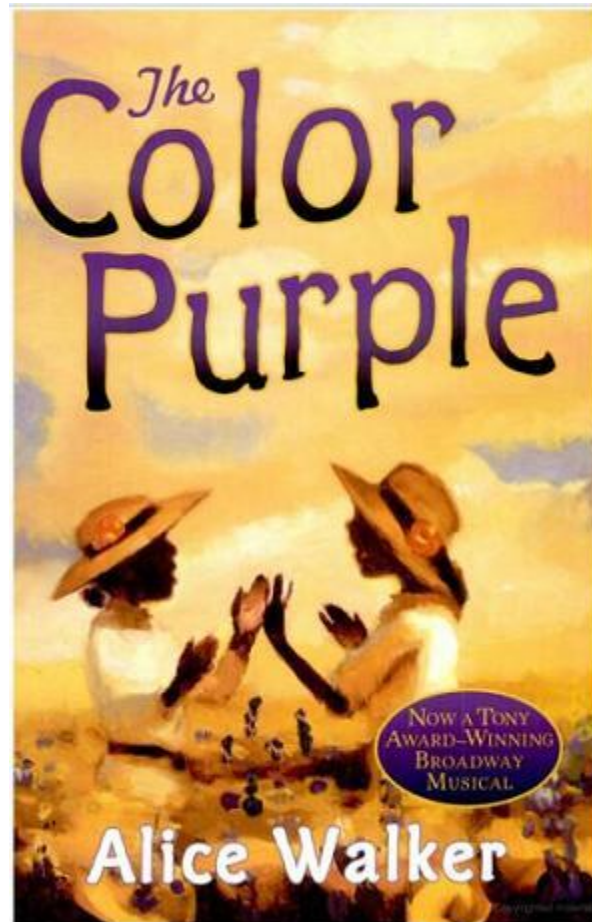


**Women as Victims:**  
**An Analysis of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple***

**E. Dhivya, Ph.D. Scholar**

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**Abstract**

This paper deals with the theme of women's quest for self, new identity and freedom to assert their femininity in and out of their married lives. African American woman writers are attempting to define their self-identity and trying to sustain their self in a hostile land. The author has brought in the other side of the African American women's real life in her fiction. The characters' uniqueness is their determination to appreciate themselves and celebrate their womanhood. The new African American woman believes in herself and wants to survive with

dignity. This paper also speaks about the marginality, not only at the universal level, but also inside the same community, race and class.

**Key Words:** African American women, Feminism, Marginality, Suppression, Alienation

## **Introduction**

African American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African American descent. The genre traces its origins back to the works of the late eighteenth century. The oral tradition as a Movement reached its height with the slave narration and the Harlem renaissance; and it is continuing till today. Writers like Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Walter Mosley are ranked among the top writers in the United States. African-American literature depicts the culture, racism, slavery and equality. At the beginning African-American writings focused on the slavery and racism, but in today's world it narrates their culture, tradition and way of life among the African Americans. African-American literature has become the integral part of American literature.

African-American literature differs in many aspects from Post-colonial literature. It is written by the black community which lives in one of the most powerful nations in the world. Their view is grounded on the experience of Black people who reside in America. Though African-Americans have been declared to be American citizens long ago in the history of the United States, they were not accepted as one among them by many white people in America.

African-American literature, while existing fully within the American culture, also retains its own entity. As a result, new styles of story-telling and unique voices are created in isolation. Artistic examples like jazz and hip hop are developed in isolation and become popular across the United States and the world. After the end of slavery and the American Civil War, many writers continue to write fiction and non-fiction works regarding the status of African Americans in the country. Naturally many African American writers did not agree with the view point that all Black literature should try to promote themselves, rather it should present the true colours of Black people's community and life.

## ***The Color Purple***

A more recent occurrence of this Black-on-Black criticism came up in charges made by some critics that Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* unfairly attacked Black men. By revealing their ideas African American writers get the attention toward the issues of class. But as the century progressed, concerns about class were eclipsed by sorrow and anger over racism, though authors like Brooks, Perry, Morrison and Alice Walker have made attempts to get outside the stereotype and most prominently, Walker has attempted to depict the gender issues in her writing. In their writings they introduced new themes like motherhood, mother-daughter relationship, women's friendship and the relationship between men and women among African Americans.

## **African American Women's Writing**

African American women's writing on the other hand presents a completely different picture. The focus upon the Black women here shifts from the slavery to an individual, struggling towards freedom and selfhood. Considering writings of women authors like Toni Morrison in whose novel, *Sula* the central character tests the conventional definition of good and evil in relation to women by insisting that she primarily is living for herself and not to be a mother or be the lover of men, while Morrison worked with the idea that black women have always served both as laboring and serving women in families and in society. Unlike many white women writers of this period, African American women related their personal issues and those of their communities, to global political issues. They insisted through their writings that personal and political issues could not be separated into exclusive categories. During the seventeenth century, African men and women were sold as slaves, depriving them of their basic human rights in order to serve in the plantations, in the Southern states of America, which further exploited the Black women sexually.

## **Alice Malsenior Walker**

Alice Malsenior Walker was born in the rural community of Eatonton, Georgia on February 9, 1944. She was the youngest of eight children, five boys and three girls. When she was eight years old, Walker was blinded in one eye when her brother accidentally shot her with a BB gun, which, partially corrected when she was fourteen, which left a profound influence on

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her and her writing. She began her college education at Spelman in 1961 but transferred to Sarah Lawrence in 1963. After graduating in 1965, she went to Mississippi as a civil rights activist. She found that writing demanded peace and quiet, but these were difficult commodities to come by when ten people lived in four rooms, so she spent a great deal of time working outdoors sitting under a tree.

Although Walker grew up in the traditionally so-called deprived environment, she was sustained by her community and by the knowledge that she could choose her own identity. Walker's mother gave her support to her writings and gave her the contexts for her stories, from her fund of spiritual, social and moral stories. Alice Walker's writings include poems, short stories, essays and novels. All her works focused on African-American women, against societies that are racist, sexist and often violent. Her writings also revealed the African-American heritage and culture. *The Color Purple* was her third novel published in 1982 and this work won both a Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award the following year. Walker started to work on the theme that was faced by most of the Black women in their life within their community. Her stories do not focus on the racial violence that happens among strangers, but the violence they experience among their friends and family members. Though Walker got good reviews for her portrayal of men characters in her writings, she was admired for her strong and powerful portraits of her women characters also.

### **An Epistolary Novel – Voiceless Women's Voice**

*The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel about Celie, a woman so down and out where she can tell her troubles only to God in the form of letters. Celie learns to lift herself from her situation with the help of another woman character in the novel. Celie pulls herself out from the sexual exploitation and brutality of men in her society. Here Celie's husband hides Nettie's letters from Celie for twenty years. In this novel Walker brings out the voiceless women's voice, the turmoil and struggles of women characters in this society to limelight.

Alice Walker exposes the dominant groups and characters, showing the ill-treatment of women occurring within the black community. When love exists in one's life in a family, community, nation or world, life is safe, happy and fulfilling. Love, hatred, ill-treatment are

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shown in different dimensions. Celie is an innocent girl in the novel, who suffers a lot in her life. She expects a little love from whomsoever she meets, which only at the end of the novel she receives. Celie's character is the combination of both extremes of life, happiness and sorrow. She wants and expects some harmony in her life, because she is soft and gentle. Though her husband never treats her, or thinks of her as a human being, she does all the house chores and duties toward him properly. She is the protagonist and narrator of the novel. She wants to look after her sick mother and her little sister Nettie. When she was molested by her stepfather and harassed by men for she knows not the real world. When she could not give voice to her pain, the only solace for her was God almighty, whom she gets hold off, by writing letters to Him.

### **Celie**

In the beginning of the novel the line opens with the note in which Celie is asking God to give her a sign to understand what is happening around her in the world: "I am fourteen year old, I have been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me....". (The Color Purple 3) These lines explain the trauma of Celie at that young age. After her mother's death she has been taken out of school to look after the children and the house, where her stepfather's abuse of her continues and she gives birth to two children of his. After her marriage to Albert, she could not give voice to her new pain. When Nettie comes out of her home and seeks help from Celie, Celie could not help; instead Nettie leaves the house saying she will come back. Celie wants to survive in this world. So, she never voices anything out about her physical pain and harassment she undergoes in her life. After meeting Shug Avery, Celie understands about herself and her identity in this world.

### **Experiencing Loneliness, Pain and Rejection**

"I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was. Well, now I know what you mean." (The Color Purple 113) Experiencing loneliness, pain and rejection from her family and from outside, Celie becomes spiritual and finds refuge in God. But continuous harassment she is used to, has made her weak physically and mentally, which leads her to stop writing letters to God. But the contrast of Celie's character Sofia, is a bold and strong woman character in the novel. Towards the end of the novel Celie understands herself and love. She understands the

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completeness of life. She also understands that power, position, education money or beauty will never make one valuable in this world. All her suffering and her questions were answered at last. Her achievement is priceless, which she attains with the help of many powerful persons. When she gets the letter from Shug that she is going to come back home, Celie is happy and contented, ready to face the world in a different way. Celie crosses three stages in her life; first she suffers abuse and cannot understand anything that is happening to her; second she understands that if she loved something, she has to set it free; and third Nettie's moving tributes towards the fabulous African culture give her something to be proud about.

At the end her love is understood by everyone, especially by her husband. Her dreams come true, she sets herself free from all the troubles and comes out with great strength and power. The character of Celie is identified in depth as she stands as a voiceless symbol among the voiced people. When compared with other characters like Sofia and Shug, only Celie is voiceless until she receives some happiness in her life.

### **Acknowledgement of the Truth of Relationship with Men**

Alice Walker focuses mostly on black women who reside in a larger world and struggle to achieve independence and identity beyond male domination. Her characters' strength resides in their acknowledgement of the truth of their relationship with men who regard them as less significant than themselves, merely because they are women. Walker throws the limelight not upon slavery, but on male chauvinism, oppression and other things pertaining to African American women's lives in this novel. Walker also portrays women characters who crave the freedom from brutality and complex systems of oppression, which shape their lives and their interpersonal relationships. The complete perfection in the novel is that it does not provide an imaginary world, rather it brings out the real color of the black women and their life style in the oppressed community, which further oppresses them! Walker brings out the voice of the voiceless through the protagonist Celie within the Black society.

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E. Dhivya, Ph.D. Scholar  
PSGR Krishnammal College for Women  
Coimbatore 642 004  
Tamilnadu  
India  
[dhivi.1777@gmail.com](mailto:dhivi.1777@gmail.com)