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Redefining Resistance: Sisterhood, Voice, and Power in Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*

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Abstract: This paper discusses the theme resistance and sisterhood that arise from the complex female relationships in Alice Walker's 1982 novel *The Colour Purple*. Walker utilizes characters such as Celie, Shug Avery, Nettie, and Sofia to illustrate how such relations are used as political tools for survival and defiance. Sisterhood, as Walker explores in the novel, develops and operates as a structural alliance stemming out of need against systemic racism, poverty, and misogyny. The paper illustrates the methods through which the structure of epistolary narratives and the growth the reader witnesses in Celie's autonomy is central to the story of self-recovery. The paper, furthermore, addresses the novel's portrayal of black masculinity and highlights its persistent legacy in feminist studies.

Keywords: Sisterhood, Alliance, Racism, Poverty

1. Introduction

Sisterhood and Resistance: A Study of Women's Relationships in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

The literary world has long dealt with the question of power—how it is taken, how it is maintained, and, perhaps more quietly but with equal consequence, how it is resisted. When Alice Walker published *The Color Purple* in 1982, she wasn't simply adding a novel to the American canon; she was offering a story of survival and, above all, solidarity. The power of sisterhood in the novel is not romanticized or reduced to platitudes—it is bruised, it is interrupted, it is political. In Walker's world, the bonds between women become a kind of unspoken rebellion against the legacies of racism, poverty, misogyny, and silence. Through this thesis, I aim to explore the dynamic forms of sisterhood and their connection to resistance in *The Color Purple*, primarily through the relationships among Celie, Shug Avery, Sofia, and Nettie.

Walker's narrative does not neatly isolate these themes. Instead, it lets them bleed into one another, the same way a woman's pain cannot always be separated from her survival, or her identity from her oppression. Bell Hooks writes, "The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it's to imagine what is possible" [1]. *The Color Purple* does precisely that: it imagines a world where women love each other without restriction, even as they struggle within and against structures built to suffocate them.

To understand the novel's radical potential, it is necessary to look at sisterhood not just as familial love or friendship, but as an emotional and political alliance—a space where women, particularly Black women, can begin to reclaim themselves. Adrienne Rich

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refers to this as “the politics of location” [2], the idea that where you speak from matters, especially for those traditionally silenced. Walker positions her characters in the deep South, in a time and place where Black women were expected to remain invisible. But through their relationships with each other, the women in *The Color Purple* become visible, vocal, and, most importantly, ungovernable by the rules that once defined them.

There is a kind of quiet urgency in the novel. Walker does not rush us into triumph. Celie’s growth, for example, is slow, hesitant, and full of fear. The relationship between her and Shug is often read through the lens of womanist theory, a term Walker herself coined to differentiate from white-centric feminism. “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender,” she wrote in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* [3]. This distinction is crucial, especially when reading *The Color Purple* through a lens that understands race, gender, and class as inextricably linked.

The question of resistance is not just whether these women fight back, but how they do it. In some cases, like Sofia’s, the resistance is loud and physical—her famous line “Hell no!” stands out as a literal and metaphorical refusal to bow down [4]. But there are also quieter forms of defiance: Nettie’s letters from Africa, Celie’s growing confidence in tailoring, Shug’s refusal to be defined by men. Audre Lorde reminds us that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” [5]. Yet Walker suggests that sometimes the master’s house can be renovated—from the inside—through community, storytelling, and love.

The bonds between these women, then, are not just emotional; they are structural. They build a kind of alternative family, one not based on blood or marriage but on shared trauma and healing. It’s in this alternative family that Celie finds her voice. Before Shug’s entrance into her life, Celie writes letters to God—a distant, patriarchal figure who never answers. After Shug, she begins to write to her sister Nettie, and in doing so reorients her voice toward someone who understands her suffering. This shift in narrative audience represents a shift in agency.

Many feminist theorists have taken up *The Color Purple* to explore how narrative form reflects and shapes resistance. Barbara Christian argues that Walker’s epistolary form “allows the voices of the women to surface without the intrusion of a male narrator, a patriarchal storyteller” [6]. Similarly, Cheryl Wall observes that “the language of the novel becomes freer as Celie becomes freer” [7]. This form becomes part of the resistance itself, as it reclaims language and authorship from those who have historically wielded them as tools of domination.

However, not all scholars agree with the methods of this resistance. Some critics have questioned Walker’s portrayal of Black men, arguing that characters like Mister (Albert) are reduced to abusers. Others claim the novel leans too heavily into individual liberation at the expense of systemic critique. Robert Stepto, for example, questions whether the novel sufficiently addresses the broader structural conditions that enable the violence against Celie and Sofia [8]. Yet, as Beverly Guy-Sheftall points out, *The Color Purple* is not trying to explain all of Black America—it is telling a specific story about survival and sisterhood under impossible circumstances [9].

What makes *The Color Purple* particularly remarkable is how it captures the slow unlearning of internalized oppression. Celie begins the novel believing she deserves her suffering. But as her relationships with other women deepen, she starts to see herself not just as someone who exists to endure, but as someone who deserves to be loved, who can make pants, own land, speak her mind, and laugh. As Elaine Showalter writes, “The real triumph of *The Color Purple* lies in its celebration of women’s emotional and sexual liberation” [10].

In the end, this thesis is not just about how women in *The Color Purple* survive, but how they help one another survive. Sisterhood here is not abstract—it is cooking meals together, listening when no one else will, risking safety for someone else’s freedom. Resistance is not only found in uprisings and grand statements but in whispered encouragements, stolen moments of joy, and the writing of letters that keep a soul from disappearing.

The chapters that follow will trace these themes in depth. Chapter Two will provide a historical and literary context for the novel, looking into the social conditions of Black women in the early 20th century American South. Chapter Three will analyze the core relationships between Celie, Shug, Nettie, and Sofia through the lens of womanism, intersectional feminism, and trauma theory. Chapter Four will look at narrative structure and voice, exploring how the form of the novel itself participates in resistance. The final chapter will consider criticisms of the novel and examine how *The Color Purple* continues to shape conversations around race, gender, sexuality, and empowerment.

Historical and Literary Context

To understand the weight that Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* carries, it's important to first look beyond the story itself and into the context in which the novel is both set and written. The early 20th-century American South, the time and place where Celie's story unfolds, was a landscape defined by the aftermath of slavery, the terror of Jim Crow laws, and the compounded oppressions of being Black and female. As Patricia Hill Collins points out, "Black women's survival is an act of political resistance in itself" [11]. And while Walker's novel is literary fiction, it is undeniably embedded in the historical and cultural realities of Black American womanhood. The characters may be fictional, but their struggles were—and in many ways still are—very real [12].

Black Womanhood in the Early 20th Century

The time period Walker portrays is one where Black women were doubly invisible—held down by white supremacy and male domination, often within their own communities. Celie's life, in the beginning, is almost entirely without agency. Her stepfather rapes her. Her children are taken from her. She is passed like property to a man she does not love and who does not love her. These were not fictionalized realities pulled from nowhere; rather, they echo countless real Black women's experiences during a time when their voices were either absent from or distorted within the American literary tradition [13].

As Angela Davis notes, "The history of Black women has never been fully told because the Black woman has never been allowed to tell it herself" [14]. What Walker does in *The Color Purple* is to begin telling that history—not from a distanced historical or sociological voice, but from the inside, through Celie's voice. That in itself is resistance.

Walker doesn't just write about the struggle; she writes from within it. Her own background—as a daughter of sharecroppers in Georgia, as a student during the civil rights movement, as a Black woman writer navigating both white literary spaces and Black patriarchal expectations—deeply informs the tone and texture of the novel. She once said, "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any" [3]. Celie begins her story in exactly that place, and her journey to reclaiming her voice is a literary echo of the collective journey Black women have undertaken throughout American history.

The Epistolary Tradition and Black Literature

Formally, *The Color Purple* stands out because of its use of the epistolary style—told through letters first to God and later to Nettie. At first glance, this may seem like a purely stylistic choice. But when placed in the context of African American literary tradition, it becomes much more than that. It is an act of textual intimacy, and also defiance.

The act of writing, for Black women during the time Walker sets the novel, was not just uncommon—it was revolutionary. Literacy was once forbidden for enslaved people in America. To write, to tell your story, was once punishable by death. So when Celie writes—clumsily at first, with grammar and spelling that reveal her limited education—she is doing something deeply transgressive. As Barbara Christian asserts, "In taking up the pen, Black women affirm themselves as subjects rather than objects" [6].

This connection to the act of writing as resistance has long been a feature of African American literature. Frederick Douglass wrote his own narrative in order to testify against slavery; Harriet Jacobs told the hidden life of a slave girl to reveal what slavery did to women; Zora Neale Hurston, a major influence on Walker, wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a way to give life to a Black female voice that spoke in dialect and loved passionately, unapologetically. Walker famously reclaimed Hurston's legacy, even

helping to mark her unmarked grave and ensuring her literary resurrection. In doing so, Walker laid the foundation for *The Color Purple* not just as a novel but as a continuation of a womanist literary lineage.

Walker and Womanism as Context

The term “womanist” was coined by Alice Walker herself in her 1983 collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, just one year after *The Color Purple* was published. She defines a womanist as “a Black feminist or feminist of color... who loves music, loves dance, loves the moon, loves the spirit... loves struggle, loves herself. Regardless.” [3]. This definition is important—not just as a political statement, but as a map for understanding the world of *The Color Purple*. The women in the novel struggle, yes. But they also sing, laugh, make quilts, and raise children. Their lives are not only defined by pain. They are full, messy, loving, complex.

Where traditional white feminism of the 1970s and 80s often centered around issues like workplace equality or sexual liberation in abstract terms, Walker’s womanism roots itself in lived Black experience. The concerns are more about survival, community, healing from generational trauma, and creating space for joy. *The Color Purple* is not concerned with abstract ideology—it’s concerned with who made dinner, who washed Nettie’s hair, and who told Celie she was beautiful. And that’s what makes it radical.

Bell Hooks, though she sometimes critiqued Walker’s portrayals, agrees with the importance of redefining resistance in intimate terms. “Sisterhood is still powerful,” she wrote, “but only when we remember that it is not always easy, not always romantic, and not always immediate” [15]. Walker writes sisterhood exactly like that—fraught, evolving, grounded in care rather than theory.

Cultural Landscape and Literary Resistance

By the time Walker published *The Color Purple*, the literary and political landscape was changing. The Civil Rights Movement had passed, but the struggle for Black women’s voices in literature had only begun to gain traction. In 1981, *Ain’t I a Woman* by Bell Hooks had just been published. Toni Morrison was publishing work that re-centered Black life in its own terms. Yet even so, *The Color Purple* was met with a mixture of praise and controversy [16].

The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983, making Walker the first African American woman to receive the honor. But its reception among Black critics was mixed. Some, like Gloria T. Hull and Michele Wallace, raised concerns about the portrayal of Black men. Others questioned Walker’s representation of lesbian love and Black female sexuality. Yet many—Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall among them—recognized *The Color Purple* as an urgent contribution to feminist and literary discourses [9], [17], [18].

Still, it is important to remember that Walker was not writing for white liberals or literary critics. She was writing to and for Black women. As she said in a 1983 interview, “I write about my people because I love them. Not because I’m trying to explain them to anybody else.” This sentiment returns us to the historical context—the story of *The Color Purple* belongs in a tradition where Black women writers were often expected to represent their entire community, defend it, and uplift it, all at once.

Walker rejects that burden by focusing on individual stories, complex characters, and imperfect people who are shaped by history but not reduced to it.

What makes *The Color Purple* powerful is not that it is flawless but that it is grounded—in place, in time, and in tradition. The historical and literary context surrounding the novel shows how Alice Walker took from the past—slavery, Jim Crow, the erasure of Black women’s voices—and wrote something new. Through an epistolary structure that resists male narration, and through a deep awareness of Black womanhood, Walker places *The Color Purple* not just in history but in conversation with it.

And if, as Adrienne Rich says, “When a woman tells the truth, she is creating the possibility for more truth around her,” then Alice Walker’s novel becomes a kind of multiplier. It allows its characters—and its readers—to tell their truths, in whatever broken, joyful, painful forms they may come.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design and Textual Corpus

This study uses a qualitative literary-analysis design centered on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* [4]. The analysis retains the manuscript's original focus on sisterhood, resistance, voice, power, Black womanhood, and epistolary narration. The novel functions as the primary text, while the critical works already mobilized in the manuscript provide the secondary interpretive corpus.

2.2 Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The interpretation is guided by Walker's womanist formulation [3], Black feminist thought [11], feminist and womanist criticism [6], [15], [17], [18], and scholarship on Black women's historical and literary positioning [12], [13], [14]. These perspectives are used to examine how race, gender, class, sexuality, voice, and community intersect in the novel without introducing an empirical or experimental design.

2.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds through close reading of the novel's epistolary structure, major female relationships, forms of resistance, and critical reception. Passages concerning Celie, Shug Avery, Nettie, Sofia, Squeak/Mary Agnes, and Mister are organized thematically around sisterhood, self-definition, narrative voice, resistance, and recovery. Interpretive observations are then compared with the secondary scholarship already discussed in the manuscript. Because the study analyzes a published literary text and existing scholarship, it does not involve human participants, surveys, interviews, or experimental intervention.

3. Results

Sisterhood and Womanism

Love, Struggle, and Survival in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

The relationships between women in *The Color Purple* are not simply subplots to the main story—they are the story. They are where power is transferred, where healing begins, and where resistance takes its most consistent and enduring shape. In the absence of institutional power, the women in Alice Walker's world turn to each other. They turn to cooking, to laughter, to writing letters, to listening and being listened to. These gestures—though small on the surface—become survival tools. They are also revolutionary acts, especially in a world where Black women are silenced by racism, patriarchy, and poverty all at once.

Alice Walker's concept of womanism provides a framework for understanding this quiet yet transformative resistance. As she writes in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, a womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" [3, p. xi]. And nowhere is that commitment more evident than in the layered relationships between Celie, Shug Avery, Nettie, and Sofia. Each of these women embodies a different way of surviving—and together, they represent an evolving image of sisterhood that is far from perfect, but always powerful.

Celie and Shug Avery: Healing as Resistance

At the heart of *The Color Purple* is Celie's relationship with Shug Avery—a blues singer who at first seems almost impossibly distant from Celie's life. Shug is bold, sexual, free, and unapologetic. She is everything Celie is not at the start of the novel. But what begins as intimidation slowly becomes intimacy, and then love.

Their relationship is often discussed as the most revolutionary element in the novel. As Barbara Smith argues, "Black lesbianism becomes the ground on which an authentic self can emerge" [17, p. 35]. But Walker is careful not to label the relationship in ways that reduce it. It is sexual, yes, but it is also maternal, spiritual, and emotional. Shug teaches Celie to look in the mirror and see herself as beautiful. She encourages her to sew pants and sell them. She laughs with her and tells her that God is not a white man in the sky. Shug is, for Celie, a source of truth—but not the only one.

Their relationship also challenges the limits of what we typically call sisterhood. It includes jealousy, disappointment, tenderness, and sexuality. It blurs boundaries but also creates new ones. Bell Hooks writes that "sisterhood is not just about shared struggle, but shared risk" [15]. Shug takes a risk in loving Celie, but Celie takes the greater risk in

learning to love herself—through Shug’s love. That’s what makes their relationship not only radical but deeply human.

When Celie says, “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook... But I’m here,” she is standing not just on her own two feet, but on the emotional support Shug has offered her [4]. That moment is often read as Celie’s climax—her declaration of selfhood. But it doesn’t happen in isolation. It comes after years of being seen and loved by another woman. In that sense, Shug is not Celie’s savior but her mirror. And sisterhood becomes the medium through which Celie’s survival transforms into resistance.

Celie and Nettie: Distance and Devotion

Unlike the passionate, physical relationship Celie shares with Shug, her bond with her sister Nettie is spiritual and intellectual. Separated by time, distance, and circumstance, the two sisters remain connected through letters. Even when Celie believes Nettie is dead, she continues writing to her. And when she finds out the letters had been hidden from her by Mister (Albert), it’s a double betrayal: her connection to her sister—and to hope itself—was stolen.

What makes this relationship remarkable is its endurance. It does not fade with time or suffer under distance. Rather, it strengthens in absence. Nettie, who travels to Africa as a missionary, writes to Celie about the Olinka people, colonialism, and cultural survival. Celie, meanwhile, writes about sewing, about Shug, about learning to love her body. The contrast between their lives creates a kind of narrative symmetry: while one sister confronts the external colonial world, the other battles the internal colonization of gendered violence.

In many ways, the sisters represent two paths toward the same kind of liberation. Nettie’s resistance is intellectual and moral—she uses education, language, and cultural critique. Celie’s is emotional and embodied—she uses self-expression, love, and art. But both paths are rooted in care, in wanting to keep each other alive. Adrienne Rich’s concept of “the politics of location” is especially relevant here [2]. The fact that Celie writes from the South and Nettie from Africa is not accidental—it shows how Black women’s resistance spans across continents and contexts, and yet remains deeply personal [19].

Their bond is not just familial. It is symbolic of the ties that keep Black women connected despite the forces that try to silence them. The letters become a kind of ritual, a form of prayer that does not beg but speaks. They also shift the narrative structure itself. As Cheryl Wall notes, “As Celie’s voice expands, so does her world” [7]. Nettie’s voice helps make that expansion possible [20].

Celie and Sofia: Conflict and Protection

Sofia, unlike Celie or Nettie, is resistant from the very beginning. When Harpo tries to control her, she simply refuses. Her most famous line—“Hell no”—is not just a retort to Harpo’s demands, but a rejection of patriarchal expectations altogether [4]. Sofia is a fighter, literally and figuratively. But her strength comes at a cost.

After Sofia strikes the mayor’s wife, she is imprisoned and silenced—physically beaten into submission. Her once-booming voice becomes quiet. Her laughter disappears. And Celie, watching all this unfold, begins to understand that silence is not safety. That moment becomes a turning point in their relationship.

In the beginning, Sofia and Celie clash. Celie even tells Harpo to beat Sofia, believing it’s the only way to make her “mind.” But later, she apologizes. She listens. And she learns. Their relationship grows into a powerful, mutual understanding—a bond shaped by honesty and pain.

In many ways, Sofia represents the cost of visible resistance. While Shug helps Celie in private and Nettie writes from far away, Sofia resists in public. Her story is a reminder that Black women’s anger is often punished more severely than their submission. Yet Sofia never loses her fire completely. When she returns to her children, when she cooks for the household again, she does so not out of resignation but survival.

Bell Hooks refers to this kind of strength as “the will to change” [16]. It’s not just about fighting back, but about living through the aftermath of resistance. Sofia teaches Celie that strength is not one thing—it is a series of choices, some loud and some quiet. Their sisterhood is not immediate. It is earned.

Expanding the Circle: Miss Millie, Squeak, and Other Women

Though much of the novel centers on the core women mentioned above, other female characters also shape the landscape of sisterhood in *The Color Purple*. Squeak, for instance, starts out as Harpo's submissive partner. But after being raped by the warden (her own relative), she begins to find her voice—literally and metaphorically. She changes her name back to Mary Agnes and starts singing.

Miss Millie, the white mayor's wife, is perhaps the least sympathetic female character. Yet her interactions with Sofia reveal the racial hierarchy even among women. Millie wants a maid, not a sister. She wants admiration, not equality. And this is important: *The Color Purple* does not romanticize sisterhood. It shows that not all women are allies. Intersectionality, as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, reminds us that gender solidarity often breaks under the weight of race and class.

Walker doesn't let sisterhood become simplistic. Instead, she complicates it—shows its failures and fractures. But despite all this, it remains central to the characters' survival.

Womanism in Action

Throughout the novel, Walker's womanism is not explained—it is lived. The women support each other through grief, through loss, through joy. They garden. They share meals. They raise each other's children. They grieve together and forgive together. And most importantly, they allow each other to change.

Unlike traditional feminist narratives that center the individual, *The Color Purple* presents liberation as a collective experience. Celie doesn't find herself alone. She finds herself with and through others. The novel ends not with a romantic resolution but a communal one—Celie reunited with Nettie, surrounded by family, saying, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" [4]. That line, often quoted, is a call to awareness—to beauty, to love, to life.

Resistance Through Form

Epistolary Voice, Language, and Narrative Power in *The Color Purple*

While *The Color Purple* is remembered mostly for its characters, its emotional weight, and its political themes, the form in which it is written is just as significant. Alice Walker didn't choose a typical narrative structure. Instead, she constructed the novel as a series of letters—first to God, and later to Celie's sister Nettie. This form, often called epistolary, has been around for centuries. But in *The Color Purple*, it takes on new meaning. It becomes a tool of survival, a private, rebellious act, and a powerful way to give voice to someone who has always been silenced. In other words, form becomes function. And it becomes resistance.

When the reader first meets Celie, she is writing to God—not in elegant, educated prose, but in a broken, misspelled, and almost painfully raw voice. She writes not because she expects a response, but because she has no one else to talk to. Her first letter opens, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" [4]. That opening line isn't just a confession—it's a warning. It sets the tone for the novel's central tension: what can be spoken, what must be hidden, and what happens when silence breaks.

Writing as a Survival Strategy

The act of writing is Celie's only form of communication that's truly hers. Everything else—her body, her labor, even her name for much of the novel—is controlled by others. But the letters are hers alone. And in a world that consistently denies Celie any kind of agency, putting her thoughts on paper is quietly revolutionary. As Patricia Hill Collins reminds us, "Self-definition is a key component of Black feminist thought because it is a core requirement for resistance" [11].

In this way, Celie's letters become more than just a narrative device. They become the foundation for her redefinition. Even when she doesn't yet know she has the right to speak, she writes. Even when she believes her sister is dead and that God is distant and silent, she writes. That, in itself, is an act of faith—not necessarily in religion, but in herself.

Bell Hooks refers to this as the power of self-recovery, and she describes writing as a "place of resistance" [1]. This is especially true for Black women, who have historically been excluded from mainstream literary traditions. By choosing the epistolary form and centering a character like Celie—a poor, uneducated Black woman—as the narrator,

Walker breaks the traditional rules of literature. She not only gives Celie a voice but structures the entire novel around that voice.

From God to Nettie: The Shift in Audience and Power

A major turning point in the novel is when Celie stops writing to God and begins writing to Nettie. It might seem like a small narrative shift, but it's incredibly meaningful. Writing to God, especially the version of God that Celie first believes in—a white man who watches but doesn't intervene—is a kind of internalized submission. She confesses, she pleads, but she rarely demands.

When she finds out that Nettie is alive and that her letters have been hidden, something breaks open in Celie. Her voice changes. She begins to write with more confidence, more ownership. She begins to write with purpose.

Adrienne Rich's concept of "re-vision"—the act of looking back at the past with new eyes—is helpful here [2]. Celie begins to re-vision her life, her God, and even her past. Writing to Nettie rather than to an abstract divine authority gives her words new meaning. It becomes an exchange, a conversation, not just a monologue.

The audience of a letter matters. When Celie writes to God, she is writing into silence. But writing to Nettie is writing into possibility. That shift in audience reflects a deeper shift in Celie's understanding of herself—not just as someone who suffers, but as someone who survives, and eventually resists.

The Epistolary Form as a Tool of Feminist and Womanist Resistance

The choice to tell a story through letters has a long literary history, but it is rarely used in narratives centered on Black women. That's why *The Color Purple* stands out. Barbara Christian explains that "the epistolary form in Walker's hands serves as a feminist device that allows for unfiltered emotional and intellectual growth" [17].

Each letter acts like a diary entry—but more than that, it reflects the process of becoming. The reader watches Celie grow not through external events alone, but through the evolution of her writing. At the beginning, her sentences are short, fearful. Her grammar is unstable. But as the novel progresses, so does her language. By the end, her voice is confident, reflective, and filled with insight. Language becomes both the mirror and the measurement of her journey.

Womanism, as Walker defines it, embraces this kind of storytelling. It is concerned with spiritual growth, with everyday life, with art and culture and family and God. The epistolary form allows all of this to coexist. The letters talk about rape and sewing in the same breath. They contain gossip, theology, pain, and joy. They reflect the womanist idea that no part of a woman's life is too small or too personal to matter.

And importantly, they center the experience of a woman who has been deemed unimportant by the world around her. As Cheryl Wall puts it, "Celie's narrative voice asserts its place against a tradition that has silenced her" [7].

Language and Power: Speaking 'Wrong' on Purpose

One of the most notable aspects of *The Color Purple* is its use of non-standard English. Celie's grammar and spelling reflect her limited education, but they also reflect her honesty. The way she speaks—the rhythm of her sentences, the emotional weight of her diction—is deeply tied to her identity.

Some critics have questioned this stylistic choice. Why not give Celie "proper" grammar? Why not have her speak "correctly"? But those questions miss the point. Walker is not interested in making Celie palatable to white audiences or literate elites. She is interested in truth. And the truth is that Black women like Celie existed—and still exist—outside the systems that determine what "correct" language is.

In choosing to let Celie write in her own voice, Walker elevates a kind of authenticity that resists literary respectability. It is, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. might say, a form of "signifying"—a way of using language that pushes back against dominant standards while creating meaning from within Black vernacular culture [21].

Celie's voice isn't broken—it's alive. And it grows. By the end of the novel, while her grammar improves slightly, her tone becomes more introspective, more poetic. Her vocabulary expands. This is not because she learns to conform, but because she learns to express herself more fully. And that distinction is key.

Narrative Silence and What Isn't Said

Another powerful aspect of *The Color Purple*'s form is its use of silence. There are gaps between letters. There are things that are only hinted at—like Shug's illness, or Sofia's inner life while she's in prison. These silences are not accidents. They reflect the real limitations placed on women like Celie. But they also leave room for the reader to feel what cannot be explained.

Audre Lorde writes, "Your silence will not protect you" [5]. And in Walker's novel, we see what happens when silence is imposed—and what happens when it is broken. Each letter is a rupture in that imposed silence. A way of refusing to disappear.

It's also important to note that Walker's novel is filled with spiritual language, but without religious certainty. The form itself reflects this: Celie's letters to God at first seem like prayers, but they don't follow any traditional religious structure. And eventually, she redefines God altogether—not as a judging father, but as a spirit present in nature, in people, in purple flowers. That spiritual transformation happens in the space between letters—in the form, not just the content.

4. Discussion

Critique and Legacy

Controversy, Cultural Impact, and the Afterlife of *The Color Purple*

Few novels by Black women have generated the kind of passionate debate that Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has—both in literary circles and in broader cultural discourse. Since its publication in 1982, the novel has been celebrated, awarded, critiqued, banned, adapted into film and musicals, and dissected in classrooms across the world. The novel did not arrive quietly, and neither did its reception. In fact, *The Color Purple* might be one of the rare works of literature that continues to spark conversations—not because it is perfect, but because it is necessary.

This chapter explores the major points of critique and praise directed toward *The Color Purple*, examining how its portrayal of gender, race, sexuality, and Black masculinity created both admiration and backlash. It also reflects on how the novel's legacy has evolved in the decades since its release, especially in light of its adaptations and renewed relevance in feminist and decolonial discourse.

Initial Reception and Praise

When *The Color Purple* was first published, it quickly drew widespread attention. It won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award in 1983, making Alice Walker the first Black woman to receive the Pulitzer. These awards marked a turning point—not just for Walker personally, but for Black women writers generally, who had long been pushed to the margins of American literary recognition.

Critics praised the novel's emotional depth, its courageous portrayal of same-sex love, and its unapologetic centering of a poor, Black, Southern woman's voice. Toni Morrison, though not uncritical, acknowledged the novel's importance in expanding the literary landscape to include voices like Celie's. Barbara Christian lauded Walker's "commitment to the ordinary lives of Black women" and her "mastery of rendering the personal political" [17] [22].

Many Black women readers saw themselves in the pages of the book—saw their trauma, their hope, their mothers, and their sisters. The novel became a landmark in womanist thought, praised by writers like Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Barbara Smith for affirming the experiences of Black women without filtering them through white or male lenses [9], [17].

Criticism: Black Masculinity and Representation

However, the novel also received sharp criticism—particularly from Black male intellectuals and some conservative sectors of the Black community. One of the central points of contention was the novel's portrayal of Black men, especially the character of Mister (Albert), who is abusive, controlling, and emotionally stunted for much of the story.

Critics such as Stanley Crouch and Ishmael Reed argued that the novel fed into harmful stereotypes about Black men as violent and morally bankrupt. They accused

Walker of airing “dirty laundry” in front of a predominantly white literary establishment eager to consume narratives of Black dysfunction. Crouch referred to *The Color Purple* as a “feminist tract that scapegoats the Black man” [23]. Reed went further, calling the novel and its film adaptation “a cultural attack on the Black family.”

These critiques were not limited to intellectuals. In Black communities across the U.S., the novel—and especially the 1985 film directed by Steven Spielberg—sparked intense debates about representation. Community leaders expressed concern that the media, already saturated with negative portrayals of Black men, would now have *The Color Purple* as further “evidence” of Black male pathology.

And while some of these concerns may be understandable given the historical context of racist caricatures, they often overlooked the complexity of the novel’s characters. Mister, for example, is not left in his initial state of cruelty. He evolves. He becomes reflective. He begins to understand what he did to Celie. As Alice Walker herself explained, “The men in *The Color Purple* are not villains. They are wounded people. They’re as wounded as the women” [3].

Intersectionality and the Problem of Oversimplification

Much of the early criticism also failed to engage with the intersectional nature of Walker’s narrative. *The Color Purple* is not a simple story about men versus women. It is a story about power—how it is abused, internalized, and sometimes relinquished. The focus on Black male representation, while valid in its concern, sometimes missed the forest for the trees.

Patricia Hill Collins argues that “the politics of representation must be informed by structural understanding, not just individual portrayals” [11]. In this sense, Celie’s suffering at the hands of men cannot be read as condemnation of all Black men. Rather, it reflects a system in which Black men, also disenfranchised by white supremacy, reproduce patriarchal violence within their own communities—not out of evil, but out of learned behavior, fear, and pain.

Bell Hooks, always nuanced, addressed this tension by writing that “it is possible to critique sexism in Black men without betraying the race” [16]. Walker’s work exists in that space. It names pain, but it also holds space for healing and transformation.

Queer Love and Black Women’s Sexuality

Another layer of critique—and celebration—concerned the novel’s portrayal of love between Celie and Shug. The depiction of a tender, sexual relationship between two Black women was almost unheard of in mainstream literature at the time. For some readers, it was liberating. For others, it was controversial—even seen as a betrayal of Black “respectability.”

But for scholars like Cheryl Clarke and Audre Lorde, Walker’s representation of queer love was not just political—it was necessary. Lorde writes, “The erotic is a source of power as female; it is not relegated to the bedroom” [5]. Shug’s love awakens something in Celie that goes beyond sexuality. It awakens her sense of worth [18].

Still, the relationship is complex. Shug is not a model lover. She comes and goes. She hurts Celie at times. But that complexity is what makes the relationship believable. It’s not idealized—it’s alive.

Walker later clarified that she did not intend to make a “lesbian novel.” Rather, she was writing about love that transcended labels. In a 1983 interview, she said, “I see Shug and Celie’s relationship as a spiritual love between two people who really understand each other.”

Adaptations and Their Impact

The 1985 film adaptation, directed by Steven Spielberg and starring Whoopi Goldberg, Oprah Winfrey, and Danny Glover, brought *The Color Purple* to an even wider audience. It received 11 Academy Award nominations but won none—a snub that many still discuss today. While the film softened some of the book’s queer content and sharpened the visual representation of male violence, it also introduced millions of people to the story of Celie.

Some critics argued that Spielberg, as a white male director, couldn’t capture the novel’s womanist essence. Others appreciated the film for its emotional power,

particularly in performances by Goldberg and Winfrey. The scene in which Celie stands up to Mister and says, "I'm poor, Black, I may even be ugly. But dear God, I'm here," became a defining moment in cinematic history.

In 2005, the novel was adapted again—this time into a Broadway musical, and again in 2023 into a reimaged film musical. These adaptations, while not without criticism, speak to the novel's continued relevance and its ability to speak across generations and media.

Contemporary Legacy: From Womanism to Decolonization

Today, *The Color Purple* is not just a novel—it is a touchstone. It is taught in high schools, colleges, and women's studies programs. It is discussed in queer studies, African American literature, and even theology courses. It continues to be banned in certain school districts, proving that it still makes some people uncomfortable. And that, perhaps, is a sign of its power.

The novel also continues to inspire writers. Toni Morrison, Jesmyn Ward, Roxane Gay, and many others have acknowledged Walker's influence. In a world increasingly concerned with intersectionality and decolonization, *The Color Purple* feels more relevant than ever.

Walker herself has faced critique in later years—for her political views, her outspoken stances, and her spiritual beliefs. But her legacy as the author of *The Color Purple* remains intact. The novel's insistence on Black women's inner lives, their love, their laughter, and their pain, has created a literary space that didn't exist before.

As Beverly Guy-Sheftall puts it, "Walker gave us not just a story but a language. And in that language, we learned how to survive" [9].

5. Conclusion

Reclaiming the Self Through Sisterhood

From the very first letter that Celie writes in *The Color Purple*—a cry to a God she doesn't yet understand—the novel is about voice. Not the kind of voice that is handed down from institutions or endorsed by authority, but the kind of voice that is earned—through pain, through love, and most of all, through connection. In tracing the relationships among the women in the novel—Celie, Shug, Nettie, Sofia, and others—this thesis has argued that sisterhood is not just a theme in Walker's work. It is the backbone of Celie's transformation. It is the structure of her survival. And in the absence of justice, it becomes a form of resistance.

In these pages, we have looked at how the historical and cultural contexts of Black womanhood in the American South shape Walker's narrative. We've explored how the literary form of the epistolary novel gives Celie a space to speak when the world refuses to listen. We've examined how womanist theory, born from Walker's own definition of feminism as rooted in Black, lived experience, helps explain the emotional, political, and spiritual significance of female bonding in the story.

Throughout the chapters, we have seen how *The Color Purple* offers multiple versions of resistance: Shug's spiritual independence and sexual freedom, Nettie's intellectual and moral clarity, Sofia's refusal to submit to male or white authority, and Celie's long, slow journey to self-acceptance. Each of these women fights in her own way, with the weapons available to her. But their resistance is not isolated. It grows stronger when they are in relationship with one another.

The novel makes no promise that healing is easy or permanent. The women argue. They leave. They disappoint each other. Sisterhood in *The Color Purple* is not romanticized. It is often painful and difficult. But it is also transformative. As Audre Lorde writes, "We were never meant to survive" [5]. And yet, the women in Walker's novel do survive. Not because of institutions. Not because of men. But because of each other.

This thesis also engaged with the critiques of the novel—especially those focused on Walker's portrayal of Black men. And while those critiques have historical validity, they also risk simplifying the complex web of structural violence, trauma, and transformation that Walker tries to depict. As discussed, Mister (Albert) is not a flat character. He changes.

He learns. And his change, while not redemptive in the traditional sense, suggests that even patriarchy can be unlearned—if challenged by care and truth.

What makes *The Color Purple* so enduring is not that it gives us a perfect model of resistance or a flawless depiction of sisterhood. It gives us something much harder to capture: the messiness of being human in a world that constantly tries to strip you of that very humanity. It shows how love—particularly love between women—can become a tool for survival and even transformation. It also teaches us that language matters. Who tells the story matters. And what is left unsaid often speaks the loudest.

Alice Walker didn't write *The Color Purple* to be polite. She wrote it to be real. And in doing so, she opened a door that other writers, activists, and readers continue to walk through. Her novel remains a foundational text not only in African American literature but in feminist, womanist, queer, and postcolonial studies. It continues to be taught, contested, banned, and celebrated.

Ultimately, *The Color Purple* reminds us that even in the most oppressive circumstances, Black women have found ways to survive, to speak, to love, and to resist. Not through grand revolutions or political manifestos, but through letters. Through sewing. Through song. Through care. Through truth. And through each other.

And that is why the color purple matters. Because it's not just a color. It's a symbol of everything that's been ignored, dismissed, and undervalued—but that still, somehow, insists on being seen.

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