

## Celie's Endeavors As The Liberal Feminism Symbol In Alice Walker's The Color Purple

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### Abstract

*Liberal Feminism has been one of highly discussed theme in literature works, especially novels. One the novels was Alice Walker's The Color Purple. This article discusses the main character's struggles to get free from abuse and oppression she experienced as a wife and a stepdaughter. Her reconciliation with her abusive husband in the end of the story was believed as a symbol of the success of liberal feminism movement.*

**Keywords:** *Liberal Feminism, The Color Purple, Abuse, Oppression.*

### INTRODUCTION

Feminism has been a great main topic in many literatures works. It has been a movement and an ideology that rising up along with education which most women get and to provide them with more skills to develop their lives. There are endless authors, novels, stories, researches in the field of feminism. One of them was Alice Walker who wrote The Color Purple. Alice Malsenior Walker is the author of the book The Color Purple. She was born on February 9, 1944, to parents Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker in the small Georgian town of Eatonton. Of her eight siblings—five boys and three girls—she was the youngest. Walker was mistakenly shot with a BB pistol by her brother when she was eight years old, leaving her blind in one eye. After the tragic event, Alice Walker became a withdrawn, melancholy, and lonesome young woman. Walker attended Spelman College in Atlanta after graduating from high school on a full scholarship in 1961 before transferring to Sarah Lawrence College in the vicinity of New York City in 1963.

This novel has reflected the issue of feminism and oppression in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cellie was the main character. She found herself sexually, mentally and physically abused and oppressed in the figure of stepdaughter and wife. Her struggles to get herself free were considered as a battle against women abuse and oppression which the author

might depicted from the social situation at that time.

For Celie, growing up at home has never been a safe or enjoyable experience. As her mother was ill, she couldn't refuse that Pa to have sex with her while they were together. Because of this, Pa's lusty gaze falls on Celie, starting years of torture. "When that hurt. I weep," Celie wrote in her prayers to God after the incident. "You best shut up and get accustomed to it," he says as he starts to choke me (Walker 2). Celie sticks to herself and refuses to speak to anyone out of fear of her father's menacing gaze.

In an effort to safeguard herself, Celie starts keeping a book of her experiences and confides in God—the only person she can trust. As He quickly establishes himself in her life as a reliable person with whom she feels comfortable to discuss her thoughts and feelings, writing helps her realize how important her relationship with God is. In order for the truth she speaks to be handled with respect, all she needs as a confidante is someone she loves and who truly feels the same way about her.

Celie's life drastically alters after marrying Mr. because she is now a subordinate wife. Celie was assaulted sexually, verbally, and physically in Mr.'s house, which was a dangerous place for her. She consequently used her letters as the only outlet she had to vent her rage and frustration. As a wife and a woman, Celie satisfies social expectations and

creates a new supply of domestic work, but under her husband's abhorrent tyranny, she is soon reduced to nothingness. This is a problem for Celie and other women in her situation, especially in a patriarchal society where men are empowered to assume the role of alpha male in their relationships and feel entitled to enjoy intimidating their female partners.

"In the text, the patriarchy maintains control by pushing the female body into a position of helplessness, therefore depriving the woman of the capacity to form an identity," author and English professor Wendy Wall claimed in her essay. Women are unable to discriminate between their male partners and determine independence because of their confinement in interiority and submission.

The story of development, sexism, racism, and the significance of one's identity is told via Celie, the novel's main character. The change from a naive, exploited teen to a powerful, independent woman who is not afraid to confront society and the patriarchy. Celie is a brave leader who wants to control her future. This is the aim of liberal feminism, to emphasize the existence of similar identities between women and men, constructing their basic assumption on freedom and equal degree between both genders.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Numerous authors have created works that investigated the circumstances of women in patriarchal civilizations. In literary works, women are typically portrayed in the context of their interaction with males in societies that are undoubtedly controlled by men.

Hook (1994, as cited in Torfs, 2008) asserts that patriarchy, the institutionalized structure of male dominance, encourages males of all races and classes to define their masculinity by acts of physical aggression and coercion toward others, women and children.

However, Alice Walker in her "The Color Purple" portrayed the condition of black women in American society. She highlighted that women were dominated and ill-treated by men and that they didn't have any right. "A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something" (Walker 1982, p. 144).

Following an article, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women," scholars agreed that Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1799) was the founder of liberal feminism. The economic and psychological harm that women experience as a result of their dependency and exclusion from society has been discussed in this article. Wollstonecraft outlined in her book how women should have an equal standing to men in terms of job, education, political rights, and even religious freedom. As time passed, the movement demanding women emancipation reached a global scale.

### **Liberal Feminism**

Feminism has different types. Liberal feminists argue that women as individuals are equal to men, and should therefore be given equal opportunities as men to pursue their own interests, that the state should limit its interference in society, that society's structure around the nuclear family is ideal, and should not be altered by the state, that women should maintain their roles as wives and mothers, and attain equality within this structure. They believe that this can be achieved by allowing women to gain an education, and giving them equal opportunities to pursue their career. Liberal feminism is for gradual reforms through advocacy for equal rights for all, and laws and policies that promote equality. (Samkange, 2015).

Liberal feminism accepts liberalism's core principles but argues that women haven't always had access to liberal individual rights. According to a liberal feminist, bias and prejudice against women, which have their roots in pre-modern, patriarchal systems of thought and social order, are the cause of this inequality. It is demonstrably untrue for patriarchy to think that women are less clever than men. Liberal feminism holds that there are few significant differences between men and women when it comes to the public arenas of law, politics, and work. Liberal feminism's message is arguably best summarized as "equal rights for women" (Axtmann, 2003).

Liberal feminism also places a strong emphasis on supporting individual women when they break free from the constraints of their gender conditioning. This philosophical

group of people believes that since women are capable of the same things as men, they should be treated equally. Liberal feminists prioritize equality, self-determination, dignity, and personal empowerment. (Smith, 2012). The goal of liberal feminism is to create a society where equality of opportunity is guaranteed. The origins of feminism stem from the late 18th-century with Mary Wollstonecraft's publications, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and later John Stuart Mill's article, "The Subjection of Women." This theory is rooted in the classic liberal thinking that individuals should be free to pursue their own goals and interests.

According to Crosianos (2009), liberal feminists believe that it is important to support women's rights and chances. Equal rights legislation, affirmative action, and other opportunity laws can be passed, as well as by political activity.

Liberal feminism puts a premium on equality for women in terms of their rights and opportunities. Freedom was defined by the liberal tradition as being free from intervention, particularly from the government. It was believed that with such independence, people might develop in accordance with their skills and aptitudes without being constrained by rules or obstacles from without. For a liberal, equality meant having equal access to opportunities (Braverman, 2012).

Liberal feminism in the 19th century, according to Mill and Taylor, prioritized women's equal liberty. There are two key ideas from Mill and Taylor that might be interpreted as the path toward equal freedom for women in the 19th century. First, allowing people—especially women—to follow their interests is typically the best approach to increase overall utility (happiness or pleasure), so long as no one interferes with or obstructs anybody else in the process. Second, society must grant women the same political freedoms, business chances, and educational opportunities that it does for men.

On the other hand, radical feminism is a viewpoint within feminism that calls for a radical restructuring of society in which male

supremacy is eliminated in all social and economic contexts, while also acknowledging that other social divisions, such as those based on race, class, and sexual orientation, also have an impact on women's experiences. Radical feminism emerged from the realization that society was set up against women, for their subordination and the ensuing empowerment of men, while aiming to end dominance and elitism in all interpersonal interactions. It believes that patriarchy oppresses women and favors males by dividing societal rights, advantages, and power primarily along sex lines. (Lewis, 2020).

In fact, other academics and critics have studied *The Color Purple* and come to various conclusions. The life of a black girl named Celie is portrayed in *The Color Purple*, who overcomes hardships like poverty, illiteracy, and physical and mental abuse by becoming self-aware and finding a respected place in American society (Radjuru, 2014). In the novel *The Color Purple*, Celie, a new black woman, is gradually formed as she progresses from patriarchal tyranny to enlightenment and independence. Celie, an African American girl who is poor and illiterate, is able to improve her circumstances. She is a symbol of optimism who inspires the readers with her tenacity, faith, and bravery. (Baga, 2010)

Walker portrays women who yearn for independence from harshness and intricate oppressive institutions. The story is absolutely wonderful in that it does not create a fictional universe; instead, it highlights the true color of black women and their way of life in the oppressed community, which only serves to further oppress them! Walker uses the protagonist Celie in Black society to give the voiceless a platform. *The Color Purple* captures significant literary criticism trends for women. Walker doesn't just criticize patriarchal tyranny; she also asserts the voiceless position of women. She also questions the polarity between femininity and masculinity, which is an important issue. Walker's characterization and story development reflect her interest regarding gender dynamics and roles. (Dhivya, 2016).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

In this study, the researcher used a qualitative research methodology to examine Cellie's struggle as the representation of liberal feminism in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* during the 19th century. The researcher uses this approach because, in order to obtain more pertinent data.

### **Source of the Data**

The source of the data is from the novel *The Color Purple*. Whereas the data for the research comprised all sentences and dialogues which were related to Cellie as the main character in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

The data analysis procedure included the data organization to make sure whether they are suitable for the theory that is used in this study. The researcher draws the result of data analysis by using the narrative presentation.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The subject of sexism, racism, and gender discrimination, as well as its detrimental psychological repercussions on women's minds, is covered in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. Walker criticizes various forms of discrimination in this book. The characters, notably the primary female characters Celie, Shug Avery, Sofia, and Squeak, don't have a fixed sense of who they are; instead, their sense of who they are changes depending on how they express themselves, what they want, and how other characters behave. The characters are affected by their own ideas and feelings, as well as by the desires and words of other characters.

As the novel opens, Celie confides in God and addresses him. As Celie's supposed to be father threatens her "you better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" Celie decides to write letters to God (Walker, p. 3). Albert, Celie's stepfather, rapes her as Celie's mother is sick and she is unable to fulfil her husband's sexual desires. The fourteen years old girl, Celie, cannot come to terms with repetitive rapes; moreover, her father tells her that she should "git used to it" "but I don't never git used to it" (Walker, p. 3). It is hard

for a woman to be abused by any man, especially someone who she considers as her father.

When Celie's stepfather gets tired of her, and cannot tolerate her anymore, he says that Celie is evil and "always up to no good" (5). He tells lies in order to get rid of her with an excuse. When he intends to give Mr.\_, Celie rather than Nettie as a wife, he claims that "but I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain't fresh tho, but I specs you know that. She spoiled. Twice" (9). He is a big liar who tells lies in front of Celie herself in order to disrepute her. He has raped her, but he never confesses it to anyone. Moreover, he labels Celie as spoiled. He intends to persuade Mr.\_ that Celie is a better choice for him; therefore, he mentions that "She ugly. He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it". (10) The statement expresses a patriarchal point of view, according to which a woman is either an angel who cleans, washes, looks after children, and satisfies her husband's needs, or a witch who disobeys and ignores her spouse. Her stepfather persuades Mr.\_ to marry Celie by praising Celie for her hard work.

As a result of the traumatic experience of rape that her father forced upon her, she lost her babies and Celie is afraid of all men. "I don't even look at men. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them" (Walker, 2004, p. 7). Celie considers a man as a person who violates women sexually because all the men she had confronted invoked fear and physical harm to her when engaging in sex with her.

Celie is forced to marry Mr.\_ as her father does not let Nettie, her younger sister, marry him. Celie is not only restricted by patriarchal force, but also restricted by her lack of knowledge. "I know I'm not as pretty or as smart as Nettie, but she say I ain't dumb" (Walker, 2004, p. 11). Here, Celie herself confesses that she is not smart and somehow illiterate; therefore, her lack of knowledge

makes her to be the prey of the patriarchal system.

Mr. \_ is always after fulfilling his own sexual desires and never thinks about Celie's emotions. Unlike Mr. \_, Celie does not have any sexual desire and it is obvious when she thinks about her sister while "he on top of" her (Walker, 2004, p. 14). Her sexual desire withers as she was the subject of rape.

When Celie accepts to go to Memphis with Shug and Mr. \_ is not in agreement with her journey, she curses Mr. \_'s brutal and egoistic behavior. "He laugh. Who you think you is? He say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (187). Mr. \_ insults Celie and even he considers being a woman is the most inferior thing in the world. This time Celie is not quiet, she also defends herself and says "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening.

But I'm here" (187). She accepts that she is poor and black but she verbalizes her individuality. She declares that she is a human being although she has been treated like an animal by her stepfather and Mr. \_ all these years. Now that she approves herself, she intends to follow her talent in sewing pants.

Many of the protagonists in *The Color Purple* represent the way women live now as a result of the 1960s feminism movement. Mother of Celie is the first person who cannot be disregarded. Although the white killed her ex-husband for an illogical cause, she is powerless to revolt. She is forced to wed the second spouse and grows numb to his brutality.

Additionally, Celie's sister Nettie was unable to escape the danger that the dangerous elements in this society posed. Celie flees her husband's nefarious plans for her and overcomes numerous challenges away from her house.

For many years, Celie endured violence. She was warned not to tell anyone—except for God—about her stepfather's abuse because doing so would cause her mother's death. Her life's bitterness left her with only one means of getting in touch with God. She was later sold to Mr. \_ like a beast, and Mr. \_ hesitated to

marry her just to find a mother for her children, a woman who could do the arduous housework for him, and a cow to gain. The scene is identical to that of selling slaves when she is instructed to turn to the right or left while facing the sunlight outside the door so that he can see well. With respect to this transaction, Celie has no choice and opportunity to rebel, and no right to speak. Since then, the violence continued to be a part of her life.

It can be seen clearly from the novel that the female consciousness of Celie has undergone three phases. The narrative makes it very evident that Celie's female awareness has gone through three stages. The first stage covers everything up until Celie touches Shug. Celie's female consciousness is currently in a hazy state. Although she is aware of her position and the humiliation she is experiencing, as seen by the first 20 letters she wrote to God, she has no idea how to change or rebel. She was the victim of her stepfather's seduction, her mother's criticism, and Mr. brutality, 's but she only knew how to cry out to God. The second part spans from the twenty-first letter through Celie's intention to leave home in order to support herself.

Shug's enlightenment and influence cause Celie's female consciousness to become active, as is evident. She felt outraged in place of the cruel loneliness. She feels resentment over the unfair treatment, is envious of Mr. concern 's for and affection for Shug, and is eager to find love and support. The third stage of Celie's female consciousness is represented by the final 18 letters. On this stage, Celie's female consciousness is comparable to a strong soldier, as can be seen.

What God has done for me, she said, "What has God done for the false God? He would see the world differently if he ever heard the cries of the black ladies! Celie's consciousness has reached a greater degree at this very instant. She can converse on an equal footing with men.

## **CONCLUSION**

The novel gives a full expression of the ideological connotation and vivid description of black women's struggle for liberation and

nationalities' striving for equality. It argues that love and salvation is the soul of Walker's Womanism and it finds profound expression in her writings. In explaining how to develop the novel concept — Feminism, Walker believes that the women should put the key point of improving women's condition into seeking oneself, emancipating one's thinking, caring and supporting each other. Women's self-respect and self-love could influence the men and promote them to change their thought, and then show respect to women. Relationships among women form a refuge, providing reciprocal love in a world that once was filled with male violence. And this reveals the author's intention to arouse women's self-consciousness and to call on them to be self-respected, self-supported and eventually be self-liberated.

The study of the color purple showed that sisterhood—a strong sense of camaraderie and solidarity among women who are actively working to advance their rights—was key to helping women overcome their oppression. We discovered that Celie, Nettie, Sofia, and Shug Avery's close sisterhood significantly contributed to their socioeconomic emancipation. However, this research exposed the discrimination that women faced in 1980s American society. This should serve as a lesson to help people understand that men and women must have equal rights and that everyone must contribute in order to create a society free from sexism.

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