

# African american women overcoming masculinity and oppression



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“ Execution was not the only form that racial violence took in the New South. Rape was also a powerful tool utilized by whites to oppress blacks”(McAleer 1). In the 1930s African Americans, especially women, were largely oppressed.

Black Women’s rights were controlled by masculinity and dominance of men. At this time a large amount of people were working to battle for racial and injustices in a colorblind society. The author of *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker wrote this novel because she believed the stories of the oppressed people she knew were not being told. In the novel, *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker documents the struggle of many African American women in rural Georgia in the first half of the twentieth century in order to delineate the ability of someone who is oppressed to emancipate from the an unjust reality and to empower and make readers aware of racial and feminist injustices throughout the 1930s by utilizing rhetorical devices such as, detailed imagery, symbolism, and epistolary form.

In Walker’s novel, epistolary form permits the main character, Celie, to establish a sense of self as well as a relationship with God. Walker starts each chapter in the form of a letter to God, “ Dear God...”(Walker 1). As Celie becomes a more effective writer, she applies her communication expertise to the rest of the world. Walker utilizes this style of writing in order to enable the readers to get an extensive and firsthand look into Celie’s life. In the Novel Celie eventually loses her faith in God and starts writing to her sister Nettie, “ Dear Nettie...”(Walker 73). Celie eventually stops writing to God because she feels like her past experiences with men have not been successful and is beginning to think that all men are the same including God.

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Walker delineates a realistic reality that sheds light on Celie's distrust of men that leads to her to lose her faith in God. Linda Selzer, from the english department at Penn State says, " By clarifying Celie's characteristic angle of vision this passage highlights the intensely personal perspective that Walker brings to her tale of sexual oppression -a perspective that accounts in large part for the emotional power of the text"(Selzer 1). Walkers use of epistolary form allows readers to see Celie's life in her point of view as well as allow readers to get a cavernous look into Celie's life in order to exemplify the harsh reality of feminist injustices in the twentieth century.

Walker utilizes imagery and symbolism in order to give her readers a realistic perspective of what black women had to go through in rural Georgia at the time. Walker's detailed imagery enables the reader to obtain a nuanced understanding of the severity of rape culture in twentieth century rural Georgia. Later in the novel, in Celie's letter to God she explains that she has been raped by her step father, " I tell him I can fix myself up for him. I duck into my room and come out wearing horsehair, feathers and a pair our new mammy high heel shoes. He beat me for dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway..."(7). Walker exemplifies the callousness of feminist injustice through her vivid imagery by describing the consequences of Celie being raped and mistreated. Walker aids the reader in realizing how far Celie would go to conform to society's masculine standards in order to suppress the needs of a man. Walker's intense imagery causes the reader to wince in disgust in reaction to the way Celie is being treated, educating and motivating her audience to stay aware of feminist injustices. As the novel progresses, Celie starts to develop a sense of self and starts to make pants;"

I'm busy making pants for Sofia now. One leg purple one leg red. I dream of Sofia wearing these pants, one day she jumping over the moon"(Walker 216). When Celie finally breaks free of Mr. \_\_ and male dominated society, she grows into a person rather than a repressed woman. Her metamorphosis into a full, unrepressed woman is symbolized by pants. For most of her life, Celie never wore pants because they were said to be men's clothing. When Celie determines not only to wear pants, but to start a prosperous business in making pants for both genders, she breaks free from gender stereotypes. Walker utilizes pants, as a symbol of freedom from a society lead by men and gender prejudice as well as economic liberation. Walker delineates the harsh realities of racism in rural Georgia at the time as Squeak, a female character in the novel, sasses the white mayor's wife:" He slap her"(Walker 37). The mayor's wife asks Squeak if she will be the maid for her household and Squeak responds with an impolite response.

Although though Squeak's response was slightly rude, it was not acceptable for her to be assaulted, but because Squeak was a woman of color she was treated unfairly and there were no consequences for the mayor's wife.

Through the blunt imagery in he quote, Walker exemplifies that blunt reality of racism at the time. Later in the novel, Celie and her close friend, Shug, talk about their perception of God and why they should not associate God with any race," And not being tied to what God looks like frees us"(87).

Emphasizing God's color instead of concentrating on His love, and creations prevents Celie from discovering her own spirituality. This internal comprehension is different for each person and must be founded on what God does, not on race or gender. The bond with Shug helps Celie to change

this view to a more nuanced understanding of God – one who exceeds gender or race. What Alice Walker is trying to show the reader is the growing maturity and freedom of Celie through the substance of her letters. Many researchers believe that :“ In structure, imagery, and theme, this novel speaks universals by narrating the richness and complexity of the lives of a community of black people- black/white, male/female, educated/uneducated, traditional African/American- and the novel does not gloss over those differences or belittle their importance in history and culture”(McFadden 3). Alice Walker exemplifies the reality of African American culture and history throughout the novel through her usage of imagery. Through her utilization of harsh and vivid imagery, Walker ingrains the severity of feminist injustices into the minds of her readers.

In brief, through Alice Waller’s strong utilization of imagery, epistolary form, and symbolism she empowers her audience to recognize the congruity of being human and a woman. Walkers use of imagery and symbolism gives the reader a look into the reality of African American women’s lives in twentieth century Georgia. This empowers readers to stay aware of social injustices. Epistolary form gives the reader a more personal look inside the the main characters life making the reader understand the harsh reality of the oppressed. Walker makes known the reality of feminist and racial injustices and how any one can overcome from hardships and become an independent member in society. Alice Walker chronicles the ability of a mistreated person to grow and gather a