

Review Article

# A Study on Feminism and Female Consciousness in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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## Abstract

Over time, feminism has evolved with varying interpretations, including a focus on gender equality across societal domains and as a political movement supporting women's rights. Feminism has historically challenged patriarchal norms, promoting sexual equality and personal freedom for women. Alice Walker, a prominent African American feminist, has made significant contributions to literature and activism. Born in 1944, Walker's works highlight the struggles faced by Black women in a racist and sexist society. Her acclaimed novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), explores themes of Black womanhood during the Civil Rights era, illustrating the resilience and empowerment of female protagonists. Walker's writings emphasize the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, portraying characters who transcend oppression to achieve self-acceptance and empowerment. Through her literature, Walker advocates for women's liberation and denounces societal injustices like sexual assault and domestic violence. *The Color Purple*, a pivotal work in Walker's oeuvre, showcases the transformation of protagonist Celie from subjugation to independence, reflecting themes of female consciousness, resilience, and liberation. The novel underscores the importance of sisterhood and solidarity among women in the fight for equality. In conclusion, Walker's exploration of feminist themes in *The Color Purple* resonates with the experiences of Black women, highlighting their historical and contemporary struggles. Her literature serves as a powerful testament to the enduring spirit of Black feminist thought and practice, inspiring readers to confront societal inequalities and envision a more equitable future.

## Keywords

Feminism, Alice Walker, Feminist Theory, African American, Civil Rights

## 1. Introduction

In 1782, in a pamphlet called *L'Homme-femme*, the French writer Alexandre Dumas the Younger coined the word feminism to describe the growing movement for women's rights [1]. Various authors have also offered competing definitions of the term: Gender equality in all spheres of society, including politics, economics, and the workplace, is central to feminism [2]. An endorsement of the goals of the newly formed women's movement in the early 1960s, it is a political

term. Over the course of its lengthy history, feminism has worked to challenge patriarchal norms, promote sexual equality, and end sexism as social forces. More personal freedom for women was the main focus. The term "feminism" encompasses a wide range of social, political, and intellectual groups that seek gender parity. Black women's movement, which seeks to ensure and protect women's equal rights and opportunities, is another possible interpretation.

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**Received:** 14 April 2024; **Accepted:** 29 April 2024; **Published:** 17 May 2024



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A sister movement to traditional feminism, postcolonial feminism emerged in reaction to the former's exclusive emphasis on women's lived experiences in Western societies and their former colonies. The goal of postcolonial feminism is to explain how colonialism's enduring political, economic, and cultural impacts, as well as racism, impact postcolonial women.

There have been three distinct waves in the development of contemporary feminist movements. The original members of the first wave of feminism were white, middle-class women in the North of the world who had more than enough money and knowledge to start a movement in the late 1800s. So, these middle-class women were almost the only ones whose problems the first wave of feminism sought to solve. The first generation of feminists fought for legal gender equality by focusing on fundamental rights like suffrage and the removal of other obstacles. This group does not account for the experiences of economically poor women who were compelled to work in blue collar occupations or women of color who were subjected to racial discrimination. But first-wave feminism did gain women the ballot and, in certain nations, changed the rules around child support and divorce [3].

## 2. Alice Malsenior Walker: A Journey of Literature and Activism

Alice Malsenior Walker was born in Georgia in 1944 and is an activist, feminist, womanist, and writer of African American descent. She has extensively discussed gender and ethnicity in her writings. She was a little girl when she overheard a white plantation owner say that African-Americans didn't need a formal education. For standing firmly behind controversial but principled causes, Walker has earned the respect of her liberal political peers. Poetry, novels, short stories, essays, and criticism are all part of Alice Walker's celebrated and diverse body of work, which positions her as a major voice among Black American women authors. Her works are lauded for their captivating depictions of Black life, especially Black women's struggles in a racist and sexist society, and they show the fight of Black people over history. Walker identifies as a Black feminist, or "womanist," according to her own words. Walker moved to Sarah Lawrence College, close to New York City, after attending Spelman College in Atlanta on a full scholarship in 1961; he graduated in 1965. Upon her return to the South, Walker resumed her activism from her undergraduate years, being active in voter registration drives, fights for welfare rights, and children's programmes in Mississippi [4].

*The Color Purple*, Walker's most famous book, was released in 1982. The film's premise—a young Black lady navigating the complexities of black patriarchy and white racism—was a smashing financial success. It was a smashing success. Walker is the author of many books. In 1983, Walker became the first Black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for

Fiction with *The Color Purple* [5]. Plus, Walker made history by being the first Black woman to ever receive the National Book Award. The fight against a racist, sexist, and violent society is a central theme in her writings, especially as it pertains to Black women. A recurring theme in her works is the historical and cultural contributions of women of color. African American culture and folklore, especially in the rural South, inform Walker's artistic vision, which is itself informed by economic struggle and racial dread. She believes in the transformative potential of social and political upheaval and delves into the complex web of female kinship in her literature [6]. She is often linked to the black women's writing movement that began in the 1970s and continued beyond, with authors like Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison. The female protagonists in Walker's works face and conquer injustice with courage, tenacity, and ingenuity, but Walker is honest about the terrible effects of the "twin afflictions" of racism and sexism. Protesting the cruel practice of female circumcision in Africa and the Middle East, she is an outspoken supporter of environmental and anti-nuclear movements and a champion for women's rights on a global scale. Numerous reviews and essays produced by Walker to introduce new generations of readers to authors like Zora Neale Hurston demonstrate her admiration for her matrilineal literary past [7]. Similar to her short tales, Walker's six novels mostly focus on the internal experiences of African Americans rather than the dynamics between minority groups and majority populations. *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981), *The Color Purple* (1982), which won the Pulitzer Prize and American Book Award, and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) are among her novels and collections of short stories. Other works by her include *The Way Forward is with a Broken Heart* (2000), *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), *To Hell with Dying* (1988), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), and *Possessing the Secret of Joy: A Novel* (New Press, 2008) [8].

## 3. Unveiling the Depths: A Comprehensive Review of Alice Walker's "The Color Purple"

Alice Walker's (a modern feminist) works, including *The Color Purple*, *Meridian*, and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, to illuminate the experiences of Black American women. The overarching goal of this research is to help Black women in the modern United States find their place in society, express themselves, and gain emotional, social, and spiritual self-confidence [9]. At their heart, Walker's writings are about slavery, racial discrimination, patriarchal tyranny, gender violence, and the Civil Rights Movement. Black feminism's "Womanism"—a phrase that attacks women's culture, strength, and flexibility—was originally used by Walker [10]. Through her heroines, the author conveys her themes—the centuries-long oppression, marginalization, and multi-faced exploitation of African-American women—in a way that is

both realistic and perceptive, while also sending a message to the rest of the world. Additionally, she reveals the societal and personal transformations that occur in her characters' lives as they progress from a state of complete powerlessness, quiet, and self-deprivation to one of acceptance, resistance, and empowerment.

By having her female heroines speak out against gender and racial injustice, Alice Walker—a radical feminist—discussed gender feminism and its associated concerns. It is based on the feminist epistemology idea, which holds that assertions about knowledge may be formed out of thin air and are thus legitimate for everyone. African women got a greater understanding of human potential by absorbing superficial information about American civilization. A number of characters in *Meridian*, *Celie*, *Lissie*, and *Tashi*—all created by Alice Walker—represent the situated knowers idea. By transforming the social, political, and economic climate via the power of love, they were able to express their pain and create a peaceful society for themselves. Alice Walker explores the feminine experience via a variety of themes. Regeneration of identity, investigation of ethics via the preservation of African culture, and resistance to sexual politics are the themes [11]. Walker attempted to record the suffering, humiliation, and inferiority that Black women endured via a selection of her works. As the books come to a close, the characters delve into their struggles with isolation, oppression, guilt, and self-doubt, ultimately finding love, empowerment, and self-acceptance. As a situated knower, Alice Walker fought for women's suffrage and holds the view that a woman can only grow into a noble person via a combination of independence, knowledge, and responsibility. The hope that one can win the game is not a lost cause, according to Walker's application of feminist epistemology theory [12].

Because of their shared interest in women's independence and liberty, this article compares and contrasts the feminist stances of Radwa Ashour and Alice Walker. The idea of freedom is presented differently by Walker and Ashour. In their own accounts of women's lives, they aim to convey women's subjective histories. Cixous refers to this tendency towards writing on women's sensuous experiences as "the feminine practice of writings," and it is their goal. When it comes to ending racism, Ashour thinks women's liberation should be part of the larger idea of national liberation, while Walker thinks it's crucial. both portray strong, independent women who are able to think critically and rationally, and who passionately advocate for gender equality [13].

Feminist writer Alice Malsenior Walker hails from the African-American community. Black women's cultural and historical contributions are the central themes of her writings. She embraces diversity in sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity, and is openly bisexual. She has detailed the struggles of African-American women and men in the face of racial, economic, and ethnic persecution [14]. *The color purple* has long been associated with the lowest echelons of society. In addition to describing the tyranny and hardship that Black

women endure, Walker offers several remedies for these problems in the book. *The Color Purple* depicts a psychological and physical dominance of female characters including Celie, Shug, Nettie, and Sofia. By book's conclusion, the oppressed, humiliated, hated, and mistreated Celie had grown into a strong, free woman. She went from being unattractive to becoming a lovely swan in metaphor. From being a burden to making physical and emotional statements of independence, and finally reuniting with her sister and children, she has gone through a lot. This essay examines *The Color Purple*'s heroine, Celie, and the novel's significant feminist themes. The way men and women are seen in different civilizations has shaped their roles throughout history [15].

#### 4. Feminism in Alice Walker: *The Color Purple*

*The Color Purple* is a book that Alice Malsenior Walker wrote. She came into this world on February 9, 1944, in the little town of Eatonton, Georgia, to parents Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker. Of her family's eight children, three were girls and five were males, she was the youngest. When Walker was eight years old, her brother shot her with a BB pistol, blinding her in one eye. Alice Walker became a quiet, introverted, and withdrawn young woman as a result of the horrific event. Walker attended Spelman College in Atlanta in 1961 on a full scholarship after graduating from high school. In 1963, he moved to Sarah Lawrence College, which is near New York City. The impact of activist and Spelman College lecturer Howard Zinn piqued Walker's interest in the American civil rights movement when she graduated in 1965. Walker has penned several works of prose, including novels, poetry, essays, and anthologies. When Walker's 1983 book *The Color Purple* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, she made history as the first African American woman to do so. She received several honours, including an Honorary Degree from the California Institute of the Arts in 1995, the Domestic Human Rights Award from Global Exchange in 2007, and the National Book Award for Fiction in 1983 for *The Color Purple*, among many others [16].

Many guys during the course of *The Color Purple* have sexually assaulted the female characters. It is Celie's mother who experiences sexual assault initially. Even when she was very ill and almost dead, Fonso preferred to engage in sexual relations with her rather than tend to her needs. It is emphasised in Celie's first letter to God. "The letter states: "

What on earth, when young Lucious arrived last spring, I overheard them arguing. Her arm was being pulled by him. Fonso, she says it too soon; I'm not well. In the end, he decides to let her be. A week later, he gently tugs at her arm once again. "No, I'm not going to," she replies. I'm almost dying, and these kids aren't even close.

Sexual assault was also experienced by the novel's protagonist, Celie. Fonso battered her stepdaughter because she

and her wife were unable to have sexual relations. Not even her mother was home. As a parent, you should be shielding your children from harm, not assaulting them, thus this is completely unacceptable. Celie writes an open letter to God in which she details her traumatic experience of being raped by her stepfather. What does she say?

She crossed Macon to see her sister's doctor. He left me to look after the other people. He was always very critical of me. Say you're going to do something your mum wouldn't. To begin, he leaned his object on my hip and wiggled it about. He proceeded to seize my titties. After that, he inserts his member inside my pussy. It ached so much that I cried. In an attempt to silence me, he says, "You better get used to it." He then begins to choke me. However, I will never become used to it [17].

When Celie was married, her husband, "Mr. albert, came get me to take care of his rotten children," in addition to her stepfather, raped her. He never once inquiries about my background. He insists on fucking and claiming to be on top of me even though I have a bandage on my head. A person who says, "Nobody ever loves me". Popularly known as "Squeak," Mary Agnes is another female character who experiences sexual assault. Her uncle molested her when she was attempting to get Sofia out from prison:

According to Squeak, he removed my cap. He instructed me to take my dress off. Odessa, he's your uncle, my god. He claims he would never harm me if he were my uncle. It would be wrong. The fornication here is rather minor, however. Everyone is to blame for it.

Where Purple Is Visible Physically, Fonso battered Celie. This was the problem, Celie said in her petition to God:

Oh my god, I was beaten today by him because, according to him, I winked at a boy in church. There was probably something in my eye, but I refrained from winking. I refuse to even glance at men's. The fact is that. To be honest, I don't feel threatened when I look at ladies [18].

It wasn't just once that Fonso defeated Celie. Whenever he wanted, he would beat her. In spite of his beating her, he still had sexual relations with her. This statement sums up Celie's predicament perfectly:

I beg him to let me go with Nettie instead of our new mammy while she's unwell. And all he does is interrupt me to probe my meaning. If he needs me, I can repair myself, I assure him. Entering my room, I change into a pair of our new mammy high heel shoes, a feather headdress, and horsehair. Even though he knows I'm dressed like a tramp, he still beats me.

The abusing by Celie persisted. They kept assaulting her after she was married. Writing to God in a letter, she composed:

Oh my god, I flee from the eldest boy on my wedding day. His age is twelve. He wishes he could never hear another one since his mother died when he was holding her. He then opened my skull by placing a boulder on top of it. I feel a torrent of blood trickling down my chest. His father warns

him against it. But it is his only statement.

One other example of the harmful effects of sexism is the fact that Celie's husband beats her. Squeak, Celie's departure, helped Harpo's wife break free of her husband's dominance. After Sofia dumped Harpo, she was married to him. After leaving Harpo, Sofia had refused to submit to his dominance. After that, Harpo wed Squeak, who was obedient but unable to stand up for herself. Finally, Squeak peered at everyone from behind her fringe', Harpo said, echoing his father's dismay at Squeak's departure. She says I am. Going north is my goal [19].

## 5. Feminist Thought and Practice in "The Color Purple"

*The Color Purple* is a realistic portrayal of the struggles faced by Black women in a patriarchal society, written by Alice Walker. Being a Black woman presents several obstacles, according to Walker and many other Black feminist authors. Since a Black woman's only challenge is not to yield to male dominance, she views all men—even those in her own family—as potentially dangerous. From the time of her birth, a Black girl begins to see a very different Earth. Everyone from his brother and father on down is someone she has to fight with. *The Color Purple's* prologue is the finest illustration of this point. The father of a Black girl named Celie rapes her and then uses physical force to keep the crime a secret.

*The Color Purple* makes advantage of the epistolary style to get readers a better look into the protagonist's mind. In her letters, Celie describes her life in great detail. In a patriarchal culture, she finds solace only in God. At first, she starts by telling God about her life. At the beginning of the book, our protagonist is submissive to the males in her life. However, as the story progresses, she gains the strength from her experiences and the friendships of other women that she needs to break free from society's constraints and become an independent woman. Her female companions' bravery in resisting male dominance gives her the strength to fight back against the males in her life and the oppression she faces. She learns that she, too, is a person deserving of a variety of rights throughout her struggle against life. In spite of her husband's claims to the contrary, she has a distinct personality. With the support of her female pals, her long-suppressed personality finally finds an outlet. There is an obvious bond and sisterhood among the female characters in her book *The Color Purple*. As a group, oppressed women rally behind one another. Yet, there are a few of these women who make an effort to demonstrate that they will not tolerate male supremacy. Shug, the lady Celie is seeing, is responsive to the males. According to Dieke, Celie's love interest turns out to be her buddy Shug Avery in the end. She becomes close to Celie and even falls in love with her after becoming her friend. Despite facing masculine domination, Celie undergoes a metamorphosis during the course of the book and eventually achieves



her dreams [20].

## 6. Exploring Female Consciousness in "The Color Purple": Empowerment, Resilience, and Liberation

Many women authors, particularly Black women writers in Africa and the Diaspora, have focused on redefining women's roles within their societies and cultures, and the concept of female consciousness is an integral element of this process. Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology, compiled by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and published in Reading Black [21].

The Negro has always been and continues to be that muted strain in the south, with its startling chord and ambiguous but understandable cadenza. Out of that muted chord, the one note that has remained silent and unspoken is the one about the pregnant Black lady... The transparent but unheard Black Woman of America knows better than anybody the burden and anguish of the "long dull pain" than anyone else [22].

In the United States, African American people have been continuously put in a "second fiddle" role since the era of slavery and colonialism, which is why Gates' statement is still relevant. Because of this, Black women felt they were even more cast into what Francis Mogu calls a "third fiddle position". Twenty indentured servants were transported on a Dutch ship and arrived at Jamestown, Virginia in 1619, marking the beginning of this horrific historical fact. In light of this shameful past, Black female authors have worked tirelessly to restore women's proper status in American culture. Significantly, the Seneca Women's Convention in 1848 was a watershed event [23].

The fight for Black civil rights and the fight for African American women's rights in the home and community are both depicted in Alice Walker's works. By bringing these two fights together, she hopes to highlight how sexism in Black households is fueled by internalized racism. An ideal illustration of the delicate balancing act between the two battles is her first book, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970). The story illustrates the vicious cycle of oppression in a sharecropping family, from children who are oppressed to adults who are themselves tyrannical, and from men who are persecuted by their white masters to spouses who are oppressive. *The Color Purple* (1982) by Walker, who was a pioneer in the Civil Rights Movement, subtly conveys that viewpoint. "Civil Rights" refers, in its simplest form, to the guarantee of equal treatment under the law notwithstanding a person's gender, color, or religion. Despite legal protections, the non-violent Civil Rights Movement spearheaded by Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1950s and 1960s brought about more achievement for these rights. In many regions of the country, African Americans are treated as second-class citizens, and this movement is characterized by unparalleled passion in opposition to this. From this vantage point, the book under

consideration portrays sexism, racism, and cruelty in the rural South, yet it ends on a hopeful note [24].

## 7. Unraveling the Forms and Patterns of Female Consciousness

*The Color Purple's* female protagonists, particularly those dealing with domestic and societal oppression, go through a series of liberation movements that mirror a post-slavery kind of oppression. It is easy to draw parallels between Walker's protagonist Celie's married life and the American "Code of Personal Status" of 1956, which mandated that the family unit be structured on the principle of equal rights for all members. Mr. Albert's motivation for marrying Celie—"... My poor little ones sure could use a mother"—is heightened by the fact that she is essentially a slave in his household. *The Color Purple* is Walker's way of calling attention to the subjugation of American women. In doing so, she follows in the footsteps of other Civil Rights Movement women who criticized the societal structure and leadership, as well as the supposed dominance of men in all walks of life. As a result, according to Francis, these women "seek to create a society, which will accord more rights, privileges and equity to females in particular, and ultimately more humane conditions for the nurture of all." Since asserting oneself is an active step towards reclaiming one's repressed rights, it is not negated on this basis [25].

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, research on feminism would provide modern audiences a more positive picture of the world through the lens of women's issues. Consequently, this is useful, as knowing one's history is critical to making sound decisions regarding one's future. To reach their current level of success, African American women have had to surmount enormous challenges and break free from oppressive patterns. Despite racism, sexism, and the idea that women are inferior, Black women have triumphed and continue to do so. The historical and contemporary plight of Black women in the United States has prompted a range of reactions from Black female authors. In the first half of *The Color Purple*, Walker effectively uses the image of the slave to demonstrate this development. Women have experienced physical violence in addition to sexual assault. After her father falsely accused Celie of winking at a boy in church, Celie was assaulted. She was not Shug Avery's (her husband's preferred wife), so he beat her. Sisterhood, a powerful sense of camaraderie and solidarity among women who are fighting for equal rights, emerged as a key theme in the purple analysis, which showed how oppression was overcome by women. Despite a sombre start, the story concludes on a positive note. It would seem that Celie had entered a promising future by the time the tale concludes.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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