

# The Independence and Position of Women in *The Color Purple*

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## Introduction

Alice Walker was born on 9 February, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia, the daughter of Willie Lee Walker, a sharecropper, and Minnie Lou Grant Walker. Alice was the youngest of eight children. She was blinded in one eye at age eight by a careless shot from her brother's BB gun. The girl, feeling ugly and very shy, escaped into a world of words, reading, and writing poetry. Alice won a scholarship to Spelman College (1961-63), the prestigious black women's college in Atlanta and to Sarah Lawrence, another prestigious college (1964-65) in New York. The summer before her graduation in 1965 from Sarah Lawrence, Alice Walker traveled to Africa and wrote her first to be published short story, "To Hell with Dying" and her first collection of poetry, *Once Poems* (1968).

Walker lived in Mississippi from 1967 to 1972, where she was an active participant in the civil rights movement, working on voter registration drives and being in charge of an adult black women's class. Through these activities Walker began to give full attention to the power of blacks and the history of blacks.

In 1967, she married Melvyn Leventhal, a white civil rights lawyer and Vietnam

pacifist. She wrote "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good was IT?" Her essay won first prize in the American Scholar Essay Contest. In 1969, her only child Rebecca was born. In 1976, Alice Walker published a second novel, *Meridian*. The following year she moved to San Francisco after she and her husband divorced.

Alice Walker's growing reputation as a writer gained her a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (1969), a Radcliffe Institute Fellowship (1971-73), a Rosenthal Foundation Award (1974) presented annually by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1977).<sup>1</sup>

In 1982, *The Color Purple*, her third novel, received critical acclaim and won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1983. So Alice Walker became known to the whole world as one of the powerful women writers. *The Color Purple* was then filmed by Steven Spielberg. But "sales of four million copies and the film transformed the novel into a controversial media event, some of Walker's readers contending that she exploited the racist stereotype of the violent black male."<sup>2</sup>

Alice Walker was influenced by the black female writer Zora Neale Hurston and the civil rights movement of Martin Luther King. At the present time, Walker is searching for black female artistic models in the early 1970's. Walker has a special admiration for Zora Neale Hurston's life and works, especially *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Writes Claudia Tate: "Alice Walker has made a long-term commitment to restoring Hurston's work to literary prominence."<sup>3</sup>

#### Section I: The style of *The Color Purple*

The novel evolves as Celie, a fourteen-year-old black girl, confides in God through letters about what happened to her, letters sent to her younger sister Nettie, who lives separated from her. The style of Celie, who was deprived of a school education and the style of Nettie, who studied as a missionary, contrast with each other. Celie's language is of course that of an uneducated person, but we can see vividly Celie's daily life and her feelings. Because Celie is talking in the voice of black folk idiom, we can vividly understand the character's feelings as we share her thoughts and values. Bell Hooks says, "Walker provides Celie a writing self, one that serves as a perfect foil for her creator."<sup>4</sup> As a result, we can see this novel describes the process by which Walker recognizes both the patriarchy in black society and the evil that white society brings on black society.

Celie gained her self-dignity and independence through Sofia, her stepson's wife, and Shug Avery, her husband's lover. Sofia taught Celie the importance of struggle but not through emotion and showing anger. Shug taught Celie the way of independence to free herself from her humble attitude to herself and society.

Thus we see from Celie's letters that they (Sofia and Shug) have shown Celie

that self-dignity and independence can be gained by her.

In the following section, I shall try to give a more precise account of these women and their independence.

Section II: Independent women who had a great influence on Celie

In *The Color Purple*, the emphasis is on Celie's independence, but for the present we shall look more closely at some of the important independent and powerful characters whom Celie was influenced by.

First, Celie was influenced by her stepson's wife Sofia, whose rebellious spirit leads her not only to desert her overbearing husband but to challenge the social order of the racist community in which she lives. I think Celie recognized Sofia's powerful nature, and she felt envious of Sofia's power. Celie gave Harpo (her stepson) the following advice:

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.

Beat her, I say.<sup>5</sup>

And when Sofia learned about this advice, she questions Celie:

You told Harpo to beat me, she said.

No I didn't, I said.

Don't lie, she said.

I didn't mean it, I said.

Then what you say it for? she ast.

She standing there looking me straight in the eye. She look tired and her jaws full of air.

I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I Say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't.

What that? she say.

Fight. I say.

She stand there a long time, like what I said took the wind out her jaws. She mad before, sad now.<sup>6</sup>

Here Celie confirmed that she envied Sofia, And as she confirmed her envy, she knew she wanted to live strongly like Sofia. Celie has a longing for Sofia, who was self-insistent and had a strong will after she married. At the same time, Sofia remembered that her mother did not fight for herself; then she understood that

Celie could not fight even if she wanted to fight. Thus Sofia became the woman Celie knows, the woman who refuses to accede to both the patriarchal and the racist demands that black women be subservient to their oppressors.

The next important character who helped Celie gain independence is Shug Avery. Shug is a blues singer of legendary beauty. She has been in love with Mr. (Celie's husband) for years, and when she falls sick, he brings her home to Celie to nurse. After that Celie and Shug became friends and then lovers. Shug has pride, independence, and appetite for living, and these act as a catalyst for Celie. Celie always thought she could not behave like Shug and have pride. (By the way, "the blues singer Shug Avery is based in part on Zora Neale Hurston.")

One day, through Shug, Celie discovered that her husband had been intercepting Nettie's letters for several years. Celie then had the intention of killing her husband.

Can you handle it? ast Shug.

How I'm gon keep from killing him, I say.

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...

Naw, I think I feel better if I kill him, I say. I feels sickish. Numb, now.

Naw you won't. Nobody feel better for killing nothing. They feel *something* is all.<sup>8</sup>

Shug saved Celie from being paralyzed by rage over her husband's concealment of Nettie's letters. Shug advised Celie to make a pair of pants. So Celie thinks with "A needle and not a razor in [her] hand" (p.125). Celie decided not to destroy the creation of Nettie and Shug. Celie began to make a pair of pants for Sofia, Shug, Nettie, and others. Then Celie earned money by herself and became "An independent woman" like Shug. Thus Shug taught her what is most important. It is "Love myself and know self-value." Shug draws out Celie's buried possibility, and Shug gives Celie's life hope.

As I have shown, these two women, Sofia and Shug, played an important role in Celie's spiritual independence.

### Section III: Various kinds of discrimination in *The Color Purple*

In *The Color Purple*, there are various kinds of discrimination. For the present, we shall concentrate our attention on two types of discrimination, discrimination against women and racial discrimination.

Let us start with discrimination against women. The heroine Celie could not receive an education, and she was worked like a slave by her father-in-law and her husband. This case shows the violence a black woman receives from men.

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. 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. That's how come I know trees fear man.<sup>9</sup>

She silently had to stand her husband's violence. In contrast to her step-daughter-in-law, Sofia is the black woman who refuses both patriarchal and racist demands. But she also was worked hard like a slave in the prison laundry, experienced violence, and was employed in the white mayor's house. When the mayor's wife said to her, "All your children so clean, ... would you like to work for me, be my maid?" (p.76), she answered the mayor and his wife, "Hell no." So she and the mayor fought. Celie too endured violence, and Sofia faced discrimination, but black people, especially black women, are especially oppressed in this novel. In those days historically, many black women worked outside the home as sharecroppers or as maids in white families. They did not resist their husbands, so their dreams, freedom, independence, and development were repressed by their husbands. Alice Walker did not hide these facts and dared to describe women who worked and resisted men.

Next, let us consider racial discrimination. In the latter half of this novel, Celie knew through Nettie's letters that her biological father was killed by lynching. In this instance, lynching was the violence white men performed against blacks. Through this violence white men guarded the turf of their racial hegemony. The novel invokes the context of black inferiority and subhuman treatment. We see that blacks had to work like slaves, and men who rebelled, like Celie's biological father, were destroyed.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker adds another world in terms of discrimination black women experienced. Through Celie's younger sister Nettie, who became a missionary in Africa, Walker mentions subordinate situations from women to men in Africa. Nettie's letters show the reason why their African ancestors came to America. They show that many Africans were murdered or captured and came to be sold as slaves. Nettie says Olinka thinks the girls do not have to receive any education, which is only for the boys. She further says whites (the English) ruthlessly destroyed the vast green forests. Through letters we see both white hegemony and patriarchy.

## Conclusion

What impresses us so deeply is that a woman who suffered double pressures from discrimination against women and racial discrimination changed because she woke up to the act of "knowing." Celie realized her own value and became independent through Shug Avery, who lived as freely as an independent woman,

and Sofia, who challenged discrimination. Celie realized the opening up of her life. As I have mentioned, the two women Shug and Sofia supported Celie. Thus *The Color Purple* says to poor uneducated people like Celie, "Let's live strongly [powerfully]." It is a call to everybody who is likely to be left behind in society.

In this novel Walker gives courage to women who do not have power and shows these women how to face their suffering. Alice Walker further emphasizes the strength of the relationships that black women have to hold with each other to liberate themselves. I think the color purple symbolized black women who have will. Ruiko Yoshida, the photo journalist, says, "Black women look like the shining color purple. I feel these women have something noble about them. So I think the black women's symbolic color is the color purple."<sup>10</sup> I also think the color purple is Celie's color as she grew into an independent woman.

As we watch the movie "The Color Purple," starring Whoopi Goldberg, we can see Celie and her friends shining in a purple glow. Throughout the film we will feel the hidden power of black women.

On these grounds I have come to the conclusion that this novel has a theme of the bonding of women in terms of respect for each other and shared power. *The Color Purple's* charm is that women find their own way and challenge themselves to life. From this magnificent novel all working women and women who are trying to find their own way in the world can be inspired.

## Notes

1. Claudia Tate, *Modern American Women Writers: Alice Walker* (New York: Scribners, 1991), p.512.
2. Tate, p.516.
3. Tate, p.513.
4. Bell Hooks, *Reading and Resistance: The Color Purple* (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), p.293.
5. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (London: The Women's Press, 1983), pp.34-35.
6. Walker, pp.37-38.
7. Donna Haisty Winchell, *Letters to God: The Color Purple* (New York: Twayne, 1992), p.90.
8. Walker, p.122.
9. Walker, p.22.
10. 吉田 ルイ子『アリスがよびかけてくるもの』(東京: 御茶の水書房, 1990), p.148.

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