

## Alice Walker's Treatment of Bildungsroman in The Novel

### “The Color Purple”

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#### Abstract

Author, poet, essayist, biographer, and activist, Alice Malsenior Walker is a multi-faceted African-American literary figure. This Pulitzer Prize-winning author has written extensively about racial and gender problems. Her best-known work is *The Color Purple* (which won her the Pulitzer Prize for fiction). Alice Walker's personal experiences as a representative of African American women authors have influenced her distinct psychological perspective. In her work, she often employs the symbolism that is popular in dark literary works. Presently in domestic academia, there are only a small number of research on the novel's creative features and expression approaches that concentrate only on the novel's symbolic meanings of the colour picture. The book has an overall focus on the construction of language, the execution of voice, the evaluation of sexual orientation, and the redefining of identity of the narrative's female characters, particularly heroine Celie. The Bildungsroman thesis states that a character's environment, experiences, issues, and oppression all contribute to his or her psychological strength. A bildungsroman is a novel that aims to mould the reader's mind and soul via their experiences in the world. She draws inspiration from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

**Keywords:** Alice Malsenior Walker, African-American novelist, Literature, The Color Purple, Bildungsroman Theory, etc.

## I. Introduction

It's hard to overstate the importance of Alice Walker as an Afro-American writer in the modern literary landscape of the US. A significant cultural landmark in contemporary American literature, *The Color Purple*, was published in 1982 and earned the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics' Association Award, making it the zenith of her accomplishments. 1986 saw the release of *The Color Purple* in China of the Chinese translation. Domestic academics have been more interested in the novel since then.

Readers throughout the globe have praised *The Color Purple* for providing African American women a platform. African-American women are encouraged to confront patriarchal social institutions in the black community and society at large by its account of the protagonist's emergence from patriarchal tyranny. The language of the letters in *The Color Purple* is so similar to spoken English that the reader is easily fooled into thinking she is hearing the narrator's voice rather than reading her writing. Often, the letter narrative is read as the direct and unfiltered thoughts of a character, as a view into their minds without interference from the narrator, whether this narrator is a third-person entity or an older and retrospective first-person narrator. Alice Walker's remarkable approach to the letter novel doubles this effect. She writes in an African-American country dialect so similar to her own speech that her letters seem like they are being read aloud by the narrator. While Celie's tale ends, the letters remain as a reminder of her maturation, and it is through the letters that Celie endures until she can speak up for herself. The oral flavour of the narrative voice emphasises the story's central topic, which is Celie's ability to talk.

There have been major changes in perceptions regarding gender roles throughout the years, as the traditional dichotomy of men as 'vitality' and women as 'fragility' has drawn

much academic investigation. Society is the sole authority on what is and isn't suitable conduct for a man or a woman, according to the modern definition of gender (Ringrose, 2003, p. 68)<sup>1</sup>. The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel 'The Color Purple' by Alice Walker deals with the seeming rise of male predominance in conventional gender norms. It seems to be centred on the ability of women to forge their own paths, in spite of the roles that have been given to them in society. "Deconstructing the hollowness of male authority, Walker argues that women may exercise their worthiness in terms of realising and articulating their own self-reliance and endurance in the Afro-American social setting." Celie, the heroine, takes on the responsibilities traditionally held sacred by men in order to establish her worth over her male counterparts. Walker reverses the stereotyped polarities and emphasises the dynamic nature of the female characters in order to highlight how culturally determined positions may change. The book makes the case that a culture that rationalises sexual abuse of women in the name of God also rationalises lesbian relationships and a women's private God. A significant aspect of this novel's feminist credentials is its emphasis on a female perspective and a mutual understanding between the sexes.

As a literary genre, the Bildungsroman focuses on female characters. Identified in the works of three female authors from different parts of the world is the notion of the Bildungsroman. To put it another way, a person grows up according to this notion. Because of their hardships, self-sacrificing women develop mature personalities that can handle any scenario. Bildungsroman is characterised by its ability to influence the reader intellectually and spiritually as a result of their experiences. Ethnic American Literature: An Encyclopedia for Students, by Vizenor Gerald (1934), 'The Color Purple is purportedly an epistolary novel, but it also has aspects of the epic, romance, realism, and bildungsroman tradition.'

## II. Black Feminism: Womanism

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<sup>1</sup> Ringrose, K. M. (2003). *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Black feminism refers to the struggles of black female authors for freedom, equality, and self-establishment. African-American women authors have always attempted women's predicament since they had to fight on many grounds against white patriarchy, white women's racism, and the sexism of black males. They have long fought against the inclination of white feminists to use their own status as a model for women's positions in society. Because white women have not had to question their heterosexuality or whiteness as political institutions, they have been shielded from the harshest repercussions of racism and sexism. The writings of black feminists provide a critical viewpoint on sexual political concerns that impact black women. "In general, it emphasises the importance of the bonds formed amongst black women as a main source of support." Because these authors describe themselves as feminists and display a dedication to women's problems and associated political concerns, they may be considered black feminist writers.

Writings and works of the advancing black artist who fought to dismantle black people's oppressive myths and images as well as to create new ones that would free and empower them were essential in the battle of black women. The Black Aesthetic/Black Arts Movement was founded on this philosophy. There was an upsurge in revolutionary awareness and combative spirit reflected in their work, which evaluated the norms and standards of two present social systems and rejected everything that was in opposition to a healthy self-definition. Some of the most well-known black poets and writers are Audre Lorde (Sonia Sachs), Sonia Sachiz (Toni Morrison), Toni Cade Bambara (Maya Angelou), and Alice Walker (Alice Walker). In response, the African American Folk heritage and the African past saw a resurgence of interest. The voices and experiences of black women, particularly those who have been marginalised by race, caste, and class, have been amplified by black women writers. It has been difficult for black women to build a history of literary criticism that represents their unique concerns. In black women's fiction, history shapes the character's

growth in connection to the historical causes that have formed the movement of her race and the hardships of her community. African American women writers have a shared history of racism and sexism and a sense of the importance of texts in their communities, which makes their writing Afrocentric as opposed to Eurocentric. This is because they have a shared history of oppression, and they also have a sense of the importance of texts in their communities.

For those who have been erased from history, wrenched from their racial heritage, silent, stifled, and denied freedom within similar vision and sight Walker continues to communicate her hopes for wholeness via her works. For Walker, the folklore and language, the grief and the energy of African Americans are merely threads in her compassionate tapestry, which she then presents to the world. "Throughout her life and career, Walker has fought tirelessly for the freedom to live one's life without fear or restraint." "But in addition to that, I am devoted to investigating the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the successes of black women, though women have always been a part of literature throughout the ages, their depiction as inferior, weaker and dependent was biased. And when it comes to black they were misrepresented, besides being suppressed. They were dominated socially, physically, and sexually; and were treated as slaves. Alice Walker, one of the most prominent Afro-American writers, fought for the black women's freedom. A tireless fighter, Walker writes fiction that often speaks against domestic violence, racism, sexual abuse, and female genital mutilation. Walker herself called as a "Womanist," committed to freeing women from all forms of oppressions. Walker's most popular work *The Color Purple* records the struggles of several black women in rural Georgia in the first half of the twentieth century. Upon its publications, *The Color Purple* unleashed a storm of controversy. It set out with the heated debates about black culture representations. Many male African- American critics

complained that the novel has a old racist stereotypes in black communities and of black men particularly.

At an early age, Celie is subjected to physical and emotional abuse by her family, and she is shown in the film *The Color Purple* (1982). Celie's narrative is told in letters to God and then to her sister, Nettie, by Walker. Celie prays to God to help her get through her father's verbal, emotional, and physical torments. The only one who can hear her cries and calm her raging heart is God, who she confides in since no one else can. Her anguish, suffering, and trauma have been revealed to God, and she feels a sense of relief and renewed strength as a result. Her path from helplessness to complete empowerment and self-recognition starts with this first step. Celie's beatings, abuses, and rejection at home are passed on to Mr. Albert, who suffers the same fate for the rest of his life. Celie's narcissistic and self-serving spouse treats her like a commodity and exploits her as a means to fulfil his lust and desires. The fact that he had a sexual connection with Celie just serves to strengthen the harmful effects of patriarchal tyranny. Celie, Nettie, Shug Avery, Shug Avery's beloved wife, Sofia the wife of Celie's stepson Harpoe, Mary Agnes and many others, Walker shows the concept of sisterhood and a kind of bond among these women; a bond of sisterhood, a bond of suffering and resistance, a bond of love and a bond of celebration to make an effort to provide healing touch to these sisters.

### **III. Bildungsroman Theme in Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'**

*The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker is used as a case study in Bildungsroman theory. At a time when African-Americans were still a minority in Georgia, this book depicts their struggle. A fourteen-year-old African American girl named Celie is the book's protagonist and writes letters to God describing her anguish as a result of her stepfather, Alphonso, being abusive. In the outset of the work, Alice Walker makes it apparent that

Celie's folly stems from her lack of education. To Celie, writing letters to God is a way of coping with the problems of her daily existence. To live in this world, she decides simply to pray to God for aid and seeks to overcome the spiritual, mental, and bodily torture she has suffered at the hands of her father. When the narrative begins, Celie's immaturity is shown by her decision to communicate her pain with God rather than with other people. When Alphonso abducts Celie's newly born children, she has no choice but to be powerless. It's as if she has no idea where her children are, so she writes letters to God detailing her troubles and converses with Him as if the other person is sitting next to her. When Celie is raped and abused by her stepfather, she doesn't stand up for herself in the strongest possible way. Celie's naivete at the beginning of the narrative makes it impossible for her to comprehend how to deal with the many circumstances she encounters. Her father, Alphonso, forbids her from informing anybody except God about the abuse she suffered at the hands of him. It's a letter to God that begins, 'I'm pregnant. Please help me.' I'm having a hard time getting back to the well in time. By the time I returned, the water had warmed up. Even though I had the tray all set, the meal would have been cold by the time I got it. Dinner will be ready by the time I finish getting the kids ready for school.' *The Purple Book*. Her stepfather, Albert, a widower with four children, takes away Celie's children from her and then marries her to Albert, who has no children of his own. Celie refers to him as Mr. at first, but he also exploits and brutalises her. Celie's opinions gradually become more mature as a result of her experiences and the hardships she has through at the hands of many nasty individuals in her family and in the community she lives in. To converse with an abstract God, she sees how futile her efforts are. As time goes on, she starts to open up to her sister about her thoughts and feelings. As she writes to Nettie in her letters, she tells her, 'I write to you, not to God' (199). Celie, influenced by Shug A Very, left her abusive husband Albert. Celie's comments leave Albert speechless. To leave you and enter into the creation, it's time. ' (207). *The Purple Color*

Slowly Celie reclines, learning from the brave and bold Shug a Very and gradually becoming a strong independent loving person. Many of her life's lessons are learned via adversity. Finally, Celie is able to harness the power of her newfound humanity and take up the cause of Shug A Very. As a result, she becomes a successful businesswoman who is able to create trousers for both men and women of all sizes. 'Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is a book that beautifully illustrates the progressive formation of a new black woman, Celie, who progresses from patriarchal tyranny to an independent self-awaken,' states Dr. Prasanta Kumar Padhi, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*. It's inspiring to read about a black, impoverished, uneducated African American girl who is able to transform her life and serve as an inspiration for other women who are in similar situations.'

Celie's character arc unfolds subtly throughout Alice Walker's book. As time passes, Celie comes to terms with the true purpose of life and establishes her independence in the community. She went from being a child who couldn't read or write to the self-aware adult she is now.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

A womanist would have opted to behave in an adult manner if Celie had decided to do so on her own. In her family's home, at a much too young age, she is forced to take on her mother's role around the house as well as in her Pa's bedroom. As a Bildungsroman, she suffers both loss and dissatisfaction early in the book. "Celie's childhood tragedy and the death of her best friend leave her unable to stand up for herself." She has no choice but to fight for her life as she is subjected to two forms of tyranny. She doesn't yet have any strong female role models in her life to teach her that there is another way to live than to comply to patriarchal society's standards and never be appreciated for it. As a Bildungsroman, the protagonist's passions and needs are repressed, and she gets perilously near to not being able to feel at all. Her needs and desires (particularly her need for love and affection) are denied.

For a woman to fully grow as a woman, she must have a strong sense of love. Celie's womanist growth began when she met Sofia and Shug and formed a sisterhood with them. As in typical Bildungsroman stories, Shug and Celie create an apprentice/mistress relationship. As a result, the narrative takes a womanist turn in the sense that Celie has evolved sufficiently to allow other women to love her and to be able to love them back at this point. She believes that love would never enter her life again after losing Nettie, but when it does, Celie is able to take advantage. She grows into a strong and self-assured lady after moving to Memphis and discovering she has a knack for sewing pants. The Bildungsroman's last trait is that by the novel's conclusion, Celie is older than she was at the beginning, yet she (and everyone around her) feels younger than ever before, as we discover when she evaluates herself and her new role in society. Celie has at long last matured. She isn't only supposed to pretend to be an adult. She's transformed from a helpless adolescent into a confident young lady in charge of her own destiny. Despite the double oppression of being a black woman in a white man's society, Celie is able to grow and develop. This is what makes *The Color Purple* a female Bildungsroman. For all of the hardships she has endured, she has emerged stronger for the experience. She is given a chance to make up for the years she lost when she became a woman naturally and without any intervention, and she feels youthful because of this. Towards the conclusion of the story, Celie shows all the characteristics of a womanist development: she's grown up, she's in charge of a company, a home, and, in other words, her whole life is under her control. She's a serious person with a universalist outlook, and most importantly, she loves. She loves Shug, the world, her sister, and most importantly, herself.

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