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Depiction of Identity Crisis for Women's suffering as Portrayed by Alice Walker's Novel:
"The Color Purple"

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Abstract

This paper explores the function of Identity as portrayed by Alice Walker, primarily in her novel in *the Color Purple*(1982). It is an experience to present notions of identity in the novel of *The Color Purple* (1982), by Alice Walker in the light of post-colonialism. It focuses on women like Celie, Shug, Sofia or Nettie occupied in journeys of self-discovery and development, it deals with new identity and freedom to affirm their femininity in and out of their married lives. African American woman writers are trying to define their self-identity and trying to maintain their self in a hostile land. The present paper also presents female suffering and identity crisis as manifested in the women characters in the novel *The Color Purple* (1982). The topics are bounded to the selected novel of Alice Walker, an African American writer. As the present study deals with women's suffering and identity crisis, Suffering is not bounded to any gender, nation and race in particular but it is universal. This paper

shows the issues of patriarchy, women's subordination, violence, wife battering and rape are woven into the relationship between Celie and the men in her life in *The Color Purple* novel. This paper show also importance of education, self-confidence, economic independence and the theme of sisterhood are depicted because they unlock the clutches of male domination that holds Celie in enslaved. The racial discrimination and cruelty of White men comes out in the life of Celie's father and also in the suffering of Sofia.

1-1. Introduction

Alice Malsenior Walker was born in February 9, 1944).she is poet, novelist, short story writer, critic, essayist, and apologist for Black women. She is one of the most gifted writers in America. She is a multitalented genius, equally at home with poetry, essay and fiction. The special identifying mark of her writing is her

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concern for the Black women and their lived experiences.

Alice Walker has been a fruitful and highly respected writer. She became globally known in the 1980s with the publication of *The Color Purple*. The Color Purple is an example of Walker's belief that history is a necessary element of depth, that nothing is product of the immediate present. The Color Purple emerges out of Alice Walker's concern with defining with existence, experience and culture of Afro-American women and brutality of oppression that shapes it. Yvonne Johnson in "Alice Walker's The Color Purple" argues that Walker's attitude towards women's bodies and pregnancy is somewhat ambivalent. In many instances, pregnancy and motherhood are presented as a trap. The continuous rape and two pregnancies end Celie's dreams of freedom and independence. But she manages to save her sister from falling into the same trap (211). This novel depicts the role of male domination in dispiriting black women's struggle for identity, existence; independence. The novel presents how women are humiliated and subjugated by men and how women became powerless. The novel also shows how women are oppressed by violence and victimized by the society. It refers to males in especially, and how they may develop a level of consciousness that allows them to manage their own lives and souls.

The Color Purple is a woman's novel about an identifiable tradition of woman's writing in terms of theme and narrative strategies. This novel has been written in an epistolary form, it is black women-centered, but re-invents the 18th century genre. Bell Hooks observes in "Unlike most novels by any writer, The Color Purple is read across race, class, gender, and cultural boundaries," according to "Reading and Resistance: The Color Purple (284)." The whole storey is written in the form of a series of letters written by Celie, the protagonist, which serve as a source of information about Celie. Her internal battle, quiet pain, and the effects of persecution on her soul are shown in these letters, as well as her victimization, rising internal strength, and ultimately victory and gaining her identity. The oppressions, insanities, loyalties, and accomplishments of black women are all explored by Walker.

Because of prejudice, black women have been denied their identity. During slavery, blacks in a white American culture were seen as simple things, and it took a long time for them to be treated as equals. Celie's existence is a metaphor for female slaves whose children were forcibly taken away by slave owners who profited financially from the sale of offspring. Celie's physical agony is intertwined with her psychological torment in a series of letters to God and her sister. 'Black women,

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like all women, have been oppressed nearly beyond recognition—oppressed by everyone,' adds Walker.' (MGWP 251).

Alice Walker invented the term "womanism" as a feminist phrase. It's a reaction to the awareness that "feminism" doesn't include Black women's opinions. It's a form of feminism that's "stronger in colour," and it's almost identical to "Black Feminism." Womanism, on the other hand, does not require the adjective "black" to be prefixed; the phrase naturally refers to black women. Womanism confronts white feminism's racist and classist components while also aggressively opposing separatist beliefs. It incorporates the term "man" to acknowledge that black males have an important role in the lives of black women as children, lovers, and family members.

Women's identity is one that is usually connected to and dignified by societal and cultural norms of a patriarchal familial structure. The constraints of her male social contacts define her identity. On the basis of women's bodies, sex, and gender, gender inequality is established, developed, and legitimized. The Color Purple is regarded as Walker's most successful and critically examined work and received instant critical and popular success. Women of Color were long deprived of their true identity, strength and creative talents, by a double or even triple oppression race, class, and gender. It is

Alice walker who through her writings threw some light on the creative activities of black woman as a means on their salvation.

Afro-American women, according to Walker, should no longer be considered slaves. In America, black women face discrimination, and their humanity and black female self are denied not just by white males, but also by their own people, especially black males. Alice Walker's work addresses the issues that black women face in their daily lives and guides them toward self-discovery. The Color Purple is a novel of celebration of black women who fight to escape from some forced factors of identities that drive them along paths they have not chosen and the title of the novel signifies, 'a celebration of the beauty, the pleasure of living and how that celebration is at the centre of spiritual and personal growth (Marowski 388). All of the women in the novel come together, and they come to know that they have nothing to lose except their poverty and slavery.

Walker says that because of their double identity, black women are the victims of both racism and sexism. The Color Purple is a film about female black life in the 1930s in the Southern United States, and it tackles a variety of topics, including their marginalisation in American society. The storey concludes on a positive note, assuring readers that Celie's and the

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other characters' lives are only getting better. She now has a voice and is surrounded by people she adores and who adore her in return. *The Color Purple* is a beautifully written novel that is full of compassion, comedy, and sadness, as well as superbly created characters.

2.2 Male Domination in the Color Purple

Celie is treated as a servant and "occasional sexual convenience" by Albert. When his kid wonders why he hits Celie, he responds it's because she's his wife, symbolizing the male dominance in marriage at the time. Men have been bred to control their spouses for generations. This is something Albert learnt from his father and is now passing on to his kid. Celie, on the other hand, musters the guts to confront him, and in the end, she triumphs, Celie is able to break free from Albert's tyranny after receiving support from the women in her life, particularly her sister Nettie, and travels to Memphis to establish a clothing design business. Celie spends the most of the tale writing letters to God because she is lonely and the only one she can turn to. As a young black woman, she talks about the challenges and discrimination she endures. She loses all control she has over her body from a young age. Her stepfather, whom she initially mistook for her father, frequently raps her. He makes her pregnant twice, and he abducts both of her children.

Albert, Shug Avery, and Celie form a love triangle in which Walker examines this issue. Celie and Shug become friends, and their relationship eventually turns into a sexual desire. Shug is told by Albert that he hits Celie because she isn't Shug. Shug, on the other hand, rejects Albert because he physically assaults Celie. This is an example of how black women reacted with the frustrations of male dominance by standing up for one another and fighting for their freedom.

First, her stepfather convinces Albert to marry her by telling him that Celie works hard and will obey him. This represents a patriarchal point of view where a woman is either 'good', meaning she "cleans, washes, takes care of children, and fulfills her husband's desires," or she is seen as a bad wife, a witch, when she disobeys her husband (Talif&Sedehi, 430). Consequently, Albert "looks her over like a head of livestock and marries her in desperation because he needs someone to cook and clean for him and take care of his four children" (Winchell, 86). Celie is treated as property and a servant in this establishment, and she is handed from one powerful black man to the next. She isn't a slave in the traditional sense, but she is nevertheless ruled by the males in her life and unable to make her own decisions. In the end, Celie gains enough confidence to leave Albert, when she learns that there is a definition of God that 'even' loves poor;

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ugly black women, because that is how she feels herself to be.

2-3. Feminism to Womanism: An Analysis of Alice Walker's Selected Fiction

Walker in relation to Black feminist thought, her views on womanism, and an analysis of her five novels, namely in the novel of *The Color Purple*. The selected work is studied in terms of double marginalization, racism, sexism, womanism, motherhood, sisterhood, quest for identity, spirituality, mythology, and folk and oral tradition. Long Shi argues that *The Color Purple* is heavy for the human being who is waiting for the real harmony. Walker's dream is to make a harmony society on which men and women, the white and black live in harmony with each other (655)

Walker's women fight against the oppression and objectification of the patriarchal system through sisterhood and women's solidarity. In *The Color Purple* it is, the trio—Shug, Sofia and Nettie—who succeed in bringing about a radical change in Celie. Walker “sees the prospect of the authorization of black women if they make a community of sisters that can change the unnatural definitions of woman and men” (qtd. in Johnson 210).

Walker champions the freedom of expression and sexual freedom for women.

In *The Color Purple*, the women characters talk about their love and sexual desires and choices, and the protagonist asserts her sexual independence. Celie says, “I don't even look at mens. That is the truth. I look at women, the, cause I'm not scared of them” (7). The love between Shug and Celie is healthy in that both women have the freedom to continue or break the affair. Accordingly, Shug later moves with a young man and Celie rejoin Albert, who is refined and reformed.

The institution of motherhood has always been under male control. Walker challenges the glorious motherhood and wifehood created by patriarchy and cemented through religion, myths, traditions, etc. Yvonne Johnson in “Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*” argues that Walker's attitude towards women's bodies and pregnancy is somewhat ambivalent. In many instances, pregnancy and motherhood are presented as a trap. The continuous rape and two pregnancies end Celie's dreams of freedom and independence. But she manages to save her sister from falling into the same trap (211).

There is a gradual development of the idea of Black women's liberation in *The Color Purple*. “This novel explores the suppression of women's voices and the damage done both to the women themselves and the broader social group, by the denial of the right of self expression”

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(Hall 107). The legacy of Ruth is continued by Celie in *The Color Purple*.

The Color Purple has been considered from diverse perspectives. It has been read as a sociological treatise on Black life, a radical feminist tract, a modern day 'slave narrative', a work within the tradition of epistolary and a sentimental novel. Morrison considers *The Color Purple* in part as an autobiographical novel where Celie is modelled on the author's great-great grandmother, and the sexually and ideologically rebellious Shug modelled on Zora Neale Hurston. The novel mounts a powerful attack on the oppressive sexual politics of the traditional African American family. With an almost total exclusion of white people the novel is a "celebration of blackness" (Morrison 213). Celie is a prey to the sexual advances and cruelties of her step-father whom she believes to be her father. He impends her: "You better shut up and get used to it" (1). When she becomes pregnant he silences her and forcefully takes away her children, Olivia and Adam, from her. Like the other Walker heroines Margaret, Mem, and Meridian, Celie also suffers from motherhood. When Alfonso gets another wife she is handed over as a chattel to Albert in marriage and her sufferings continue.

In fact, she offers herself a prey to Albert to save Nettie from the hands of Alfonso. Nettie runs away from home and joins Celie to help her and urges her to fight

against Albert's children, especially Harpo. Harpo doesn't help Celie and, believes that it is the duty of women to work. When she is persecuted by both her husband and his children, Celie believes that "To be a wife means to be submissive, to be subordinate, to be obedient and to be a punch bag for the men" (22). As directed by Celie, Nettie goes with Rev. Samuel and his wife, Corrine, promising that she would send her letters regularly. Celie's transformation gathers momentum when she meets Shug Avery, Albert's mistress who is brought home sick, and Sofia, Harpo's wife. Sofia shows Celie how to live with one's husband with self-esteem and dignity. Sofia challenges not only sexism but also racism. She refuses to work as a maid for the mayor's wife and when she is slapped by the mayor she retaliates. Her belief in her Black female identity has a great impact on Celie. Tucker praises the novel and remarks: With this work, Walker has created a truly modernist text; that is, a text that manifests itself as an artistic production in which language is essential to the shaping of vision. She has created a text that shows language as power and has also demonstrated through this work what the nature of black women's discourse might be. (82)

She represents the idea that Black women's inferiority is not inherent, but stems from their lack of will to fight racism and sexism. *The Color Purple*, Walker's

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womanist gospel, concentrates on Celie's awakening as a confident woman who fights against sexism. This transformation occurs as a result of the concerted effort of a team of women, namely, Nettie, Sofia, and Shug Avery. Shug shows her alternate ways of living in a patriarchal and heterosexual culture and Nettie teaches her to be proud of her African heritage and recover from racial inferiority complex. Celie watches with wonder the way Sofia confronts sexism and racism simultaneously. Shug, the Blues singer, acts a catalyst in the transformation of Celie. Her body and sexuality which had withered in the heat of sexism began to blossom in the presence of Shug. Her body, a source of exploitation and torture, becomes a source of pride and sexual pleasure without any guilt.

Shug leads her to the knowledge of her body, the pleasures forbidden to her, the new concept of spirituality, and helps her to rejoin her sister, relieves her from the bondage of Albert by moving to Memphis with her, and finally makes her physically, psychologically and financially independent. Shug shows neither possessiveness nor superiority in her relationship with Celie. Shug leaves Celie alone when she is self-reliant, helps her to be reunited with her husband, and goes in search of her future. The letters are hidden by Albert in the beginning but later recovered by Shug and Celie. In her first

letter, she warns Celie, "You've got to fight and get away from Albert. Nettie's letters open up before Celie a forgotten, glorious, past history of Africa which was more glorious and richer than that of America. Her letters about the life of the Blacks in Harlem leading a decent life like the whites and their love for Africa reveal the power of the Black race. It is from Nettie that Celie comes to know about her lost children, who are now with her as the adopted children of the missionaries.

Celie is relieved of her sense of guilt when she learns from her sister that Alfonso is not their father. Thus with the help of these three women, Celie, who was helpless, poor, black, ugly, and sexually abused, moves from dependence to independence and achieves a Black womanist consciousness. Her images of herself, of patriarchy, and of God and spirituality are redefined under the influence of Shug, Nettie, and Sofia. In one of her letters Nettie argues with Celie that Jesus Christ was not white but Black and Shug ridicules her image of God as a man "big and old and tall and gray bearded and white" (174). She remarks, "When I found out God was white and a man, I lost interest" (175) and argues that, "God ain't a he or she, but a It" (176) During her journey from slavery to freedom, Celie changes her perception of God and spirituality. She learns to renounce the white Christian God and accept an animistic, omnipresent God

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without a fixed image. This transformation prompts her to write her last letter addressed to “Dear God, dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, and dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God” (292).

2-4 Sexism in the Color Purple

Because of men's dominating role in American culture, gender governs black women's sexuality. Because white women have distinct dominating images of their sexuality, class regulates sexuality. The commoditization and control of black women's bodies has long been a part of American culture, and it's clear in *The Color Purple*, for example, when Celie's stepfather essentially "sells" Celie to Albert. They argue about how Celie is horrible, but she can work hard. They treat her like possessions, or a servant. Celie's most obvious change is in the ways she relates to traditional gender roles through novel. “Initially, Celie have faith in that being a woman inevitably means that she has to serve and obey men and she is consequently a victim of patriarchy. She is ultimately introduced to another way of living by the strong female characters of Sofia and Shug who embrace her in a kind of sisterhood, which is a way for oppressed women to resist patriarchy”. (Sundqvist, 2006, p. 12). They also argue about how Nettie is lovelier, and Albert talks about Shug in realizing way. Furthermore, Celie's mother cannot satisfy her stepfather's sexual needs, which her stepfather sees as

an excuse to rape Celie. The regulation and exploitation of black female sexuality is present here. Chelsey Boutan points out another significant symbol from the novel are Celie's pants. Both the film and the novel use this symbol to display how women who live in a patriarchal or sexist society can become liberated through economic independence and nonviolence (18)

By regulating black women's sexuality, an assumption arose of ‘good girls’ and ‘bad girls.’ This serves as a way of creating a sexual hierarchy within American society, and maintaining the social order of male dominancy. As we can see, the discrimination based on sex is present in American society and in the *Color Purple*.

Conclusion

Black women have always resisted all the way through their life to keep black family together and for the survival of black community. Black women have displayed their strength and willpower to fight for their rights and survived till the end in the great depression.

Black women's writing is shaped by history which involves reconstruction and the development of the character's individual personality in relation to the historical forces that have shaped the migrations of her race. African American

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women writers share a collective legacy of racist and sexist domination in addition to awareness of historical continuities. The Black African American Women writers have been victimized not only by racist and sexist but also by the class exploitation. They were also victims of scholars who are preoccupied in the notion of blacks as marginalized and black literature as inferior literature and their literary works start with the crisis of their identity. Identity has indeed been themes in black women's writing over the years.

Alice Walker belongs to the group of writers who have tried to trace the development of black women's image from its infantile stage of invisibility to its present stage of self-definition, to discover their self-identity, searching for freedom from their traditional roles. The major themes of the black fiction are the exploitation of the blacks, especially, the exploitation of the black women, search for identity. It is the quest for identity that is predominant in almost all the black literature. The *Color Purple* is a novel of celebration of black women who fight to escape from some forced factors of identities that drive them along paths they have not chosen and the title of the novel signifies, 'a celebration of the beauty, the pleasure of living and how that celebration is at the centre of spiritual and personal growth (Marowski 388). All of the women in the novel come together, and they come

to know that they have nothing to lose except their poverty and slavery.

Walker is among such black female writers who are conscious of their self and identity. She exposes the cultural crisis and projects her female characters struggling to play the traditional role. Walker tries to understand women's world and the relationship of women to men, to women, to society and to the black community. Her works portray female protagonists in search of self and identity, so that they bring out the hidden power from within. Walker has studied the black woman from an insider's point of view.

Walker presents the distinct individuality and identity of her female characters and her writings project liberated women emphasizing an integral relationship between an individual and the community, required for realization of womanhood. She is concerned with the internal struggle of her women characters which unfolds the complexities of their racial identity and gender definitions. She attempts to know unravel their true selves so that they can redefine themselves. Walker's protagonists play stereotypes as wives, mothers, and silent listeners imposed on them by the patriarchal society. She emphasizes that women have to change themselves and be aware of their self and identity. She urges the African American community to mobilize an effective social

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movement to overcome institutional resistance, pre-empt fragmentation to achieve social equality. She wants African American women to embrace the precept that “unity does not require uniformity.”

The Color Purple explores the basic tenets of women’s movement of the 1970s. Walker protests violence against women and racist violence among women and she also celebrates the bonding that women must develop in their struggles to achieve selfhood. She expands feminist thought at the centre of the novel. In The Color Purple, Women love each other and work together as community of changers and through this process the individual black women and men come to experience more of life.

The Color Purple, set in the post slavery time period depicts black females who were denied of their identities, and not allowed to know their true identity. Black women in the novel, like Celie are continually dehumanized and she supposes to be inferior. Alice Walker’s personal sufferings and humiliation on account of her gender and race enabled her to enter deep in to the lives of her characters and become empathetic towards them.

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