



From Imposed Silence to Selfhood: A Womanist Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, the subjugation of Black women has remained a global tragedy, rooted in racial and patriarchal hegemony. Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), vividly encapsulates this intersectional struggle within the African American community, illustrating a rigid gender stratification divided into patriarchal rulers and subjugated women. This study provides a qualitative, womanist critique of the novel, examining the domestic injustices that enforced Black women to silence and trauma. Utilizing Patricia Hill Collins's black feminist thought as a theoretical framework, the research analyzes the harrowing trajectory of the protagonist, Celie. Initially trapped in a cycle of domestic brutality and sexual violence inflicted by her stepfather and later her husband, Celie's destiny appears to be fabricated by male tyranny. However, the study illuminates how despite the imposed subjugation, Celie holds enough courage for her eventual liberation. This emancipation is catalyzed by the transformative power of a marginalized female community.

Key Words: *Womanism, Patricia Hill Collins, Enforced Silence, Selfhood, Intersectional Oppression, Domestic Tyranny, The Color Purple.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the systematic marginalization of Black women has persisted as a critical sociopolitical crisis, driven by what structural theorists define as the intersection of racial supremacy and male-dominated hegemony. Historically, patriarchal structures have binarized the social landscape into dominant male victimizers and subjugated female as "others". It enforces rigid gender roles that reduce women to fragile, domestic subordinates. Within the specific context of the African American experience, this matrix of domination has historically subjected Black women to a unique form of dual catastrophe—navigating both external white supremacy and internal patriarchy. Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning epistolary novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), directly confronts these institutionalized gendered and racial injustices. By depicting a starkly stratified society divided into patriarchal rulers and silenced female subjects, Walker illustrates how systemic abuse attempts to fracture the Black female psyche, while simultaneously offering a profound blueprint for psychological emancipation through individual and communal solidarity.

Rather than merely presenting a narrative of passive suffering, *The Color Purple* captures the expansive developmental trajectories of its female characters—most notably Celie, Nettie, Sofia, and Squeak—each serves as a distinct literary archetype of resistance against hierarchical oppression. The narrative centers on Celie, an impoverished, uneducated young Southern Black girl whose early life is defined by severe physical, emotional, and sexual trauma. Structurally divided into shifting epistolary phases, the novel begins with Celie's desperate letters to God—the only psychic sanctuary available to her while enduring the brutal domestic tyranny of her stepfather, Alphonso, and later, her abusive husband, Albert (Mister). For decades, Celie is subjected to relentless institutional and domestic violence, her initial response being one of complete psychological withdrawal and enforced silence. Her sister, Nettie, escapes a similar domestic fate, transitioning to missionary work in Africa, which provides a parallel narrative counterpoint regarding the global dimensions of patriarchal oppression.

However, the trajectory of the novel pivots on the introduction of Shug Avery, a fiercely independent blues singer whose arrival disrupts the abusive domestic sphere. Although initially introduced as Albert's mistress, Shug transcends the conventional rivalries of the male-dominated love triangle, establishing a profound, transformative bond with Celie. Through this intimate and emotional alliance, Celie unlearns her enforced insignificance, mustering the psychological agency required to terminate her patriarchal ties and reclaim her bodily and spiritual autonomy. By tracing this evolution, Walker demonstrates how marginalized women transition from silent objects of oppression to self-actualized subjects of their own destinies.

Central to Walker's narrative architecture is the radical subversion of traditional romantic dynamics. By constructing an emotional and spiritual bond between Celie and Shug, Walker illustrates the core tenets of Womanist consciousness. A Womanist, as defined by Walker, is explicitly committed to the survival, wholeness, and collective emancipation of an entire people, while centering the vital necessity of female-to-female solidarity. In *The Color Purple*, Walker produces a mosaic of Black Southern women who, despite navigating a highly charged sexist and racialized society, cultivate a sense of communal belonging that catalyzes individual self-recovery. The interpersonal relationships among women in the text serve as a direct





subversion of the isolation imposed by patriarchal abusers. Consequently, individual healing becomes inherently tied to the structural support of the female collective.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Psycho-Linguistic Mechanics of Enforced Silence and Marginalization

Within literary and gender studies, the phenomenon of erasure is understood not merely as the absence of speech, but as a systematic, psycho-linguistic weapon deployed by patriarchal systems to deny marginalized subjects their humanity. The structural enforcement of silence serves to internalize oppression, transforming the victim's psyche into a site of subjugation where self-definition is replaced by the master's narrative. Historically, patriarchal discourse has constructed language as a gatekeeping mechanism; women are trapped between adopting the linguistic tools of their oppressors or retreating into absolute isolation. When a subject is systematically denied the right to narrate their own existence, they experience what trauma theorists describe as psychological fracturing. In this state, the individual ceases to exist as an autonomous agent and is instead reduced to a passive object of labor and physical exploitation. Literature serves as a primary field for diagnosing this condition, mapping how the trauma of domestic tyranny manifests as an absolute loss of linguistic agency.

2.2. The Matrix of Domination and the Sociology of Safe Spaces

To articulate the specific dimensions of this linguistic and psychological containment within the African American experience, sociologists look to Patricia Hill Collins's paradigm of the "matrix of domination." Collins argues that the oppression of Black women cannot be evaluated through isolated categories of race or gender; rather, these vectors function as interlocking structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal systems of control. A critical facet of this matrix is the suppression of Black women's unique knowledge and self-expression. Because Black women occupy a position of double marginalization—navigating both external racial hegemony and internal community patriarchy—their domestic spaces often reproduce the very dynamics of domination found in the public sphere.

However, Collins's framework offers an essential mechanism for psychological recovery through her conceptualization of "safe spaces." These are autonomous, marginal environments—such as networks of Black female solidarity, extended families, and communal spaces—where Black women are able to escape the surveillance of their oppressors. Within these safe sanctuaries, marginalized individuals can openly validate one another's hidden histories, unlearn their enforced insignificance, and transition from institutionalized objects of abuse into self-aware subjects of their own destinies. Thus, Collins positions communal dialogue as the foundational prerequisite for escaping the psychological paralysis of the matrix.

2.3. Alice Walker's Womanism

Alice Walker's development of Womanist theory provides the literary counterpoint to Collins's sociology, functioning explicitly as an Afrocentric methodology of psychological healing. Coined in her 1983 essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker's framework grounds the path to emancipation in the traditional wisdom, emotional flexibility, and mutual reliance of Black women. Unlike mainstream Western feminist frameworks that often prioritize individualist, legalistic equality, Womanism centers the absolute necessity of collective survival and emotional wholeness:

Womanist: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength... Committed to





survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female; not a separatist, except periodically, for health... (1984, p. xi-xii)

This theoretical lens directly reflects Walker's creative preoccupation with the spiritual survival of Black women navigating deeply hostile environments. Through a womanist framework, the recovery of identity is treated as an evolutionary, communal process. The theory recognizes that the deep emotional wounds inflicted by protracted domestic and sexual violence cannot be cured through isolation. Instead, Womanism posits that the path out of trauma requires a return to a supportive female collective, where the sharing of labor, stories, and emotional validation acts as a restorative catalyst for the individual psyche.

2.4. Critical Diagnoses of the Transformative Trajectory in *The Color Purple*

Extensive academic scholarship surrounding *The Color Purple* (1982) has consistently focused on the novel's profound depiction of internal development and structural transformation. Early critics immediately recognized that the novel's core value lies in its documentation of the "oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women" (Davis, 1987, p. 51). Rather than presenting a static record of trauma, contemporary scholars evaluate the text as a narrative blueprint for psychological emancipation. Baga Amira's (2010) analysis of the text underscores this perspective, framing the structural progression of the epistolary format specifically as a mechanism that tracks the "Emancipation Process of Celie" from absolute domestic subjugation to self-directed economic and emotional independence.

Furthermore, literary critiques highlight how Walker explicitly restructures conventional domestic dynamics to facilitate this psychological healing. Scholars like David Guy note that the novel's resolution hinges entirely on the characters' capacity to construct alternative, cooperative communities that operate outside patriarchal control. By organizing collective spaces for economic self-sufficiency and mutual emotional validation, the women successfully dismantle the traditional power dynamics that historically doomed them to silence. Ultimately, the consensus within contemporary womanist scholarship positions the novel as a vital exploration of identity reclamation, illustrating that through the deliberate cultivation of safe, supportive female spaces, the fractured Black female psyche can successfully transcend imposed silence and emerge into authentic selfhood.

2.5. Commentaries on the Walker's *The Color Purple*:

King-Kok Cheung (2020) in his recent commentary on the novel "*The Color Purple*" has described the text as a journey of breaking silence and achieving self awareness. He regards the novel as a womanist communal force that transforms Black women's suffering into collective empowerment and prosperity.. The female characters turn to masculine figures for guidance, to female models for inspiration, and to native idioms for stylistic innovation.

Goda Baltrušaitytė has touched upon the factor of currently disrupted masculinity in *The Color Purple* (2011). His whole work focuses upon the breaking dominance of males on the African women. He has titles his work as "Breaking the Boundaries of Masculinity: Men and Women in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*" (2010). This paper contains the deformation of masculinity which stands for men. It presents the Break through from the traditional concepts of African society and the image of future which is contrary to the traditional depiction of Africa. Through this text Alice Walker proves her point of view that masculinity is represented as a socially constructed identity rather than a biologically determined attribute.





Elisabeth Torfs in her research, Alice Walker's *Womanism Theory & Practice* (2008) discusses Walker's concept of womanism. She has evaluated her paper by a detailed history of Black feminism and its relation to Walker's feminism, gender issues, racial discrimination and male dominance. Walker refers black feminism as womanism as her coined term is deeply rooted in the experiences of being black and female. She has created her own approach toward this term and has become a very strong fascinating advocate of black feminism.

Mel Watkins an editor of New York Times has also praised this novel in her book review on *The Color Purple*. Watkins states that this novel is one of the most successful and controversial text ever written by any black women. Many people found this text as offensive and one dimensional but Walker's book has outlived its critics. This novel is a wonderful success for its author to tell the untold stories of African American heroes who faced the abusive racist and sexist society. This novel emerged a triumph. Alice Walker states once in her interview that the African woman is one of America's most prominent saints as she has been persecuted to the point of being indistinguishable

Thomas in his book review on *The Color Purple* quotes from the novel:

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. They look at the ground and bend their heads toward the ground. The women also do not "look in a man's face" as they say. To "look in a man's face" is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? (Walker, 1992, p.146-147).

In his opinion the novel is a sad and splendid book. It tells the tale of the 20 years struggle of a black women who strives to get a respectable status in her house and society. Walker has effectively built her characters and has portrayed an untold tale of African women.

To conclude it can be said that feminism is a movement for the equal rights of women in society. Many feminist writers and critics have contributed in the theory of feminism by analysing it from different angles. This chapter is a detailed overview of feminism through the glasses of different feminists such as Charlotte Bunch, Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter, Mary Wollstonecraft and many others. All these feminist critics have made a great contribution in raising a voice for women as equal beings. They demand a society where human beings are not judged by the colour of their skin or their race or gender, rather where all human beings are treated as equal. It has also discussed Alice Walker's concept of womanism with the special reference of her novel *The Color Purple*. This book is particularly dedicated to African American women who are not only marginalized by their own men but also by whites. Many people have made various commentaries on the several characteristics of the novel. Their arguments also contribute in raising a voice for African women to enlighten them with their own self identity.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study offers a qualitative, womanist critique of *The Color Purple*, utilizing the foundational framework of Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist Thought. By applying Collins's concepts of intersecting oppressions and the political vitalization of "safe spaces," this article examines how institutionalized patriarchal injustices systematically attempt to doom Black women to eternal silence. Furthermore, this research investigates how Womanism functions as a vital mechanism for psychological emancipation and self-definition. Through a





close textual analysis, this study aims to locate the specific intersections of trauma, linguistic agency, and communal healing, ultimately demonstrating how Walker's characters successfully dismantle male-dominated hegemony to assert an authentic, self-determined identity.

Patricia Hills Collins and Black Feminism:

Patricia Hills is one of the strongest advocates of Black women's rights. She strongly claims that a person cannot be separated from his society and social environment does have its strong influences on the lives of a human being. Thus, black women are subjected to intersecting forms of racial and gender discrimination such as 'others', throughout the ages. In this way the historical context and the material conditions are shaping the lives of black women. According to feminist critics, women are not born women but they are made women. Patricia Hills asserts that race, gender and class oppression are the bases of the poverty of Afro-American women.

Patricia Hills and *The Black Feminist Thought*

Patricia Hills' well known book *The Black Feminist Thought* explores, on a large scale, the ideas and themes of the Black feminist writers inside and outside the academy. *The Black Feminist Thought* proves to be a more broad canvas that grasps all the social backgrounds and fundamental causes of black women's oppression. The book clarifies several assumptions underlie the core themes of black feminism such as the Black women's oppression of work and family, sexual politics of Black womanhood, oppression in Black women's motherhood and love relationship. Unwin Hyman writes in a book review of *The Black Feminist Thought*,

Black Feminist Thought provides a synthesis of a body of knowledge that is crucial to putting in perspective the situation of Black women and their place in the overall struggle to reduce or eliminate gender, race and class inequalities. The book provides an analysis of the ideas of Black women, particularly those ideas that reflect a consciousness in opposition to oppression. (Hyman, 1992, p.508).

In short this study demonstrates that *The Color Purple* is a powerful womanist text that exposes the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class while affirming Black women's capacity for resistance, healing, and self-definition. Through the lens of Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought*, the analysis reveals that Walker portrays female solidarity, linguistic agency, and communal "safe spaces" as essential means of overcoming patriarchal domination and reclaiming identity. By transforming experiences of trauma into collective empowerment, the novel challenges oppressive social structures and reaffirms the significance of Black women's lived experiences as sources of knowledge, resilience, and liberation. Consequently, *The Color Purple* remains a seminal contribution to womanist literature and Black feminist scholarship, offering a compelling vision of justice, dignity, and self-determined womanhood.

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 The Domestic Matrix of Domination

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker exposes how the black male-dominated domestic sphere operates as a localized microcosm of Patricia Hill Collins's "matrix of domination". Within this structure, African American women are systematically reduced to commodified, subordinate objects, denied both geopolitical visibility and basic human respect. The text illustrates that the enforcement of this marginalization is deeply somatic, utilizing physical and psychological terror to strip the female subject of agency.





This systematic fracturing is initiated in the protagonist Celie's life through her stepfather, Alphonso. Alphonso functions as the primary architect of Celie's linguistic and bodily alienation, replacing the supportive paternal archetype with an abusive, exploitative tyranny. When he commands her, "You better never tell anybody but God. It'd kill your mammy," he uses familial guilt to sever her connection to human community, effectively trapping her within an isolated psychological prison. The trauma is compounded by the forced extraction of her reproductive labor; Alphonso sells the two children she bears him, leaving Celie to conclude that he "kilt it out there in the woods". By interrupting her education and removing her from school, Alphonso deliberately forecloses her access to the basic tools of structural literacy, ensuring her absolute dependence.

Alphonso's Trauma Loop:

Enforced Rape → Enforced Silence ("Tell nobody but God") → Linguistic Erasure → Academic Disfranchisement

This domestic subjugation seamlessly transfers to the marital sphere via Albert (Mr. ____), whose incomplete name functions as a blank placeholder representing the widespread, institutionalized nature of black gendered tyranny. For Albert, marriage is not a reciprocal partnership but an aggressive acquisition of property. When his son Harpo inquires why he inflicts physical violence upon Celie, Albert replies, "cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for __ he don't finish". This fragmented syntax underscores the absolute dehumanization of the female subject; her utility is so profoundly reduced to sexual and domestic labor that it defies linguistic articulation within polite discourse.

This institutional mindset is inter-generationally transmitted. Harpo instinctively internalizes this patriarchal conditioning, asserting, "Women work. I'm a man". The text reveals that even when men deviate from these rigid boundaries—such as Harpo's latent affinity for domestic tasks like cooking and cleaning—the oppressive scrutiny of older hegemonic figures like Albert forces them to abandon their natural inclinations in favor of violent dominance. Consequently, the domestic space becomes a site of perpetual labor and surveillance, where a woman's wedding day is transformed from a celebratory milestone into a frantic, exhausting "adventure for survival".

The gradual course of the text moves from fractured silences to divine dialogue because human interlocutors are violently denied to Celie by the patriarchal figures in her life, her linguistic survival hinges entirely on the epistolary format. Her letters to God represent a desperate, psycho-linguistic defense mechanism against absolute psychological disintegration. Denied the right to express anger or process her abuse—a containment strategy that literally manifests as physical illness ("every time I got mad or start to feel mad, I got sick")—Celie externalizes her trauma through the written word.

As the narrative progresses, this epistolary space evolves from a passive record of victimization into a radical zone of self-analysis. By translating her daily miseries into text, Celie preserves a hidden, interior selfhood that her abusers cannot access or erase. This private linguistic realm lays the vital psychological groundwork for her eventual transition from an institutionalized object of abuse into an autonomous, self-actualized subject.





Another major development in the course of novel can be translated as womanist communicational ties as catalysts for liberation. While individual resistance within the matrix of domination often results in severe containment or destruction, Walker's text exposes that the cultivation of Womanist communicational ties functions as an unstoppable mechanism for psychological and economic autonomy. The text demonstrates that when marginalized women establish intentional, dialogic bonds, they break the spell of patriarchal isolation, pool their collective strength, and effectively dismantle the structures of their past bondage.

Sofia Butler represents Celie's first concrete encounter with unyielding female physical defiance. Visually characterized by Celie as an imposing, empowering force who looks "like the army change direction," Sofia rejects the script of submissive victimhood. She openly confronts male-dominated authorities, declaring, "A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house".

When Celie admits that her own internalized jealousy prompted her to advise Harpo to beat Sofia, their subsequent conversation transforms into a space of profound psychological reckoning. Sofia's radical counter-counsel—"you out to bash Mr. ____ head open... think about heaven later"—disrupts Celie's escapist theological conditioning. Sofia demonstrates an alternative mode of being; her refusal to cease speaking or alter her behavior when men enter the room offers Celie a real-time masterclass in linguistic survival.

If Sofia provides a blueprint for physical resistance, Shug Avery serves as the ultimate catalyst for Celie's emotional, spiritual, and sexual restoration. Shug, an independent blues singer viewed by Celie as a revered "queen," introduces an element of maternal nurturing and unconditional validation completely missing from Celie's life. The turning point in Celie's self-worth occurs when Shug validates her individual existence by composing and naming the "Miss Celie Song" after her. For the first time, Celie experiences herself as an object of art and respect, noting, "First time somebody made something and name it after me".

It is through Shug's loving intervention that Celie finds the audacity to confront Albert's verbal assaults. When Celie resolves to leave for Memphis, Albert unleashes a torrent of misogynistic abuse designed to reduce her to nothingness: "You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny... You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman... you nothing at all". Backed by the protective presence of the Womanist collective, Celie survives this verbal onslaught, successfully breaks her financial dependence, and transitions into a self-actualized entrepreneur.

The bond between Celie and Nettie completes this liberatory matrix by providing an intellectual and global perspective on oppression. As her biological sister and first instructor, Nettie equips Celie with basic literacy, directly enabling her to write her way out of trauma. Even when Albert interceptively isolates them by hiding Nettie's letters for decades—acutely aware that sustained sisterly communication would undermine his domestic control—Nettie's unyielding epistolary dedication persists.

Once recovered, Nettie's descriptions of the Olinka village reveal to Celie that male gendered subjugation is a global, systemic phenomenon rather than an isolated personal failure. Nettie chronicles how Olinka women are psychologically enslaved to think that working like pack animals is an honor, and how the community actively bars young girls like Tashi from education under the premise that "a girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something". This cross-cultural mirror allows Celie to conceptualize her struggle not as a solitary curse, but as a collective global battle for human dignity.





Finally, the textual evidence warns against the vulnerability of isolated female resistance when cut off from a protective collective. Sofia's eventual capture, brutalization, and systemic enslavement by the white civic infrastructure serves as a sobering turning point. As Celie astutely observes, "If you hadn't tried to rule over Sofia the white folks never would have caught her".

This dynamic reveal how internal community patriarchy directly feeds into external white supremacy. By forcing Sofia to exhaust her defensive energies fighting the men within her own household, the black patriarchal structure leaves her highly vulnerable to state-sanctioned racial oppression.

Similarly, Shug Avery's vulnerability highlights the complicity of institutional religion in enforcing this subjugation. When a local preacher publicly degrades Shug's moral character, Albert sits idly by, passively crossing his legs, choosing to protect his hegemonic status rather than defend the woman he loves.

The text consistently illustrates that male-dominated institutions—whether the rural church or the tribal council—will always sacrifice female safety to preserve the artificial boundaries of male supremacy. True empowerment, therefore, can never be granted by patriarchal concessions; it must be collectively seized and maintained through the autonomous networks of the Womanist community.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the intense domestic marginalization and systemic containment of Black southern women within Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is primarily executed through a psycho-linguistic matrix of enforced silence and somatic trauma. By evaluating the text through Patricia Hill Collins's paradigm of interlocking oppressions and the sociology of safe spaces, this research demonstrates that the patriarchal domestic sphere operates as a localized site of tyranny where the female subject is systematically denied linguistic agency and reduced to a passive object of labor. However, Walker's narrative blueprint successfully subverts this institutionalized isolation by executing a calculated shift toward emotional and economic emancipation through the cultivation of organic, Womanist communicational ties. Rather than navigating their trauma in isolation, the female characters establish vital solidaristic dyads—such as the linguistic, emotional, and physical connections shared between Celie, Sofia, Shug, and Nettie—which transform their shared oppression into a collaborative sanctuary for self-analysis and growth. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that the reclamation of identity is an evolutionary, communal process; by establishing autonomous safe spaces outside male-dominated surveillance, the fractured Black female psyche successfully overcomes intergenerational submissiveness, reclaims its voice, and emerges into authentic selfhood.





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