CHAPTER - V

Alice Walker: Quest for Identity and History in
The Color Purple

The Color Purple unfolds the panorama of black female reality of the neo-slavery period that takes shape in the smithy of black male brutality towards black females, racial/patriarchal oppression and misogynist assumptions. The novel focuses on the process of the self-discovery of an unlettered black southern woman. It traces the gradual growth of her radicalisation and empowerment through female bonding, education and self-employment. The black feminist analysis reveals how black female radicalism, embracing of womanism, exploration of black heritage and resultant self-determination bring to fruition Celie’s quest for identity and history.

Celie succeeds in her quest for identity and history by developing an understanding of her roots and heritage and acquiring the awareness that she has a right to happiness, passion, creativity and emotional fulfilment. To exercise her rights as an individual, Celie learns to resist the advances of black men who hinder her self-fulfilment. Alice Walker has been vehemently criticized within the African-American community for her portrayal of black men as abusers and rapists. Like her literary predecessor, Zora Neale Hurston, who was criticized during the Harlem Renaissance for her feminist writing, Alice Walker has withstood the criticism. She has held on her convictions and continued to be a spokesman for the cause of the oppressed black woman. In her oeuvre, she explores “the issue of the spiritual survival of black people” in particular, black women. She states: "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival of whole of my
Stephen Spielberg’s “cinematic revisioning of the novel” in 1985 presents a visual commentary on the central problematic of African-American women as delineated by Alice Walker who asserts, “a black woman is the mule of the world, because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else, everyone else- refused to carry.” Besides dealing with a rural southern, black woman’s search for an identity, *The Color Purple* is about “reclaiming one’s history, ...inheritance, language, ...and voice...” It is apt to note that in *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker signs herself as “A.W., author and medium.” This indicates that her purpose has not only been the creation of female literary images but lending “voice and representation to these same women who have been silenced and confined in life and literature.” She creates "a sense that these characters embody experience of many people, memorable contrasts between the oppressors and the oppressed, a downtrodden central character who overcomes ... abuse and deprivation to bloom into a strong person..."

In approaching the peculiar dilemma of the African-American woman as a trapped victim of both gender and race, Alice Walker feels there is need for a more radical criticism. She feels that white feminists like Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer and Kate Miller fail to address the black woman. Like Barbara Smith and Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker thinks that the aims and objectives of the white feminism are not relevant to the cause of the black woman. In this context, she observes:

> You see, one of the problems with white feminism is that it is not a tradition that teaches white women that they are capable. Whereas my tradition assumes I am capable. I have a tradition of people not letting me get the skills, but I have cleared fields,
I have lifted whatever, I have done it. It ain’t not a tradition of wondering whether or not I could do it because I am a woman. In an attempt to address the dual dilemma of the black woman, Alice Walker shows: ... a way of putting aside the limited confines of white feminist criticism ...(as) feminist criticism of white women cannot define or lead Black feminism. In the writing of Walker, a dialogue begins which can help feminist criticism reconsider its emphasis on psychoanalysis and literary history and move into the expanded notion of feminist culture.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker establishes a “feminist culture” by focussing attention on the under privileged and inconspicuous southern black woman, who suffers not only at the hands of the white society but also due to black male oppression. The adverse criticism of the theme of black male brutality in *The Color Purple* seeks legitimacy from the belief that the patriarchal practice of sexist politics symbolizes black opposition to racial oppression. Thus the black male aggression against black woman is camouflaged as reaction to social victimization. bell hooks regards this perspective on black male brutality as an expression of the pedagogy of patriarchy and rhetoric of black nationalism which collaborate in oppressing the black woman. She argues:

At the peak of contemporary feminist movement black males were one upping white males by representing themselves as the group of males who had not capitulated to feminist demands that they rethink sexism. That repudiation of feminist thinking was highlighted when black males responded to the feminist fiction writing of black females like Alice Walker by once again flaunting their sexism and accusing her and other black women of being traitors to the race.

Albert, Celie’s malevolent husband, embodies the black male chauvinism and the patriarchal assumptions and tendencies, analyzed by bell hooks. In the absence of another benevolent black male character, he seems to represent the majority of black American manhood. Alice Walker has refuted the allegation that she has presented
Albert in order to tarnish the image of black men in general and create a schism between black men and women. Nevertheless she is outraged by black America’s denial of the existence of any form of spousal or child abuse. She is appalled by her detractors’ total lack of empathy for women. She thinks that it amounts to condemning black women as a whole. She contends that the portrait of Albert is suggestive of the black feminist denigration of male sexism and phallocentrism, inherent in sexual/racial politics that justifies domination of females, misogynist thinking and negative anti-woman mythology. The black feminist criticism disentangles the skein of race, gender and class with a view to confirming that black male sexist brutality against black women is triggered off by the racist exploitation and oppression of black men by the whitemen. The psychic linkages between racist oppression of black men and black brutality towards black women validate the observation of Paul Gilory, “gender is the modality in which race is lived.”

Besides establishing the interlinkages of race and gender in *The Color Purple* Alice Walker reinforces her position as a “womanist” writer. Tonette Inge points out: “Feminist is only the general category in which Walker’s philosophy belongs, as flower is only the general category for the purple petunia Walker loves.” As the term feminist does not reflect Walker’s preoccupation with the plight of the Southern Black woman she adopts the term “womanism,” which is propounded in the preface to *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). It is derived from the word “womanish” which black southern people use to describe a girl who questions norms and traditions and has a voice of her own. Womanish is the opposite of “girlish.” According to Alice Walker, womanist is “Responsible. In charge. Serious.” Regarding her choice of the
word, “womanism,” Alice Walker remarks: “I just like to have words that describe things correctly... I need a word that is organic... that really comes out of the culture.”

The subtitle of *The Color Purple*, “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” reiterates Alice Walker’s womanist position.

Despite being labeled a womanist text, *The Color Purple* does not fall into a specific genre category. It represents the “blurring of genre conventions.” Alice Walker reinterprets the genres and uses them in a post modernist sense, diverse from the traditional practice. It strikes us as an epistolary novel, a Bildungsromane and a historical novel all in one.

*The Color Purple* adopts the narrative technique of the eighteenth century epistolary novel of sentiment. The epistolary form enables Celie, a black southern woman, to speak for herself. By writing letters, Celie discovers a means of structuring her identity and discovering herself. The novel unfolds itself in “the process of Celie’s writing herself into being and consciousness, of her growing power and control as a writer.” The novel’s narrative structure is closely linked to the theme of search for identity and history. The ingenuity of Alice Walker lies in revising the genre conventions of the sentimental novel. In sharp contrast to the chivalrous knight who comes to rescue the damsel in distress, Mr. comes to marry and brutalise Celie. She comes to her own rescue in the novel, aided by a sisterhood of black women and not by the chivalrous knight.

Alice Walker unfolds the narrative of the novel through a series of letters, which are not dated and numbered. It is a device, aiming at preserving the verisimilitude of the narrative. The letters, written by Celie and her sister, Nettie, reveal political
consciousness and throw spotlight on the contemporary, social, political and cultural scenario. Underscoring what Alice Walker achieves through the epistolary form, Linda Selzer observes:

Walker’s mastery of the epistolary form is revealed precisely by her ability to maintain the integrity of Celie’s and Nettie’s domestic perspectives even as she simultaneously undertakes an extended critique of race relations.... Moreover, the epistolary form helps the novelist bring to life the characters, doubly caged within the confines of their gender and race. It enables her to take into account a wide spectrum of personal, political, racist, sexist, cultural and textual assumptions, stereotypes, and constructs.18

Due to the peculiarities of the epistolary form, the novel demands to be read intensively. Clues and hints within the letters reveal the social set up of the period. In the opening letters, there are references to wagons and the closing letters reveal the appearance of cars. The time span of the novel is roughly about forty years. There are also large time spans between the letters, sometimes of about five years. The epistolary form has enabled Alice Walker to press into service the resources of a western tradition for exploiting the creativity of African-American folk expression. In this regard, David Bloom makes an apt observation “Celie’s letters transpose a black and oral mode into a western epistolary tradition. Walker’s use of the vernacular has invested an old and somewhat rigid form with new life.”19

Alice Walker’s use of the vernacular reveals her sensitivity to a language that she seeks to liberate from the bondage of racism. Alice Walker and Audre Lorde believe that black feminist writing seeks “a radical examination of how language operates in Black women’s history, how Black women rework it, and how Black women create and support through language what becomes through them a flourishing culture.”20
The Color Purple goes beyond its contextual enclosures towards establishing a "flourishing culture". By dismissing prevalent personal, cultural and racial assumptions, the narrative celebrates a black woman's coming to terms with her own self, her history and relentless effort in the direction of enhancing her self-esteem and realizing newly discovered powers and potentialities.

As the narrative opens, we are brought face to face with the fourteen year old, Celie, who lacks formal education and writes her letters, constituting the body of the novel, in the colloquial English of southern, black, poor country people. Pryse and Spillers anatomise Celie's creativity: "Celie's authority as a storyteller results from no mere sleight of hand; Walker seems to be saying that Celie’s ability to write her story is a pre-condition for her own (Walker's) ability as a novelist."21

This observation highlights the inherent similarity between the author and her creation at the level of perception and sensibility. The socio-cultural and political conditions in which Celie writes letters to God and her sister are the same in which Alice Walker's nineteenth century literary predecessors had written. Alice Walker argues that the black woman novelist has evolved from an immensely turbulent and disturbing past. She is not to be regarded as a late fluke of the twentieth century American culture. The black woman novelist has come into her own after surviving the crippling effects of slavery, lack of formal education, sexual abuse and mental oppression which have historically limited the literary productions of black women. Despite these historical handicaps, the black woman novelist has emerged powerful and eloquent, capable of expressing herself in the face of familial, cultural and economic predicaments.
Alice Walker's power and eloquence are attributed to her drawing sustenance and inspiration from the creative potential of her predecessors, especially Zora Neale Hurston. Like her, Alice Walker regards black magic, witchcraft, art and fiction as a form of conjuring. It enables Walker to become Celie's cumulative medium of self-expression. In the process: "...she challenges the authenticity of an American history that has failed to record the voices of black women and also that of the literary history, written by black men as well as white that has compounded the error of that neglect."22

The Color Purple records the voice of Celie, an illiterate southern black woman, who is raped by her stepfather and then married off to Mr. ____, who could make use of a good worker on his farm. Threatened by her stepfather that she had better tell no one but God about her rape at his hands, Celie starts writing letters to God. The entire novel comprises of Celie's letters to God, then to her sister Nettie, and of Nettie's letters to Celie. After her children are separated from Celie and her sister Nettie escapes the advances of Mr. ____ and leaves for Africa with missionaries, Celie sinks into isolation. With the passage of time, she develops affinity with an extended family which includes Shug, her husband's mistress who is a juke joint singer and the strong and rebellious Sofia. With the help of the black sisterhood, Celie overcomes oppression and acquires an identity and a sense of her history. In the end, Nettie and Celie's children are reunited with Celie. Mr. _____ mellows down and develops respect for Celie and her new found independence.

As The Color Purple deals with Celie's early life, growth and development, it falls in the category of a Bildungsroman. As a Bildungsroman, The Color Purple charts out Celie's gradual evolution and transformation. In the beginning, Celie lacks strength and
courage to fight male brutality. Instead she teaches herself to merely survive: “It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree.” She is the archetypal meek, subservient southern black wife: “She never say nothing back. She never stand up for herself.” Unlike Sofia, Celie is unassertive and bears her suffering without questioning. She contends: “I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is to stay alive.”

Celie's evolution of self is slow and gradual. Her journey to self-realization is a long and arduous one. Linda Tate contends that Celie’s transformation stems from her “ability to take control over defining oneself, naming oneself.” In the beginning, Celie is a mere “nothing”. Mr. rebukes her: “Who you think you is? ...You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, ... you nothing at all.” At this stage Celie accepts Mr.’s contention that she is a mere “nothing”. She lives a desolate existence “in irreconcilable fragments.” She cannot even begin her narrative by stating, “I am” due to lack of self-confidence and self-acceptance. As a result, Celie suffers silently and passively. With regard to passive suffering of black women, Audre Lorde remarks, “it is our silences ... which immobilise us and not our differences.”

As a result of her silence in the face of oppression, “Celie has been fragmented into pieces which are given away to others.” Her life is a series of sacrifices to her father’s ruthless desires, to her sister’s safety, and to Mr.’s cruelty. She leads a devastated, hopeless life after being abused by her father and her husband and her separation from her children and her sister. She lacks a sense of belonging and self.
As the novel evolves, Celie gradually moves towards self-acceptance and later self-assertion. She asserts her self for the first time when she takes the decision, on her own behalf, of leaving for Memphis with Shug. She boldly announces her existence on earth, “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook…. But I’m here.”

In Memphis, Celie, for the first time, gives expression to her dormant potentialities and creativity. In a letter, written to Nettie, from Memphis, Celie communicates a new and positive vision of herself: “I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children.” Further more, Celie, for the first time at the close of this letter, signs emphatically, there by revealing her new sense of self that she has acquired through her relationships and her business:

“Your sister, Celie
Folkpants, Unlimited
Sugar Avery Drive,
Memphis, Tennessee”

Celie comes close to acquiring a sense of identity in Memphis, which opens up new vistas for her and brings her in contact with the world at large. From newspapers, Celie learns about global happenings. On the war torn scene of the contemporary world, she honestly comments that people are “fussing and fighting and pointing fingers at other people, and never even looking for no peace.”

Even though Memphis is the beginning of Celie’s journey of making a place in the world, she is still away from realising full potential. In Memphis, Celie acquires a presence that is acknowledged. Her employee, Darlene attempts to “improve” Celie’s dialect to make her “refined”. As a result, Celie returns to Georgia with a personality
and style of her own. On her return to Georgia, she announces to Sofia and Harpo: “I feels different. Look different…”\(^{35}\) Significantly, Mr.___ does not recognize the new Celie: “I pass Mr ____ house and him sitting on the porch and he didn’t even know who I was.”\(^{36}\) It is in Georgia that Celie’s final discovery of a sense of self occurs. On returning to Georgia, she reclaims her family home, the farm and the store after her stepfather’s death. Her ownership of property marks the beginning of a new life for Celie. It is significant that she returns to Georgia “round Easter.”\(^{37}\) The synchronisation of her return with Easter symbolizes the rebirth and redemption of Celie.

It is significant that Celie is reborn in Georgia. Her discovery of self in the south marks her wholesome acceptance of the south and all that it represents. By returning to the south, Celie acquires a sense of belonging and roots. The south bequeaths to her a legacy of love, perseverance and hard work. Alice Walker believes that the southern black heritage also imposes an obligation on its representatives:

“No one could wish for a more advantageous heritage than that bequeathed to the black(s) … in the South: a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and in abiding love of justice. We inherit a great responsibility as well, for we must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate, but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love.”\(^{38}\)

The import of the theme of black sisterhood in *The Color Purple* can be fully understood only in the southern perspective.

At the end of the novel, Nettie and Celie’s children also return to the sustaining south. Celie’s experiencing extreme joy and fulfilment after reunion with her long separated family marks the final step in her quest for identity. Alice Walker has been criticized for the unrealistic, fairy tale ending of the novel. The ending of the novel
"creates a utopic vision of new southern community." However, the ending of the novel is also redemptive as the celebration in the end makes up for the misery with which the novel begins. Nettie and Celie’s children return home to Georgia, their “mothers’ gardens” to seek integration with the community from which they sprang. Celie’s reunion with her family coincides with the American Independence Day. As white Americans celebrate their independence from England; black Americans “spend the day celebrating each other.” “In a clever twist, Alice Walker uses this traditionally white holiday to mark the emotional, social, economic, and spiritual independence of Celie..."

As Celie’s quest for a sense of self culminates, the reader realizes that “redemption that Walker’s characters experience is possible for all of us. *The Color Purple*, an odd miracle of nature, symbolizes the miracle of human possibilities.” Celie succeeds in her quest for an identity because she recognizes the strength of the south, integrates with her race and refuses to internalize the alienating influences of the western white tradition. Celie’s evolution from a self-effacing woman to a woman whose consciousness allows her to gain control over her life is inspiring. Celie however would not have been able to attain a sense of self entirely by herself. Nettie, Shug and Sofia who form a close sisterhood aid her in her quest for identity. In this context, *The Color Purple* focuses on “southern black female survival and transcendence.” At this point it is significant to focus yet again on the Walker’s powerful notion of womanism: “...understanding among women is not a threat to any one who intends to treat women fairly.” The black feminist analysis of Celie's growth and self-discovery demonstrates how the assimilation of black values of
neighbourly kindness and sustaining love, embracing of African-American religious traditions, assertion of cultural identity and allegiance to ethnicity empower her to resist racial, sexual and patriarchal pressures. Her self realization highlights the inadequacy of the white Christian God, efficacy of black sisterhood and relevance of womanism.

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker clearly "lays out for us the theme that dominates her work—continuity and creativity in southern black women's lives."45 "Sister's choice" is the pattern of the quilt Celie and Sofia create together. The quilt becomes a symbol of the "female bonding that restores the women to a sense of completeness and independence."46 Quilting together creates a well-knit female community in a world that represses female expression. It strikes the reader as a symbol of women's bonding, creativity and also a living manifestation of African American folk culture. In the evolution of Celie as a person, quilting acquires symbolic significance when she makes a choice to end her exploitation and create a pattern of her own liking out of her oppressed existence. Shug, Nettie and Sofia help her in creating this pattern. These women do not fall into the category of stereotyped African American women. They transcend the stock southern definitions of black womanhood.

Shug exemplifies this transcendence. She is Celie's guardian angel in the novel and lifts Celie from the mire of suffering and oppression. Shug, the juke joint singer, represents the blues culture of the 1920s. It is a known fact that "vast majority of the earliest professional blues singers were women."47 Like her contemporary co-
professionals, Shug had chosen the “itinerant life of a tent show and theater performer in … (her) attempt to escape the poverty and hardship of black life in the rural South.”

Shug is looked upon as an incarnation of sin in rural, religious black southern community. Angela Davis states that “historically the blues person has been an outsider.” She further contends: “the most pervasive opposition to the blues… was grounded in the religious practices of the historical community … (as the blues)... blatant defied the Christian imperative to relegate sexual conduct to the realm of sin.” As a blues singer, Shug is responsible for the “total flaunting of the society’s prescribed roles for women.” However, in Celie’s eyes, Shug Avery is the most winsome and beautiful woman that she has ever seen. Celie is vastly influenced by Shug’s personality which is marked by a fierce sense of independence. She removes the “terrible nothing” from Celie’s life and encourages Celie to have a mind and a voice of her own.

Shug is the first person who acknowledges Celie’s goodness and humanity and dedicates a song to her. Celie records: “First time somebody made something and name after me.” The spiritual center of the book “radiates out of the connection between Celie and Shug that is simultaneously outrageous, audacious, courageous, wilful … and decidedly sexual.” It constitutes the hallmark of The Color Purple.

Sexual love between Shug and Celie has generated much criticism. For its proper evaluation, it must be regarded as a gesture of “the total liberation of women” and “an expression of love between two human beings who happen to be women.” In the relationship of Shug and Celie, the “essentials of love are in place - trust, compassion,
understanding, gentleness, and friendship." It has not been Alice Walker's intention to focus on lesbianism because more than the physical aspect of their love, it is the spiritual bonding of Shug and Celie that is responsible for Celie's final evolution as a person.

Shug enhances Celie's spirituality by passing on to her a liberating concept of God when the white God and the church fail to rescue her. Oppressed by the patriarchal setup, Celie had turned to God for help. However, she is let down by Him as well. As a result, she begins to think of God as white, racist and sexist. She voices her impression of God: "He big and old and tall and gray bearded and white. He wears white robes and (has) ... bluish-gray eyes. White lashes." Celie has suffered disappointment in God's love because He: "... is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown." Paul D.'s disenchantment with Christianity in *Beloved* provides an inter-textual parallelism to Celie's view of God. Their disenchantment with Christianity forms the basis of their adoption of the black theological model of God that evolves out of contradiction between Christian symbols and sacraments and the lived experience of African American characters. The embracing of black theology is symptomatic of black resistance to white domination.

Shug replenishes Celie's faith by propounding a new concept of God. Shug tells her: "God is everything.... Everything that is or ever was or ever will be." "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it." At this point, Shug acts as the spokesperson of Alice Walker, who had once remarked, "I don't believe there is a God... beyond nature."
The world is God. Man is God. So is a leaf or a snake... God is “in the color purple in a field somewhere.” By the end of the novel, Celie fully comes to accept this new and liberating concept of God and addresses a letter of thanksgiving to this new God: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God.”

The altered perspective on God sustains Celie and helps her to evolve as a person. Shug instils self-pride in Celie as a result of which Mr. also begins to see Celie in a new light. The end of the novel shows his revised attitudes toward women and gender roles. He forms a new and non-sexual relationship with Celie. Thereafter, he is transformed into “Albert”. By shedding male chauvinism, he gains the right to a name, which has been denied to him for the most part of the novel.

Shug helps Celie evolve as a person and make peace with her surroundings as well as with the oppressive patriarchal system. Therefore, Alice Walker’s final paradigm in the novel is “neither the male/female nor the female/female dyad, but a variation on the eternal triangle in which women complement rather than compete with each other, and, at the same time, share an equal status with the men.” The bonding between Celie and Shug offers an illustration of this paradigm. It emerges as the most powerful relationship in the novel and Celie realizes her place in the universe as a result of this extraordinary relationship.

Besides Shug, Sofia plays a significant part in Celie’s growth and evolution. Sofia is a formidable character who demonstrates “feisty refusal to be controlled by anyone - by whites, regardless of sex, or by men, regardless of race.” Sofia bravely transcends gender boundaries in her relationship with her husband, Harpo. She works
in the field while Harpo takes care of the household chores. They lead a happy life and love each other until propriety drives Harpo to dominate Sofia and fight “like two mens,” eventually leading to their long separation.

Sofia inspires Celie to protest against her condition. Sophia’s holding on her convictions despite adverse consequences is exemplary and urges Celie to continue her fight against both sexism and racism. In the end Celie, like Sofia, fights, struggles, dares, pays a price but wins. Sofia’s role in Celie’s growth and evolution is unmistakable.

Besides dealing with Celie’s self-discovery, *The Color Purple* also focuses on Celie’s quest for history. In this sense, it is also a historical novel that chronicles Celie’s coming to terms with the legacy of her race and her roots. It affirms and makes black history. It traces the history of the blacks from Africa to the suburbs of the USA. The novel captures Celie’s developing a sense of her racial roots and history. The historical perspective of *The Color Purple* highlights the significance of Nettie. She becomes the vehicle by which Celie understands the meaning of the epic journey of her relentless race. Nettie educates Celie and becomes crucial to Celie’s coming face to face with the oppression, experienced by her race. Nettie has always been an educating force in Celie’s life since childhood. Nettie’s education enables her to enter the outside world and become a missionary. In the process, she discovers Africa and her roots and passes on the knowledge of the tumultuous history of the Blacks to Celie. Consequently, Celie learns to treasure and value her race and its heritage.

Nettie reveals to Celie the harrowing story of how the Colonizers has oppressed the blacks and robbed them of their heritage and culture. When Celie gazes at the
envelope that brings Nettie’s letter from Africa, the stamps showing the “little fat queen of England” catch her attention. Through the stamps, Alice Walker brings Queen Victoria and the universe of imperialism and colonialism into focus. Nettie informs Celie how the English road builders displace the Olinka villages in Africa. She also reveals that the black missionaries are made to participate in the process of colonization in Africa under the garb of educating the colonised. Nettie tells Celie that missionary work is another form of promoting imperialism. She makes an acute comment on the colonizer’s plundering of the art objects of the colonised:

.... the English have been sending missionaries to Africa and India and China and God knows where all, for over a hundred years. And the things they have brought back. We spent a morning in one of their museums and it was packed with jewels, furniture, fur, carpets, swords, clothing, even tombs from all the countries they have been. From Africa they have thousands of vases, jars, masks, bowls, baskets, statues - and they are all so beautiful it is hard to imagine that the people who made them don’t still exist. And yet the English assure us they do not.

Evidently, the personal/private discourse of a young wonder-struck girl is dexterously embedded in a wider context of race and class. The discourse also underscores how, in a subtle fashion, the white society, for its own gains, has been using the blacks against their own race. Nettie realizes the dormant strength of her race and the fact that valuing their heritage and their history alone could save the blacks from alienation and extinction. She passes on this realisation to Celie. It sustains her and enables her, unlike Pecola in The Bluest Eye, to emerge successful in her quest for self-discovery. Through Nettie’s travel to Africa, Nettie and Celie not only discover themselves but also their overwhelming past. This represents the convergence of the quest for identity and history, both reinforcing and reiterating each other.
The theme of quest is separably associated with traveling that becomes a mode of moving into the past and confronting history. According to bell hooks, the experience of travelling in lands, dominated by the whites, encompasses an encounter with white terror. She opines: “... it is crucial that we recognize that the hegemony of one experience of travel can make it impossible to articulate another experience or for it to be heard. From certain stand points, to travel is to encounter the terrorizing force of white supremacy.” For instance, in Africa, Nettie encounters the “terrorizing force” of the ruthless white colonial setup that has robbed the colonized of everything including their selves.

Nettie’s encounter with white colonizers urges her to explore black history. She shares with Celie the three insights that she gleans in the process of exploring black history:

- Africans and not white men were the first to sell blacks into slavery.
- Jesus had lamb’s wool like hair i.e. kinky.
- Africans had a more advanced civilization than the Europeans had at a comparable period of time in history.

The first insight reveals to Celie that Africans has exploited fellow Africans for mercenary motives. In response to the call of Mammon, they have chosen to dehumanize their brothers and had reduced them to a saleable commodity. The second insight focuses on the lineage of kinky hair, which are generally associated with the blacks. By imparting a halo to the kinky hair, Nettie makes an effort to boost the self-esteem of her race. The third insight historicizes what is primarily a play of mythical imagination, aiming at gaining collective self-esteem.
Nettie's exploration of the black heritage instils in her and Celie a sense of pride in their heritage and history. It fills their minds with a new admiration for their black skin. They come to look upon themselves as an inseparable part of the vast African continent and its rich and diverse civilization. Consequently they are overwhelmed by a strong feeling of black nationalism and pan-Africanism. As a result, the urge to uplift the black people seizes them. In the wake of this psycho-cultural transformation and rejuvenation, Celie partakes of the collective consciousness of black people. Nettie also passes on to Celie the ideology of Marcus Garvey, a prominent black figure of the time. The racial/cultural/social consciousness, generated by Garveyism gives a boost to Celie's quest for history and heritage. Resultantly it culminates in her acquiring a distinct identity.

Celie's distinct identity is defined by her transformation from a meek subservient woman into an angry and assertive woman. She wants to kill Mr._____ for concealing Nettie's letters from her and thus blocking her channel of communication with her sister. Nettie dissuades her from taking recourse to violence and persuades her to be tolerant. Moreover she imparts the liberating knowledge of their racial legacy to Celie and enthuses her to emerge successful in her quest for history.

Thus by tapping the creativity of the epistolary form, Alice Walker has:

"created an internal dialogue, comparing and contrasting, and finally reconciling poor and middle class, educated and uneducated, African and Afro-American heritage. Nettie's letters to Celie constitute the sub text of the novel. From vastly different points of view...the two sisters gradually come to identical realizations about the nature of life, blackness, and men and women."70

The black feminist analysis of the text demonstrates that Celie's quest for identity
and history contextualizes racial conflict, oppression of black women and production of female subjectivities within the African American community. It highlights the role played by the dismissal of men from her private world, realization of the inadequacy of the white Christian God, integration with black heritage and racial roots and the assimilation of the power and wisdom of her female ancestors. Edward Said captures the Celie’s quintessence of liberation and spiritual elevation: "There emerges a change in the status quo: finally, moving towards freedom and fulfilment, consciousness looks ahead to complete self-realization, which is of course … revolutionary, … stretching forward in time."

Celie’s self-realization is made possible through affirmation of her self and others. Her spiritual transformation from a “tree”, a piece of wood, to a happy and fulfilled person occurs through knowledge, creativity and love. With regard to the role of creativity in the transformation of Celie. Alice Walker refers to the dormant artistic potentialities of the black female ancestors: “These grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the spirits of creativity in them for which there was no release.” Unlike Walker’s female ancestors, Celie and the other brave female characters in The Color Purple find the “release” of their creative potentialities. The black women in The Color Purple realize their individualities in their quilts, songs, and gardens. Shug and Mary Agnes discover themselves in music; Sofia and Celie in their quilts; Nettie in her teaching; and Celie in her wonderful “folkpants.” At the end of the book, Celie finally discovers a world of “the color purple” “the little purple frog…on my mantelpiece” symbolising her triumph in life. Purple is the colour of fulfilment, glory and regal power. By associating this
colour with Celie's quest, Walker renders heroism to her life and fills the matrix of her life with happiness.

Celie attains this happiness by reconciling with the past. In the process, she also helps others like Albert to make peace with their surroundings. Like her prominent African American predecessors, Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker focuses on black female quest for identity and wholeness. In this sense, the impact of The Color Purple on African American literature and culture has been abiding. Its strength, according to CLR James, springs from "not seeking to impress white people at all." Contrary to this, like Conrad in The Heart of Darkness, Alice Walker relentlessly unveils the dark designs of colonialism and imperialism.

The black feminist approach also underlines the opposition of men to the emancipation of women and the varying responses of the male and female characters to the emerging social order, which enables women to assert themselves and gain economic independence. It focuses on the existential project of the female characters in the novel and brings into focus their womanistic slant and exclusion of men from their sisterhood and struggle for self-realisation and empowerment.

The black feminist approach focuses on the slow and painful growth of Celie's self-consciousness and self-discovery and how her rejuvenation and rebirth are occasioned by her freedom from the expectations and demands of the patriarch, sexism and racism. It takes into consideration the gradual process of her empowerment, brought about by the kindling of her dormant libido by Shug, the enlightening of her mind by Nettie and the attaining of economic security, provided by her owning the house after
Fonso's death and her work as a seamistress. It contextualizes Celie's arduous journey from self-pity to self-love, from sense of worthlessness to sense of pride, from degrading deprivation to uplifting fulfilment and from being a non-person to an authentic person. The black feminist study of the text throws spotlight on the less travelled path that the chief female protagonist traverses in the course of her quest for history and identity. Her quest crystallises as a universal expression of the oppressed and the dispossessed humanity's struggle for emancipation and fulfilment.

The tour de force of the black feminist study of *The Color Purple* lies in denouncing the white patriarchal set up and the black male oppression. The black feminist approach reveals that the collective degradation of black people is linked with the issues of race, gender and class. The close focus study of the sub-text, constituted by Nettie's letters, reinforces the point that Alice Walker offers an authentic critique of race relations and class positions. The specific thrust of the study lies in underscoring the hegemony of race and class in the private and personal discourses of Celie. She resists racism and sexism and emerges successful in her quest for identity and history. The dexterous treatment of the theme of quest for identity and history makes *The Color Purple* "an American novel of permanent importance." The feminist analysis shows how alongside *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, *The Color Purple* has become a vehicle of radical black self-determination and a document of black feminist theory and praxis.
References


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34. Ibid., p. 208.


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36. Ibid., p. 215.

37. Ibid., p. 174.


62. Ibid., p. 286.
66. Ibid., p. 36.
67. Ibid., p. 102.
68. Ibid., pp. 116-17.
69. bell hooks, op.cit., 1996, p. 44.