

Research Article

Female Resilience and Empowerment in *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

Dr. Moussa SANE

Cheikh Anta DIOP University of Dakar (Senegal), Department of English, American Studies.

Abstract:

In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, female resilience and empowerment are central themes demonstrated through the protagonist's journey from a silenced victim of abuse to an independent, self-assured woman. This transformation has become possible thanks to a female solidarity through a network of **sisterhood**, **meaning economic independence**, and **spiritual growth** which help pave the way to success for the main character, Celie. Thus, this article highlights how Celie, the protagonist of the novel succeeds in showing signs of resilience and empowerment thanks to women like Shug Avery, Nettie, and Sofia who provide vital support networks that help her reclaim her voice, dignity, and identity, illustrating how empowerment often comes through sisterhood.

Keywords: Snake Envenomation, Quality of Life, Lived Experiences, Snakebite

Résumé:

Dans le roman intitulé *La Couleur Pourpre* d'Alice Walker, la résilience et l'émancipation des femmes sont des thèmes centraux, illustrés par le parcours du protagoniste, qui passe du statut de victime silencieuse face aux abus à celui de femme indépendante et sûre d'elle. Cette transformation a été rendue possible grâce à la solidarité féminine à travers un réseau de sororité, synonyme d'indépendance économique et de croissance spirituelle qui a aidé à ouvrir la voie du succès à Celie, le personnage principal du roman. Ainsi, cet article met en évidence la manière dont Celie, l'héroïne du roman, parvient à faire preuve de résilience et d'émancipation grâce à des femmes telles que Shug Avery, Nettie et Sofia, qui lui apportent un soutien essentiel et l'aident à retrouver sa voix, sa dignité et son identité, illustrant ainsi comment l'émancipation passe souvent par la sororité.

Mots-clés: Racisme, émancipation, résilience, sexisme, oppression, discrimination.

Introduction

The Color Purple is a novel in which Alice Walker, Alice Malison Walker by her real name, skillfully deals with the difficulties that Blacks in general, and African American women in particular were trying to cope with in a society where they were suffering from racism, classism, but also from the consequences of sexism and the patriarchal culture. The novel unfolds the events of black male brutality towards black women. It exposes the ways that the main character, Celie succeeds in achieving freedom despite unspeakable difficulties she is made to undergo such as ill-treatment, recurrent rapes followed by a pregnancy. Celie goes through a difficult journey of racial and patriarchal oppression before achieving sovereignty.

As a result, Celie gives birth to two children (Olivia and Adam) following her rapes, the latter are taken away from her by her rapist, her stepfather called Pa (Alphonso). Unfortunately for her, the protagonist remains barren throughout her later life. She is married to Mr. (Albert) who turns her life into hell by making her suffer from all kinds of oppression.

It is a fact that black Americans were not equal to their white counterparts in the early twentieth century, especially women, who faced various forms of oppression from different parts of the American society. In fact, if Black men suffered from racism during that time, Black women were triply oppressed, for they were as mentioned above, victims of racism, sexism and classism. Thus, the title of the novel *The Color Purple* is connected to the historical context of the early 20th-century American South, referencing the discrimination and abuse faced by African American women during that period such as the legacy of slavery and the "Jim Crow" laws which made it impossible for black people to use the same water fountains, lunch counters, and bathrooms as whites. These laws also made it difficult for African-Americans to get access to education at the white-dominated universities of the country, have the right to vote to name but these.

In fact, racism, classism, sexism and the social patriarchal order have for so long oppressed, ill-treated, underestimated and relegated Black women to the private spheres. They have always been considered as third-class citizens as shown by Bell Hooks in her book entitled *Ain't I a Woman*:

Black women are one of the most devalued female groups in American society, and they have been the recipients of a male abuse and cruelty that has known no bounds or limits. Since the black woman has been stereotyped by both white and black men as the "bed" woman, she has not been able to ally herself with men from either group to get protection from the other. Neither group feels that she deserves protection ... most young black men see their female companions solely as objects to be exploited ... referred to

black female as "that bitch" or "that whore". Their perception of the black female as a degraded sexual object is similar to white male perceptions of the black female. (Bell Hooks, 1982 p.108)

In addition, history shows that men have always taken advantage of women for their own benefits, and they have been seen as impediments to the progress of women on multiple levels especially in education, socially and even economically by preventing them from getting involved in the establishment of their own business, thus gain economic independence. Furthermore, this system has had many horrendous consequences on women exemplified in their sexual, economic, spiritual and psychological states.

It is for this particular reason that we have witnessed the birth of feminist movements, and above all, writers who claim for women to be given the same rights as men. Most importantly, feminist groups had the strong belief that women have the ability to take part in the activities in relation to politics, economics, education and you name it.

Thus, among the latter, we have Alice Walker who is one of the most outstanding American writers of all time. Born in rural Georgia in 1944 to sharecroppers, she overcame a childhood eye injury and segregation to excel academically, attend Sarah Lawrence College, and become a key figure in the Civil Rights Movement, where she coined the term "womanist".

Known for her insightful portrayal of African American life and culture, Alice Walker is a very prolific writer, an activist, a poet, a short story writer, an essayist. She is the author of a huge number of productions among which we have [*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*](#) (1970), [*Meridian*](#) (1976), [*Possessing the Secret of Joy*](#) (1992), [*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*](#) (1983) and most importantly *The Color Purple*, her masterpiece which enabled her to win the Pulitzer Prize for literature and the National Book Award.

As shown above, through *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker explores key themes such as racism, sexism, abuse and violence, laying the emphasis on Black women's oppression in the early twentieth-century South. She also skillfully counterbalances these with themes such as **female solidarity, identity, self-discovery, spiritual awakening and the strength of sisterhood, focusing on how women resist the social patriarchal structures and find liberation through community**, and self-acceptance, culminating in empowerment and resilience.

However, this article is aimed at showing the steps taken by the protagonist of the novel with the support of other female characters, which led to her freedom. Thus, for a good analysis of the theme of Female Resilience and Empowerment in this book, we will first and foremost delve deep into the impact of sisterhood and mutual support in the life of the protagonist, Celie. Secondly, see how economic independence helps her break free from her oppressive husband and the patriarchal yoke, and eventually see how she succeeds in gaining her freedom through **Self-discovery**.

I. Female Resilience and Empowerment through Sisterhood and Mutual Support

In *The Color Purple*, the most crucial element of female empowerment is the support network among women. Celie's relationships with other strong female characters provide the foundation for her self-discovery and freedom. Female empowerment and resilience are built through sisterhood and mutual support, meaning through the creation of a network that provides emotional backing, favors a sense of belonging, and empowers individuals to overcome adversity. This support helps women cope with various ordeals and challenges, build confidence, and achieve goals by creating safe spaces for vulnerability, encouraging shared experiences, and enabling collective action and growth.

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker portrays sisterhood as a crucial tool for female resilience and empowerment against a deeply rooted and systemic misogyny, racism, and violence. Through her relationships with her biological sister called Nettie and her friends Shug Avery and Sofia, the protagonist, Celie transforms from a voiceless, oppressed young woman into an independent and self-assured individual.

Both Shug and Celie help each other find who they really are and bring out the best in each other, as they both felt confined in their roles because of people's perception of them. Shug becomes Celie's role model and helps Celie find a new outlook in life. Celie begins to grow stronger and find who she truly is, how to love and what it means to be loved. Shug can be seen in a metaphorical way as a missionary in Celie's life, like the missionaries in the Olinka. It is Shug who makes Mr____, Celie's husband stop pestering Celie and she also helps Celie find the letters from her little sister, Nettie, which her husband had been hiding from her. Finding these letters gives Celie the courage and strength she needs to break free from Mr____. Shug inspires Celie to create her own business, helping her find a new passage in her life for her passion and creativity, giving her more personal and financial freedom. In fact, Shug is the first character who has made Celie feel valued, this can be read when she dedicates a song to her: "*This song I'm bout to sing is call Miss Celie's song*" (Walker. A., 2004, p.70) Celie feels important for the first time in her life when Shug dedicates and sings a song to her at Harpo's bar, thus, giving her a sense of identity. "*First time somebody made something and name it after me.*" (Alice Walker, 2004, p.70) As the two of them become closer they begin a lesbian relationship, but this goes beyond just sex. Shug helps to give Celie a sense of identity making her feel sexually, physically and emotionally at ease. Thus, the novel explores the exploration of desire and sexuality as a path to self-discovery and emancipation, particularly for the protagonist, Celie.

This also symbolizes motherhood because Shug is the reason why Celie gains a sense of importance in the novel. With Shug's guidance and love, growing into an independent individual becomes possible for Celie.

In addition, it is obvious that through Shug, Alice Walker affirms female power, she is the character who embraces the real powers that Walker wants women to embody. Her real name is Lillie, but she is named as Shug, which is the short for sugar. She is a very

successful and wealthy singer who has travelled a lot thanks to her financial independence as Celie states, “*She sing every weekend now at Harpo’s. He make right smart money off of her, and she make some too. Plus she getting strong again and stout*” (Alice Walker, 2004, p. 71) This shows once more that Shug leads a lifestyle that is completely different from that of the overwhelming majority of Black women who feel downplayed, underestimated and incapable of breaking free from the patriarchal yoke. Contrary to other women, Shug chooses her own way, path and lifestyle. She sleeps with whoever she pleases. She has a number of affairs with various people, most of whom are very young as Celie comments:

She singing all over the country these days. Everybody know her name. She know everybody, too. Know Sophie Tucker, know Duke Ellington, know folks I am never heard of. And money. She makes so much money she don’t know what to do with it. She got a fine house in Memphis, another car. She got one hundred pretty dresses. A room full of shoes. She buy Grady anything he thinks he want. (Alice Walker, 2004, p. 101)

Shug later leaves Celie for a nineteen-year-old man called Germaine, her final fling. He is very significant in Shug and Celie’s relationship because Celie and Albert become closer while Shug is with Germaine. Albert realizes for the first time that Celie is a good company and Celie equally enjoys her friendship with Albert. “*Then the old devil put his arms around me and just stood there on the porch with me real quiet. He ain’t Shug, but he begin to be somebody I can talk to.*” (Alice Walker, p. 250) When Shug and Germaine’s relationship is over, Shug returns to Celie, but Celie’s relationship with Albert makes Shug jealous. This is an emotion that Celie felt when Shug and Albert were so close earlier in the novel. Shug’s time away from Celie made her realize how much she loves Celie and brought them both closer.

Thus, it becomes clear that Shug and Celie’s relationship is indeed very significant because it helps Celie grow from an uneducated, submissive, weak girl to an independent strong woman by the end of the novel. Celie’s and Shug’s relationship was important to Celie because Shug made Celie feel important. This improves Celie’s confidence and allows her to grow into the woman she has become and helped Celie find her identity.

However, it is also important to note that beyond the vital support of sisterhood, Celie’s independence has also been realized thanks to the struggle she led in order to become financially independent.

II. Female Resilience and Empowerment through Economic independence

In Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, economic independence is a critical and transformative force that underpins female resilience and empowerment. For the protagonist Celie, achieving financial autonomy is essential to breaking free from decades of patriarchal oppression, domestic abuse, and social marginalization.

Celie understands that if a woman is economically free, she can be free in every aspect of her life like having her own ideas, and relying on herself. This is the reason why she sets up her own business with the help of Shug to be able to make money. Thus, Celie makes use of her creativity to establish her own job and puts into practice her ability and her own taste to design clothes, so this reflects her inner beauty and self-confidence. Celie’s journey toward economic independence begins when, with the encouragement of Shug Avery, she puts into practice her domestic skill of sewing by opening a business enterprise.

As shown above, Shug has played an important role in making Celie become financially independent. Shug has a prosperous career, her own home and many more opportunities thanks to her music industry. Because of her financial independence, Shug never stays at one place or with one person. She acts more manly than most of the black men as Celie confirms, “*She work late, sleep late, get up late ... It a big round pink house, look sort of like some kind of fruit. It got windows and doors and a lot of trees round it,*” (Alice Walker, 2004, p. 76). She is able to keep many boyfriends because of her financial stability. Thus, thanks to Shug, Celie takes sewing, a traditional and often devalued domestic chore, and turns it into an entrepreneurial endeavor. Shug suggests Celie:

Let’s put a few advertisements in the paper, she say. And let’s raise your prices a hefty notch. And let’s just go ahead and give you this dining room for your factory and get you some more women in here to cut and sew, while you sit back and design. You making your living, Celie, she says. Girl, you on your own way. (Alice Walker, 2004, p.193)

Thus, Celie opens a sewing shop known as “*Miss Celie’s Fancy Pants*”. This act reclaims women’s labor and proves its value, both practically and symbolically. The money she earns from selling her uniquely designed pants for women and men gives her an income stream independent of her abusive husband, Mr. ____ (Albert). This financial security is a necessary prerequisite condition for her physical and emotional departure from her oppressive marriage.

Thus, this business allows Celie a form of creative self-expression previously denied to her. She changes the fabric, the print, the style, and the fit, which reflects her newfound ability to make choices and define her own life, a stark contrast to her earlier voiceless existence.

By earning her own money, Celie no longer has to rely on men for her livelihood, directly challenging the patriarchal structure that bound her to a life of servitude. Thus, her business allows her to break free from male dominance. In fact, the business serves as an inspiration for other women, such as Squeak (Mary Agnes), who also finds her voice and independence through a career in singing. In essence, economic independence provides Celie with the practical means to escape her immediate circumstances, while also serving as a potent symbol of her ultimate psychological and spiritual liberation. It solidifies her transformation from a victim into a strong, autonomous woman who is “free”. Thus, her business in making pants provides her with a financial autonomy which is crucial to her independence and self-worth, and eventually helps by the end of the novel reclaim her identity from the abusive forces that sought to undermine her:

I sit in the dining room making pants after pants. I got pants now in every color and size under the sun. Since us started making pants down home, 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 the fullness of the leg. (Alice Walker, 2004, p.191)

Becoming an independent woman is something that marks the turning point in Celie's life and creates a situation that makes her feel as if she is born again given that her dream of becoming an independent female has come true. Thus, she regains her stolen personality and confidence after achieving financial independence, and eventually has the chance of emancipating herself.

Celie's economic independence blossoms through her pant-making business, symbolized by her declaration, **"I'm poor, I'm black. I may be ugly and can't cook. But I'm here,"** (Alice Walker, 2004, p.172) This statement marks her initial realization of self, a precursor to self-sufficiency, even if still defined by societal constraints. It also asserts her existence beyond oppression, and later, her transformation into a confident businesswoman who provides for herself and others, finding purpose and self-worth, demonstrating how financial freedom enables her to own her life.

Thus, through Celie's economic success, the author, Alice Malison Walker wants to show African American women that despite the endless burden upon their shoulders, the multiple injustices inflicted upon them, they can get out of the patriarchal yoke by believing in their potentials, their abilities to change their miserable situations. In this regard, Walker did not only write the novel to give a voice for women but also to guide them to the right way that they have to follow to regain their liberation.

III. Resilience and Empowerment through Self-discovery and Voice

The color purple symbolizes female resilience and empowerment through the protagonist's journey from abuse to liberation, supported by strong female relationships and self-discovery. The narrative highlights how sisterhood provides a vital support system for women to find their voice, recognize their worth, and overcome the systemic oppression they face. Resilience and empowerment is further achieved through spiritual and financial independence, as Celie builds a successful business and reclaims her identity.

In fact, self-discovery and empowerment are central themes that are primarily embodied by the protagonist's transformation from a passive, abused young girl into a self-assured woman, supported by female relationships, economic independence through her sewing business, and a spiritual journey that challenges patriarchal oppression and celebrates the resilience of Black women.

The protagonist Celie starts as a quiet, voiceless victim of abuse, but through her experiences and relationships, she learns to express herself and stand up for her rights by rejecting patriarchal norms, achieving spiritual awakening that allows her to develop a stronger sense of self and embrace her individuality. So, Celie and other women in the novel actively resist and overcome the oppressive forces of the patriarchal culture they live in, which is marked by racial and gender injustice.

It is obvious that solidarity among women is one of the key factors of self-discovery and empowerment in the novel. The collective experience of Black women struggling for agency and dignity forms the basis of their empowerment, illustrating the transformative power of women's relationships and support systems.

The novel is ultimately, a journey of self-discovery for Celie and for other characters. Celie begins the novel as a passive, quiet young girl, socked by her own pregnancy following multiple rapes in the hands of her stepfather called Pa, and her ill-treatment by her own husband called Mr. _____ in the novel. These incidents shock the protagonist to such an extent that she wonders what she has done wrong to deserve this. Given that she trusts none, she talks to God about her sufferings as she states:

DEAR GOD, I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me... He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. firt 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 used to it. (Alice Walker, 2004, p.11)

Thus, the abovementioned statement is the evidence of Celie's traumatic experience as a fourteen-year-old girl. She is then forced to get accustomed to this given that she does not have the ability to resist her step father's recurrent assaults as she puts it: *"But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive"* (Alice Walker, 2004, p.26) Slowly, after seeing her sister run away, Celie develops practical skills. She works hard in the fields, learns how to manage a house and raise children, and she meets other inspiring women such as Shug and Sofia who have always had to fight men in their lives.

Furthermore, she discovers her own sexuality and capacity to love through her developing romance with Shug. Eventually, Celie discovers that her sister Nettie has been writing to her all along, and this, with the help of Shug, allows Celie to cope with various injustices inflicted upon her. She confronts Mr. _____, and moves to Memphis with Shug in order to begin her own pants company, and eventually make enough money to gain her independence. Celie's life begins to change when she inherits her biological father's estate, allowing her greater financial freedom, and she manages to repair her relationship with Mr. _____ and create a kind of family with Mr. _____ Shug, Harpo, Sofia, Squeak, Nettie, and her own children.

Nettie's arc is also one of self-discovery. Nettie receives more years of schooling than does Celie, and Nettie has seen the world, working as a missionary in Africa, and eventually marrying a kind and intelligent man. But Nettie also realizes that she can balance her independence, and her desire to work, with a loving married life that also includes two stepchildren, Celie's children named Olivia and Adam. Indeed, it is the arrival of this extended family on Celie's land at the end of the novel that signals the last stage in both Celie's and Nettie's journey of self-discovery. The sisters have found themselves, and now, as the novel ends, they have found each other.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, it becomes crystal clear that Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is a novel that outstandingly describes the horrendous conditions of black women in an American society where they were trying hard to break free from the patriarchal yoke and white domination. Through a skillful description of the protagonist named Celie, Walker shows how women are bound to struggle in order to put an end to the longstanding chains of injustices inflicted upon them by the social structures that worked in favor of men, considering them as mere sexual tools under the will and whims of men. The author reconstructs Celie's identity of an abused black woman into an independent one.

As a poor and uneducated black woman, Celie succeeds in transforming her environment with the unwavering support of other women such as her sister Nettie and her friend Shug. She is described as an ambitious character that influences the readers by her strength, determination, faith and courage. Through this excellent novel, Alice Walker shows that sisterhood is key to the liberation of women. Being in contact with the aforementioned characters allows the protagonist, Celie to become aware that a woman can cut the bound with the oppressive patriarchal system and become free. Thus, it becomes obvious that solidarity among sisters, also known as sisterhood is the most impressive step that efficiently contributes in the process of Celie's liberation.

Bibliography

1. Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*, Phoenix – an imprint of Orient Books Ltd., London, 2004.
2. Dr. Prasanta Kumar Padhi, 2015. "A Study of Celie's Emancipation in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*", International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention ISSN (Online): 2319 – 7722, Volume 4 Issue.
3. Hooks, Bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism?* London: Pluto Press 1982.
4. R. RAAJITHA, "QUEST FOR SELF: A BRIEF STUDY OF ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*", Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL), Vol.5.Issue 3. 2017.

Ashraf Asa'd AL Qaisi, "Celie's Journey to Freedom: A Study of the Steps She Takes and the Means that Support Her in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*", MA Degree in English Language and Literature Department of English Language and Literature Faculty of Arts and Sciences Middle East University December, 2016.



Published by Research and Analysis Journals Journal, this is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

© The Author(s) 2026 _