

OPPRESSION AND RESISTANCE IN CELIE'S CHARACTER IN ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE: A BLACK FEMINISM ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study examines the forms of oppression experienced by Celie in novel *The Color Purple* (1985) by Alice Walker, and her strategies of resistance as analyzed through Black feminist theory. Employing a qualitative literary research design with descriptive-interpretive analysis, this study draws on the theoretical frameworks of Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and bell hooks (2015) to identify and interpret the evidence of interlocking oppression, female solidarity as resistance, and identity reconstruction. The findings reveal that Celie experiences layered oppression encompassing race, gender, and class, as conceptualized through Collins's matrix of domination. Resistance emerges through the cultivation of sisterhood relationships particularly with Shug Avery and Sofia which catalyze Celie's psychological liberation and eventual economic independence.

Keywords: Black Feminism, Oppression, Resistance, Female Solidarity, *The Color Purple*

INTRODUCTION

The history of African-American women in the United States has long been marked by the convergence of multiple forms of structural oppression. During the early twentieth century, Black women in the American South occupied a particularly vulnerable social position. They faced three overlapping forms of oppression: racial discrimination, patriarchal domination, and economic deprivation. These forces did not operate independently. Rather, they reinforced one another, making Black women among the most marginalized groups in American society (Collins, 2000).

The concept of double and even triple oppression among Black women has been widely explored in feminist scholarship. hooks (1981) argues that the simultaneous presence of racism, sexism, and classism creates compounded marginalization. As a result, Black women tend to be overlooked in mainstream feminist discourse, which has historically centered on middle-class white women, and in civil rights discourse, which often prioritizes Black men.

One of the most influential literary works portraying these realities is *The Color Purple* (1985) by Alice Walker. Set against the backdrop of segregation in the American South in the early twentieth century, the

novel narrates the life of Celie, a black woman who has experienced persistent oppression since childhood. Celie is subjected to domestic violence, sexual abuse, racial discrimination, emotional exploitation, and economic dependence within both the family and the broader social structure. Her experiences reflect how patriarchal authority and racial hierarchy operate simultaneously to silence Black women's voices and restrict their autonomy. Walker portrays these forms of oppression not merely as individual experiences but as manifestations of broader institutional systems embedded within American society (Sharma & Sharma, 2024; Kirana & Wiwoho, 2025). These Black women's experiences not only reveal the persistence of social injustice but also demonstrate their resilience, agency, and struggle for liberation (Showunmi, 2023; Wajiran & Apriyani, 2025).

Previous studies on *The Color Purple* have mostly discussed the feminist aspects of it. Bendjelloul and Selseldeb (2018) examined how race, gender, sexuality, and class intersect in the oppression of Black women and found that Celie's transformation reflects the principles of womanism introduced by Walker. James (2025) focused on sisterhood and solidarity among the female characters, showing that the bonds between Celie, Shug, Sofia, and Squeak serve as a key mechanism of survival against patriarchal oppression. Wajiran et al. (2025) explored Walker's contribution to intersectional justice discourse and found that economic ownership—particularly Celie's inheritance and sewing business—marks a turning point in her journey toward self-empowerment. Similarly, Maknun and Rizal (2025) traced Celie's transformation from oppression to empowerment through both Black feminist and womanist lenses.

Previous studies have examined analyze oppression and resistance as separate or sequential processes. Few have examined how race, gender, and class operate simultaneously as interlocking mechanisms of domination and how resistance to these forces is articulated within the text itself. However, limited studies specifically investigate how intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class shape Celie's identity construction through Black feminist theory, particularly through Collins's (2000) matrix of domination and hooks's (2015). Therefore, this study contributes by analyzing Celie's transformation through Black feminist perspectives emphasizing intersectional oppression and resistance. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on patriarchal oppression, this study highlights the interconnected operation of race, gender, and class in shaping Celie's identity transformation through Black feminist perspectives.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research seeks to interpret meanings embedded within texts and social phenomena. The analytical framework applied in this study is Black Feminist Theory, particularly drawing the works of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, which examine race, gender, and class oppression experienced by Black women.

The data in this study are derived in two categories: primary and secondary data. The primary data source is Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1985), focusing on words, phrases, dialogues, and narrative passages that reflect Celie's oppression and resistance.

Secondary data consist of peer-reviewed journal articles and books related to Black feminist theory, used to support and strengthen the interpretation of primary data.

Data collection in this study is conducted through a close reading and library research. Close reading involves a careful and systematic examination of the literary text to identify dialogues and narrative elements that portray oppression and resistance as embodied in Celie's character. The data analysis follows a thematic analysis procedure involving: (1) Conduct intensive reading of the novel; (2) Identify textual evidence related to oppression and resistance; (3) Categorize data using Black feminist concepts; and (4) Interpret findings using thematic analysis

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Forms of Oppression Experienced by Celie

The concept of interlocking oppressions is central to Black feminist thought. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) introduced the matrix of domination, arguing that race, gender, and class are not separate hierarchies, but rather systems that mutually shape and structure Black women's experiences. In Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple* (1985), Celie embodies this matrix from the first pages. Her life is shaped not by a single factor, but by the interconnected forces of racial marginalization, patriarchal oppression, and class oppression. This section examines four interconnected dimensions of Celie's oppression: sexual violence, domestic violence, racial marginalization, and class oppression.

1.1 Sexual and Domestic Violence

The Color Purple. From a young age, Celie was sexually abused by her stepfather, Alphonso, who repeatedly raped her until she gave birth to two children who were later separated from him. This violence not only robbed Celie of her right to her body but also created a deep trauma that caused her to grow up in fear and silence. This experience is described in her confession, "He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't" (Walker, 1982), a quote that shows how Celie's body was treated as an object to satisfy male desires without consent or protection. After being forced to marry Albert (Mr. ____), the form of oppression she experienced continued through domestic violence. Albert routinely beat, humiliated, controlled her activities, and exploited Celie's energy and body without giving her any appreciation or affection. When Celie asked Harpo why Albert always hit her, Harpo replied, "Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn" (Walker, p. 30), reflecting how violence against wives has been normalized in a patriarchal culture. From a Black feminist perspective, Celie's experience demonstrates that sexual and domestic violence against Black women is a result of a combination of patriarchy, racism, and class inequality. Bell Hooks (1981) argues that Black women experience violence in the domestic sphere as a consequence of a patriarchal system reinforced by racism and economic exploitation, while Patricia Hill Collins (2000) explains through the concept of the matrix of domination that the oppression of Black women occurs simultaneously through various interconnected social structures.

1.2 Racial Marginalization

Racial marginalization is one form of oppression experienced by Celie in the novel *The Color Purple*. As a black woman who living in the southern United States in the early twentieth century, Celie faced discrimination rooted in a racist system that marginalized Black people socially, economically, and politically. This condition limited African-Americans' access to education, economic ownership, and legal protection, thus reinforcing their subordinate position in society. Although the novel does not show much direct interaction between Celie and white society, the structure of white supremacy still shapes her lived reality through poverty, limited opportunities, and the normalization of violence against Black women. Celie's awareness of her social position is reflected in her statement, "I'm poor, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook... But I'm here" (Walker, p. 187), which shows that racial, class, and gender identities have become sources of marginalization and the starting point for the emergence of self-awareness. Celie's experience reflects the concept of the matrix of domination proposed by Patricia Hill Collins (2000), namely the interconnected system of oppression between race, gender, and class. As a poor Black woman, Celie not only experiences racial discrimination from the structure of a white-dominated society, but also gender subordination within her family environment. In line with this, bell hooks (1981) emphasizes that the experiences of Black women cannot be understood only through the lens of feminism or anti-racism separately because both forms of oppression operate simultaneously. Therefore, the racial marginalization that Celie experiences is an important foundation in understanding how her identity is shaped by various

interconnected systems of oppression, while also explaining why her struggle for voice, self-esteem, and independence is a form of resistance against the structures of domination that oppress Black women. Farhat and Mustafa (2024) argue that Walker's portrayal of Black women consistently foregrounds how racialized poverty and social invisibility shape their search for voice and self-worth, reinforcing the centrality of racial marginalization to Celie's characterization.

1.3 Class Oppression and Economic Deprivation

Class oppression is a crucial dimension of Celie's life in *The Color Purple*. From the beginning of the story, Celie is depicted as an African-American woman living in structural poverty, lacking access to education, property, or economic independence. Her weak economic situation makes her completely dependent on men, first her stepfather, then her husband, Albert (Mr. ____), who control all aspects of her life, including her labor, production, and decision-making power. Celie performs various household and agricultural tasks without receiving wages or recognition for her contributions. This form of exploitation demonstrates that poverty is not only an economic condition but also a mechanism that maintains power relations and reinforces the subordination of Black women. Celie's awareness of her position as a poor woman is reflected in her statement, "I'm poor, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook... But I'm here" (Walker, p. 187). This statement reveals that class, racial, and gender identities are intertwined in shaping her experience of oppression. Celie's experience reflects the concept of the matrix of domination proposed by Patricia Hill Collins (2000), who explains

that the oppression of Black women cannot be understood solely through a single social category, but rather is the result of the interaction of class, race, and gender. Furthermore, bell hooks (1981) asserts that capitalism, patriarchy, and racism work together to exploit Black women, so that their poverty is a consequence of an unequal social system. As the story progresses, Celie begins to fight class oppression through economic independence after developing a pantsuit sewing business. "I was so happy. I had love, I had a job, I had money..." (Walker, p. 193). This quote shows that ownership of her own income and work transformed her social position from a dependent individual to a financially independent woman. Thus, Celie's economic struggle is not only an effort to improve her well-being, but also a form of resistance against the class structure that has placed her in an oppressed position. Sangeeth (2024) contends that Walker's fiction repeatedly depicts economic dependency as a deliberate mechanism of gendered control, making financial autonomy a central marker of Black women's resistance across her body of work.

2. Female Solidarity as Resistance

Black feminist scholarship consistently identifies collective solidarity among women as a primary mode of resistance to interlocking oppressions. Against the backdrop of these interlocking oppressions, the novel presents female solidarity as a primary mechanism of resistance. The relationships Celie builds with Shug Avery and Sofia constitute what hooks (2015) theorizes as a counter-hegemonic women's community, a space of mutual recognition, support, and consciousness-raising that allows for the development of alternative

epistemologies rooted in Black women's experiences. These relationships function at multiple levels of Collins's matrix of domination: at the interpersonal level through everyday acts of care and solidarity; at the hegemonic level through the construction of affirming counter-narratives; and at the structural level through the practical facilitation of economic and physical independence (Maknun & Rizal, 2025).

2.1 Shug Avery

Celie's relationship with Shug Avery is the most important form of female solidarity in the novel. At the beginning of the story, Celie lives in fear due to sexual and domestic violence perpetrated by her stepfather and her husband, Albert (Mr. ____). She loses self-confidence and accepts bullying as normal. Shug Avery's presence changes Celie's perspective on herself. Shug not only provides affection and attention, but also teaches Celie that she has the right to live free from violence. This support is evident when Shug says, "You should beat Mr. ____'s head until it bleeds. Think about heaven later." (Walker, p. 42). This statement is not simply an invitation to physical resistance, but a symbol of rejection of the patriarchal culture that has silenced women. Shug encourages Celie to realize that violence is not her destiny.

Shug's solidarity is also demonstrated through her discovery and reading of Nettie's letters that Albert had hidden for years. These letters reconnect Celie with her sister and prove that Nettie is still alive. This discovery marks a crucial turning point in Celie's character development, as it awakens hope, strengthens her identity, and breaks Albert's manipulation. Furthermore, Shug encourages Celie to develop her sewing skills, ultimately

leading to Celie's success in establishing a pantsuit business. This success marks the achievement of economic independence, which, from a Black feminist perspective, represents a form of resistance against women's dependence on the patriarchal system.

2.2 Sofia

Celie's relationship with Sofia demonstrates a distinct form of solidarity. Although the two have very different personalities: Celie is passive, quiet, and accustomed to accepting violence, while Sofia is bold, assertive, and resistant to all forms of oppression, their relationship develops into a mutually empowering solidarity. From a Black feminist perspective, this solidarity demonstrates that Black women can build collective power to challenge the interconnected systems of patriarchy, racism, and class oppression.

Sofia is the first woman to openly demonstrate to Celie that men are not always to be feared. When Celie complains about her husband's violence, Sofia demonstrates otherwise by confronting the violence of her own husband, Harpo. This scene shakes Celie's perspective, who has long believed that obedience is the only way to survive. Sofia says: "I love Harpo, but I'd kill him before I let him hit me" (Walker, p. 46). This quote describes that the experience of violence against Black women begins within the family and continues throughout social life. However, unlike Celie, who chooses silence as a survival mechanism, Sofia chooses to fight back. Within Patricia Hill Collins' framework, Sofia's experiences reflect a Black woman's perspective, namely knowledge born from Black women's lived experiences facing

various forms of domination. Collins (2000) asserts that these experiences become a source of critical consciousness that enables Black women to develop collective resistance strategies. Her relationship with Sofia also helps Celie redefine herself. Before meeting Sofia, Celie saw herself as a weak woman with no choice but to submit to men. Through Sofia's courage, Celie begins to understand that women have the right to determine their own lives. Thus, solidarity not only provides emotional support but also becomes a process for forming a new, more independent and empowered identity. As Sharma and Sharma (2024) argued, Sofia stands as an anti-conventional figure who encourages Celie to stand up for herself and fight against prejudice and injustice.

3. Identity Reconstruction and Liberation

3.1 Economic Independence

In *The Color Purple*, economic independence is one of the most significant transformations Celie undergoes. Early in the novel, Celie is completely economically dependent on men—first her stepfather (Alphonso) and then her employer (Albert). This economic dependence reinforces patriarchal power relations because Celie lacks resources, ownership, or control over the fruits of her labor. From Patricia Hill Collins' perspective, the economic exploitation of Black women is a key dimension of the matrix of domination, a system of oppression that combines race, gender, and class to limit Black women's access to power and independence.

For much of the early part of the story, Celie performs all the household chores without recognition or compensation. She cooks, washes, cares for the children, and

performs all household chores, but has no ownership of property. This situation demonstrates the exploitation of women's labor as part of a patriarchal system that views domestic work as a natural obligation for women. The transformation begins when Celie develops the skill of sewing pants. Initially, this activity serves as a means of expressing her creativity, but it later develops into a profitable business. Walker illustrates this change through Celie's statement: "I was so happy. I had love, I had a job, I had money..." (Walker, p. 193).

This quote demonstrates that Celie is no longer working solely to meet the needs of the men in the household. Celie's economic transformation becomes more evident after she inherits a house from her father. Homeownership gives Celie the space to live independently and develop her business without relying on Albert. The house becomes a symbol of ownership, security, and autonomy she previously lacked. In the context of Black feminism, asset ownership represents a form of redistribution of power that enables Black women to make decisions about their own lives.

According to Patricia Hill Collins, Celie's experience reflects the importance of economic independence and empowerment as strategies for Black women's resistance to systems of oppression. Collins emphasizes that access to productive employment and economic ownership allows women to break free from exploitative relationships and define themselves beyond traditional social roles. Younger (2025) describes economic self-sufficiency among Black women as a form of resistance against intergenerational economic trauma, framing financial independence as both a healing process and

an act of defiance. Overall, economic independence is a crucial stage in Celie's character transformation. From a woman exploited for her labor and completely dependent on men, Celie develops into a woman with her own business, income, assets, and control over her life. Within Patricia Hill Collins's framework, this transformation demonstrates how economic independence is part of the process of liberating Black women from the matrix of domination. Meanwhile, according to Bell Hooks, Celie's experience confirms that economic freedom is a crucial foundation for psychological, social, and political freedom. Thus, economic independence in *The Color Purple* is not merely financial success, but a concrete form of resistance against oppression based on race, gender, and class.

3.2 Psychological Freedom

Psychological liberation is the process of freeing oneself from internalized fear, trauma, feelings of inferiority, and oppression, allowing one to establish one's own identity and determine one's own life. From the perspective of Black feminists, particularly Patricia Hill Collins, psychological liberation is related to self-definition and the rejection of controlling images that have shaped Black women's identities. Meanwhile, bell hooks emphasizes that the process of healing and critical awareness is crucial for Black women to liberate themselves from patriarchal domination and racism. At the beginning of the novel, Celie experiences severe psychological distress due to the sexual and domestic violence she experienced as a child. This trauma leaves her feeling insecure and worthless. This is evident when Celie writes:

"I'm fourteen. I'm fourteen. I've always

been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign that tells me what's happening to me." (Walker, p. 11)

This quote demonstrates Celie's confusion and helplessness. She doesn't understand the violence she experiences because she has internalized male dominance as normal. Fear drives her to remain silent, allowing her to express her suffering only through letters to God. At this stage, Celie's psychological freedom is almost nonexistent, as her identity is completely shaped by the patriarchal system. Celie's psychological transformation begins after she enters into a relationship with Shug Avery. Shug becomes the figure who helps Celie recognize her self-worth and realize that she has been living in oppression. Shug encourages Celie to express her feelings, question men's treatment of her, and see herself as a woman worthy of love. This realization marks the emergence of critical consciousness, as bell hooks describes it—the ability of victims to recognize the structures of oppression that shape their lives. The greatest transformation is seen when Celie finally confronts Albert. For the first time, she refuses to submit and expresses her anger openly:

"I'm poor, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook., a voice say to everything listening But I'm here." (Walker, p. 187)

This quote symbolizes Celie's psychological freedom. Although she acknowledges the social identities that have been used to demean her as a poor and unattractive Black woman, she affirms her existence as a valuable human being. The line "But I'm here" indicates that Celie no longer accepts the definitions imposed by patriarchal society. Furthermore, Celie's changing relationship with God also reflects her

psychological freedom. At the beginning of the novel, God was seen as a distant, unhelpful male figure. After discussing with Shug, Celie begins to understand God as a spiritual presence present throughout creation, rather than a symbol of patriarchal power. This change in perspective frees her from the fear and guilt that had held her captive. From Patricia Hill Collins' perspective, this transformation demonstrates Celie's success in defining herself. She no longer accepts the controlling image that portrays Black women as passive, worthless, and mere objects of violence. Instead, Celie begins to define herself based on her own experiences, voice, and choices. She gains psychological autonomy that allows her to build healthier relationships with others and independently determine her own life's direction. Celie's journey from a fearful woman to an individual capable of speaking, making decisions, and defining herself demonstrates that true liberation means not only freedom from physical violence, but also freedom from the mental shackles and patriarchal ideologies that have long dominated her mind. This transformation affirms that the struggle of Black women is not only oriented towards social and economic freedom, but also towards restoring dignity, identity, and psychological health as the primary foundations for a free life. Nash (2024) argues that self-work and self-definition function as a form of political resistance in their own right, further situating Celie's inner transformation within a broader feminist practice of healing as resistance.

3.3 Self-definition

From Patricia Hill Collins' perspective, self-definition is a Black woman's ability to define her identity, experiences, and values

based on her own voice, rather than on stereotypes (controlling images) shaped by a patriarchal and racist society. Collins (2000) asserts that self-definition is a form of epistemological resistance because it allows Black women to become subjects with authority over their own lived experiences.

At the beginning of the novel, Celie lacks the ability to define herself. Her identity is shaped by her stepfather and later by Albert, who treat her as a sexual object, a domestic worker, and a woman without value. Celie even accepts this view as truth because throughout her life she continues to experience physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. This is evident when she writes:

"You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy." (Walker, p. 11)

This quote demonstrates that from childhood Celie was forced to silence her own voice. She was denied the opportunity to explain her experiences or develop her identity. As a result, she internalized the role of a woman who must remain silent and accept. Within Patricia Hill Collins' framework, this situation demonstrates that Celie's identity remains completely controlled by images that position Black women as submissive, weak, and lacking authority over themselves. The transformation of her self-definition begins to unfold when Celie enters a relationship with Shug Avery. Unlike the men in her life, Shug encourages Celie to recognize her own feelings, needs, and desires. Shug teaches Celie that she has the right to speak up, to be loved, and to determine her own life. Through this relationship, Celie begins to realize that her identity does not have to be defined by the violence she has experienced. This change is

most evident when Celie finally confronts Mister directly. In one of the most pivotal scenes in the novel, she declares: "I'm poor, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here." (Walker, p. 187)

This statement culminates in a process of self-definition. Although Celie acknowledges the negative labels attached to her, she refuses to let them define her worth. The phrase "But I'm here" affirms her existence, dignity, and right to live as a whole individual. For the first time, Celie speaks in her own voice without fear of male authority. This development in self-definition is also evident in the change in how Celie writes her letters. At the beginning of the story, all letters are addressed to God because she feels she has no space to express her voice to others. However, after learning that her sister, Nettie, is still alive, her letters shift to communicating with Nettie. This change symbolizes that Celie is no longer speaking from the position of an isolated victim, but as a woman who has found her own community, identity, and voice. According to Patricia Hill Collins, the act of Black women sharing their lived experiences is a form of knowledge production (Black women's knowledge) that challenges the dominance of patriarchal perspectives. Recent scholarship extends this argument: Okello (2024) contends that self-authorship and self-definition remain vital survival practices for Black people navigating anti-Black structures, echoing Celie's own reclamation of voice through her letters.

Furthermore, Celie's success in establishing a pantsuit sewing business also strengthens her self-definition. This work becomes more than just a source of income, but also a medium for expressing her identity. Celie creates designs based on her own

creativity and choices, not on the demands of men. Thus, her identity is built through her abilities, creativity, and independence. Overall, Celie's journey demonstrates that self-definition is central to her character's transformation. From a woman whose identity was shaped by violence and oppression, Celie evolves into an individual capable of defining herself based on her own experiences, voice, values, and choices.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the character Celie in *The Color Purple* novel by Alice Walker represents the experiences of black women who experience multiple layers of oppression due to the intersection of gender, race, social class, and the patriarchal system. The forms of oppression she experiences include sexual and domestic violence, racial marginalization, and class oppression. Through the perspective of Black Feminism, specifically the thoughts of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, this study finds that Celie's resistance process develops gradually through critical awareness, solidarity among women, and the ability to define herself (self-definition). Her relationship with Shug Avery and Sofia is a crucial factor that helps Celie reject controlling images that have limited her identity. This support allows Celie to gain psychological freedom, build economic independence through her own efforts, and gain authority over her life and voice. This novel not only depicts the reality of oppression against African-American women, but also emphasizes the importance of female solidarity, self-awareness, and independence as forms of resistance against the system of oppression.

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