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Beyond Virginity: Celie's Journey From 'Virgin' To Empowered Woman In Alice Walker's The Color Purple

Dr. Anju Mehra (Corresponding Author)

, Associate Professor, Dept. of English and Foreign Languages, Maharishi Dayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana, India, anjumehra781980@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Aim: This paper explores multiple layers of Alice Walker's groundbreaking novel The Color Purple, concentrating on Celie and her metaphorical journey from a 'virgin' to an independent woman. The goal of the research is to disentangle the complex ways that the early 20th-century American South's sociocultural and historical setting shaped images of female identity, agency, and resilience.

Methodology: The study aims to examine Walker's purposeful decision to refer to Celie as a "virgin" and its ramifications for comprehending the character's path through the prism of feminist literature. The study looks at how Walker's story questions conventional gender norms, examines the effects of sexual abuse, and emphasizes the value of female solidarity in the face of institutional oppression through analyzing Celie's changing connections, both romantic and familial.

Objective: The results may add to the current conversation on women's literature by illuminating the transformational potential of narrative to alter cultural conceptions of female identity. This study also emphasizes how The Color Purple is still relevant today, holding its own in conversations about empowerment, resilience, and gender. **Conclusion:** The paper makes the case that Celie's transformation into a 'virgin' is a literary technique used to subvert gender norms and redefine feminine virtue, giving the character more agency as she makes her way through a process of self-discovery and personal development. The goal of the article is to present a thorough grasp of the intricacies surrounding female empowerment within a larger social and historical context by looking at the intersections of Celie's identity.

Keywords: Alice Walker, The Color Purple, womanism, Celie, Gender Roles, Intersectionality, Feminist Literature, Sexual Violence, Female Solidarity, Female Empowerment, and Virginity.

Introduction

Full paper

Alice Walker, an African American novelist, poet, and essayist, gained widespread recognition for her 1982 novel The Color Purple, which earned her both the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. In the 1970s, Alice Walker's career took off, establishing her as both a writer and a teacher. Demonstrating her versatility, she delved into various literary forms, including short stories, novels, poetry, and essays. Despite the diversity of her work, a certain consistency is evident, with recurring themes such as racism, sexism, the artist's role, the interplay between art and life, the pursuit of "spiritual health and self-definition" (3), and environmental concerns weaving through her body of work. While displaying a particular fondness for exploring "the oppressions, insanities, loyalties, and triumphs of black women" (Walker 250), she articulates her broader focus on "the spiritual survival, the survival whole of [her] people" (250). Additionally, Walker frequently incorporates autobiographical elements, shedding light on the political, social, and moral conditions of the Southern United States in her writings. Richer Wesley rightly remarks that "like the best writers of any era, Walker has probed deeply into the soul of the nation in which she was bred and in doing so, has brought to the light our country's dark secrets" (15).

Published in 1982, the novel The Color Purple serves as a culmination of the themes explored in Alice Walker's prior works. The novel achieves tremendous success, solidifying Walker's standing as a writer by earning her both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1983. Furthermore, in 1985, the novel undergoes adaptation into a movie directed by Steven Spielberg. Concurrently, in 1983, Walker releases In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, a collection of essays encompassing her writings from previous decades. Through this compilation of what Walker terms "womanist prose," she strengthens her position as a black feminist on a theoretical level, introducing the term "Womanism" to articulate her perspective within the realm of black feminism. The aim of Alice Walker is very much implied when she writes, "We are not whites: We are not Euopeans. We are black like the African themselves and that we and the Africans will be working for a common goal; the uplift of black people everywhere" (11). In 1949, De Beauvoir vehemently highlighted the complete male dominance of Western society. She

emphasized that women in this society were considered the "second sex" and the "other" in relation to men. "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. he is the subject, he is eh Absolute—she is the Other" (59). Kate Millet, a renowned feminist, similarly expressed the concept of "the other" in her seminal work, "Sexual Politics." She proclaimed this perspective as "patriarchy has already been established and the male has already set themselves as the human form, the subject and referen t to which is the female is 'other' or alien" (25).

Continuing the thread of their unique heritage, black people have perpetually regarded themselves and their lived experiences as inseparable from the broader fabric of American life throughout the centuries. In their literary creations, they have employed diverse approaches to articulate what W.E.B. Du Bois termed their "double consciousness." This concept, as elucidated by Du Bois, involves... "[A black person] ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, Byerman, np). Simone de Beauvoir, in her seminal work The Second Sex make a similar observation observation:

> Women's actions have never been more than symbolic agitation; they have won only what men have been willing to concede to them; they have taken nothing; they have received. It is that they lack the concrete means to organize themselves into a unit that could posit itself in opposition. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and unlike the proletariat, they have no solidarity of labor or interests; they even lack their own space that makes communities of American blacks, the Jews in ghettos, or the workers in Saint-Denis or Renault factories. They live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests, and social conditions to certain men—fathers or husbands—more closely than to other women. As bourgeois women, they are in solidarity with bourgeois men and not with women proletarians; as white women, they are in solidarity with white men and not with black women. (28-29)

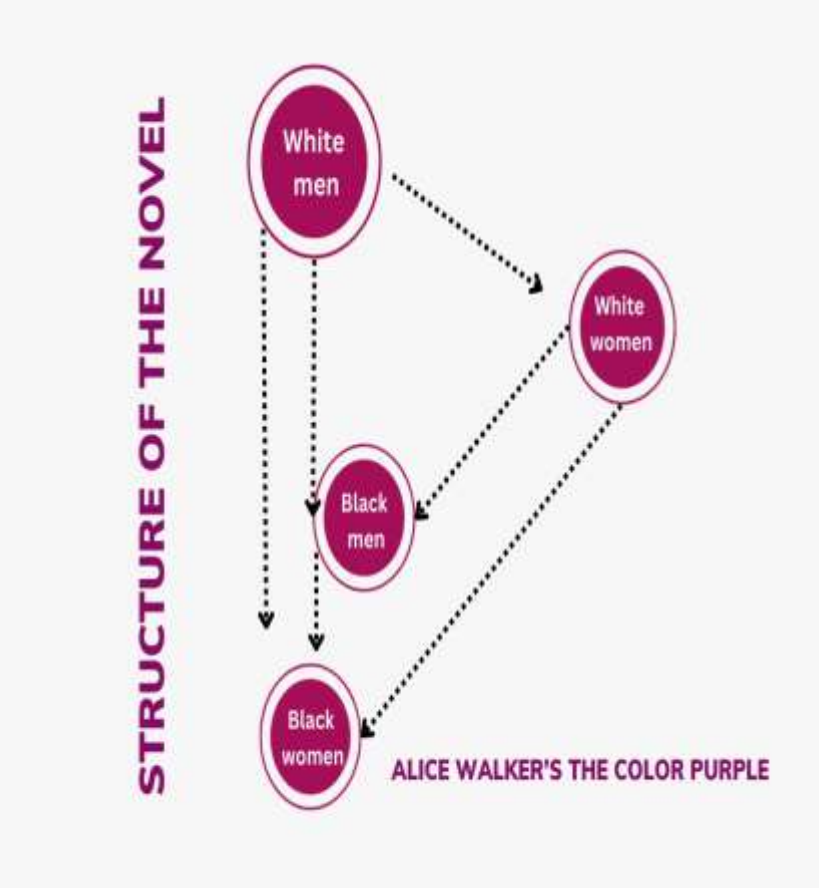
Alice Walker introduces the term "Womanism" in her essay collection titled In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. At the outset of the collection, she provides a definition of this concept as "feminist, Afrocentric, healing, embodied, and spiritual" (Razak 100). She illustrates this by means of the metaphor of the garden in which "the women and men of different colors coexist like flowers in a garden yet retain their cultural distinctiveness and integrity" (Collins 11).

The Color Purple explores the complex and often harsh realities of African American women in the early 20th century. The story is narrated through letters written by the main character, Celie, who is a young black girl subjected to abuse and exploitation by her father and later her husband. The novel unfolds as Celie discovers her own strength and resilience, navigating through issues of racism, sexism, and the broader societal challenges faced by African Americans. The novel explores the themes of female empowerment, self-discovery, and the importance of sisterhood. Through Celie's relationships with other women, particularly the strong-willed and independent Shug Avery, the narrative explores the transformative power of female bonds. The Color Purple also addresses the impact of religion and spirituality on Celie's understanding of herself and the world around her. One of the distinctive aspects of the novel is its use of dialect and unique narrative style, allowing the reader to intimately connect with Celie's voice and experiences. Despite its success, the novel has also faced criticism for its explicit content and portrayal of certain characters. The writings of the activist author Alice Walker are notably radical, serving as the conduit for her activism. In her collection of essays, she expresses her radical perspectives:

> Each story or poem has a formula, usually two-thirds "hate whiteys guts" and one-third "I am black, beautiful, strong and almost always right". Art is not flattery, necessarily, and work of any artist must be more difficult than that. A man's life can rarely be summed up in one word; even if that word is black or white. And it is the duty of an artist to present the man as he is. (137)

The term has gained widespread recognition over time. With this statement, Walker suggests a shared foundation between the concepts, yet underscores their undeniable distinctions. By concluding with this sentence, she effectively completes the circular nature of her definition, mirroring her initial observation in the collection's first entry that a womanist is, in essence, a black feminist. The rationale behind her choice of purple and lavender as reference colors, as opposed to, for instance, blue and violet, remains unclear. The association does prompt thoughts of The Color Purple, but whether this was a deliberate intention on Walker's part is uncertain. As demonstrated, gender holds significant importance in shaping the identity of black women, in addition to the impact of race. Numerous black female scholars have emphasized that while the black community collectively confronts racism, black women uniquely contend with sexism both externally and within their own community. While it is evident that most Black men lack the institutionalized patriarchal power and control over Black women's lives comparable to that wielded by privileged white men in society, it is undeniable

that they still exert considerable influence over the daily lives of Black women and children. (xii). The diagram provided illustrates the social structure depicted in the narrative:



The diagram elucidates the social hierarchy portrayed in the narrative. The arrows positioned above signify the prevailing oppression perpetrated by certain individuals. At the pinnacle of the societal structure are white men, signifying their complete authority. They exert oppression over white women, black men, and black women. In contrast, black women find themselves situated at the bottom of the social order, facing discrimination in their rights not only from white individuals but also from black men within the society. Sprouting in a lineage of men, the bulky woman with thunderous legs realizes that she can exist only by contending: “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” (Walker 38). Similarly Kate Millett in her Sexual politics states that:

> In the American South it was as a way to humiliate black victims of the Klan. In the Ancient East it was a barbarous form of punishment for crime. In the courts of the Italian Renaissance castration was a perverse method of providing soprano voices for the Papal Choir. It was felt that women

> were too profane to sing the holy offices so to supply the demand for the higher musical register, eunuchs were created through putting young men to the knife. (24-25)

On the opening page of the novel, Walker challenges the notion that stillness and respectability are automatically conducive to salvation. The writer challenges this notion throughout the novel as "You better not never tell nobody but God" (1). Celie's stepfather Alphonso is said to have said the line to her after raping her multiple times. Alphonso wants Celie to stay silent about his sexual abuse, but Celie goes on to write letters to God sharing her story, which negates Alphonso's threat. According to Martha Cutter, "the rape becomes not an instrument of silencing, but the catalyst to Celie's search for voice" (166). Celie writes a startling account of Alphonso's maltreatment in her first letter to God: "He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it" (1-2). Walker employs Celie's poor linguistic orientation to make the reader understand the suffering caused by the abuse she is going through. The novelist thus fictionalizes the patriarchal mindset that suppresses the female voice. Eisenstein, therefore, rightly observes that, Patriarchy advocates to "destroy woman's consciousness about her potential power, which derives from the necessity of society to reproduce itself (14). Manganyi emphasizes that Black Consciousness (BC) goes beyond merely representing skin color. He contends that the sociological portrayal of the black body as synonymous with unwholesomeness deeply influences the existential experience of black individuals. As a result, the philosophy of BC is compelled to originate from the existential reality of the black body:

> In other words, it has determined part of the totality of the experience of which we are being called upon to be conscious. In terms of our body, then, we may say that we are being called upon to experience our black bodies in a revitalised way. We are being called upon to change the negative sociological schema imposed upon us by whites (18).

In The Color Purple, Alice Walker strategically employs the term "virgin" to encapsulate Celie's complex and transformative journey, both physically and emotionally. This deliberate choice of language serves as a nuanced exploration of Celie's evolving identity within the novel's broader themes of oppression, liberation, and self-discovery. The term "virgin" also carries cultural and religious connotations, often tied to purity and innocence. In the context of Celie's early life, marked by sexual abuse and victimization, Walker's use of this label underscores the societal expectations that attempt to define and

confine women based on their sexual experiences. Celie, initially labeled as a "virgin," is emblematic of the oppressive norms that restrict women's agency and self-determination. As Celie's character undergoes a profound transformation throughout the story, her designation as a "virgin" becomes symbolic of her rebirth and liberation. Walker skillfully utilizes this term to mark key moments in Celie's sexual and emotional awakening. The intentional use of the label allows readers to witness Celie's progression from a state of imposed innocence to an empowered understanding and ownership of her body and desires. J. C. Hall, therefore, concludes that The Color Purple is "an ant-story: anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist" (90). According to Lisa Tuttle, the ultimate aim of feminist criticism is to "to develop and uncover a female tradition of writing," "to analyze women writers and their writings from a female perspective", "to rediscover old texts", "to interpret symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view" "to resist sexism in literature and to increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style". (184)

The intentional use of the term "virgin" also emphasizes the power dynamics embedded in language. As Celie gains agency over her own narrative, the reclamation of language becomes a tool for empowerment. Walker's choice of words contributes to Celie's gradual assertion of control over her identity and the way she is perceived by herself and others. Celie's label as a "virgin" intersects with broader themes of racism, sexism, and the historical context of the novel. The term becomes a lens through which Walker examines the layers of oppression faced by black women during this period, highlighting the interconnected nature of societal expectations and their impact on individual lives.

In one of the conversations, Celie expresses her realization, "Oh, Celie, there are colored people in the world who want us to know! Want us to grow and see the light! They are not all mean like Pa and Albert, or beaten down like ma was." (74) Celie's step-son's wife, Sofia Butler, comes to life as a shining example of sisterhood. She serves as a significant role model for Celie, following her sister Nettie, as an independent woman. As critic Amy Sickels puts it "Sofia is the first woman Celie encounters who successfully resists male abuse, she is one of the women in the novel who will challenge Celie's passivity and influence her development into an independent woman" (40).

However, Sofia has challenged Celie to be a strong woman, therefore their friendship is now extremely important. Sofia's resistance is made possible by the backing of her family and the fact that she has been subjected to similar treatment and violence from males throughout her life. Walker views black women's sisterhood as

a crucial component of female resistance. She then advises Celie to resist since a female in a family of men is not safe:

> 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 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. Now if you want a dead son-in-law you just keep on advising him like you doing (45)

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. states in the opening of Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology (1990) "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." (1) Celie's journey of self-assertion corresponds to her personal growth, evolving from a timid individual to a competent and industrious woman. Additionally, Nettie's relocation to Africa not only allows her to fulfill her role as a missionary but also presents the opportunity to rescue Celie's children, who had been sold. As Celie undergoes self-discovery, her narrative undergoes a transformation. Initially, her letters merely recounted events without delving into understanding or interpreting them. Over time, she starts to make observations and express her own emotions and 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). Mogu says that "the quest for economic emancipation of African American women would be better pursued in the community and family instead of gender or sex" (97).

Due to her husband's reluctance to meet her needs, she is prohibited from wearing her favorite colors, purple or red. Celie takes a decisive step towards liberation by embracing Shug's suggestions and launching her own clothing company, Folkspants Unlimited Company. Despite being an illiterate black woman, Celie asserts her intelligence, creative strength, confidence, and economic independence by immersing herself in the artistic pursuit of making pants, supported by her persistent physical efforts and encouragement from Sofia. Celie's perception of life undergoes a transformation, and her societal position strengthens as she envisions herself producing pants in Shug's dining room. She boldly ventures into exploring the world on her own terms, rejecting others' opinions, and forging ahead with her current line of work. The Color Purple symbolizes Celie's financial liberation, as she begins to see herself as an essential, contributing member of the community, valuing her own existence and creativity.

In the narrative arc of The Color Purple, Celie undergoes a profound psychological and spiritual journey toward self-discovery and individuality. A pivotal moment in this transformative process is her experience of sexual fulfillment with Shug. “Celie experiences her sexual awakening because her lesbian desire lead her to Shug, a woman uniquely suited to help her combate and defeat the masculinist oppression preventing her liberation” (63). Through this intimate connection, Celie finds a sense of security and embraces the rare gift of unconditional love. The exploration and understanding of her own body, guided by Shug, become instrumental in triggering Celie’s desire for personal integrity, leading her towards a final release from the constraints that had limited her self-expression and autonomy. This event marks a crucial step in Celie’s evolution as she moves beyond the constraints imposed on her and begins to define her identity on her own terms.

Celie does not write, of course, with such lofty intentions. God is not problematic for her, nor is she looking for self-unfoldment. She starts out just wanting a sign “letting me know what is happening to me” (11). Celie becomes more physically aware and appreciative of grace once she first notices her sex organ in the mirror and declares, “It’s mine.” Celie’s contemplation of Shug signals her transition to be the other female and shows that, despite having two children, she is incapable of engaging in sensual ejaculation. There is another moment that reaches its climax with a blend of maternal and infantile ecstasy for Celie. “Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a lost baby too.” (109)

Alice Walker gives black female characters in The Color Purple the chance to stand up for themselves in a patriarchal society, develop their identities, and take on a social role. Celie becomes a brave warrior who defends her rights as a result, changing from a timid non-fighter. Because of her uprising, she succeeds in linear time and enters the sewing industry, defying patriarchal beliefs. Instead of spending all of her time doing housework, she starts a sewing business and grows financially.

The religious and spiritual dimensions of Celie’s identity are intricately woven into the narrative. Walker critiques the misuse of religion to enforce submission and control, particularly in the lives of black women. As Celie’s spiritual understanding evolves, she transcends the limitations imposed by a dogmatic interpretation of faith. Her spiritual journey becomes a vehicle for empowerment, challenging the oppressive forces that seek to confine her. The exploration of Celie’s intersections also involves her relationships with other women. Sisterhood emerges as a powerful force of support and resilience, transcending the boundaries of race and

social class. Celie's connections with women like Shug Avery and Sofia highlight the transformative potential of female solidarity in the face of systemic oppression.

Celie's intersections within the broader social and historical context in novel illuminate the multifaceted nature of her identity. Through Celie, Walker invites readers to reflect on the enduring impact of societal norms and the transformative power of individual agency in the face of systemic adversity. The novel stands as a timeless exploration of identity, resilience, and the quest for selfhood within the intricate tapestry of social history. C. Hamilton in "Alice Walker's Politics or Politics of The Color Purple." Observes on the novel as:

> …the brutal sexual violence done to a nearly illiterate black woman child who then proceeds to write down what has happened to her in her own language from her own point of view. She does not find rape thrilling; she thinks the rapist looks like a frog with a snake between his legs. How could this not be upsetting? Shocking? How could anyone want to hear this? (382)

Richard Wesley, a highly positive reviewer of the book, The Color Purple, expresses his favorable stance in his review for Ms. Magazine. As an African-American male, Wesley notes that he finds little in the book and the film that is offensive concerning the portrayal of black men. In his analysis, he identifies Mr. as emblematic of "male privilege" and points out the perpetuation of a detrimental dynamic where black men imitate the oppressive power structures, and black women, in turn, submit to them. Wesley highlights that this troubling relationship, exemplified by Celie and Mr., continues to unfold in homes across America as long as these patterns persist. Wesley counters critics who fault the novel for presenting a negative image of black males. He argues that Alice Walker, by depicting these uncomfortable truths, is essentially airing societal issues in public, forcing both men and women to confront their failures. He acknowledges that such revelations may be unwelcome to many, but he stresses the importance of acknowledging and addressing these realities. Wesley passionately supports the novel's right to bring forth these challenging narratives. He asserts that no one, especially in black America, should dictate what writers may or may not express. Wesley emphasizes the crucial role of writers as the societal antennae, compelled to speak about uncomfortable truths when others hesitate. The novel explores a black feminist awakening, serves as a paradigm for the revitalization of a black feminist literary tradition. If the presence of such a tradition was previously characterized by "white page" and historical silence, Walker disrupts the conventional space by embracing its void or absence (Hall 1). Biko argues that a crucial step in reclaiming dignity for Black people

involves celebrating the heroes of African history and promoting African heritage. This effort aims to dismantle the notion of Africa as the "dark continent." Black consciousness strives to highlight the positive values embedded in indigenous African cultures, establishing them as a benchmark for self-evaluation among Black individuals. This represents an initial form of resistance against imperialism and Apartheid. According to him, 'what black consciousness seeks to do is to produce at the output end of the process, real black people who do not consider themselves as appendages to white society'. (3).

Because their stories end with a positive rebuilding of the female self within the framework of the family and community, black female writers remain optimistic despite instances of female oppression. As Celie accepts her body and breaks free from the bonds of her soul, spirit, and financial constraints, she becomes free. She finds liberation through the letters, which she uses to voice-over her existential moments and her relationships with Nettie, Sofia, and Shug. Every hidden detail becomes apparent when one approaches the work from a feminist critical position. Women who must subsist under the dominance of their fathers or husbands should be nourished with an unwavering spirit and have faith in their identity, self, and the conceivability of their valuable existence. Celie's story of survival turns into a narrative about the search and her reunion with the all-powerful entity. Even though Celie has often been hurt, she serves as a leading voice for the other women, pointing them in the direction of a more sophisticated and liberated existence free from male control or coercion. Barbara Christian thus concludes "Walker's Celie comes close to liberating herself through the community of black sisters, Nettie, Sophie, and Shug, and is able to positively affect the men of her world" (32). Celie's concluding letter resonates as a hymn of triumph, unveiling a newly discovered harmony between the protagonist and the universe both within and beyond.

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