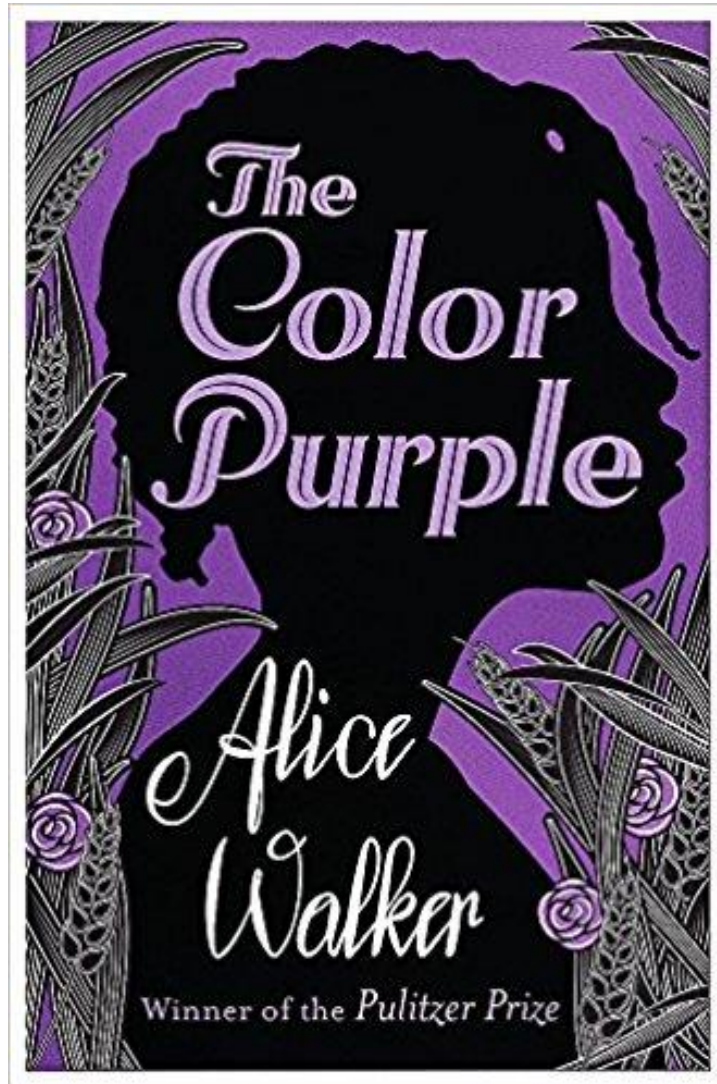


Gender Studies in Subaltern Literature in
Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Yanpolumi M Sangma and Dr. K. Rajaraman



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.in/Color-Purple-Alice-Walker/dp/1780228716>

Abstract

A gender study implies the study of gender identity and gender representation. This field includes women's studies concerning feminism, womanism, women politics, gender division and men studies. Gender can be studied in several disciplines such as literary theory, drama studies, novels, films etc. In Alice Walker's novel "*The Colour Purple*", Walker describes women in different ways who deprives from their rights, freedom, happiness and force to live their life by bowing their heads and sacrificing their needs and desires for males society. Women became strong and find joys when they unite each other. They support one another in times of sadness, fearfulness, happiness and finally reject the male oppression which makes them to live like an animal and achieve their dreams and live happily. Men thought women as their private property with whom they can do whatever they want. For example, Alice Walker portrays Celie's having two children from her own father Alphonso which shows the incestuous relationship between her father like Oedipus who had incestuous relationship with his mother and this very example depicts that women are not safe even in their own home. The equality between men and women is disappearing as men holds superiority over women. Thus, this paper studies about the women destruction and inequality by the domination of male society.

Keywords: Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, Oedipus, Marxism, Male Domination, Unity of women.

Subaltern

The term *Subaltern* was coined by Antonio Gramsci, notably through his work on cultural hegemony, which identified the groups that are excluded from society and denied from right to voice in their society. The term designates the populations which are socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony. The Subaltern literature studies of a society who are under control by leadership or superior which makes individual to feel inferior and worthless. This paper studies about the subaltern characters of African American females who are dominated by male gender in Alice Walker's novel, '*The Color Purple*'. Alice Walker is one of the most famous Afro –American women who gave fantastic views about women who got dominated by males. It is one of the most significant black women's novel of 1980's from which we can see that firstly women lost their identity but after facing many problems they found their identity.

The Color Purple

Walker sets her novel *The Color Purple* in a Black South Community. Most of the black male characters dominates women and treat them in an ill- mannered and violent ways. Women are violated in several ways like sexually abuse, emotionally and physically torture which makes women to live fearfully in their own society. A man treats them as inferior and worthless. This is particularly obvious in the central character of Celie , whose experiences of sexual abuse at the hands of her step - father followed by a loveless marriage with Albert where Celie is treated no

better than a slave . This very action picturesque the most brutal aspects of the African American males.

Male Superiority

Throughout the novel the attitude of superiority is so deeply rooted in the male characters that they considered women to be men's property. In 1885 the Free Love advocate, Mary Grove Nicholas described marriage as annihilation (a complete destruction) of women by explaining that women were considered to be men's property . For example, the law often allowed a husband to beat his wife. This very law can be seen in this novel through the action of Mr [Albert] beating his wife Celie in Letter 13 to which Harpo asked why he beat Celie to which Mr replied 'Cause she is my wife'. Followed by Harpo repeating the same action like his father [Mr Albert] beats his wife Sofia, believing that he can make his wife under control by beating him and he believes it is his right to do so as he is legal sole husband of her.

Injunction of Silence

The novel opens with a paternal injunction of silence, 'You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy'. Celie is denied from the right to speak to raise her voice against her step – father who rapes her and pregnant her. She is not allowed to reveal her grief to anyone except God so she writes a letter to God to console herself. From this very opening line itself we saw women are dominated by patriarchal society. They lost their freedom of speech and have to accept whatever men wanted to do with her. Celie's situation reflect the myth of Philomena whose throat was cut by a tyrant Tereus who marries her sister Procne and later on rapes Philomena by taking a chance of her loneliness while he was accompanying her as she travels over for a visit to her sister Procne. Celie takes all the sufferings without a word because in her view, she believes her worst situations will not last as she has God along with her "This life soon be over, Heaven last all ways".

Women as Sex Objects

In *Color Purple* novel, women were considered as sex objects where Celie got beaten up and abuses by her step- father Alphonso and begot two children (Olivia and Adam) which reflects the myth of Oedipus complex who killed his father and have an incestuous relationship with his own mother and other female's roles like Sofia, Nettie assembles of a slave or inferior. Celie's letters to God does not only show a cry for help but it also stands as mouthpiece of all the African American women who have faced the same situation. Like a slave, Celie dare not even to look at men because she is so scared because of the situations that she faced since from her childhood to marriage life. These shows that women were not safe even in their own homes and they cannot expect a secure life from their family.

Females turn to one another to find solidarity and companion. They help each other in terms of happiness, sadness and stay like a great pillar to one another which makes us to believe

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on the famous word 'Unity Is Strength'. For instances in *The Color Purple*; Mary Agnes helps Sofia when she is in prison, Sofia looks after Mary Agnes child when she goes away to become a singer. Shug helps Celie to become an independent woman and one of the important subaltern character Sofia, who is robust and outspoken stands against the racial discrimination against whites which shows women fight for their rights and also helped each other in order to bring out their lives with justice and freedom by leaving their unhappy marriage life, tortures and inequality which they have to suffered in male society.



Alice Walker

Courtesy: <http://www.nndb.com/people/577/000024505/>

Colour Discrimination

The colour discrimination is the greatest problem of the world, especially for women. If woman is black she does not get full respect from the society as comparison to whites. There are many problems related to colour discrimination. African Americans also referred to as Black Americans or Afro-American, and formerly as American Negroes. Most African American is of West African Women of African origin in the United States having always been keenly aware of the fact of race, class gender and oppression upon their lives. It is only the memories of the painful and agonizing activities experienced by their people in The white people like Mayor and his wife assumes that it's a great honour to be a white lady's housemaid but Sofia rejects to become a housemaid so she got beaten up by Mayor and Police and put her on prison for twelve years in order to reassert their racial dominance. The mistreatment of African American women by both Blacks and Whites as a result of the male beliefs that women are worthless and inferior. Thus, a Marxist reading finds this objectionable because men and women should be treated equally. Celie is exploited by her husband Albert by being made to labour with Harpo, on the family farm thereby making a profit for Albert and his father.

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Women are not allowed to receive education. They have to stay at home looking after their families including husband, children, kitchen and farms. They are deprived from their rights by male society and cannot think to fulfil their dreams as they have to stay in four walls of their houses. For instances Celie, the protagonist of the novel *The Color Purple* is also victimized by this cruel male society. She is removed from school and deprived of education very early in her life because of her female identity and she has to stay at home looking after the house. Her lack of education can be evident from her letters in which she made errors in spellings and sentence structures like in spelling she wrote, get as git in Letter 1, cursing as cussing, cursed as cuss in Letter 2, supposed as sposed and asked as ast in Letter 3 and Letter 6 and moreover she wrote, them did not comb instead of they did not comb [their hair] . In addition, a Marxist reading would criticize the fact that Olinka's girls were not educated because they were female.

Black Women in Male Dominated Societies

Thus, the novel selected for this study, like in many of her novels Walker considers the position of black women in male – dominated societies. The subaltern female characters of *The Color Purple* were subjected to racial and patriarchal forces that had manipulated their subjectivity and silence their voices. Walker expressed that Black woman must raise their voices and lift their head held high in equal with males in socially, politically, and emotionally. Thus, in her novel *The Color Purple*, Walker depicts the inner strength of black women for getting their rights and gender equality.

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