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DOUBLE OPPRESSION AND RESISTANCE IN WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE

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Double Oppression and Resistance in Walker's The Color Purple

Maria Lalremruati

Assistant Professor, Dept. Of English, Govt. J. Thankima College, Aizawl

Abstract – The paper projects an in-depth insight into the psyche of the suppressed and the agonized protagonists who have suffered double oppression both from the white and her male counterpart, and will deal with Walker's common theme of the destructiveness of racism and poverty, violence towards women and their inherent resilience through their shared experience, which binds and draws them closer together and how they find acceptance when they are in each other's company. It will focus on how Walker's women characters are portrayed as a means for women to summon the courage to share their own experience and stories, and how these stories allow women to resist oppression and dominance. It will focus on their struggle against racist, sexual and violent society and their inherent resilience incorporated in 'The Color Purple'.

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INTRODUCTION TO ALICE WALKER:

Walker is a prolific writer in multiple genres. Her fiction, particularly her novels, have established her as a distinctive figure in American letters, as well as a major figure in what scholars term the renaissance in African American Women's Writings of the 1970's. Walker knows firsthand the social and political consequences of being a black woman coming of age during the second half of the twentieth century. In her fiction, non-fiction, and poetry she confronts bluntly the history of oppression of her people and, more recently, the oppression of her planet.¹

Walker's creative vision is rooted in the economic hardship, racial terror, and folk wisdom of African American life and culture, particularly in the south. Her writing explores multidimensional kinship among women and embraces the redemptive power of social and political revolution. Her wish for black men and women is that they not merely survive, but survive whole, as she has done. From the time she first appeared on the literary scene in 1968 with a collection of poems called 'Once', Walker has viewed her writing as a means of survival.² The poems in 'Once' grew not only from the sorrowful period in which walker contemplated death but also from her triumphant decision to reclaim her life. Since the appearance of her first book in 1968, she has published poetry, fiction, and criticism, all of which have advanced her literary reputation. Walker has clearly expressed in her writings the relationship between the degree of freedom black women have within and without their communities and the survival of the black people as a whole.³

Walker's focus is on Black women, who grow to reside in a larger world and struggle to achieve independent identities beyond male domination. Although her characters are strong, they are also vulnerable. Their strength resides in their acknowledged depth to their mothers, to their sensuality, and to their friendships among women. These strengths are celebrated in Walker's work, along with the problems women encounter in their relationships with men who regard them as less significant than themselves merely because they are women.⁴

Walker is most famous for her critically acclaimed novel *The Color Purple* (1982), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (the first American woman writer to receive this award) and the American Book Award. The story deals with a young black woman fighting her way through not only racist white culture but patriarchal black culture.

AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE:

On studying the black American literature, we can understand that the black woman is the most victimized person in the history of America. She suffered both racist and sexist oppression, and her identity is defined by her male counterpart. She suffers all kinds of injustice, and under the economy of slavery, the black woman was exploited for both productive and reproductive ends. She was exploited by the slave owner and the planters, and was expected to work as efficient and competent as her male counterpart. The Afro-American women would be severely punished if they could not perform a job to their owner's satisfaction. Angelou Davis writes,

"Where work was concerned, strength and productivity under the threat of the whip outweighed consideration of sex".⁵ The black American woman is made to perform the works of all the household drudge like plowing, harvesting and cotton picking, while at the same time she has the duty of producing human livestock. She is made to reproduce and breed children who will grow up to be slaves and used for labor force. She has no voice but to obey and is entirely at the mercy of the white masters who rape her to fulfill their desires.

The constant torture and abuse has a deep negative impact on the black woman's psyche. She is subject to brutal force of work and sex both by the white and her male counterpart, and she is stripped of her dignity. She is brutally forced to work and at the same time manipulated by her white masters and her male counterpart. This state of constant torture fills her world with anxiety, fear, feeling of inadequacy and frustration. Her physical bondage leads to deep psychological bondage. She begins to adopt and internalize the ideas and values of the white masters with a sense of self-negation. Her personality is developed under the atmosphere of brutality. Survival for them means being servile. They are in fact, mentally enslaved. Jean Nobles writes, "Even when told, some were reluctant to be free. Slavery has, as it was, lulled many of the victims into false sense of security. They either feared freedom or adopted the negative attitude of their masters".⁶

For a long time women had been made to think that their oppression was secondary to the racist oppression and that only after attainment of the American liberation of their manhood would they be liberated. The Afro-American women were therefore, silenced and they strove to support and encourage their men folk to achieve their liberation while the men exploit them. An African American writer Bell Hooks, also a professor of English and Afro-American at Yale university writes, "Racist, Sexist socialization had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and regard race as the only relevant label of identification... we clung to hope that liberation from racial oppression would be all that was necessary for us to be free. We were new generation of black women who had been taught to submit, to accept sexual inferiority and to be silent".⁷

Celie, speaks in a turn of a century black rural dialect that transforms illiterate speech into something that is, at times, very beautiful, as well as effective in conveying her sense of her world. The oral transmission plays a crucial role on the reproduction of the nation itself, from generation to generation.

A significant feature of the African American women writings is the bond between the women folk. Their shared experience binds and draws them closer together and they find acceptance when they are in each other's company. In Walker's 'The Color Purple', female friendship is portrayed as a means for women

to summon the courage to share their own experience and stories. In turn, these stories allow women to resist oppression and are subject to degrading and dehumanizing conditions. While the male African Americans fight for their racial freedom, women have to fight a silent battle of the sexist and racist injustice. In their struggle for liberation what the male Africans really wish to achieve is to regain their manhood of which they have been mute to their unlawful and inhuman treatment for many decades. But contemporary writers following the renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston as their model for inspiration break the silence of the African woman in her sufferings. Writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall fictionalized the experiences of African woman by exposing in-depth insight into the psyche of the African woman who has been denied all human complexities. The African women are the most victimized in the whole history of America and yet have to struggle to define and defend their own identity or self. *The African women writers focused not merely in revealing their oppression but more on projecting the emergent individual who is equipped with determination and confidence.*

'*The Color Purple*' (1982), Walker's best-known work is a story of a young black woman who fights her way through not only racist white culture but patriarchal black culture. Alice Walker's common focus is on the struggle against a racist, sexual, and violent society. The novel is written in an epistolary form, since the protagonist, Celie tells her story through private letters that she writes to God, and later to her sister Nettie. She narrates her life story with complete honesty and her letters are confessional, and does not take protective measures to hide her true intent. Alice Walker, in her brief interview with the BBC, says that in writing the novel, she prepares herself by changing her life almost completely because the characters in the novel are very real to the writer and the picture she paints are vivid of the era and times. The characters and pictures portrayed in the novel have connections with the author's family legacy and African American culture, movements of the time, her own sufferings and what she had to endure as a Black American. Celie, speaks in a turn of a century black rural dialect that transforms illiterate speech into something that is, at times, very beautiful, as well as effective in conveying her sense of her world. The oral transmission plays a crucial role on the reproduction of the nation itself, from generation to generation.

Walker was married to a white Civil Rights lawyer. It was a racist marriage, and people could not accept racial intermarriage and was illegal at the time. To be seen in public together was not accepted, and had to even go shopping in the middle of the night to avoid the public hostility and aggression. She had to raise her children in such an environment where people really hated black people, and her marriage had really been shredded by the painful experiences she and her children had to endure, and this was the time when there was lots of fire bombing and lynching. They had a very tensed life and Walker actually faced an

incident where she and her African roommate in Atlanta, were all dressed up to enter a white church, and there would actually be deacons with axe handles at the church. Such were the racial situation of the time, and Walker's novel is an innovative piece and also revolutionary to certain extent. Walker in her writings gives a strong portrayal of the Afro-American women who had to suffer racist and sexist oppression against their own male folk.⁸

The prevalent theme in walker's novel, 'The Color Purple' is the destructiveness of racism and poverty, violence towards women and their women's inherent resilience. 'The Color Purple' is one of the bestselling books of the recent decades, a novel that deeply touches readers around the world and has enthusiastic responses. The book consists of a sequence of letters. Initially the letters are addressed to God, the only being in whom the writer Celie can imagine she can confide in. Celie is a young woman in Georgia in the early 20th century, trapped in a brutal existence, and a victim of domestic abuse. The man she believes to be her father has raped her throughout her teenage-hood, made her pregnant twice, got rid of the babies and married her off to a widower with kids of his own. Her father never had a kind word to say o Celie:

"He never had a kine word to say to me.

Just say you gonna do what your mamma wouldn't".⁹

Alice walker has said that her intend with 'The Color Purple' was to supplant the typically patriarchal concerns of the historical novel – "The taking away of lands, or the births, battles, and deaths of great men" – with the sense of "One woman asking another for her underwear".¹⁰ Walker manipulates the horizon of expectations of the historical novel by writing the novel within the traditionally confessional, local, privatized concerns of the autobiographical epistolary novel.

The majority of the men and women picturized in the story are of the opinion that men should dominate women. Harpo feels threatened by his strong- minded wife Sofia, and tries to become physically stronger than her so that he can beat her and return things to what he sees as their natural order. The women in the book are degraded by men and treated as second-class citizens. This self-imposed inequality ironically mirrors the inequality between the races.

In the novel, Walker focuses on the theme of double repression of black women in the American experience. Walker contends that black women suffer from discrimination by the white community and from a second repression from black males, who expose the double standard of white society on women.

There is no getting away from the fact that the 1930's Georgia must have been a difficult place to live as a

black person due to widely-held prejudice amongst the white population. Slavery was a recent memory. Due to their mistreatment at the hands of white people, the characters in the novel believe that their children are doomed to grow up in a racist society, with no hope for improvement. Furthermore, Sofia is convinced that due to the influence of the society's prejudice her children will become cynical of everyone around them. The black characters have difficulty accepting the condition, yet they see no hope of change in the future and this is seen throughout the novel.

As the fictive autobiography of an oppressed black woman's journey from sexual slavery to freedom, 'The Color Purple' parodies those primary texts of autobiographical writing that have shaped and influenced the direction of African-American fiction- the "Slave narrative". With the publication of slave autobiographies, oppressed African American slaves moved from object to subject, from silence into speech, creating a revolutionary literature- one that changed the nature of and direction of African-American history that laid the groundwork for the development of a distinct African-American literary tradition.¹¹

Although Walker conceived of 'The Color Purple' as a historical novel, her emphasis is less on historical accuracy and more on an insistence that history has more to do with the interpersonal details of everyday life at a given historical moment than with significant dates, events or important dates.

Walker exposes the evils of sexual domination and significantly, 'The Color Purple' is a narrative of sexual confession and throughout the novel, sexuality is graphically and explicitly discussed. As we approach this novel in the context of white supremacist patriarchal society wherein black women have been and continue to be stereotyped as sexually loose, the text graphically emphasizes the horror and pain of black male sexist exploitation of Black females, while de-emphasizing the horror and pain of racist exploitation.

The novel opens with a demand for silence that leaves a 14 year old girl named Celie with no way to express her pain and confusion except in the letters she writes to God. 'The Color Purple' begins with Celie's first letter to God. Celie tells God that she is fourteen years old. She begins her second sentence with words "I am" but strikes a line through the words and substitutes "I have always been a good girl". Celie places her present self ("I am") under erasure, which reminds us that she is writing, and searching for her voice by selecting, then rejecting, word choice. Celie was once "a good girl" but no longer feels that she can make this claim before God. Celie has been raped by the man she knows as her father and only fourteen; she is already pregnant with her second child-the result of rape and incest. Alphonso, Celie's

father, has turned to Celie for sexual gratification because Celie's mother is ill and can no longer fulfil his desires. Celie does not understand what is happening to her and in her first letter ask for God's guidance. Celie has been silenced by her father and is completely powerless throughout the beginning letters. She is so powerless that the only person she can talk to is God. She writes to God rather than pray. Celie loses the ability to control her own life and the death of her mother forces her to assume the duties of her mother and has to take care of her siblings and the household. Through rapes and beatings, she is completely dominated by her father, Alphonso. She has no voice and feels that the only way to persevere is to remain silent and invisible.

She is treated by her father like a slave and the only living person who provides Celie with friendship is her sister Nettie. Celie's father wants to have Nettie too but Nettie is protected from rape by Celie in the beginning and thus eventually is able to run away from home.

When Mr. ____ asked for Nettie's hand in marriage, Celie's father instead persuades him to marry the subservient Celie. Celie is forced into marriage and her wedding day is described in a moving and deep tone in her 9th letter to God:

"Dear God, I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve. His mama died in his arms and he don't want to hear nothing about no new one. He picks up a rock and laid my head open. The blood runs all down to my breasts. His daddy say don't do that! But that's all he say. He got four children, instead of three, two boys and two girls. The girls' hair aint' been comb since their mammy died. I tell him I'll have to shave it off. Start fresh. He says bad luck to cut a woman hair. So after I bandage my head best I can and cook dinner..... I start trying to untangle hair. They only six and eight and they cry. They scream. They curse me of murder. By ten o'clock I'm done. They cry themselves to sleep. But I don't cry. I lay there thinking about Nettie while he on top of me, wonder if she safe".¹²

Celie spends her wedding day bandaging a wound from a rock Mr. ____'s son throws at her, untangling her screaming and cursing step daughter's hair, and cooking dinner. Celie spends a joyless wedding night with Mr. ____ on top of her, all the while worrying about Nettie's safety.

Celie, a victim of domestic abuse, is almost completely voiceless and disenfranchised in everyday society. However Celie's letters enable her to break privately the silence that is normally imposed upon her.

Celie's confessional narrative is reminiscent of African slaves narratives from the nineteenth century. These early slave narratives, which took the form of song, dance, story-telling and other arts, ruptured the silence imposed on the black community. Yet, unlike

Celie's letters these slave narratives employed codes, symbols, humour and other methods to hide their true intent. Slaves took these measures to prevent slave owners from discovering the slaves ability to communicate, articulate and reflect on their happiness, but Celie takes no such protective measures. Walker uses Black folk speech/Black folk English which is rendered in a stilted way and part of her intention in writing in Black folk English is to keep alive their folk language, which is very effective in conveying the writer's message.¹³

Celie's letters, though completely candid and confessional, are sometimes difficult to decipher because Celie's ability to narrate her life story is highly limited, since she does not receive formal school education like Nettie does. But Walker wants to show through the character of Celie that even if a person does not get formal education, she can express herself beautifully through folk language or speech. Walker says that her mother and grandparents could express themselves beautifully even though they don't speak Standard English.¹⁴

Celie knows how to sate the events plainly, but often does not know how to interpret them. Despite the abuses she endures, Celie has a little consciousness of justice and shows little or no anger. Walker's use of Celie's own voice, however underdeveloped, allows Walker to tell the history of black women in the rural South in a sympathetic and realistic way. Celie's letters offer a powerful first-person account of the institutions of racism and sexism. Celie's simple narrative brings us into her isolated world with language that reveals both pain and detached numbness. "My mamma dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me".¹⁵

When Celie's cursing mother asks who fathered Celie's baby, Celie, remembering Alphonso's command to keep quiet, says the baby is God's because she does not know what else to say.

While in town one day, Celie catches sight of a young girl who thinks may be her lost daughter. The girl closely resembles Celie, especially her eyes. The little girl's mother talks kindly with Celie after she follows them into a fabric store where Celie learns that the mother calls her daughter Olivia, the same name Celie gave her daughter. In the store the racist shopkeeper treats Olivia's mother poorly, making her buy thread she does not want and tearing off her new fabric without bothering to measure it. Celie invites Corinne, the baby's mother to escape the racist glares of the white men in the market place by sitting in her wagon; Corinne expresses her gratitude to Celie with a pun of the word "hospitality". Celie demonstrates the power of the joke: "Horsepitality, she say. And I get it and laugh. It feel like to split my face".¹⁶ Mr. ____ comes out, he realizes immediately that this shared joke, such as it is, threatens his control over the discursive space in which Celie lines. "What you sitting here laughing like a fool fer?" he says.¹⁷ Celie's split face all too

graphically refers to the scars she bears, the masks of dumbness she hides and also refers to an object of a victimized shadow. Nettie's escape from home and seeking shelter in Celie's and Mr. ____'s home shows their father's intention to raping and carrying on an incestuous relation with Nettie, like he had done to Celie. But unlike Celie, Nettie is strong and fights back and defends herself against the male domination and abuse. Celie raped and beaten by her father is powerless, and when she is married to Mr. ____, he mistreats her as much as her father did. Celie is strongly disempowered by sex. Sex is described by Celie as something which is done to her, but never as something which she enjoys. Celie is essentially an object to others who is very passive in her interactions, especially those with men. Celie in the earlier part of the novel is someone who completely lacks power. Celie's lack of voice becomes more obvious when she says to Nettie:

"But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive"¹⁸

Nettie is the first of several women who tell Celie to fight back. Nettie observes that seeing Celie with Mr. ____ and his children is like "seeing Celie buried". Nettie encourages Celie to fight back and to show who has got the upper hand especially in connection to Mr. ____'s children.

Celie shows she is aware that others see her as a powerless object when she tells Sophia she is jealous of her assertive, self-defensive personality. When Kate tells Mr. ____ that Celie needs new clothes, Celie is actually aware that Mr. ____ thinks of her as little more than dirt:

"He looking at me. It like he looking at the earth. It need somethin? His eyes say".¹⁹

Kate, Mr. ____'s sister tells Celie to fight back for her own safety;

"You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself".²⁰

Celie's response shows that she has found it easier and less dangerous to become numb in the face of adversity:

"I don't say nothing, I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive".²¹

Celie's explanation to Katie indicates that she does not want to fight because it is too risky and seems fatalistic and self-defeating, but Celie is right – there are significant, possible even fatal, dangers inherent in resistance. Walker explores this tension between safety and danger throughout the novel.

Celie is also reluctant to resist because she lacks the tools she needs to fight back successfully—namely, a sense of self and ability to create and express her own story. Nettie tries to help build Celie's sense of self by passing along to Celie Mr. ____'s compliments, which Celie admits bolster her self-image. Celie's strained attempt to communicate her own feelings and her admission that she feels she deserves more than she has are important first steps in Celie's process of empowerment.

Celie's life with Mr. ____ is almost as bad as her life with her father. She gets beaten and is forced to work like a slave both in the house and out in the fields. But as the story progresses, Walker begins to develop the idea that people can attain power by strengthening their own voices. Walker argues that mastering one's own story and finding someone to listen and respond to it are crucial steps towards self-empowerment and autonomy. The primary theme of 'The Color Purple', though, reflects Walker's central character will eventually triumph over adversity and forgive those who oppress her. This central theme of the triumph of good over evil is no doubt the source of the book's great success.²²

The trial of thinking and making it through the "racial problem" in "The Color Purple" falls mainly to Sofia Butler, the "Amazon" who enters Mr. ____'s extended family as Harpo's first wife. The voice of sexual and racial resentment – for instance, she twice expresses a desire to kill her sexual and racial oppressors. She suffers both racial and sexist oppression. In her conversation with Celie, she says:

"All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers, I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house".²³

And she goes on to say that Celie reminds her of her mother who is also a victim of domestic violence and oppression;

"To tell the truth, you remind me of my mama. She under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot. Anything he say, goes. She never say nothing back. She never stand up for herself. Try to make a little half stand sometime for the children but that always backfire. More she stand up for us, the harder time he gave her".²⁴

The conversation between Celie and Sofia is very touching and Celie's speech about her helpless situation when being raped by her father makes it all the more painful and said;

"Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what.

Then after while every time I got mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick, feel like throwing up. Terrible feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all".²⁵

Celie's pitiful situation is all the more painful when she continues;

"Well sometimes Mr. ____ git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to old maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways".²⁶

Walker clearly highlights the issue of the powerlessness of Southern black women in this novel. Within the patriarchal system, women are objectified and often regarded as less than human. Celie feels helpless and trapped both by her father and her husband Mr. _____. This image of entrapment and powerlessness is very much the narrative of Celie. The powerlessness Walker's women feel is often reaffirmed by the physical abuse they endure in their marriage. Celie is also silenced by abuse. When Celie's stepfather tells her to "never" tell nobody but God" after he has raped and abused her, Celie obeys by writing to God. When her husband beats her, Celie survives by refusing to feel "I make myself wood". Celie has difficulty defining, interpreting and speaking about herself, as she confesses to God; she has grown so numb in the face of adversity.

Walker is obviously committed to exposing the oppression of black women. Walker is committed to exploring the oppression, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women. Walker's voice explores women's role within the patriarchal system, emphasizing their desire for freedom, spirituality and creativity.

Sofia suffers racist oppression but asserts her right and dignity by daring to refuse Miss Millie's proposal. She is the first woman Celie knows who refuses to accede to both the patriarchal and the racist demand that the black women demonstrate her abjection to her oppressors. But the mythic test of Sofia's strength takes place in her refusal to enter the servitude of double discourse demanded of blacks by the white culture. She says "Hell no" to the mayor's wife's request to work as her maid and further punched the mayor for scolding her, and as a result she ends up in jail, beaten very severely by the Mayor and six police men, eventually ends up serving the Mayor's family as a maid for twelve long years. Sofia unlike Celie is a person who will not allow men to have the upper hand, which is the result of her struggle and abuse of her past. She is the one who encourages Celie to fight back and Celie is also jealous of her self-assertiveness and strong power she holds against Harpo. But under the White racist domination even Sophia is helpless. For her effort to stay honest in the face of the White demand for black hypocrisy, Sofia gains incarceration in a set of penal institutions, which is a way similar to lynching; to racialize the scene of class struggle in the

public sphere and to deploy prejudice against Women. Sofia tells Celie about her stay in prison:

"Every time they ask me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you, I jump up and do just what you say".²⁷

Sofia is separated from her own family and forced to join the Mayor's household against her will, living in a room under the house and assigned to housekeeping and child raising, Sofia carries out the role in the Mayor's household which clearly recalls that of the stereotypical mammy on the southern plantation. However, as someone who prefers to build a roof on the house while her husband tends the children, Sofia seems particularly unsuited for the role of mammy, but whites-including and perhaps Miss Eleanor Jane continually expect her to behave according to their cultural representation of the black mother. Miss Eleanor Jane's stereotypical projection becomes clear when she can't understand why Sofia doesn't just love her new son, since, she believes that all other colored women she knows loves children.

The social coercion of the Afro- Americans to participate in a discourse that proclaims their unworthiness is resisted by Sofia, and then performed on Sofia's behalf by Squeak, Harpo's second wife, a dutiful replacement for Sofia, who had refused to allow Harpo to dominate and beat her.

Walker emphasizes the intersection of racism and sexism throughout her writings, while at the same time focuses on relationships within the African American community. The white community exists on the fringes of consciousness in Walker's characters, but its oppression, the oppression expressed through patriarchy, reaches into the black community. Walker explores the indirect effect that racism has on her protagonist.

In reading Walker's 'The Color Purple', it can be easily said that Black women not only digest the hurt and pain, they feel it their duty to become a repository of the Black man's rage. But, Walker in 'The Color Purple' offers an alternative. Celie, Harpo, Mary Agnes (Squeak), Mr. ____ and Shug realize that they must get Sofia out of jail that she will die if she remains in prison. They plot together, Mary Agnes (Squeak) agrees to seduce the jailer, and they successfully manipulate the racist system that threatens Sofia's life. Throughout the novel, the authorial speaks for subverting a system that promotes both racism and sexism.

Against the backdrop of Celie's letter is another story about African customs. Thus evolves from her sister Nettie's letters while Celie's husband Mr. ____ hid from Celie over the course of 20 years. Through Nettie's letters, Celie is able to learn about the truth and about Pa not being their biological father, and which releases Celie from her guilt of incestuous sin committed, and her two children not her sister and brother, the story

about how their father had been lynched by the white people because of his success as a business man, and how Pa end up marrying their mother. Nettie's letter not only reveals their historical past, but more importantly, Walker through Nettie's letters present problems of women bound within an African context encountering many of the same problems that Celie faces. Both Celie and Nettie are restored to one another, and most important; each is restored to herself.

Nettie's letter place Celie's story within a much longer context. The plot of the novel before Celie and Shug's discovery of Nettie's hidden letters has been confined to a small set of people in a small town in rural Georgia. This insulation and isolation contrasts sharply with Nettie's experience, which has bought her to a village in Africa. Celie remarks that Nettie's letters are covered with stamps that have the picture of the queen of England on them, signaling that blacks in Africa are also suppressed and dominated. The image in Nettie's letters not only open Celie's eyes to the outside world, but also link the personal oppression Celie has felt with the broader themes of domination and exploitation on the continent of Africa.

The theme of racial and sexual reconstruction is played out on a large canvas in 'The Color Purple'. Nettie's retelling of the African story contains some equally harsh truths, but like the ones told to Albert and Eleanor Jane, hers, too, clear the way for reconciliation. On the racial front, Europe mythologizing of Africa and its people as backward and mired in poverty is revised to reveal Europe as the cause of the problem it blames the victims for. Not only did Europe rob Africa of priceless art and artefacts that fill up many a museum in the west, "but millions and millions of Africans were captured and sold into slavery". Celie! And whole cities were destroyed by slaves catching wars. Today the people of Africa-having murdered or sold into slavery their strongest folks-are riddled by decease and sunk in spiritual and physical confusion.²⁸ Walker, through Nettie's letters presents the pitiful situation of the Africans and how Europe is responsible for the destruction of many African cities. The economic rape of Africa continues as European companies push Africans out of the land, destroying their way of life in the process, to make room for rubber and cacao trees, the goods of the marketplace. Nettie in her 11th letter to Celie writes about the destruction and taking away of lands by the Europeans:

"It was pitiful, Celie. The people felt so betrayed! They stood by helplessly- they really don't know how to fight, and rarely think of it since the old days of tribal wars-as their crops and their very homes were destroyed Every hut that lay in the proposed road path was leveled. And, Celie, our Church, our school, my hut, all went down in a matter of hours".²⁹

Just as Europe's racial myths are challenged in the novel, so are Africa's sexist altitudes held up to public view. The oppressive African mentality, according to Walker, is rooted in self-centeredness, and sexists Africans are as guilty if this crime as are racist (American) whites. Nettie in her letter writes:

"I think Africans are very much like white people back home, in that they think they are the center of the universe and that everything that is done is done for them".³⁰

Through Nettie, Walker, true to her womanist courage, chastises African men for their subjugation of women. So deeply has the belief in male dominance that the female African subordination has been ingrained in men and women that a mother can say about her girl-child:

"A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something".³¹

Education is reserved for boys who, when they become men, will care for their wives. The idea of a dependent Olinka woman is fixed in the Olinka psyche. Tashi's father declares that there is always someone to look after Olinka woman, and that someone being, of course, a man. This sexually oppressive climate replaces the one that nearly stunted Celie's and Nettie's growth under "Pa", as Nettie rightly observes:

"There is a way that the men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don't even look at women when women are speaking".³²

The Olinka women are obedient and submissive, and those women, such as Tashi's aunt, who fight against the cultural effort to reduce them to ciphers, are sold into slavery, an act that completely effaces their individuality.

Walker's concern for women is global. In "The Color Purple", Nettie discovers that Olinka people of Africa think very little of women who are not connected to men through marriage. In the Olinka tribe women have status only as mothers. When Nettie states that she is not the mother of anybody's children but is still something, she is told by Tashi's mother that she is nothing much. Walker's work depicted the emotional, spiritual, and physical devastation that occurs when family trust is betrayed. Her focus is on black women, who grow to reside in a larger world and struggle to achieve independent identities beyond male domination as seen in "The Color Purple", through the characters of Sofia, Shug, Nettie, Squeak and later, Celie herself. Although her characters are strong, they are, nevertheless, vulnerable. Their strength resides in their acknowledged debt to their

mothers, to their sensuality, and to their friendships among women. These strengths are celebrated in Walker's work, along with the problems women encounter in their relationships with men who regard them as less significant than themselves merely because they are women. The by-product on this behalf is, of course, violence. Hence, Walker's stories focus not so much on the racial violence that occurs among strangers but the violence among friends, and family members, a kind of deliberate cruelty, unexpected but always predictable.

Black women not only digest the hurt and pain, they feel it their duty to become a repository of the black man's rage. But Walker offers an alternative and Walker, through her novel encourages black men and women to support each other, and she disparages the incipient racism so often found within the African American community itself, especially the significance attached to skin color.

Walker states in an interview that she has always wanted to explore relationships between men and women to know why women are always condemned for doing what men do as an expression of their masculinity. Black women are loyal to black men than they are to themselves, and Walker advocates a sisterhood of black women, really all women, who will support each other in resisting patriarchy. The patriarchal system objectifies women. Mr. ___'s objectification of Celie is described by Celie in her letters to God. Celie is harshly beaten by Mr. ___ for not being Shug, and simply because Mr. ___ accuses her of winking at a boy in the church, and at times for no reason at all.

Walker sees the possibility of empowerment of Black women if they create a community of sisters that can alter the present day unnatural definitions of women and men. At the end of the "The Color Purple", Celie and Mr. ___ actually become rather close friends. Because of her love for Shug, Celie is able to move towards an understanding of the man she only knew as "Mr. ___" for many years. Walker advocates freedom of expression for women. The moving force behind Celie's liberation is Sofia's assertiveness and Shug's strong character, Celie is introduced as a woman who first writes, and then speaks herself into existence.

Through her letters she moves from oral silence to speaking subject or as she says "into creation".

Walker's voice explores women's role within the patriarchal system, emphasizing their desire for freedom, spirituality and creativity. In her interview Walker defined the subject of her creative imagination: "I am committed to exploring the expressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women... the most fascinating creations in the world". More precisely, the focus of Walker's attention is the Southern black women and until 'The Color Purple' her

personal "oppression" and "insanities" far outnumbered her "triumphs".³³

In 'The Color Purple', women are objectified and often regarded as less than human within the patriarchal system. Sofia complains that all Harpo wants is obedience from her, and says that Harpo don't want a wife, he want a dog. Many of Walker's female characters feel helpless and trapped by either husbands or fathers, or both. The powerlessness Walker's women feel is often reaffirmed by the physical abuse they endure in their marriages. Many of the women in Walker's stories have seen silenced by abuse. When Celie's step- father tells her to never tell anybody but God after she has been raped and abused, Celie obeys by writing her story in a series of letters to God. When her husband beats her, Celie survives but refusing to feel.

When Sofia's mother dies, Harpo argues that she and her sisters should not be pall- bearers:

"Women weaker, he say, People think they weaker, say they weaker, anyhow. Women spose to take it easy. Cry if you want to. Not try to take over".³⁴

When Shug announces that Celie is going to Memphis with her, Mr. ___ tells Celie that she is worthless:

"You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. God dam, he say, you nothing at all".³⁵

Celie implicitly accepts white and masculine dominance and makes the assumption that her voice can never be heard. But Celie's assertion of herself comes forcefully in this section. Her defending moment, the speech she gives to Mr. ___ contrast sharply with her former silence. Celie's assault on Mr. ___ releases years of pent-up emotion and hurt that had been silenced. Mr. ___ tries to counter by stripping Celie of her sense of self, as he has throughout the novel. He tells her that as a poor, black, and ugly woman, she is "nothing at all". But Celie's sense of self of self is strong enough that she is no longer a helpless object, so she resists Mr. ___'s proclamation, reinterpreting his words in a defiant context:

"I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook but I'm here".³⁶

Walker's wish for black men and women is that they not merely survive, but survive whole, as she has done. Walker has viewed her writings as a means of survival. When she was nearing fifty, she expressed surprise that she did not commit suicide before the age of thirty, but explains in the introduction to her fifth volume of poetry, 'Her Blue Body Everything We Know (1991)', "I have climbed back into life over and over on a ladder made of words, but knitted, truly, by the unknowable". Walker has denoted her most recent years to fighting for women throughout her work, for

those “survivors and champions” who refuse to become victims of sexist traditions.³⁷

Throughout ‘The Color Purple’, Walker portrays female friendships as means for women to summon the courage to tell stories. In turn, these stories allow women to resist oppression and dominance. Relationships among women from a refuge, providing reciprocal love in a world filled with male violence. The female ties take many forms: Some are motherly or sisterly, some in the form of mentor and pupil, some are sexual, and some are simply friendships. Sofia claims that her ability to fight comes from her strong relationships with her sisters. Nettie’s relationship with Celie anchors her through years of living in the unfamiliar culture of Africa. Samuel notes that the strong relationships among the Olinka women are the only thing that makes polygamy bearable for them. Most important, Celie’s ties to Shug bring about Celie’s gradual redemption and her attainment of a sense of self. The quilt composed of diverse patterns sewn together, symbolizes diverse people coming together in unity.

The arrival of Shug Avery is the turning point in Celie’s life. While Celie is a victim of male domination Shug Avery is not. Also, Sofia influences Celie to have her own voice. While Celie has allowed patriarchal ideology to inform her sense of self, Sofia has not. Sofia’s assertiveness and autonomy is witnessed by Celie. When Sofia meets Mr. ____ and defies his attempt to control her. Sofia denies Mr. ____’s accusation that she is in trouble and therefore will end up on the streets. Sofia refuses to despair at her own pregnancy and rebuffs Mr. ____’s attempt to make her miserable. Likewise, Sofia’s refusal to stop talking when Mr. ____ or Harpo enters the room demonstrates that she does not view her identity as a woman simply in terms of defiance of the customs of patriarchy amazes Celie.

Sex also plays a key role in the empowerment of the characters. Whereas sex was used in the first section to disempower Celie, later after Shug is able to show Celie what sex can really be like, Celie no longer blindly accepts sex as something that happens to her. For Celie this makes the first time sex actually has meaning, and the realization of her new self-releases her from the constraints of male domination. She thus gain control over her own body and sexuality, giving her the ability to later consider leaving home much the way Sofia does.

Walker in her interview says that bisexuality plays a key part in the protagonist growth towards fulfillment in ‘The Color Purple’, which is crucial to creativity. The fertility of the story is in a way an expression of Walker’s own ability as a bi-sexual person to hold all of the characters, their emotions, and their desires, and to keep them in balance and to honor them all.³⁸

Celie has always been in relationships, which are the product of real or implied threats of violence. After her new-found love with Shug, Celie is empowered and finds her voice to resist male domination. Shug’s influential presence and acceptance give Celie the strength she needs to redefine her and take charge of her life.

The discovery of Nettie’s hidden letters with the help of Shug is another force, which helps Celie towards her resistance and empowerment. Celie and Nettie provide the sisterly relationship in the novel. Nettie is Celie’s hope and faith for life. They constantly push each other throughout the book to stay true to God, and the believe that they will meet again one day is something that keeps them alive.

Walker gives an idea in the novel that people can attain power by strengthening their own voices. Celie in the beginning lacks power. Celie begins to understand that her perception of herself differs from the way others perceive her. These beginnings of self-awareness represent a foundational first step toward Celie’s empowerment.

Celie’s growing sense of self enables her to take her first action against the oppression of patriarchy. Celie has become a “silent revolutionary”, a woman who does not yet have the power to verbally express herself.

Nettie’s letters play an important part in Celie’s empowerment. The idea of economically successful and independent blacks is largely foreign to southern black women like Nettie and Celie, who are accustomed only to denigration, denial, and subservience at the hands of both whites and black men. Nettie’s description of Harlem in New York empowers Celie and may be a factor in the economic independence is yet another submerged or suppressed narrative that is emergent into the foreground of Celie’s consciousness.

Celie relies heavily on God as her listener and source of strength, in the earlier part of the novel, but her relationship with Shug, her ability to tell her stories to Shug and the discovery of Nettie’s letters encourages her to form her own powerful narrative. Celie’s forceful assertion of this newfound power, her cursing of Mr. ____ for his years of abuse is the climax of the novel. The recovering of the missing letters from her long-lost sister Nettie introduces a new narration and begins the transformation of Celie from writer to reader. The women in the novel form a community that resists patriarchal control. The patriarchal system in the novel enslaves and degrades women. But Walker sees the possibility of empowerment for black women if they create a community of sisters.

In 'The Color Purple', the relationship between women plays a very important part in resisting and survival against their male domination and Walker also portrays the importance of the bond between children and their mothers. The children create mothers by circulating among women who in other contexts are daughters, sisters, friends, wives, and lovers. Celie's children pass first to Corrine, then to Nettie. Squeak takes on Sofia's children, later, mothers Squeak's daughter Suzie Q and with exasperated acknowledgement that even unwilling nurture can engender filial affection the white girl Eleanor Jane.

Almost none of the abusers in Walker's novel is stereotypical, one-dimensional monster whom we can dismiss as purely evil. Those who perpetuate violence are themselves victims, often of sexism, racism, or paternalism. Harpo, for example, beats Sofia only after his father implies that Sofia's resistance makes him less a man. Mr. ___ is violent and mistreats his family much like his own tyrant like father treated him. Mr. ___ is violent and mistreats his family much like his own tyrant like father treated him. Celie advises Harpo to beat Sofia because she is jealous of Sofia's strength and assertiveness. Sofia tells Eleanor Jane that societal influence makes it almost inevitable that her baby boy will grow up to be a racist. Only by forcefully talking back to the men who abuses them and showing them a new way of doing things do the women of the novel break these cycles of sexism and violence, causing the men who abused them to stop and re-examine their ways.

Walker creates women who unexpectedly transform themselves from objects into speaking subjects within the African American community. These creations of Walker emerge from their narratives as independent, empowered beings who take charge of their own lives.

Celie empowers herself as she creates a permanent life for herself. Her new found economic independence, her pants sewing business is a form of creative self-expression, a form of entrepreneurship and a means to life-sufficiency. Celie has taken sewing, traditionally a domestic chore, and turned it into an instrument of independence. Walker implies that such economic independence is crucial for women to free themselves from oppressive situations. When Celie inherits her family's old property, Celie completes her independence, becoming a fully autonomous woman, with her own money, business, story and circle of friends. The full empowerment of Celie arrives in full force at the end of the novel when Nettie returns to her with two children Adam and Olivia, and has Shug by her side. The strong female relationships and their support for each other, their endurance and their resistance is the reason for their independence and the defeat of the male folk and the men's ability to change from a negative to positive characters in the end.

Walker's central concern in the novel is double oppression and resistance and their inherent resilience

through their shared experience, which binds and draws them closer together and how they find acceptance when they are in each other's company. She creates women who unexpectedly transform themselves from objects into speaking subjects, independent and empowered capable of taking charge of their own lives.

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