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**REDEFINING BODY AND ITS AGENCY: A STUDY OF THE WOMEN  
CHARACTERS IN ALICE WALKER'S NOVEL, *THE COLOUR PURPLE***

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**Abstract-** In patriarchal cultures, women internalize oppression, for regnant narrative schemas, themes and figurations provide the default templates for their self-portraits and self-narratives and thus impede women's agency. To describe a woman's relationship with her body means to create a setting and the possibility to grasp women's narratives and body language as they engage in acts of resistance, as well as the marking of body and space. Thus this study redefines the body as "agent" and also explores the body as a primary site for the construction and performance of gender, specifically of femininity, with examples drawn from the novel, *The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker. Agentic skills bring women's voices into alignment with their individual identities and their lives. Accordingly, this novel provides women with their agency using which enriches women's self-knowledge, extends their emancipatory potentialities, and strengthens their ability both to define themselves in their own terms and to enact their identities.

**Introduction**

Epistemologically, by 'agency', we mean an individual's (or group's) ability to make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes. Agency can be understood as the process through which women and men use their endowments and take advantage of economic opportunities to achieve desired outcomes. Thus, agency

is a key to understand how gender outcomes emerge and why they are equal or unequal. In the novel, *The Colour Purple*, Alice Walker shows how women are denied of agency in a patriarchal society. This novel shows the growth of women from a voiceless character to a voiced one. It also explores the very 'corporeal' being of a woman in a narrative, which shapes the setting.

Alice Walker is one of the most popular and prominent authors of America whose works revolves around the sufferings and survival of black people, especially black women. She coined the term 'Womanism' for 'black feminism or feminism of colour'. It is a deeper subset of feminism which is distinguished from the traditional Anglo-American context. Alice Walker's famous quotation "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (xii) describes womanism as the broad umbrella under which feminism falls. She used the term to set aside mainstream white feminists from feminist women of colour and primarily to resist anti-blackness within the feminist movement. Blacks cannot use the term feminism because the experience of black women is different from that of the whites. According to her, womanism is not against feminism, but a darker shade of feminism as she famously quotes,

Womanism is simply another shade of feminism. It helps give visibility to the experience of black women and other women of colour who have always been at the forefront of the feminist movement yet marginalized and rendered invisible in historical texts and the media (2018)

The most glaring difference between white women and black women is the fact that black women deal with what may be termed as three level oppression (racism, sexism, and classicism), while the white women's oppression can be one dimensional; that is against sexism.

Alice Walker in her novel, *The Colour Purple* shows the oppression of women also by the African- American women deal with that. It is set in the early twentieth century around the 1930s, in a time when the sense of inclusion, tolerance and political correctness had not seeped into the mainstream consciousness and racism, oppression, and sexism were rife, in fact, normalized. Most black Americans remained alienated and were stereotypically looked down upon by the whites. Black women suffered the most during this period because they were considered inferior to men- both black and white.

The narrative of the novel revolves around the character of Celie, who, as her character is introduced, is a black girl of fourteen and lives in the state of Georgia. She has been raped and impregnated by her father twice and children were taken away by her father and sold. Celie is shown to have experienced abuse at the hands of both, her father and her husband, whom she addresses as 'Mister' throughout the novel. Her sister Nettie had a great influence in her character as he helped her to learn how to read

and write and it is through her that she was able to explore the world outside her simultaneously malevolent and banal sphere. And the arrival of Shug Avery, the former lover of Mister changed her life from a weak and submissive woman to a strong and independent woman, even as this process is initiated by Sofia, another strong and independent but reactionary character. Almost all the female characters have contributed in transforming her life, as the story unfolds, for the better. At the end of the novel, Celie becomes independent and possesses great emotional strength and power to define herself. As a poor African- American woman in rural Georgia and a victim of domestic abuse, Celie is almost completely invisible as an individual. Walker's use of Celie's own voice, however underdeveloped allows Walker to tell the history of Black women in the rural south in a realistic way.

The characters in *The Colour Purple* have womanist traits. Through Celie, Shug Avery, Sofia and Nettie who are major characters in the novel, Walker suggests that women can get an upper hand at some point by challenging the authority of their husbands and oppressors, and dare to overcome their odds. It is noteworthy that a womanist "loves struggle", it is evident through the character of Celie who has the capacity to ask questions that are uncomfortable, even subversive as a route to truth. She was sexually forced both by her father and her husband where her corporeal body was denied agency. But later with the help of Shug, Celie takes charge of her life and becomes an independent woman, by opposing Albert who resisted Celie's idea to accompany Shug to Memphis and even starts her own business of Pants. Her sister, Nettie also plays an important role in her; she was able to explore the world outside her simultaneously malevolent and banal sphere.

The characteristic of Shug Avery in *The Colour Purple* is a typical one, within the African-American racial societies. Walker shows her as a free and independent woman who has agency over her own body. When Celie first lays eyes on Shug, in her husband's house, she thinks Shug looks glamorous and instantly begins to take a liking to her. She states, "First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man" (*The Colour Purple* 35). Shug and Celie's relationship is based on a shared experience and were the help of each other. Women's collective agency is transformative and helps in promoting changes in society. The character of Shug Avery is unconventional. She is a blues singer which was unconventional for women of the rural Georgia. She is an entertainer and singer who find power through her sexual identity. Shug makes her decisions by herself without the influence of any male dominance like power and control. She also provides guidance and a path of liberation to Celie and helps her to be an independent woman. A woman like Shug has power over her own body and denies masculine assistance. Through the character of Shug, Walker tries to show the empowerment of women by their own agency.

Nettie, who is the sister of Celie also plays a major role in building Celie's life as an independent woman. As Nettie had the privilege to go to school, she helped Celie to learn letters. Throughout Nettie's journey as a missionary, she wrote many letters to Celie giving the knowledge about the world that exists outside Georgia. This encouraged Celie to be more enthusiastic and optimistic about her life. In the novel, Celie tells her story to the readers in the form of letters. Nettie lives her latter life as a missionary and brings back Celie's children to her. Nettie is shown as a self-empowered woman who helps others in their journey towards liberation.

Another woman character is Sofia who marries Albert's son, Harpo, challenges the prevalent notion of gender roles, and engages in physical disputes. She is a strong female character who is determined to assert her independence by rejecting traditional ideas about a woman's role in African-American society. She is assertive, aggressive and would never allow anyone, not even her husband to step on her toe. She believes in 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' regardless of who committed evil to her. This behavior of Sofia is courageous and audacious as a womanist character which shows her agency. Like many African-Americans, Sofia pays for hitting the Mayor and refusing to work as a maid, by being jailed for twelve years showing her audaciousness and courageousness. Sofia also has agency over herself but at the end was forced to suffer at the hands of the white colonizers.

In conclusion it can be said that women empowerment starts from self-realization of women themselves. Celie, Sofia, Nettie, these are the women characters of this novel, who have developed their self and liberated themselves from the societal norms. Everywhere patriarchy maintains power by forcing the female body into a position of powerlessness thus denying them agency. The women characters of this novel successfully achieve empowerment and freedom with the help of each other. Through this novel, Alice Walker brilliantly portrays women's quest for freedom and their journey of transformation and empowerment. *The Colour Purple* is a novel where the women's body and agency is given high dignity and the theory of 'womanism' is successfully embodied through the female characters of the novel. By celebrating the values of love, togetherness, femaleness, and courage to fight against oppression, the novel succeeds in bringing freedom and equality in its true sense.

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