continue to this day. These works show how the criminal justice system, the reproductive healthcare industry, and other institutions still discriminated against, violently attacked, and marginalized Black women.

Throughout history, black women have resisted and fought against their enslavement and oppression. Scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her work on intersectionality, have highlighted the importance of recognizing the unique experiences of black women and the interconnectedness of race, gender, and other social identities. Again, the writings of Audre Lorde, Bell Hooks, and other black feminist scholars have provided theoretical frameworks for understanding and challenging systems of oppression.

#### **2.1 Literature Review**

A comprehensive literature review of available scholarly works pertaining to the topic of emancipation and empowerment through self-discovery in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* reveals a rich and diverse body of research that examines various aspects of the novel and its themes. Some scholars have examined the novel through different critical lenses, including feminist

theory, African American literary criticism, and postcolonial studies. One prominent strand of scholarship focuses on the character of Celie and her journey towards self-discovery and empowerment. For example, in her essay “Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*: Emergent Womanist Aesthetics,” Claudia Tate analyzes Celie’s transformation from a voiceless victim of abuse to a self-assertive woman who finds her voice and freedom through her relationships with other women in the novel. Tate’s work upholds the importance of sisterhood and female solidarity in Celie’s empowerment process.

The significance of spirituality and folk beliefs in Celie’s self-discovery has been studied by several scholars. “Reclaiming African Heritage: Spirituality and Cultural Politics in Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple*,” by María Herrera-Sobek, explores how Celie’s ancestor worship and folk magic, two African spiritual practices, help her reclaim her identity and fight against racism and patriarchy. Walker’s novel, according to Herrera-Sobek, honors the inventiveness and resiliency of African American women in the face of hardship.

Scholars have also examined the role that sexuality and sexual agency play in Celie’s quest for emancipation. According to Trudier Harris’ essay “*The Color Purple*: Revisions and Redefinitions,” Celie is able to explore her own needs and reclaim her body as a place of autonomy and pleasure because of her relationship with blues singer, Shug Avery. According to Harris, Shug challenges conventional ideas of female sexuality and respectability by acting as a catalyst for Celie’s sexual awakening and self-empowerment. In addition, it is also pertinent to look at the novel’s larger sociopolitical background and how it relates to African American women’s liberation battles. In “Race, Gender, and Nation in *The Color Purple*,” Jacqueline Bobo examines how Walker’s depiction of black women’s lives in the South in the early 20th century relates to race, gender, and nationalism. Bobo contends that the novel demands for a fundamental rethinking of social and political interactions by exposing the violence and injustice that are inherent in systems of power. Therefore, by analyzing the book from a variety of critical angles, the literature on Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* provides a comprehensive examination of the themes of empowerment and emancipation via introspection. Scholars have illuminated the intricacies of the lives of African American women as well as the opportunities for resistance and change.

Self-discovery is sine qua non for the empowerment of marginalized individuals. More specifically, the novel, *The Color Purple* has received critical attention for its portrayal of the transformative power of self-discovery, journey towards emancipation, and empowerment for African American women. According to Valerie Smith, self-expression and self-discovery are essential for marginalized individuals to assert their identities and resist oppressive systems (Smith 160). In Walker’s novel, Celie’s letters to Nettie provide her with a means of articulating her own experiences and feelings, which is an essential step towards her emancipation. It is also pertinent to underscore that Celie’s relationship with Shug Avery, a woman who challenges her internalized beliefs and encourages her to explore her own desires and sexuality, is also a crucial factor in her journey towards self-discovery.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

Feminist and intersectionality frameworks have become increasingly important in literary analysis and critical theory. These frameworks aim to highlight the ways in which gender, race, class, and other social identities impact individuals’ experiences of

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oppression and privilege. In the context of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, these frameworks provide a lens through which to examine the novel's portrayal of self-discovery and empowerment for marginalized women. According to Gloria Anzaldua, intersectionality allows for a more nuanced understanding of social identity and how it impacts individual experiences of oppression and resistance (Anzaldua 12). Through intersectionality, the novel's portrayal of the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in shaping identity and empowerment can be analyzed. Additionally, feminist frameworks offer a lens through which to examine the novel. Bell Hooks asserts that feminist theory places a strong emphasis on the analysis of systematic oppression and power dynamics especially as they relate to experiences of women (Hooks 26). The early 1900s South's male-dominated society is described in the novel as a major cause of oppression for Black women. The novel also emphasizes the strength of sisterhood and female bonds in enabling women to oppose and triumph over oppression.

Furthermore, feminist and intersectionality frameworks can be used to analyze the novel's portrayal of self-discovery as a necessary step towards empowerment for marginalized women. According to Audre Lorde, self-discovery and self-love are crucial for marginalized individuals to resist and overcome systemic oppression (Lorde 16). Through examining how the novel portrays self-discovery and the impact of relationships and support systems on self-discovery, the importance of self-love and sisterhood in empowering women can be explored. These frameworks therefore provide valuable lenses through which to analyze *The Color Purple*. Through examining the intersections of identity, power dynamics, and the importance of supportive relationships, these frameworks deepen our understanding of the novel's portrayal of self-discovery and empowerment for marginalized women.

### **2.3 Thesis Statement and Research Questions**

The thesis statement of this study is: Celie's emancipation in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is achieved through a combination of self-discovery, sisterhood, and a rejection of patriarchal norms.

The research questions that guide this paper are:

- a) How does Celie's character development throughout the novel contribute to her emancipation?
- b) What roles do supportive relationships with other women, particularly Shug, Sofia, and Mary Agnes, play in Celie's journey towards empowerment?
- c) In what ways does Celie's rejection of patriarchal norms contribute to her ability to assert her independence and reclaim freedom over her own life?

### **3.1 Transformation from Victimhood to Self-Assertiveness**

The theme of transformation from victimhood to self-assertion takes on profound significance when viewed through the lens of the historical context of black women's enslavement in America, as well as the character development of Celie in Alice in the novel. Given this backdrop of systemic oppression, exploitation, and dehumanization, the journey of black women from victimhood to self-assertion comes as a powerful narrative of resilience, and liberation. Unarguably, enslaved black women in

America faced unimaginable hardships and atrocities. They were subjected to brutal physical labor, sexual exploitation, and the forcible separation of families. They were stripped of their freedom and humanity and denied the most basic rights. These women relegated to the background of society as mere property or commodities for the benefit of their white oppressors. In this context, the concept of freedom and self-assertion for black women was not only a matter of personal empowerment but it also became a radical assertion of their humanity and dignity in the face of systemic dehumanization.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie, the main character, represents the experiences of innumerable black women who suffered through the atrocities of slavery and its aftermath. Celie experiences a variety of abuse and exploitation from an early age, such as emotional manipulation, domestic violence, and rape. Her identity is shaped by these experiences of victimhood, leading to feelings of powerlessness, self-loathing, and acceptance of her fate. However, as the narrative unfolds, Celie's journey toward self-assertion begins to take shape. Through her relationships with other women, such as Shug Avery and Sofia, Celie finds sources of strength, support, and solidarity that empower her to challenge the oppressive forces in her life. Shug, in particular, serves as a catalyst for Celie's transformation. As Celie gradually asserts her freedom and right to self-determination, she undergoes a profound internal and external transformation. She learns to value herself, recognize her own worth, and envision a different future for herself beyond the confines of her past traumas. Through acts of resistance, resilience, and self-discovery, Celie emerges as a self-assertive woman who refuses to be defined by her victimhood or limited by the expectations of others. Her journey underscores the transformative power of courage, perseverance, and self-belief, inspiring readers to confront their own struggles with determination.

### **3.2 Celie's Journey: Towards Self-Discovery and Empowerment**

Celie's journey towards self-discovery and empowerment is a central theme in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Through a close analysis of Celie's character development, this paper argues that her emancipation is achieved through a combination of self-discovery, sisterhood, and a rejection of patriarchal norms. At the beginning of the novel, Celie is portrayed as a victim of systemic oppression. She has been abused by both her father and husband and has internalized their misogynistic and racist beliefs. Celie begins to question the patriarchal standards that have shaped her life through her interactions with Shug Avery and Nettie. "One of the most important steps towards Celie's emancipation is the ability to express her own experiences and feelings through her letters to Nettie" (Smith 160).

Celie's relationship with Shug is also an important factor in her emancipation. Shug challenges Celie's internalized beliefs and encourages her to explore her own desires and sexuality. According to Bost, Shug's role in Celie's journey towards self-discovery is significant in that it shows the importance of supportive female relationships in empowering women (Bost 168). Through Shug's encouragement, Celie is able to reject patriarchal norms and assert her independence.

The emancipation of Celie is also greatly influenced by her relationships with other women, especially Mary Agnes and Sofia. According to St. Jean, the significance of the novel's depiction of sisterhood lies in its emphasis on the necessity of collective resistance against systemic oppression (St. Jean 126). Thus, Celie's relationship with Sofia and Mary Agnes provides her with a

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support system and a sense of community that empowers her to resist the patriarchy. It is therefore pertinent to highlight that Celie's emancipation is achieved through a combination of self-discovery, supportive relationships with other women, and a rejection of patriarchal norms. Through this examination of Celie's character development, this paper upholds that the novel portrays the importance of self-love, sisterhood, and collective resistance in empowering marginalized women.

### 3.3 Emancipation from Patriarchy

Through Celie's transformation from a voiceless victim of abuse to a confident woman, Alice Walker tackles the issue of emancipation from patriarchy. The novel explores the sufferings and triumph faced by women who defy patriarchal expectations and work to free themselves from unjust systems.

Set in the early 20th-century American South, *The Color Purple* portrays the harsh realities faced by African American women in a patriarchal society marked by systemic racism and sexism. Celie's experiences reflect the historical oppression of women of color, who were doubly marginalized by their race and gender. Walker incorporates intersectional perspectives into her portrayal of emancipation from patriarchy thereby highlighting the ways in which race, gender, and class intersect to shape women's experiences of oppression. Celie's struggles are compounded by her identity as a poor, uneducated black woman which underscore the intersecting systems of discrimination that she must navigate (Collins 45). Her journey toward emancipation is not void of challenges and acts of resistance. She confronts physical and emotional abuse from men, as well as societal expectations that confine her to traditional gender roles. Despite these obstacles, Celie finds strength in her relationships with other women and gradually asserts her autonomy and self-worth (Smith 56).

It is noteworthy that It is notable that the South attempted to keep Black people in subjugation by denying them access to education. Despite being prohibited from attending school, Celie managed to obtain an education through the lessons her younger sister taught her. Black people were thought to be ignorant of their rights and unlikely to fight for independence if they were kept out of school. The following letter serves as evidence that Celie is not allowed to attend school:

The first time I got big Pa took me out of school. He never care. That I love it. Nettie stood there at the gate holding tight to my hand. I was all dress for first day. You too dumb to keep going to school, Pa say. Nettie the clever on in this bunch. But Pa, Nettie say, crying, Celie smart too. Even Miss Beasley say so. Nettie dote on Miss Beasley. Think nobody like her in the world (Walker 11).

From the quotation above, it is implied that Celie is one of the examples of contemporary African American women who was not permitted to go to the school. As Olinkas stated, "A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something," (140). So, it is evident that the condition of African American women at that time was hard.

Throughout the novel, Celie employs various strategies in her quest for emancipation from patriarchy. She seeks education and self-awareness. She learns to value herself and challenge oppressive norms. Celie also forms bonds of solidarity with other women, such as Shug Avery and Sofia, who support and empower her in her journey toward self-assertion (hooks 32). Alice

Walker therefore presents a powerful portrayal of emancipation from patriarchy while highlighting the struggles and triumphs of women who challenge oppressive systems. Through Celie's transformative journey, Walker underscores the importance of solidarity, resilience, and self-expression in the fight for gender equality and liberation.

#### 4.1 Conclusion

Walker navigates the harrowing experiences of trauma and abuse endured by Black women, through the central character of Celie. Thus, she offers a narrative that transcends victimhood to celebrate resilience and defiance. Celie's journey from a voiceless victim of abuse to a self-assertive woman serves as a symbol of the transformative power of self-discovery and solidarity. Guided by relationships with other women, such as Shug Avery and Sofia, Celie learns to reclaim her voice and her freedom in a world marked by oppression and dehumanization. Walker's novel illuminates the enduring strength and resilience of Black women, whose stories have often been overlooked in historical narratives. *The Color Purple* therefore stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit of hope and empowerment that persists even in the darkest of times and undoubtedly invites readers to bear witness to the power of self-assertion and liberation. There is again a crucial message for women who have been marginalized and oppressed by systemic structures of power. Like St. Jean notes, the novel's portrayal of sisterhood is a significant aspect of its feminist message (St. Jean 125).

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