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Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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January 2019

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Abstract

Violence against people of other races in general and Black people in specific has a long history in America and its roots date back to the colonial era. Within this racist society of America, the relationship between the Whites and the Blacks was based on two principles: hegemony of the Whites and subjugation of the Blacks. For this reason, the Blacks struggled throughout ages in order to get their freedom in all fields. This has prompted black writers to adapt their pens to defend black issues and keep their ancestors' identity. Among these writers is Alice Walker. The aim of this study is to illuminate the impact of racism on the black community and how it caused a rift between black males and females resulting in what is known as

Sexism and how the black woman, represented by Alice Walker, responded through what is called *Womanism*. In addition, through this study, the difference between principles of Feminism and Womanism was explained. The study then applied such womanist approach on one of Walker's outstanding novels, *The Color Purple*, tracing the journey of Walker's female characters to self-recognition.

Key words

Racism, Sexism, Womanism, Feminism, Colonialism, Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, Civil Rights Movement, Violence, self-recognition.

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Violence against people of other races in general and Black people in specific has a long history in America and its roots date back to the colonial era. The United States is “a country created out of genocide [European conquest of the Americas] and colonialism [the historical process of conquest and exploitation]” (Trask 9). Within “the colonial agenda” of this country, Floyd-Thomas and Gillman state, “power is organized and violence is exercised within a system that maintains control

over Black people. But it is those more internalized forms of oppression that add further injury to the acts of violence” (536). Within this racist society of America, the relationship between the Whites and the Blacks has been based on two principles: hegemony of the Whites and subjugation of the Blacks. For this reason, the Blacks struggled throughout ages in order to get their freedom in all fields. They sacrificed their souls to obtain dignity within this racist society that denied the rights of the blacks for ages and treated them as beasts and animals rather than human beings. As the cost of freedom is so expensive and it may demand one's soul, thousands of black ancestors sacrificed their souls to have their voice heard and now their offspring seems to enjoy the fruit of this sacrifice. This has prompted black writers to adapt their pens to defend black issues and keep their ancestors' identity. Among these writers is Alice Walker.

The poet, novelist, essayist, short-story writer, activist and editor, the highly regarded writer Alice Malsenior Walker (1944-) was born in the rural South into one of the victimized black families that suffered poverty and injustice of the sharecropping system. She is the first African American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for fiction (1983) for her novel *The Color Purple* (1982), which was made into a movie in 1985. Her

genius is also glimpsed in her other novels as *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), her two essay collections, her five poetry books, and her two short-story collections. “The struggle to have work and minds of our own, vulnerability, our debt to our mothers, the price of childbirth, friendships among women, the problem of loving men who regard us as less than themselves, sensuality, [and] violence” are pivotal issues in Walker’s novels (Cerrito 340).

Due to the boldness of her issues, Walker is categorized among the most controversial Black writers such as Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, and Ntozake Shange, “whose work explored how a patriarchal and capitalist culture might affect individual psychology and intimate relationships among African Americans” (Duck 439). Throughout her life, Walker believes in “change: change personal, and change in society” (Walker, *Gardens* 252). It was this belief that stimulated her to participate in the Civil Right Movements at an early age and since then she has become an activist. In fact, Walker’s involvement in the Civil Right Movements was a pivotal event in her personal and literary life as it has ranked her as “the only major African American woman writer who came of age during the Civil Right Movements and participated in it and the only one to write a

novel about the Civil Right Movement [*Meridian*]" (Hendrickson 112).

Victimization of black women in the racist and sexist American society is a principal theme in Walker's literary works. This may be related to her belief that "to be female or black is to be bound to the bodily realm and hence to be more like animals in the decretory sense of inhuman" (McKay, 'Getting Close', 262), or what Amanda Greenwood terms "the reduction of being to beast" (167). For Nelisiwe Zondi, "Not only does Walker focus on women as victims of physical violence but also of a kind of psychological violence" (52).

For this reason, Walker "has made it her business to ... give voice to the ones who have lived and died from this emotionally and physically violation of black females" (King "Possessing", 103). This may interpret why her protagonists are always black females and why she always "challenges [the] androcentric perspective which assumes that male vision and the masculine pronoun encompass all of humanity" (Stein 129). This drives her to attack forcibly physical violence, represented in sexual oppression, practiced by black males against black females, and therefore she is mainly interested in "women who act in complicity with the status quo to institutionalize sexual oppression ... For her women must unlearn sexism before they can truly liberate themselves" (Sample 169).

Indeed she is preoccupied with the spiritual survival of her all people, but Walker is mainly committed to exploring the oppressions and the triumphs of black women. Solidarity and unity among Black women are therefore basic elements to realize such triumphs. Connectedness with black foremothers is also essential in Black women's quest for identity and survival. This is clear in Walker's continued search in literary production of her black foremothers such as Zora Neale Hurston, whose novel *Their Eye Were Watching God* resulted in "a radical shift in black women's fiction" (Davidson and Wagner-Martin 33).

In fact, Walker's serious struggle for Black women's rights can be related to her awareness of the danger of sexism as one of the abominable outcomes of racism and it seems more dangerous than any other problems as it has caused a rift between the two pillars of the Black community, Black man and woman. Based on this notion of sexism, which refers to the superiority of one sex to the other, "women are perceived as 'other' to men rather than as similar to them by assigning opposite characteristics to each and then hierarchizing those characteristics so that those understood as male are superior to those understood as female" (790). Like racism, sexism resulted in an unbearable sense of inferiority and self-split for the black female. By 1970, this sense of self-split has been intensified due to the call raised by "some people who called themselves black

nationalists or black militants... [for] black women, who had struggled for their freedom along with black men in the Civil Rights Movement, to subordinate themselves to black men, to make themselves less, for the good of their people” (Hendrickson 112).

The desire of black men to dominate and control black women, as the white men do, has shocked black and , thus, they decided to struggle for freedom as well as the Black man. She suffered slavery and racism, and her suffering was, however, duplicated as a result of being raped in order to increase the capital of her slave owner. Under this depraved system of slavery “an enslaved woman’s refusal to work or her complaints about enforced sex with beatings and decisions to sell her children. [However,] black women denied compliance with a worldview that asserted their bestiality as workers, as mothers, and as women” (Palmer 123).

Even after slavery Black women suffered poverty, and mistreatment by both white men as well as women. However, racism has not prevented them from practicing their political, social, and literary responsibilities. Like Black men, Black women participated in the establishment of early civil rights groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1910). They also participated in the 1960s’ marches and in the Civil Right Movement. “Young blacks like

Walker participated in the Civil Rights Movement precisely because they held themselves responsible for changing the condition of black people in America. That feeling of responsibility did not go away when the Civil Rights Movement ended”, as Hendrickson notes (117). The solidarity between black men and women at these strikes “made it clear that Black people were not turning back” (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 1).

Unfortunately, a rift was caused in this solidarity due to black male’s desire for hegemony and domination, and, therefore, Black women writers have felt that they have to struggle for their right to have a laudable literary position in the Black literature. This right was in fact acquired with the publication of Toni Cade Barbara’s anthology, *The Black Women* (1970), which expressed resisting views of women writers against “the chattel-like roles [of black women] in a male-dominated society’ ... [and] signaled the decline of the historical inequality of women writers in Afro-American Literature” (Hernton 140). This resisting trend against black women’s subjugation is prominently figured in works by such writers as Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Toni Cade Bambara. The dream to have black women’s voice heard was thus realized during the 1970s and the 1980s. Worth mentioning is that the

quest to achieve this dream was supported with the existence of such movement of Feminism within the United States.

A movement with a long history in the struggle for women's rights, feminism has played an important role in the issues related to women's liberty not only within the United States but all over the World. This goal drives Barrow and Millburn to define feminism as "a label for a commitment or movement to achieve equality for women"; J.A. Cuddon perceives it as "an attempt to describe and interpret (or reinterpret) women's experiences as depicted in various kinds of literature", and sociologically "the word feminism can stand for a belief in sexual equality combined with a commitment to transform society" (Ebunoluwa 227). Through these various perspectives towards Feminism, it becomes clear that its core is female struggle for freedom from sexism. This interest in woman's freedom and gender equality made Feminism a magnet that attracted Black women writers. However, Black women have later felt the necessity of establishing a movement that expresses black women's experience that differs from that of their White counterparts.

This difference is in fact clear in the lack of White feminists' interest in such important issue as racism because "sexism, not racism, is the principle issue for the average, middle class, White feminist" (Beckmann 406). Indeed the black woman and

her White counterpart have the same goal of defying male's power, the relationship between a black woman and a white feminist is controlled by this notion of power and therefore "white woman's invocation of power destroys [this] relationship" (Reames 3). This urged Black women to "define their realities, reflect upon their experiences, and find their place in the world" (Jue 451).

To enable the Black women to have such place in the world and represent the uniqueness of her experience, Walker has chosen the term "Womanism" to give a special character to Black women's struggle against racism and sexism. Black women have a unique experience with male's violence, and the bitterness of this experience has led one of the writers, Traci C. West, to state sympathetically that "there is no more compelling societal problem in need of redress than black women's experience of male violence. ... in the United States white supremacy, patriarchy, and intimate violence often represent simultaneous, heinous violations of the personal and communal becoming of African-American women" (1).

In her remarkable collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), Alice Walker defines a womanist as

a black feminist or feminist of color. [...] A woman who loves other women, sexually and/ or nonsexually.

Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. [...] Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (xi-xii)

An important difference between *Feminism* and *Womanism* is that "feminism as a movement ... is exclusively for women and, at worst, dedicated to attacking or eliminating men... in contrast to feminism, womanist inquiry... assumes that it can talk both effectively and productively about men" (Collins, "What's in a name?" 11). For Walker, a womanist is also "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (*Gardens* xi). Walker's definition of "Womanism" thus "suggests a hope that social change may help solve the type of private dilemma her fiction particularizes" (McGowan 25). At the time that feminism is based on such principles as "refusal to deal with the world of men altogether, and advocate sexual relations (lesbianism) among women, and overcome cultural and language for the sake of the unity of women everywhere" which make it exposed to harsh criticism for being "an

exaggeration in a bias for women" (Enani 30), Walker's Womanism asserts its commitment to "the survival of entire people, male and females."

However, Walker's womanism beside her mostly negative portrayal of male characters in her novels has plagued her literary life with a non-stop criticism. Some critics relate Walker's negative portrayal of black males to her childhood accident when her brother blinded her right eye with a BB gun while playing. Although it was a partial blindness, this accident had a somber impact on Walker's personality as it "shatter[ed] her spirit, [and] fragment[ed] her world..." (Warren and Wolff 2). She suffered feelings of isolation and rejection by her classmates and thus she spent most of her time reading and writing poetry. Walker later described this wound in her essay "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self" as "a patriarchal wound" that "because she was a girl, her parents had not given her a gun" (*Gardens* 363).

Nagueyalti Warren and Sally Wolff try to analyze Walker's somber feeling that:

Walker associates her eye with the center of her physical, social, and sexual self. She has been incestuously raped by her brother, his gun [has] destroy[ed] her physical sense of

completeness, as well as her soul's ability to visualize its wholeness...[Moreover,] Walker associates her childhood injury more directly with violence against females in general...the wounded eye signifies the violent acts directed not only against her but all abused women. (1-2)

In an attempt to rationalize the non-stop criticism against her, Walker states in one of her interview that "I do understand that my world view is different from that of most of the critics. ... [T]hey are defending a way of life, a patriarchal system, which I do not worship" (Braendlin 47). For Barbara Christian, the secret of Walker's success and the non-stop criticism towards Walker's works lies in "her willingness ...to challenge the fashionable belief of the day" (*Black Feminist Criticism* 82). From the beginning of her literary life Walker believes that "the writer-like the musician or painter-must be free to explore, otherwise she or he will never discover what is needed (by everyone) to be known" (Braendlin 48). It is this exploratory mission of the writer that prompted Walker to the world of writing in order "to engage the world, explore my own thoughts, learn about myself-my connection to others and to the universe", as she states in an interview by *Literary Cavalcade* magazine ("Alice Walker: Engaging the World" 28).

However, Walker repeatedly expresses her commitment to the survival of her whole people as well as the whole universe. As she asserts in her landmark *In search of Our Mother's Gardens* that "If the Civil Rights Movement is 'dead,' and if it gave us nothing else, it gave us each other forever" (128). As a black woman and as a writer, Walker has felt that the Civil Rights Movement reaffirmed the fact that all the Blacks, men and women, struggle for the same aims of freedom and dignity. This commitment to the unity of her people is reflected in her portrayal of the sufferings faced by her Black community throughout ages. Also, this "commitment to social activism, personal growth and development" gained Walker respect and appreciation of some writers as Townes Glenn (Glenn 33).

In fact, through her writings Walker tends to "repossess, re-name, re-own and reconstruct representations of black identity" (Fulton 55). She tries to heal the wounds, to give a voice to the oppressed, and to reclaim the lost identity of their black people. For these noble aims,

it is difficult to imagine our classes, most modern literature conference programs and journals, or even the local 'mainstream' bookstore existing without the continuing wise presence of Toni Morrison or Alice Walker. ... [They] are still contributing their art and vision to our lives today. [...] These influential authors [are] forces acting upon a

new generation of writers- to see them as , in Walker's terms, the 'mothers' of a new set of 'gardeners'." (Reid 313)

It is this commitment to survival of the whole community that makes Alice Walker's novels "distinctly black and examine distinctly black issues" (Cormier-Hamilton 109). Both Morrison and Walker belong to a group of women writers, including Toni Cade Barbara , Ntozake Shange, Angela Davis, and June Jordan- who "mirror that faced by African Americans as a collectivity... broke silence in the 1970s, [and] in the 1980s and 1990s developed a voice, a self-defined, collective black women's standpoint about black womanhood"(Collins , "What's in a name?" 9).

Violence against black women has become an undeniable phenomenon within the American society. This phenomenon "is widely believed to be motivated by [males'] needs to dominate women," as Crowell and Burges state (59). Within this patriarchal society, "womanhood, like blackness, is Other [...] and the dilemma of woman in [this] patriarchal society [becomes] parallel to that of the blacks in a racist one" (Davis 12). Black women suffered violence under slavery and racism the same as African-American men. They "struggle[d] together

with black men to fight [such] racism" but now they "struggle with black men over sexism" (Tate 123). Victimized themselves by violence and oppression of the whites, Black men have started to misdirect their violence and to project their sense of failure under racism onto black women. That is to say that black men use violence as a tool to maintain their sense of superiority and existence.

Black women then are doubly-oppressed. If they suffer oppression and violence of the white oppressors, they are also oppressed and abused by the black man whether he is a father or a husband, as illustrated in chapter three. This violence practiced by white and black oppressors has resulted in the failure of some black women in their quest for self-determination, and, in turn, has deprived them of achieving their assigned roles as wives, mothers, and daughters, exactly as exemplified throughout chapter five. Nevertheless, some black women have succeeded in defying their oppressive reality and therefore they have led a successful journey for self-determination.

The reader of Alice Walker's *Color Purple* notices such womanist approach represented by multiple female characters who strive for self-determination economically, intellectually, and socially defying all types of violence directed by men, whether white or black men. This category of black women is characterized by a unique ability to recreate themselves "out of

the creative legacy of her maternal ancestors" and therefore they are called by Walker as "the new Black woman" (Thomas 13). Furthermore, this paper is also devoted to illustrate the elements that helped those women in their successful journey for self-recognition. The representative female characters of Walker's womanist in her *Color Purple* are Celie, Sofia, Shug Avery and Nettie.

In *The Color Purple*, uses the story of her protagonist Celie to demonstrate the difficulty of being a woman within a patriarchal society. According to Linda Abbandonato, "Celie's burden in building a self on a site of negation is shared by any woman who attempts to establish an identity outside of patriarchal definition ... But it is no easy task for women to authorize themselves as women, to disengage their feminine identity from the ideological master narratives that inscribe it" (298). Notably, the character of Celie in Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) resists gender and Black male dominance representing Walker's attitude, as a womanist, towards the norms of the patriarchal society. For Alice Walker a womanist should be outrageous and willful. Thus, Walker's fiction is a typical example of a womanist writer. Through her novel Walker "focus[es] on women , looking at what is to be a woman of color and not only survive but live a full life , learning to matter not only to others

around her but also to herself " (Kelly 172). To enable Black women to achieve such wholeness , Walker's novel resists the patriarchal system of the United States which considers black women , or women of color , as doubly other – neither white nor male.

Thus, many critics see this novel as a revolutionary novel. In her article , "A View from 'Elsewhere' : Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine's story in *The Color Purple*," Abbandonato states that "*The Color Purple* [i]s a revolutionary novel within the wilderness of patriarchal thought" (1106). Supporting the same idea, Jane Miller describes the novel as "a story of rebellion , a regenerative and affirming turning of the tables on men, whose brutality towards women may be understood but must also be resisted" (241). *The Color Purple* is thus " a song of joy and triumph: triumph of one woman's struggle against racism, sexism, and social determinism to ultimately blossom into the wholeness of her being" (Christophe 101).

The story of Celie, the protagonist, represents "one of the pillars of the patriarchal [society] ... the idea of woman as marginal"(Allan 83). Celie is a fatherless, motherless and later sisterless black woman. She has been rejected from her society for being black, a woman, ugly, and "ain't smart either" (*CP* 9).

Consequently, she has been deprived of individuality, her right to be, and always described as unproductive and nothing, someone with no right for love or care. She embodies suffering and agony of black women in the rural south during the first half of the twentieth century. Celie is modeled after Walker's grandmother, who was raped at the age of twelve by her slave owner. Celie's fate, however, is brighter. To enable Celie to achieve such happiness, Walker uses many factors that help Celie in her quest for freedom and self-recognition: process of writing (the epistolary form of the novel), Sofia, Shug, and Nettie.

The epistolary form of the novel enables Celie to express the hardships of a young black woman within the male – oriented society. Celie's story is unfolded through a series of epistles first to God, then to her sister Nettie, then to God and the entire universe. Praising this epistolary form in his article "*The Color Purple*, Revision and Redefinition," Mae G. Henderson writes:

The Color Purple subverts the traditional Eurocentric male code which dominates the literary conventions of the epistolary novel. As a genre, the English epistolary novel, a form invented by man writing about women, embodies male control of the literary images of women. By appropriating a form invented and traditionally controlled

by men, but thematizing the lives and experiences of women, Alice Walker asserts her authority, or right to authorship. (67)

But Walker's target is not only to control or assert her creativity in this literary genre, but to enable Black women to give voice and express themselves after a long time of imposed silence. Worth mentioning is that *The Color Purple* opens not with a letter but with an epigraph including a direct and firm threatening order: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (*Color Purple* 3). This threat provides the reader with the drives behind Celie's writing of such epistles.

Raped repeatedly and impregnated twice by her father, who turns out later to be her stepfather, Celie feels guilt and shame due to this incestuous relationship. When Celie's mother discovered her pregnancy she curses her and what intensifies Celie's suffering is that she cannot tell her mother the truth because "It'd kill [her]mammy", as her stepfather warns. Furthermore, Celie's children are given away by Pa (as Celie used to call her stepfather, Fonso) and she accordingly suffers horrible dreams about what happened to them. Like a slave, whose children are sold for financial support, Celie's children are sold but she has not been compensated for her loss, she rather gains more suffering and agony. She is frightened to

death, too oppressed to speak of her sufferings, not understanding why it happens to her. Thus, she turns to writing to God: "May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me"(3).

Celie writes to God because she is unable to bear the burden of her secrets alone. She writes to God to share her the burden of these secrets. She is raped by her father, watches her mother's death without being able to tell her of her victimization, plays the role of a protective mother for her sister Nettie to protect her from sexual advances by their stepfather and later by Mr.__(Celie's husband, Albert), and bearing humiliation and degradation at the hand of Mr.___, who "chose her the way he chose [a] dowry cow" (Cheung 165).

Unable to express her openly, Celie writes her initial epistle to address the beginning of her victimization to God: "I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (*Color Purple*3). She is confused by what is "happening to her." She feels guilt and shame and this is reflected when she erases "I am" to show the reason why she was once "a good girl"; because the "good girl" should avoid having sex with her father. She believes that she must have done a vicious deed and hence she deserves such punishment from God. "For Walker,"

as E. Ellen Barker puts it, "Celie embodies all black women. Like them she too bears her pain unaware and unmindful of personal beauty and inner worth" (56).

In fact, rape is considered one of the violent actions practiced by black men against black women, which results in women's degradation, despair, oppression, and subjugation. M.E. Hawkeworth explains that rape creates "physical terror and coercion, which was an essential ingredient in the process of turning free persons into slaves"(86). In other words, it causes physical and psychological damage upon women through the destruction of their identity, subjectivity and empowerment. Commenting on the severe impact of this violent pattern, Madonne Minner writes: "Men, potential rapists, assume presence, language, and reason as their particular province. [Whereas] women, potential victims, fall prey to absence, silence, and madness" (181). As Minner has noted, "absence, silence, and madness" are outcomes of rape and this what happens with Celie. Being raped by her father and abused by her husband, Celie is reduced to a slave.

Celie is collapsed by the brutal act of raping. It is her father tyranny and her husband's abusive treatment that makes Celie feels that she exists without self or identity. This self-split or lost identity is reflected in her erasure of "~~I am~~" and using "I

have always been a good girl". As a result of rape "Celie has no present tense subjectivity, no present tense 'I am' " (Cutter 164). Also, whenever Celie writes about her husband at the first half of the novel she does not mention his name. Instead, she writes Mr.___. Marc A. Christophe explains this behavior that:

Celie [at the beginning] is Mr.___'s slave, a being who derives her existence only through the goodwill of another being. Celie's subservience to Mr.___ was so complete that she could not bring herself to pronounce his name, for to name is to take possession, to project one's own perception on the Other. Celie could not call out Mr.___'s name until she regained control of her own existence. (*Color Purple*103)

Silence, the second outcome of rape and body exploitation, is considered another type of domination. Celie has been prevented from talking by her father and later by her husband because talking is a mark of freedom. Fonso and Mr.___ were insisted on Celie's silence to control her life. They treat her as a piece of property that could be exchanged. At the beginning, Pa orders her not to speak to anyone but God, and then when he decides to get rid of her, as he believes her to be "ugly," "evil" and "always up to no good" (5), he convinces Mr.___ to marry her instead of her sister Nettie. Unfortunately, Mr.___ proves to

be another image of Pa. He deals with Celie in an abusive manner and also insists on keeping her silent by beating her very often for the slightest mistake, and mostly for no reason at all. She cannot express her feelings or show her rejection of such treatment, since she is denied such a right, and she only stands silently:

Dear God,

Harpo (Mr.____'s son) ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr.____ say cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for ... he did not finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa....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 peaking through the cracks, it all I can do not cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear men. (22)

This abusive treatment illustrates the inferior status of the Black women in the Southern community.

In an attempt to liberate Celie (and all Black women) from degradation and heal her wounds, Walker enables Celie to express her *self*, to give voice and defeat silence that has been resulted from rape. Thus, "in Walker's text," as Cutter puts it,

"rape leads not to erasure, but rather to the start of a prolonged struggle toward subjectivity and voice" (167). After her rape by Pa, Celie turns to writing. In order to achieve self-assertion, Celie should speak, should express her self because freedom "cannot come from the hollow shell of selfhood that Celie presents early on" (Ross 3). Writing is considered a promising form of resistance against the action of rape. By writing about her rape, moreover, Celie externalizes her bitter experience so that it will not destroy her.

Thus the imposed silence leads to the first form of resistance, an idea that has been elaborated by Wendy Wall in his article, "Lettered Bodies and Corporeal Texts". According to Wall, "Celie's texts are born when she is raped and silenced" (260). This imposed silence "forces as an alternative mode of expression – Celie's diary – letters to God. She tries to understand the violation that has threatened her identity" (W. Wall 261). In her letters to God, Celie tries to vent her sufferings and private experiences "that remain hidden from her life of labouring acquiescence. The letters act as:

a second memory, a projected body that holds this hidden life. This body is released into the form of Celie's epistles, an identity that is porous and disjunctive. [These] letters act as a surrogate body for Celie, an inanimate form that

serves a dual purpose; it fends off pain by siphoning off her feelings of degradation, as well as allowing her to express and thus feel the intensity of her emotions (W. Wall 262).

Supporting this idea of writing as an outlet for self-expression, King –Kok Cheung argues that "through this process of writing Celie uses words to describe wordlessness," it is thus considered a "desperate alternative to speech" (165). This process enables Celie's rejection "to be the passive sheet upon which the father writes unalterable messages" (Cutter 166). In using this epistolary form, Walker enables Celie to "express the impact of oppression on her spirit as well as her growing internal strength and final victory" (Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* 469).

Associated with the development of the protagonist's character, the style of Celie's epistles changes towards the end of the novel. The change reflects Celie's growing self-awareness. Instead of using a broken dialect to record events and her oppressors' voices, the transformed Celie now (at the end of the novel) has the ability to use poetic and "sophisticated re-creation of dialogues and events, charged with suspense , humor, and irony" (Cheung 171). In one of these letters Celie writes: " Nettie, I am making some pants for

you.... I plan to make them by hand. Every stitch I sew will be a kiss" (*CP* 192). This letter reflects "[Celie's] three creative modes- writing, sewing, and loving, [which] requires freshness and distinctiveness by being so much a part of her self" (Cheung 171).

Moreover, Walker uses this epistolary structure as a way to "establish a bond and intimacy between women" (Henderson 68). It is this intimacy and such bond between Celie and the three women characters (Sofia, Shug, and Nettie) that will also strengthen Celie's quest for the freedom and self-actualization. Unlike Celie, the character of Sofia is presented as the "amazon" woman who is fiery and self-directed. She is an independent woman with a strong will that enables her to fight her husband's desire for control and domination. She rejects to be a submissive wife whose obligation for her survival is to "love, honor, obey [and] amuse her husband" (*Color Purple*5).

"Sofia is the first woman Celie knows who refuses to accede to both the patriarchal and racist demand that the woman demonstrates her objection to her oppressors" (Berlant 30). It is through Sofia's strong personality that Celie feels the possibility for a woman to resist because she lacks this ability. Feeling jealous of Sofia's strong-willed nature to do what she wants and say what she feels, Celie tells Harpo, Sofia's

husband and Celie's stepson, when he asks her what he should do to "make her mind" she repeats the same patriarchal attitude: "Beat her; I say" (*Color Purple* 43). By doing so, Celie participates in what H el ene Cixous calls "[men's] greatest crime against women": "Insidiously, violently, they [men] have led them [women] to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves" (Dieke 166).

Instead of focusing on Sofia's boldness, what matters to Celie is that other women feel the pain that she feels. She tries to impress her will upon Sofia because she [Sofia] makes Celie be confident

That her own subjugated identity is not one that she has chosen for herself but one that is forced on her. And thus by understanding her forced identity as a predetermined lot for all women, Celie takes solace in her suffering and that of other women. According to Celie's logic, Sofia's disregard for such subjugation needed to be punished because otherwise, if left unpunished it would expose to Celie the absurdity of her complicity with her own subjugation. [She] used someone else's hand to enact her violence against Sofia. (Floyd- Thomas and Gilmann 537)

Arguably, Celie's jealousy can be seen as the first sparkle of her quest for self-recognition and freedom. She wishes if she were in Sofia's place to enjoy such sense of freedom. This may explain why when Sofia confronts her asking why she [Celie] has suggested such action to Harpo, Celie replies, "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" (*Color Purple* 38). When Celie admits the reason for her act, Sofia feels sympathy for the hapless and defenseless Celie, and tells her the difficulties that she has facing as a female in a black community dominated by men, as Celie writes in her following letter:

Dear God,

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 hose. ... I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. (35).

Sofia opposes Harpo's attempt to suppress her, insisting on returning blow for blow: "Next time us see Harpo his face a mess of bruises. His lip cut. One of his eyes shut like a fist. He

Walk stiff and say his teeth ache" (35). It is not surprising then that Sofia rejects working as a maid in the mayor's house. She says "Hell no" (86) to the mayor's wife's suggestion, and later she answers the mayor's slap of her face with a powerful punch. For Sofia, the mayor is a "living embodiment of and literal heir to the system that oppresses her" (Selzer 75). Although she is sent to the prison, Sofia does not give up her resistance. She resists the inferiority and unworthiness imposed on the Blacks by the white culture in spite of the torture that she experiences within the prison, as Celie describes: "they crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber" (*Color Purple* 87).

This resisting spirit of Sofia motivates Celie's desire for freedom, and provides "[the] first glimpse of [Celie's] female existence beyond that of the battered wife or slave" (Cheung 167). Instead of putting her hopes in the afterlife, Sofia teaches Celie to see things differently: "you ought to bash Mr.____ head open... think about heaven later" (*Color Purple*47). It is also through Sofia that Celie asserts her right to choose, for the first time in her life, when she [Celie] begins quilting with her. Celie chooses a quilt pattern, the two women choose to be sisters, and

they choose to work together. Those choices are signified in the quilt design Celie selects, a pattern called "Sister's Choice" (47). Quilt making in that sense is considered

A process of healing because they [Celie and Sofia] are no longer passive victims who are torn. Quilt making turns being torn into tearing, turns object into subject. Active creation replaces passive victimization as the two out of the fragments of their lives. [...] Celie's decision to make the quilt is thus the turning point in her life because it is the first step to her empowerment via connection with other women. (Elsley 167)

In a similar context, J. Cutter sees that quilt making in Walker's novel suggests that "sewing is precisely the language that can replace the patriarchal discourse of Mr. __, that can revise the mythic pattern of silence/violence/silence" (172). Indeed Sofia plays an important role in Celie's journey towards self-empowerment, but the most important role in such journey is played by Shug Avery.

Like Sofia, Shug Avery is considered a typical example of Walker's womanist. In her *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), Walker defines a womanist as " a serious, independent-minded woman intent on gaining possession of her own space in

the world" (xi-xii). The shadow of this definition is in fact perceived in the novel through a conversation between Celie and Mr. ___ in reference to Shug's and Sofia's "abnormal," "different" selves:

Mr. ___ thinks all this is stuff men do.

But Harpo not like this, I tell him. You not like this. What Shug got is womanly it seem like to me.

Sophia and Shug not like men, he say, but they not like women either. (*Color Purple* 228)

Shug Avery is described by Stacie Lynn Hankinson as Celie's "magic helper" (320). It is through Shug that "the love inside Celie comes forth, breaking the spell that has bound her" (Walsh 90). Shug, a famous Blues singer, is a prodigal daughter who gets thrown out of her Baptist minister father's home for bringing shame to her family. She is famous not only for her beautiful voice, but also for her secular reputation. In addition, she is a mistress to Mr. ___ and the mother of his illegitimate children.

However, Celie is attached to Shug. This attachment begins with an image- a photograph of Shug- which embodies multiple possibilities for Celie:

The first [picture] of a real person I ever seen. Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me. I see her their in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like something tall. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motorcar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some. (*Color Purple*8)

In Shug, Celie sees a woman who embodies everything she lacks. Shug's furs and hair suggest her self-confidence and power; all qualities that Celie lacks. For this reason, Celie is fascinated by Shug's photograph, and whenever Celie remembers her suffering, her only source of hope is the name of Shug. She thus becomes for Celie the symbol of freedom and, more importantly, of power.

Surprisingly, Shug comes to Mr. ___'s home very sick and in need of somebody to look after her. Mr. ___ decides to bring her into his house to recover from what the town gossip suspect is "some nasty woman disease." Treated as a slave in Mr. ___'s house, it becomes part of Celie's duties to take care of her husband's mistress. This act, in fact, signifies Celie's degradation and humiliation within this house.

From the first moment of Shug's arrival the contrast between her and Celie is obvious. Opposite to Celie in every way, Shug has the reputation of a high-living, adventurous, independent blues singer, whose life style gives her greater freedom than Celie's more conventional status. Yet, when Celie nurses Shug and helps her to recover, the two women become intimate friends instead of rivals. Celie learns from Shug a new language because Shug, a singer of sweet songs, has a "mouth just pack with claws" (53), and "he vocal organ has built-in weapons" (Cheung 167). Celie describes how when Albert (Mr.____) tries to make advances to Shug, she snaps at him: "turn loose my goddam hand ... I don't need no weak little boy ..." (*Color Purple*51). Noting and recording Shug's words, this will one day encourage Celie to call her abusive husband "a lowdown dog" to his face (170). Thus, Celie's progress toward gaining coherent language in the form of speech is guided by Shug Avery.

Expressing her gratitude for Celie's help during her sickness, Shug dedicates a special song to Celie. This is considered an important act and a step forward in Celie's quest for self-determination. It is the "first time somebody made something and name it after me," as Celie gratefully notes (75). According to Daniel W. Ross, "this act of naming something after Celie assures the integrity of Celie herself; she must be somebody to

be a subject of a song: (10). She starts to recognize that she is a human being who has the right to love and be loved, a right that has been denied for her for long time. Through Shug's song, Walker has definitely proclaimed with more strength the genuine role of the blues woman whose songs are typical representative of past experiences of the Black.

Another important incident with Shug (besides the song) that helps Celie in her struggle for self-recognition is the mirror scene. "In this scene, Celie first comes to terms with her own body, thus changing her life forever" (Ross 4). Before holding a mirror to examine her own body, Celie's sense of this body was void. She is always described from the very beginning of the novel as an ugly girl, and after years of repeated rape and beatings she loses the desire to care for her appearance or even to know her own body. Daniel W. Ross tries to analyze this negative attitude of a black female towards her body, and affirms the importance of reclaiming one's body for the purpose of self-actualization:

One of the primary projects of modern feminism has been to restore women's bodies. Because the female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to fear or even hate their bodies. Consequently, women often think of their bodies as torn or fragmented, a

pattern evident in Walker's Celie. 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 women a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status. (4)

Thus, Walker, as a womanist, has tried through this scene to defy the patriarchal culture that used to exploit the female body. She has tended to restore women's bodies that have been considered for long time as an exploited target of male aggression and oppression. As a result, women have learned to fear or even to hate their bodies . Like those women, Celie feels that she "has had to annihilate her body as well as her soul *in order to* protect herself" (Barker 60). She, therefore, prefers to keep herself invisible. It is Shug who helps her to change this negative attitude towards he body by holding a mirror to examine her organs. According to Ross,

Th[is] process of discovering or developing desire begins, for Celie, with the re- appropriation of her own body, which was taken from her by men-first by her stepfather and then passed on to her husband, Albert. The repossession of her body encourages Celie to seek selfhood and later to assert that selfhood through spoken language.

During this process Celie learns to love herself and others and to address even her written language to a body, her sister Nettie. (3-4)

Walker also uses the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug as a means to help Celie get her lost sense of love and freedom. It is through this love relationship with Shug that Celie will be able to gain strength to separate herself from her past and find her lost identity, and "With her new found identity Celie [will be] able to break free from the masculine prohibition against speech and to join a community of women, thus facing herself from dependence and subjection to male brutality" (Ross 6). At the time that some criticize this lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug, others perceive this relationship as a way of expressing love, or a mother-daughter relationship.

Celie has played the role of a surrogate mother to her mother's children, to Mr.____'s children, and to her sister Nettie (by protecting her from sexual advances of both Pa and Mr.____). However, she herself is deprived of such sense of maternal love, and she is also deprived of her capacity to be a real mother for her own children. It is her relationship with Shug that will enable her to compensate the passive image of her biological mother. Although Shug is described by the local preacher as "a strumpet in short skirts" raising doubts about her

morals, Celie makes an unconscious comparison to her "mama", and concludes that "She [Shug] more pretty than my mama" (*Color Purple* 8). In contrast to Celie's mother, who is controlled by gender and the patriarchal discourse, Shug is a woman of her own, a woman whose experience has given her an identity, as Celie notes: "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" (228). Shug thus provides Celie with all psychic elements that her biological mother failed to provide. As "a surrogate- mother", Shug nurtures Celie into self-acceptance and "guides her through all the stages of self-actualization that most children go through early in their lives" (Barker 57).

Furthermore, Shug acts as Celie's protector. When Celie tells her that Mr. ___ beats her because she is inadequate, Shug promises not to leave until he reforms. It is also Shug who discovers the letters of Nettie that Mr. ___ hides from Celie. Reading these letters, Shug discovers that "Pa" was not Celie's biological father and thus her children were not the product of incest. This discovery helps Celie to overcome her feelings of guilt and shame that have tormented her for long time. Accordingly, Celie is fueled by a desire for change , resistance

of the ill-treatment of her husband. She is ready now to achieve her self-recognition.

Celie now has a desire to know her roots, her family and her place. When her mother died, her roots vanished. Yet, Shug helps her to recover them. Through Nettie's letters, Celie discovers that she has inherited her parents' property and, thus, she "has a desire to view her past as a means of securing her future" (Barker 59). Unfortunately, she fails to recover her roots because Fonso placed the bodies of her dead parents in unmarked places, burying Celie's past and identification with the corpses of her parents. Shug at this moment replaces Celie's family, affirming to her that "[u]s each other's people now" (*Color Purple* 156). Another important benefit achieved through Shug's discovery of Nettie's hidden letters is that it enables Celie to confront her oppressors, Mr.____ in front of the family telling him her decision to leave with Shug to Memphis:

Celie is coming with us, say Shug.

Mr.____'s head swived back straight. Say what? He ast.

Celie is coming to Memphis with me.

Over my dead body, Mr.____ say.

...what wrong now?

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.

Say what? He ast shock.

All round the table folks mouths be dropping open. ...

You took my sister Nettie away from me, I say.

And she was the only person love me in the world.

Mr.____ start to sputter. But But But But But But

Sound like some kind of motor. (*CP* 170)

Thus, Nettie's letters provide Celie with enough energy for defiance to express herself and confront Albert. Celie now matures in self-love, encouraged by Shug, and enters a stage of remarkable transformation.

Continuing her role as Celie's surrogate mother and protector, Shug prevents her from continuing frequently to kill Albert in order to take her revenge. She is sickened by Albert's cruelty and, therefore, she believes she will feel better if she kills him. Celie, in fact, has the opportunity to do so when Albert commands her to shave him. She sharpens the razor, but Shug holds her back. However, Celie could not stop her

imagination of the cycle of violence that her oppressors have initiated. Celie thinks taking revenge from Albert: "All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble. About the house crazy for Mr. ___ blood. In my mind, he falling dead every which way. By time night come I can't even speak. Every time I open my mouth nothing come out but a little burp" (*Color Purple*115).

It is Shug's presence in Celie's life that makes Celie change her strategy of revenge. Instead of using a razor to kill Albert, Celie will use the power of speech. When she declares her independence from Albert, she feels she is possessed by a mysterious power: "Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words" (187).

Celie has at last expressed her liberation and defeated her oppressor , as well as her silence. The silenced and beaten Celie now can control the situation and orders her oppressor to keep silent. Commenting on this situation, Cheung writes, "openly enjoying the freedom of the backtalk for the first time, Celie expresses herself with so much gusto that she feels inspired by forces outside herself. Her words, long dammed up by her husband, now flow in torrents" (168). Celie now has the ability to declare her separation from Albert and to leave with Shug.

Arriving with Shug at Memphis, Celie soon finds that she can make her living by practicing the traditionally feminine art of sewing. In fact, it is Shug who encourages her to pursue her creativity through the design of fancy pants. Moreover, Shug supports Celie by investing her money in Celie's business to ensure her success. She always tries to nurture Celie, help her define herself through love and success, and then let her "go on [her] way" (181). As Celie sits on Shug's dining room floor, visualizing patterns and sewing together fabrics of her own choosing, Celie begins to trust in her own creativity and her own role as a contributing member of society.

Describing the importance of this art of quilt making in Celie's journey of self-discovery, OMP. Juneja writes:

Celie's journey of self-discovery is symbolic of the "womanist process" embedded in the Afro-American folk-art tradition of their survival culture. This is a tradition in which the Black American women, despite heavy oppression, expressed their creativity in such crafts as gardening, cooking and quilting. The art of quilting, for example, allowed them to satisfy their creative urge in bits and pieces of waste material to create new designs. Quilting therefore represents the two-way process of art: economy and functionalism... (86)

Thus, Shug's encouragement and support have made Celie's status better. As a result, Celie has now the ability to sign her letters to her sister Nettie stressing her feeling of triumph and freedom, "I am so happy, I got live. I got work, I got money, friends and time" (*Color Purple* 183). Indeed, Celie's signature of her letter is of implicit significance since it is another mode of freedom, of establishing a self, an entity of its own with a name, title, address place and reference: "your sister Celie/Folkpants, Unlimited/ Sugar Avery Drive, Memphis, Tennessee" (182). According to Cutter, "Celie's sewing functions as an alternative methodology of language that moves her away from violence and victimization and into self-empowerment and subjectivity" (163). Indeed "Shug does not give literal birth to Celie, [however,] she does give her spiritual rebirth, freeing her finally to enter 'into the creation'" (Barker 55). In a similar context, Christian (1997) claims that it is through Shug that Celie becomes "[a] new Black woman", one who is able to "recreate herself out of the creative legacy of her maternal ancestors" (470). This urges Barker to state that "Shug and other black women like Hurston, Walker's mother, and Walker herself become the collective spirit of 'womanist fiction'" (57).

Besides Sofia and Shug, Nettie, Celie's sister also participates in Celie's successful journey for self-realization. Nettie is Celie's confident sister and the main source of love for Celie throughout the novel. If Celie fails at the beginning to nurture her own children (because Pa gave them away), she has been a mother- surrogate for Nettie. She protects her from the Pa's threat of incest and the inevitable rape of Mr.____. This enables Nettie to complete her basic studies and escapes these threats. She is employed by a missionary and his wife to serve as a nanny to their children, who are later discovered to be Celie's children. Indeed Celie's separation from Nettie intensifies her self-denial and results in more passivity, but it is Nettie's letters that will enable Celie later to discover her family history and, consequently, overcomes the feelings of shame and guilt on discovering that Pa is not her biological father and hence her children are not product of incestuous relationship.

In addition, when Celie discovers that Albert was keeping Nettie's letters from her, this fuels her will to resist and stand against him for the first time in her life. Also, it is through Nettie's letters Celie discovers that she has inherited the house (where they lived with Pa) because it is her biological father's house. Celie now realizes that she no longer has to be a homeless person and tells Nettie through a letter that they can

now live together with their children. Now, she can be a real mother: "Oh, Nettie, us have a house! A house big enough for us and our children, for your husband and Shug. Now you can come home cause you have a home to come to!" (*Color Purple*217).

Another important function of Nettie's letters is that they address important themes as racial and sexual oppression. The sexist African men, in their attempt to sexually oppress their female partners, are considered as guilty as the white racists. In one of her letters Nettie writes: "I think Africans are very much like white people back home, in that they think they are the center of the universe and that everything that is done for them" (143). Celie's daughter, Olivia, is allowed schooling in Africa where it is a denied act for native Olinka girls. Women members of this tribe are expected to fulfill both the subservient role set by their village and the role of being a woman.

Moreover, women within this African society are also defined and recognized in terms of their value for their husbands, as one of the Olinka women tells Nettie, "A girl is nothing to herself, only to her husband can she become something" (132). This attitude reflects the deep-rooted belief in male dominance and "female subordination as its corollary being ingrained in men and women" (Allan 91).Men's

oppression and desire for control are the same in both American and African societies. Once Nettie writes to Celie that in Africa "there is a way that men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don't even look at women when women are speaking" (*Color Purple*137). This patriarchal system has a negative impact on women's identity and creates what M.E. Hawke worth termed, "a double blind." For Hawke worth, "psychological oppression operates women who are convinced that they are incapable of autonomy, who doubt that they have the abilities to excel in the full range of human activities" (75).

This wholeness is the target that Walker seeks throughout *The Color Purple* , but it cannot be recognized through this victimized woman, Celie. For this reason, Walker uses these three characters, Sofia, Shug and Nettie, to enable Celie achieve self-assertion and wholeness. In his article, "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*", Cheung has noted that "writing about Sofia, Shug, and Nettie allows Celie to relieve and rehearse their speech or action, thereby composing a new self" (168). It is her relationship with these three women characters that enables Celie to transform from the state of a victim into a victor. The impact of this transformation on family relationship is obvious

at the end of the novel. At the end of the novel, the family is united with the with the arrival of Nettie and Celie's children, and Celie, Shug and Mr.____ sit on the porch together. It is a moment of celebrating each other, as Harpo asserts: "white folks busy celebrating their independence from England. Us can spend the day celebrating each other" (*Color Purple* 243).

Walker's *The Color Purple* is "a song of sorrow and joy, of birth, rebirth, and the redeeming power of love" (Christophe 107). Thus, it ends with the reunion of lovers, family, and friends. Perhaps the most important achievement of this novel is Walker's celebration of the "centrality of black women in the reclamation of the past and transformation of the notion of community" (Henderson 80); the same target that has been achieved in Morrison's novels.

Through her works, Morrison tries to find the reason why some African American women were able to survive while others were not. During an interview with Gloria Naylor, she acknowledged that

It wasn't easy being a little black girl in this country- it was rough. The psychological tricks you have to play in order to get through-and nobody said how it felt to be then. And to know that and to see what you saw in those other people's

eyes was devastating. Some people made it, some didn't. I wanted to explore it myself. ... I wanted to go to those places. (577)

Repeatedly in her critical commentary and interviews Morrison urges black women to break the silence that has been imposed on them by the dominant social structure. For her, the African-American woman is an "original self- the self we betray when we lie, the one that is always there. And whatever that self looks like... one measures one's self against it" (N. McKay 423).

Likewise, Walker views that everyone exploits black women regardless the burdens that those women carry to appease their oppressors:

Black women are called 'the mule of the world,' because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else-everyone else- refused to carry. ... When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been knocked down our throats. (*Gardens* 237)

Finally, those female characters who succeeded in their quest for self-recognition achieve this success because they know well who they are and what they need. They struggled to break the boundaries that both white and black society had created for African American women. It becomes clear then that Walker tried through her depiction of successful black females to "help her black women characters learn to define themselves positively instead of just reacting against other's stereotypes, and gave them the power to speak their own names and stories.[Her characters] fought battles on behalf of millions of women-and the fruits of [her] triumph are beginning to appear in the novels of contemporary writers" (Reid 315).

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