CHAPTER IV

The Color Purple:
The Sense of the Self and Black American Heritage
Alice Walker's third novel, *The Color Purple*, won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for Fiction. Written in an epistolary form, it is Black women-centred. The entire novel is written in a series of letters which form the source of information about Celie, the principal character. Celie's letters reflect her internal conflict, her silent sufferings, and the impact of oppression on her spirit as well as her growing internal strength, and final victory. *The Color Purple* is a song of joy and triumph: triumph of a woman's struggle against racism, sexism, and social determinism ultimately leading to the wholeness of her being. Mary Helen Washington writes that "from whatever vantage point one investigates the work of Alice Walker -- poet, novelist, short story writer, critic, essayist, and apologist for black women -- it is clear that the special identifying mark of her writing is her concern for the lives of black women."1

Walker is concerned with "the spiritual survival, the survival whole" of her people. She explores, "the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women."2 She says that "black women among all women have been oppressed almost beyond recognition -- oppressed by everyone."3 Walker is sympathetic towards the sexually exploited and abused black women. Black women have been pictured as, "the mule of the world." They have also been called "Matriarchs," "Super-women" and "Mean and Evil Bitches," Walker shows a mysterious liking for black women. She says, "For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world."4 She wishes to probe the
relationship between men and women, and to a greater extent the lives of the black women. In *The Color Purple* Walker attempts to depict the oppression black women experience in their relationship with black men. She portrays the need for sisterhood which has liberating possibilities for black women.

While Walker depicted the racist and economic oppression and the victimization of black women in her earlier two novels, in *The Color Purple* she emphasizes the universal oppression of black women, focusing primarily on Celie’s story. Bernard Bell has rightly pointed out that *The Color Purple* is “more concerned with politics of sex and self than with the politics of class and race... its unrelenting, severe attacks on male hegemony, especially the violent abuse of black women by black men, is offered as a revolutionary leap forward into a new social order based on sexual egalitarianism.” Walker calls her novel a historical novel. The “history,” she says, “starts not with the taking of lands, or the births, battles, and deaths of Great Men, but with one woman asking another for her underwear.”

*The Color Purple* opens with a warning or rather a threat from the stepfather of Celie which silences her, thereby depriving her right to even speak of herself with anybody. She is not even allowed to share her feelings of joy or sorrow with anyone except God. “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy.” So she addresses her letters to God and mentions all her thoughts, her fears, her impressions of others and her aspirations in simple broken language. The crudeness and the style of her language reflects her traumatized, depressed, mental and emotional state of mind. Walker writes of
Celie, "She has not accepted an alien description of who she is; neither has she accepted completely an alien tongue to tell us about it. Her being is affirmed by the language in which she is revealed, and like everything about her it is characteristic, hard-won and authentic." 8

Walker is very realistic about the language she uses for Celie. She celebrates the oral tradition that is black and southern. She says:

For Celie’s speech pattern in *The Color Purple*, Celie’s words reveal not only an intelligence that transforms illiterate speech into something that is, at times, very beautiful -- as well as effective in conveying her sense of her world -- her speech also reveals what has been done to her by a racist and sexist system, and her intelligent blossoming as a human being despite her oppression demonstrates why her oppressors persist even today in trying to keep her down. For if and when Celie rises to her rightful, earned place in society, across the planet, the world will be a different place. 9

Celie’s communication with God through her letters confirms her very existence. Through her letters she asserts that she is still alive. She writes just to survive. “The actual language of the letters, which are written in Celie’s folk speech without any attempt at editorializing on Walker’s part, is similarly reaffirming, something essential to her personality.” 10

Celie has been raped twice and impregnated by her stepfather whom she thought was her real father. She suffers from an overpowering sense of incest. She feels ashamed to tell her mother what has happened to her, and she thinks she deserves it. “She ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God’s. I don’t know no other man or what else to say” (3). Celie hates herself and has no desire to get to know her body which had been a constant source of exploitation.
Adrienne Rich sadly remarks, “But fear and hatred of our bodies often crippled our brains. Some of the most brilliant women of our time are still trying to think from somewhere outside their female bodies -- hence they are still merely reproducing old forms of intellection.” She further suggests to women to overcome their negative attitudes if they are to achieve intellectual progress.

Celie believes and accepts that she is ugly. Her stepfather stresses the fact that she is ugly. “She ugly. Don’t even look like she kin to Nettie” (9). Even Shug Avery, the person she admires and the lover of her husband, also makes it very clear. “You sure is ugly, she say, like she ain’t believed it” (48).

Celie’s stepfather gives a very bad picture of Celie to Mr. Albert. When Mr. _____ comes to ask for Nettie, their father flatly refuses to give her. Instead he offers Celie for Nettie. He tells Mr. _____, “Fact is, he say, I got to git rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. And she a bad influence on my other girls. And another thing -- She tell lies” (9). Celie has no right over her body and life. Her living standards are clearly revealed when her father tells Mr. _____, “You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it” (9). Celie is constantly reminded of her ugliness which makes her feel inferior and downtrodden in her own eyes. She tries to ignore herself, and her body which has been put to repeated sexual and physical assaults. Daniel Ross rightly says, “To confront the body is to confront not only an individual’s abuse but also the abuse of women’s bodies throughout history; as the external symbol of women’s enslavement, this abuse represents for woman a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status.”
Celie transforms herself from a living being into a non-living thing when her husband beats her. This clearly shows the state of her degradation. “He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree” (23). Celie becomes a victim of ‘soul murder’ when she depersonalizes herself from the state of human to a non-human. “This depersonalization of the self results from the subject’s impossibility to determine his/her life; it is a loss of feeling himself [herself] as an organic whole… an alienation from the real self.” Celie’s alienation in partly because of the ignorance of herself and partly because of the oppression and dehumanizing behaviour towards her of Mr. ____. She is not only deprived of love and affection but also of decent clothing. When Albert’s sister asks him to buy clothes for her, his response is awful: “Buy Celie some clothes. She say to Mr. _____. She need clothes? he ast. He look at me. It like he looking at the earth. It need somethin? his eyes say” (21). In spite of all the horrible situations she faces, she never raises her voice to protest against his actions. She is too frightened to fight or rebel even when Albert’s sister advises her to do so, because of the fear of losing her shelter and her life. “You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can’t do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself. I don’t say nothing. I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive” (22). Her only idea is to survive under whatever conditions came her way. More over she tries to convince herself of her inability to protest by saying, “Well, sometimes Mr. ____
git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways” (44).

Self-esteem is the primary issue dealt with by black women in their writings. They stress this factor by saying that “women must assume responsibility for strengthening their self-esteem by learning to love and appreciate themselves -- in short, to celebrate their womanhood.” Celie initially lacks this characteristic. Even though she has the idea to liberate herself from the clutches of male domination, she is too dependent to assert her black womanhood. In the beginning, Celie tries to escape with the assistance of her sister, Nettie. She marries Mr. , knowing very well that her life will be no better than the present one, devoid of love and self-respect: “All I thought about was Nettie. How she could come to me if I marry him and he be so love struck with her I could figure out a way for us to run away” (10). Though her ability to envision success is evident, her plan is thwarted since it is linked to Nettie. Celie’s plans and hopes of escaping remain unsuccessful and dormant for many years for she thinks that Nettie is dead. They are once again renewed after she learns that Nettie is alive. “Now I know Nettie alive I begin to strut a little bit. Think, When she come home us leave here. Her and me and our two children” (154). Celie leads a passive life not knowing her inner talents and potentialities. She needs the intervention of someone or the other to constantly keep reminding her of her personal value. Her dependent nature is evident even in confrontation of her day-to-day problems. She is again linked to Shug Avery, the blues singer and the lover of her husband, who consistently shows her her ability to ensure her own well-being.
Celie loses her good-enough mother at the height of her rapprochement crisis and her identity formation was in the early stages of development. It is hardly surprising that Celie later responds to the ministrations of women and resumes the development tasks of identity formation. Shug becomes a good-enough mother for Celie and provides an environment for her to reveal her true feelings and to establish a stable and autonomous self. Shug is brought home by Albert so that Celie nurses her back to health. Celie is not even informed or told anything about her. But still she serves her with love, devotion and admiration. "I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short" (51). Shug too, like everyone, hates and shuns Celie in the beginning, but later starts liking her and she takes the place of Nettie and brings out the true self of Celie and restores her dignity and self-respect. She literally helps Celie attain transcendence. She even names one of her songs Miss Celie's song. Shug's small gesture makes Celie feel that she is of value. "She say my name again. She say this song I'm bout to sing is call Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick." "First time somebody made something and name it after me" (77).

In The Color Purple novel, Alice walker develops the themes that dominated her previous works, but extends her canvass by depicting a lesbian relationship. Tackling this taboo subject, Walker shows the relationship to be one of restoration and freedom and emphasizes the importance of female friendship in the black community. The novel is lesbian in the much broader sense implied by Adrienne Rich's concept of "lesbian continuum" which spans
the whole spectrum of women's friendships and sisterly solidarity. Walker's own term 'womanist' is clearly influenced by Rich's and in this womanist text, the eroticism of women's love for women is at once centralized and incorporated into a more diffuse model of woman identifying women. Shug is the first person to love Celie and through her Celie comes to love herself. Indeed, under Shug's guidance she discovers the loveliness of her own body and the beauty of lovemaking.

Shug indirectly awakens Celie's subconscious desire for identity. She not only acts like a loving and caring mother to Celie, but she brings out her tender motherly feelings. She also provokes her unknown and uncared for feminine desires. She teaches Celie to love herself and to love and admire her body. Celie is allowed to get to know the different units of her body through which she gains confidence and a sense of selfhood. They both enter into a lesbian relationship.

She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. Um, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say, um, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other. I don't know nothing bout it, I say to Shug. I don't know much, she say. Then I feels some thing real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too. (118)

Celie's lesbianism is politically significant. It subverts masculine cultural narratives of feminity.

Walker attempts to recapture the mother-daughter bond through lesbianism. She considers Black lesbian relationship as a natural phenomenon.
In a certain context she even says that, "We are all lesbians." Through this relationship she emphasizes the importance of female friendship in black community and the importance of sisterhood. As Bernard Bell rightly acknowledges, "rather than heterosexual love, lesbianism is the rite of passage to selfhood, sisterhood and brotherhood for Celie." Compulsory heterosexuality is the basis on which society operates and whereby the patriarchy flourishes. Women are prevented from becoming subjects in an economy where they are exchanged as objects and homosexual desire becomes a taboo, like incest, because it disrupts the terms of the social contract. Compulsory heterosexuality enforces Celie's subjugation and erases her subjectivity. Trapped from the beginning into complicity in the shameful secret of incest, Celie makes a timid plea to God: "Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (1).

The specific systems of oppression that operate in Celie's life symbolize the more or less subtle operations of patriarchal power in the lives of women everywhere. Celie bleakly represents the plight of her more privileged sisters who are victimized by social tyrannies, like anti-abortion legislation, the kidnapping of children, and state intervention in the family and in individual's sexual orientation. She is denied status as subject. Her sexuality is controlled by men and her submission is enforced through violence. In her terrified acquiescence to such blatant male brutality, Celie symbolically mirrors Everywoman.
An important project of feminism is to topple the dominant ideology by placing the unorthodox and marginalized at the center of the discursive and cultural stage. Feminist theory constructs homosexuality as a powerfully subversive weapon. In *The Color Purple* Walker breaks the taboo. She reduces the system of compulsory heterosexuality to its basic level, making it abstract. Her women refuse to become objects of exchange between men. Celie is rescued from an identity crisis by Shug who tells her, "Us each others peoples now" (189). The two women have mothered each other and now elect to be woman-identified women. In breaking the taboo against homosexuality, Celie symbolically exits the masternarrative of female sexuality and abandons the position ascribed to her within the symbolic order. Implicit here is an escape from patriarchal law.

Mae Henderson has said of Shug, "Unlike Celie, who derives her sense of self from the dominant white and male theology, Shug is a self-invented character whose sense of self is not male inscribed. Her theology allows a divine, self-authorized sense of self." 17 Shug teaches Celie not only to love herself but also to love other people around her. When Celie rejects the notion of a white and male God, Shugs reveals her own way of perceiving God and offers Celie a genderless God. Her teachings allow Celie to find God in herself, in nature, and in the whole creation:

Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. 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. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. (202)
Celie accepts this new conception of God which Shug offers. Her last letter, “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (292) reflects her newly accepted pantheistic view of Godliness. Even Nettie who was far away has discovered a different God. She writes to Celie:

God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone -- a roofleaf or Christ -- but we don’t. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us. And perhaps Samuel and I will found a new church in our community that has no idols in it whatsoever, in which each person’s spirit is encouraged to seek God directly, his belief that this is possible strengthened by us as people who also believe. (264)

Celie’s letters to God are replaced by her letters to Nettie after she discovers the old letters written by Nettie which were “stolen” by Albert. Writing plays an important role in the lives of the two sisters, Celie and Nettie. The epistolary form of the novel stresses the importance of writing. Literacy, restricted only to the whites, was used as a tool to control and dominate the blacks. When Celie’s stepfather threatens her not to speak out, she resorts to the written form of word. She writes letters to God, the only one form of expression which gives her solace and a retreat from pain and agony. She is forced to quit school because of her pregnancy. Even after she is dropped out of school, Celie keeps her interest in books. She tries to escape from her stepfather’s advances with the help of literacy: “Us both be hitting Nettie’s schoolbooks pretty hard, cause us know we got to be smart to git away” (10).
Both the sisters knew that literacy can help them to get out of their oppressive situation. Writing becomes a bond joining them. When Nettie leaves Celie, Celie tells her to keep in touch. “I say, Write. She say, What? I say, Write. She say, Nothing but death can keep me from it” (19). In her letter Nettie writes, “Well, I started to fight him, and with God’s help, I hurt him bad enough to make him let me alone. But he was some mad. He said because of what I’d done I’d never hear from you again, and you would never hear from me” (131). Albert takes revenge by breaking the communicative link between Celie and Nettie. He hides Nettie’s letters and keeps Celie in darkness. Although Nettie is aware of the fact that her letters would not reach her sister, she never stops writing to Celie: “... I imagine that you really do get my letters and that you are writing me back: Dear Nettie, this is what life is like for me” (161).

Writing helps Nettie to preserve the oral culture. Her letters serve as records in preserving the history of the African-Americans. Nettie’s letters explore the gender oppressions on the African continent and reveal the universal oppression of Black women. Her descriptions of the experiences of African women stresses the fact that Black women’s oppression is transcultural. Celie’s situation is thereby placed within a larger framework. Her experiences are linked with those of Black women in Africa. Writing helps Celie to explore her consciousness and enables her to create self-awareness. Through Nettie’s letters Celie comes to know certain facts of her past. She also comes to know that her father, whom she had been thinking as her father, is not her true father. She feels relieved and purified from her feelings of guilt. As one reviewer of the
novel suggests, "Celie can affirm herself through the act of writing; while others
would deny her humanity, she can assert it through the process of creation in
the letters."\textsuperscript{18}

Celie's discovery of Nettie's letters, which are a powerful connecting,
metaphor for the reconstruction of the black feminist literary tradition, marks a
radical turning point in the novel. Albert's desire to keep Celie, to shape her
for himself, to proscribe her existence, is most powerfully expressed in his
attempts to break sororal bonds through the denial of a textual connection with
Nettie. The discovery of letters, a product of ongoing self-redefinition, further
promotes that process. This interruption of Celie's voice is something of a
history lesson. Alice Walker intends to show the reader that black Americans
have long historical links with their African cousins. She points out, through
the agency of these letters, that sexism is as prevalent in Africa as it is in America.

Shug becomes the embodiment of feminist existential freedom in choosing
her career as a blues singer and in refusing to settle down for a life of domesticity.
Celie sometimes feels that there is something masculine about Shug. Shug has
grown strong and independent by being true to her own experience. As Celie
remarks, "When you look in Shug's eyes you know she been where she been,
seen what she seen, did what she did. And now she know" (276). Shug's
character functions not only as the antithesis of Celie but also as a vehicle through
which Celie becomes conscious of and empowered to address the conditions
that oppress her. Her spiritual insight helps Celie to learn new things about
God and religion. Nevertheless Celie's frustration would have ended up in her
bitter rejection of God. Shug becomes an empowering agent for Celie thereby bringing about a transformation that allows her to extricate herself from her oppressive situation.

Shug indeed opens up a New World for Celie, a new hope, and the assurance of a better life. She transforms her into a new being. Though Nettie, Kate, and Sofia advise Celie to fight back and have a better life, it is Shug who truly makes an attempt to create the right atmosphere for Celie to grow out of her shell and declare her independence. In the later part of the novel when Celie finds that Mr. _____ had been hiding Nettie’s letters written to her, she thinks of killing him. It is Shug who again stands by her side and prevents her from doing so. “Don’t kill, she say. Nettie be coming home before long. Don’t make her have to look at you like us look at Sofia” (150). She channels Celie’s anger into a proper and purposeful direction. She draws out Celie’s in-built talent. Celie’s aggressive posture is sublimated in the development of her own form of art: sewing. She adopts a traditionally feminine form of art to complete her separation from the violent masculine world. As Adrienne Rich describes it, sewing or weaving emphasizes woman’s “transformative power.”

By sewing, Celie narrows the gap between the sexes, making pants for both men and women. Sewing also links Celie to woman’s primordial power that pre-dates patriarchy.

Walker introduces the art of quilt-making, which she herself works on while writing the novel: “I bought some beautiful blue-and-red-and purple fabric, ... My quilt began to grow. And, of course, everything was happening.
Celie and Shug and Albert were getting to know each other.” Quilting symbolizes female bonding, sisterhood, and togetherness. Walker’s mentioning of the art of quilting reflects her respect and love for black cultural heritage. Speaking of a quilt that hangs in the Smithsonian Institution as the work of “an anonymous Black woman from Alabama,” Walker says that the anonymous woman was “one of our grandmothers -- an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use.” The metaphor of quilting represents for Alice Walker the creative legacy that African-Americans have inherited from their maternal ancestors. Walker feels that this functional work of art made of bits of worthless rags reflects the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling:

Weaving, shaping, sculpting or quilting in order to create a kaleidoscopic and momentary array is tantamount to providing an improvisational response to chaos... It constitutes survival strategy and motion in the face of dispersal. A patchwork quilt, laboriously and affectionately crafted from bits of worn overalls, shredded uniforms, tattered petticoats, and outgrown dresses stands as a signal instance of a patterned wholeness in the African diaspora.

Celie and Sofia sit and make quilts together. Celie, out of jealousy, supports Harpo to beat Sofia to submissiveness. Sofia learns Celie’s betrayal and returns the curtains Celie has made. Later sewing establishes a harmonious relationship between the two women. Shug too develops an interest in quilting. “She pick up a random piece of cloth out the basket. Hold it up to the light. Frown. How you sew this damn thing? she say. I hand her the square I’m working on, start another one. She sew long crooked stitches, remind me of
that little crooked tune she sing” (59). Corrine, the adoptive mother of Celie’s children, gets interested in the quilting of the Olinka. A search for the material unravels certain facts. Corrine learns that Nettie is the aunt of her children and not their real mother. Nettie also finds out that Olivia and Adam are none other than her sister Celie’s children. Quilting brings together the lost relationship.

Shug discovers and develops Celie’s ability to make pants. She even makes Celie wear pants, which marks an advance in Celie’s life. When Shug insists on taking Celie to Memphis along with her, Albert would not allow her to. He starts saying all nasty things and Celie retorts confidently and boldly by saying, “You a lowdown dog is what’s wrong, I say. It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need” (207). When Albert still resists, she could no longer tolerate him. She curtly tells him thus: “Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail” (213). Mr. ___’s inability to understand, “What that mean?” becomes definitive of a separate tradition of voice and text. Celie’s curse brings havoc upon the patriarchal household and makes a claim for her own space within creation. Her acknowledgment of Mr. ___’s disclaimer negates its power and rejects its attempt to define appropriate roles and standards for Black women.

Cicie responds to Mr.____ in a very positive manner, but she is still critical about her looks. Her evaluation of her appearance does not change:

Sometimes I think Shug never love me. I stand looking at my naked self in the looking glass. What would she love? I ast
myself. My hair is short and kinky because I don't straighten it anymore. Once Shug say she love it no need to. My skin dark. My nose just a nose. My lips just lips. My body just any woman's body going through the changes of age. Nothing special here for nobody to love. No honey colored curly hair, no cuteness. Nothing young and fresh. My heart must be young and fresh though, it feel like it blooming blood. (266)

Celie never believes or trusts Shug's affection showered on her. On top of it, Albert keeps on reminding her by repeatedly saying that she is black and ugly. Celie too believes that she is ugly and she centres that belief on her blackness. Walker feels sorry that blackness is not much valued. She resents people who differentiate themselves from their ancestors because of their dark skin. Such ignorant people, she says, are sure to end up in self-eradication. “For no one can hate their source and survive, as has been said.”23 “To me,” she says, “the black black woman is our essential mother -- the blacker she is the more us she is -- and to see the hatred that is turned on her is enough to make me despair, almost entirely, of our future as a people.”24

Shug takes Celie along with her to her place. She treats her as a friend and her equal. She even scolds her when Celie tries to work for her. “... she say. You not my maid. I didn’t bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet” (218). Though Shug is criticized and called a tramp, slut, hussy, heifer, and street cleaner, she builds upon good rapport with Celie. She moulds Celie into a new being and supports her endeavor to build up a new identity within the feminine domain. She makes it a point to break Celie's dependence upon herself by going off with her over. Celie is left to face the world which makes her shed all the fear of imposition of her husband.
Although Shug is responsible for the physical and psychological development of Celie, Celie becomes fully confident only after she discovers that Nettie is alive. Nettie runs away and seeks shelter from a black missionary couple. She moves off to Africa along with them and she too becomes a missionary. Unlike Celie who retains her black vernacular, Nettie undergoes a change, a change in herself, a change in her language and her ethnic values. She is like the black women who lightened their skin and straightened their hair.

Walker constructs an alternative language through the displacement of standard English. In *The Color Purple* the dialect is both naturalistic and symbolic. Celie’s linguistic processes reflect her struggle to construct a self. *The Color Purple* is an elaborate act of signifying. By incorporating Nettie’s letters into Celie’s text, Walker illuminates the contrast between Celie’s spare suggestiveness and Nettie’s stilted verbosity. Thus the expressive flexibility of the black vernacular, a supposedly inferior speech, is measured against the repressed and rigid linguistic codes to which Nettie has conformed. The position of Standard English is challenged, and Celie’s vitality is privileged over Nettie’s dreary correctness. Nettie has been imaginatively stunted, her language bleached white and her ethnicity virtually erased. Always the other woman who lacks an identity of her own, she is cast in the preposterous role of a black missionary who attempts to impose the ideology of her oppressors on a culturally self-sufficient people. Celie, by contrast, refuses to enter the linguistic structures of white patriarchy. She comments that “only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind” (223). And so she retains a discourse
that is potentially subversive. Nettie experiences a divided self mainly because she is frustrated on account of lack of communication with her sister. She develops a relationship with Samuel, her fellow missionary, marries him, and fits herself into a comfortable place as a wife and as a mother to the adopted children whereas Celie struggles to carve out a place for herself.

Referring to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Alice Walker asserts, "There is no book more important to me than this one."25 Walker's *The Color Purple* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, embody many similar concerns and methods, ones that characterize the black woman's literary tradition. Hurston and Walker reclaim two often deprecated territories: the language of black folk culture and the experience of uneducated rural Southern women. Hurston explores and celebrates black life on its own terms, not primarily in its relationship to white society. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she focuses on a young woman's quest for identity and wholeness. For Hurston’s heroine, Janie, self-discovery and self-definition consist of learning to recognize and trust her inner voice while rejecting the formulations others try to impose upon her. Janie struggles to find out the ground of her being, a source of value and authority out of which to live. Both writers feel that this problem is especially acute for black women because the structures neither of society nor of formal religion provide this grounding, Janie finds it by being true to her own poetic, creative consciousness. In *The Color Purple*, Walker’s characters discover it through the strength and wisdom available in the community of women.
Despite her oppressive environment, Janie grows steadily in self-knowledge and discernment. The image of a blossoming pear tree buzzing with bees and dusting the world with pollen becomes her image of community and her metaphor for what marriage should be. Janie identifies herself with a part of nature and envisions complete fulfilment. As a “tree”, she will be in possession of great strength, awesome beauty, and communion with the natural world. The horizon represents Janie’s need to explore all the dimensions of life and of her own self. She increasingly trusts and articulates her own values. For Janie learning about living means going to the horizon of her consciousness and establishing joyful relationships with others. Her eyes have been watching God -- the God who manifests himself in nature and in human beings. Hurston is a lone voice and she presents a character whose insights come largely from individual experience. Walker, by contrast, places greater emphasis on the importance of sisterhood. The Color Purple takes up the project of women’s self-definition where Their Eyes Were Watching God ends it. Shug is a woman who, like Janie, grows strong by being true to her own experience. In Walker’s The Color Purple, when Celie retaliates against Mr. _____, it seems to appear that she has relied upon the supernatural to guide her and to give her strength. She herself is now brutal in her admonitions when she says, “I give it to him straight, ... And it seem to come to me from the trees” (213).

The Color Purple is a novel which not only highlights the oppressions of women but is a work that maintains women’s relation to nature as a major element for freedom. Janie in Their Eyes Were Watching God is deprived of
happiness and love. Having undergone the experiences of two marriages that resemble what life would be like in a prison she learns a lesson for herself. Celie too functions as the object of control, deprived of the very letters that her sister Nettie had composed to answer her own communications from behind the marriage wall. As in the case of Hurston's Janie, it is only after Celie has absorbed all she can take that she is compelled to stand up for herself, and she finally asserts, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, ... But I'm here" (214). Janie, after experiencing a long mental abuse, finally rejects the premiere upon which Joe, her husband, had conceived their marriage. Similarly, Celie experiences physical and mental torture, leaves her husband Mr. Albert, and finally asserts herself.

There is also a resemblance between Tea Cake, Janie's third husband, the rehabilitated and the natural man, and Albert. Tea Cake is the most significant male character in Hurston's novel. He is a type of the natural man who seems to love Janie for her own sake. Though a perfect man, Tea Cake still strikes Janie and she kills him. Hurston's novel ends with a hint of the effect such a woman can have on other women's lives. Walker goes on to make women's communal empowerment the primary focus of her novel. The novel's inclusive, holistic consciousness also manifests itself in its form. Whereas Hurston's novel takes its form from the story-telling traditions of black culture, *The Color Purple* is more consciously literary. Unlike Hurston, Walker links her novel to the larger literary tradition. The great achievement of both writers, however, has been to open that tradition to black women's voices and to the transforming spiritual power of their vision.
Men in Walker’s novels also undergo a change and work out their salvation. They reassess and re-evaluate their lives and develop a better relationship with their women. When Celie returns home, she is surprised to find a tremendous change in Albert. Her absence and his loneliness change Albert’s attitude towards Celie. Sofia gives an account of the mental state of Albert and his peculiar behaviour: “Right after that he start to improve. You know meanness kill, she say” (231). Walker feels that the brutal nature and weakness of the black men results from their having followed their forefathers. The dominating nature of the black men is because of their socially defined sex role. They try to keep up their manliness by beating their women and restricting them only to certain jobs. Wendy Wall says thus: “Throughout The Color Purple, inherent biological gender characteristics are questioned; gender becomes a socially-imposed categorization.” But Albert changes and his change is genuine. Walker admits in “In the Closet of the Soul” that she indeed loves Albert because he “went deeply enough into himself to find the courage to change. To grow.” Celie and Albert achieve gender cross-over which allows them to grow toward wholeless. They both grow out of their culturally defined sex roles. They achieve a mixed blend of both the male and female characteristics. Celie wears pants and behaves like a man. Albert becomes very mild and submissive and enjoys helping Celie in her work. As Walker writes, “They proceed to grow, to change, to become whole, i.e., well, by becoming more like each other, but stopping short of taking on each other’s illness.” Albert feels like a new person and experiences peace and serenity.
after the change. He tells Celie during a conversation with her, "I'm satisfied
this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feel like a new
experience" (267). He starts enjoying Celie's company and feels good in her
presence. In a very good mood, he expresses his thoughts and feelings: "Took
me long enough to notice you such good company, he say. And he laugh"
(283). Albert undergoes a complete transformation and he even proposes to
remarry Celie.

Harpo blindly tries to follow his father by beating Sofia. His attempt to
change Sofia into another Celie fails. Later, he also undergoes a similar kind of
change. Harpo, like his father, stops acting as he did before and readily takes
up the household duties and helps Sofia in taking care of the children. Mary
Agnes nicknamed as "Squeak," is the mistress of Harpo. Although Sofia hates
"Squeak," "Squeak" takes up Sofia's children and looks after them when Sofia
goes to jail. Mary Agnes, once beaten up by Sofia, helps to free her from
prison by submitting herself to be raped by the warden, her illegitimate father.
This act of submission gives Mary Agnes a power over the warden -- the power
of guilt -- that expedites Sofia's release. Mary Agnes represents the kind of
sacrifice women must make in order to bind themselves together in a community
that resists the pressure of male domination. Mary Agnes, the victim, emerges
from this encounter with a new power over men in general. Though she comes
home with a limp, her dress torn, a heel from her shoe missing, she repudiates
her derogatory name and demands that she be called by her real name. Not
only does Mary Agnes no longer "Squeak", but she also begins to sing. Although
Celie reports that "She got the kind of voice you never think of trying to sing a song" (103). Mary Agnes soon emulates Shug's success, using her voice to give her a new freedom from, and power over, men. She begins to travel, choosing when to move in and out of Harpo's life. Thus her story foreshadows the story of Celie's freedom. Both stories validate the theme that strength can come from enduring oppression with as much dignity as possible and then rising to denounce it. Ultimately, the victim gains moral power over the oppressor.

An interesting feature of *The Color Purple* is that Walker shows almost all the major characters involved in triangular relationships. Men are placed at the apex of the triangle and two women are put at the other two corners. There always exists a tough competition between the two women for a single man. Nettie's letters reveal that the Olinka (the African tribe) women are equally ill-treated and dominated by their men. But the Olinka women who share a single husband live in harmony and friendship. Nettie writes to Celie that "the women share a husband but the husband does not share their friendships, ... the women are friends and will do anything for one another" (172). If the two women fight for a single person either one has to be destroyed, as in the case of Nettie. Fortunately for Nettie, Corrine, her fellow missionary, dies leaving Nettie to have her husband. Thereby the triangle among them is destroyed. But if the women recognize their sisterhood and become united, the problem is solved. They will be able to transform the triangle into a circle through their mutual help and support, as in the case of Sofia and Squeak. A similar situation arises in the lives of Sofia and Squeak, Harpo's mistress. Though at first they hate
each other and fight for Harpo, they later learn to love and live together in harmony. The relationship between Celie and Shug is also triangular with Albert at the apex. Just like the Olinka women, Celie and Shug develop a friendly relationship. Shug in fact strives to enhance a better relationship between Celie and Albert. Later on she quits, leaving Celie to have Albert. But Celie must endure the indignities of her life without Nettie's support and aid. Even before Shug's arrival, Celie is introduced to Sofia, Harpo's wife. Harpo's marriage to Sofia introduces Celie to an alternative mode of coping. Sofia "modifies" the requirements of marriage and child-rearing. She rebels against the authority of her own father, and she is unwilling to behave differently with any man. Sofia's rebellion becomes a cause for Celie to reflect her living conditions: "I think bout this when Harpo ast me what he ought to do to her to make her mind. I don't mention how happy he is now. How three years pass and he still whistle and sing. I think bout how every time I jump when Mr. ____ call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me"(38). Jealous of Sofia's autonomy and uncomfortable with her pity, Celie suggests to Harpo to beat her. Harpo's lack of success in taming Sofia and her own conscience conspire to make her realize her "sin". Sofia's confronting Celie with the fact of her betrayal leads to her considering a new possibility.

The colour 'purple' symbolizes the indomitable female spirit. Sofia, the Amazon-like woman, represents the plight of the female in rebellion. She stands in contrast to Celie in her effort to put up with the male-dominated world. She tells Celie that she had been fighting all through her life, right from her childhood:
"She say, All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain’t safe in a family of men. But I never thought I’d have to fight in my own house" (42). She is put in prison for fighting back, when slapped by the Mayor. She is tortured and turned into another Celie by circumstances. Sofia tells Celie, “Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I’m you. I jump right up and do just what they say” (93).

Sofia’s struggle for a meaningful existence displays her strong will power and ability to transcend the racist and sexist society. She struggles for self-respect and dignity, in spite of her defeat and mutilation Sofia even brings up the white girl Eleanor Jane with love and affection. Celie develops a good relationship with Sofia. She even makes pants for Sofia, one leg purple and other red in colour. She dreams of Sofia wearing them and jumping over the moon. The motif of the colour ‘purple’ appears again and again in the conversation of Shug and Celie. The transformation Shug brings about in Celie makes her visualize the beautiful creations of God: “I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers. Nothing” (204). Talking about God, Shug says that, “God love everything you love ... But more than anything else, God love admiration. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it” (203). Walker’s definition of ‘womanist’ also suggests the significance of the title: “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.”29 Celie, the
downtrodden, degraded, despised, abused, misused one is transformed into and
independent and liberated woman:

From a used and abused woman, Celie emerges as an independent, creative businesswoman. She moves from being ugly duckling to a figuratively beautiful swan. She moves from being Hurston's mule, the beast of burden, to physical and mental declarations of independence, to a reunion with her children and her sister. She moves from seeing God as the center of her universe to redefining the concept of the supernatural as an "It" that dwells in everyone. She moves from being beaten and used by others to establishing her own business. She moves from being a strait-laced church woman to being a reefer smoker. She moves from the back room of the house in which her stepfather has violated her to sharing a huge house in Memphis with her lover to returning to a house, property, and a store she has inherited. She moves from being Albert's footstool to demanding his respect and teaching him how to sew.30

Celie thus undergoes a series of changes. Walker through her character Celie represents not only the living status of Celie, but that of the whole community of black women living under the same oppressive conditions. Walker, through all other characters in the novel, celebrates communal harmony by bringing all of them together towards the end of the novel. Harpo explains the significance of July 4th. "White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th ... so most black folks don't have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other" (294). Walker feels that being a black Southern writer, she inherits a sense of community as a natural right. Celie's children, Adam and Olivia, returning to America, to the south reflects, the continuity of generations. The novel starts on a very pessimistic note and ends up optimistically. "Beginning in the most abject misery, degradation and isolation,
the work ends with joyous fulfillment and integration."

Celie’s narrative is about breaking silences, and appropriately, its formal structure creates the illusion that it is filled with unmediated “voices.” Trapped in a gridlock of racist, sexist, and heterosexist oppressions, Celie struggles toward linguistic self-definition. She is an “invisible woman,” a character traditionally silenced and effaced in fiction. By centring on her, Walker replots a heroine’s text. Celie’s story represents the story of the most marginalized of heroines, the black lesbian, who challenges the patriarchal constructions of female subjectivity and sexuality. In the Color Purple, Walker shows her heroine trapped in the whole range of possible oppressions. Celie’s struggle is to create a self through language, to break free from the network of class, racial, sexual and gender ideologies to which she is subjected. By letting the silenced voice speak in her own language, Walker has enriched our knowledge of black American women and paid homage to the lasting beauty and magic of the black oral tradition.
REFERENCES


3 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 149.


21 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 239.


