

**A QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND FREEDOM IN
ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE**

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Abstract

Identity implies granting the same rights to women as those enjoyed by men. Identity and freedom do not exclusively talk of equality and rights of women but it is more about compassion, respect and understanding from the male counterparts in the society. Throughout the world women have been denied of their social and economic rights. Twentieth century has seen a growing awareness among women regarding their desires, sexuality, self-definition, existence and destiny. Women's endeavors to seek their freedom and self-identity began a revolution all over the world which was termed by analysts and critics as "Feminism". This paper focuses on 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 striving hard to explain their self-identity and trying to sustain their self in a hostile land. The author has brought in the other aspect of the African American women's real life in her fiction. The characters' selfhood 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 focuses on marginality, not only at the universal level, but also inside the same community, race and class.

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

A woman is a biological other of man, creation of God, responsible for the creation of human race. The spelling of "woman" in English has progressed over the past millennium from wīfmann [2] to wīmmann to wumman, and finally, the modern spelling woman.[3] In Old English, wīfmann meant "female human", whereas wēr meant "male human". Mann or monn had a gender-neutral meaning of "human", corresponding to Modern English "person" or "someone"; however, subsequent to the Norman Conquest, man began to be used more in reference to "male human", and by the late 13th century had begun to eclipse usage of the older term wēr.[4] The medial

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labial consonants f and m in wīfmann coalesced into the modern form "woman", while the initial element, which meant "female", underwent semantic narrowing to the sense of a married woman ("wife"). Woman play equal role in society. By no means she can be addressed an inferior to male counterparts in the society. According to the patriarchal set up of the society women are supposed to submit to the men and adhere to them. Therefore feminism came into being for the rescue of the females from the clutches of patriarchy. Feminism is a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social equality of sexes.^{6/7} This includes seeking to establish educational and professional opportunities for women that are equal to those for men. Charles Fourier, a Utopian Socialist and French philosopher, is credited with having coined the word "féminisme" in 1837 (8).

Sara Ahmed argues that Black and Postcolonial feminisms pose a challenge "to some of the organizing premises of Western feminist thought." During much of its history, feminist movements and theoretical developments were led predominantly by middle-class white women from Western Europe and North America. However women of other races have proposed alternative feminisms. This trend accelerated in the 1960s with the civil rights movement in the United States and the collapse of European colonialism in Africa, the Caribbean, parts of Latin America, and Southeast Asia.

Since that time, women in developing nations and former colonies and who are of colour or various ethnicities or living in poverty have proposed additional feminisms. Womanism emerged after early feminist movements were largely white and middle-class. Postcolonial feminists argue that colonial oppression and Western feminism marginalized postcolonial women but did not turn them passive or voiceless. Third-world feminism and Indigenous feminism are closely related to postcolonial feminism. These ideas also correspond with ideas in African feminism, motherism, Stiwanism, negofeminism, femalism, transnational feminism, and Africana womanism. So it can be said that this moment came into being somewhere in 1960 and African-American literature got some recognition. Eminent writers like Phillis Wheatley (poet), Frederick Douglass, Tonny Morrison, Maya Angelou, Walter Mosley. Today African American Literature has become accepted as an integral part of American Literature with books such as "Roots: The Saga of an American Family" by Alex Haley, "The Color Purple" by Alice Walker and "Beloved" by Tony Morrison achieving best selling and award

winning status. African American Literature tends to focus on the themes of particular rights of Black people, African-American culture, racism, religion, slavery, freedom, and equality. The focus started with the earliest African-American writings such as the slave narrative genre in the early 19th century. African American Gospel music, rap, African-American tradition of Christian Sermons made their way into African American Literature. It brought new attention to African-American Literature. While the Harlem renaissance is based on the African-American community in Harlem in New York City, existed as a larger flowering of social thought and culture-with numerous Black artists, musicians, and other classic works in the field from jazz to theater. The renaissance is best known for the literature that came out of it. African-American literature differs in many ways from Post-colonial literature. It is exclusively by the black people who live in one of the most powerful nations in the world. Their view is based on the experience of Black people who live in America.

Though African-Americans have been announced to be American citizens long ago in the history of the United States, they were not accepted as one among them by many white Americans. African-American literature, while existing fully within the American culture, also retains its own entity. As a result, new styles of story-narration and unique voices were created in isolation. Artistic examples like jazz and hip hop were developed in isolation and became popular across the United States and the world. After the abolition of slavery and the American Civil War, many writers continued to write fiction and non-fiction works regarding the status of African Americans in the country. Naturally many African American writers did not support the view point that all Black literature should try to promote themselves, rather it should present the true picture of Black people's community and life. 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 exposing their ideas African American writers caught 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.

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 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 visited Mississippi as a civil rights activist. She found that writing required 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 supported her and 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 working 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.

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 discovers herself from her situation with the help of another woman character in the novel. Celie's treatment at the hands of man lets her reveal that I dnt even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, I'm not scared of them (*The Color Purple* 6). Her first and foremost concern was to save her sister Nettie from Alfonso's advances. One of the touching examples of womanism happens when she offers herself to her father to save Nettie from him. "I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick" (*The Color Purple* 8). Celie learns to pull herself out from the sexual exploitation and atrocities of men in her society earlier by her father and later by her husband. She marries Mr _____ for her sister's sake. "he look at me. It like he looking at the earth" (*The Color Purple* 21). Albert a typical dominating male believes, wives is like children. You let

them know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do better than a good sound beating” (The Color Purple 37). She used to get a sound beating from her husband but she doesn’t cry. “I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree (The Color Purple, 23).

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. To quote Wendy Wall: Letter became the surrogate body for Celie an inanimate form that serves dual purpose; it fends off pain by siphoning off her feelings of degradation, as well as allowing her express and thus feel the intensity of her emotions. Albert intercepts Celie’s letters because he couldn’t seduce her so he rapes her language as he couldn’t seduce her body. Terry Eagleton identifies letters with illicit intercourse. “The letters come to signify female sexuality,” her remarks, “that folded secret place which is open to violent intrusion.”

Walker’s main aim to write the novel was to replace the typical patriarchal concerns of the historical novel- the taking of lands, or the births, the battles and the deaths of the great men”-with the scene of one or two.

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 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. 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.

"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 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. Shug Avery a blue singer also brings transformation in her life. Celie experiences extreme happiness in the company of Shug. She feels an emotional bond with her. For the first time in my life, I feel just right (The Color Purple 60). Further transformation of Celie takes place when she receives letters of her sister Nettie. Celie's belief on God being is also changed by Nettie who says, "the Bible says that Jesus Christ had hair like lamb's wool. Lamb's wool is not straight Celie" (The Color Purple 141). 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. Shug takes Celie to her big home, Shug states, "you not my maid. I didn't bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet" (The Color Purple 218). 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. Albert after his conversation with Celie after she has returned back tells her, "I'm satisfied, this is the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feels like a new experience" (The Color Purple 267). He also admits that "it took him long enough to notice you such good company, he says" (The Color Purple 283). Towards the end her dreams come true; she sets herself free from all the troubles and comes out with great strength and power. In the end we meet a confident and self-reliant Celie who starts stitching pants and "anybody can wear them" (The Color Purple 218). These are not only males she sews pants for but for females too. Through this she makes an attempt to break the distinction between two sexes. Love sustains Celie; she learns to love herself and to share love despite continually cruel pressures. Celie endures and learns to fight and finally wins her battles. Ultimately Celie survives physically and spiritually

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