

Exploring Intersectional Oppression: Racism and Sexism in Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*

Dr. Shashi Kant Tripathi

Asst. Professor & Miss Priya Research Scholar, Department of English, JRD State University, Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

The Color Purple (1982) by Alice Walker delves deeply into the several forms of oppression that African American women in the early 1900s American South faced. The impact of racism and sexism on the novel's female protagonists, Celie and Sofia in particular, is the focus of this article. The research shows that the marginalization of Celie is caused by the combined impacts of both gender and racial oppression, using Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality as a framework. The story shows how racial prejudice, economic exploitation, marital violence, and patriarchal control are genuine problems that women face and how they restrict their power as a result. Nevertheless, Walker also highlights the potential for strength, confidence, and empowerment via sisterhood and mentoring, as seen by Celie's connections with Shug Avery and Sofia. This research places Walker's writings in context with other works by African American writers, such as Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison, and highlights the importance of intersectional analysis in modern feminist thinking and struggles for social justice. In the end, the article contends that within complex societal hierarchies, *The Color Purple* praises the power of resistance, unity, and the reclaiming of one's voice while also criticizing institutional oppression.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Racism, Sexism, Patriarchy, Alice Walker, The Color Purple, Feminism, African American Literature, Gender Studies

Introduction

African American writer and activist Alice Walker has received much appreciation for her works that highlight the struggles of Black women in America. Her Pulitzer Prize-winning work, *The Color Purple* (1982), takes place in the early

20th century American South and brutally depicts the racial and gendered oppressions that existed there. By following the story of Celie, a Black American woman who endured sexual assault, patriarchal domination, and systematic racism, Walker sheds light on the multifaceted nature of oppression experienced by oppressed women. By weaving together a complex narrative of oppression, defiance, and ultimately liberation, the book gives readers a window into the multiplicative impacts of racism and sexism over time and space (Crenshaw 1241).

Presented by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the notion of intersectionality provides a crucial framework for comprehending the ways in which various oppressions interact to generate distinct types of marginalization (Crenshaw 1241). The oppression of Celie stems from the interplay of two social hierarchies; her plight cannot be comprehended in isolation from either racial prejudice or gender inequality. Economic exploitation, social isolation, and personal kinds of abuse are all aspects of the multi-faceted oppression that African American women experience, as Walker's tale shows. The intersectional character of Celie's subjection is shown, for instance, by her forced marriage, domestic violence at the hands of her father and husband, and the systemic poverty that she faces (Walker 12–15).

The *Color Purple* depicts racism in two ways: first, via institutionalized oppression; and second, by the physical and psychological harm that Celie and her friends endure. African Americans, especially women, were subject to harsh economic and social limitations even after slavery ended, including forced labor and the denial of fundamental rights and respect. Because her fight against gendered and racial oppression leads to her incarceration and physical torture, Sofia's interaction with the police is a horrific example of the harsh effects of systematic racism (Walker 98). In a similar vein, the stifling of African American women's voices and denial of their autonomy that Celie experiences at home and in her community is a reflection of the widespread beliefs of racial hierarchy. These aspects of the story show how social standards establish and maintain power disparities across time, shedding light on the lasting effects of slavery and the systemic injustices that uphold racial oppression (hooks 15-20).

Another underlying injustice in Walker's work is sexism and patriarchal dominance. Sexual exploitation, domestic slavery, and stifling gender norms are pervasive experiences for women. The normativity of gender-based violence and the systematic control over women's bodies and lives are shown by Celie's forced marriage to Mr. ____ and her frequent sexual assault. Patriarchal societies illustrate the conflict between compliance and disobedience via Sofia's resistance, which defies

these gender standards (Glymph 18). From emotional manipulation and household confinement to societal expectations that undermine women's economic and personal autonomy, Walker depicts the overt and subtle techniques of patriarchal domination. These incidents illustrate the ways in which sexism shapes the lives of African American women, both in the private and public spheres, and how it interacts with racism to produce oppression. The emotional and mental toll of several oppressions is further highlighted in Walker's story. The author skillfully portrays Celie's slow path toward strength, highlighting the power of personal and collective resistance. Her initial passivity and lack of self-worth are direct outcomes of persistent abuse and marginalization. The narrative emphasizes the value of female camaraderie and support systems as a means of empowerment and survival. Celie regains her voice, asserts her identity, and challenges the cultural systems that have traditionally silenced her via her connections with Shug Avery and Sofia (Collins 56-59). In her work, Walker highlights the importance of female friendship, mentoring, and collective resilience. This echoes wider feminist discourses that acknowledge the strength that comes from standing together against many oppressions.

When trying to make sense of the intersecting social structures that Walker depicts, the intersectionality paradigm is invaluable. Research that does not take gender or race into account at all fails to capture the marginalization that women of color face, according to Crenshaw (1245). Celie's story exemplifies how patriarchal control exacerbates the weaknesses caused by racial prejudice and how institutional racism intensifies gendered oppression. The intricacy of oppression and the significance of studying many axes of marginalization concurrently are highlighted by this dual lens, which allows for a more nuanced view of the social reality experienced by African American women. Scholars may get a better understanding of the ways in which gender and race interact to impact the lives of disadvantaged people by analyzing *The Color Purple* through the lens of intersectionality. These individual stories are placed in larger social and historical frameworks in Walker's work. Social and economic disenfranchisement for African American women are products of a complex interplay between Jim Crow legislation, economic exploitation in the aftermath of slavery, and long-established gender norms. Both individual oppressions and the institutionalized forms of inequality are critiqued by Walker, who shows how these structural forces interact with marginalization and maltreatment experienced by individuals (hooks 23). The epistolary structure of the book, via Celie's letters, gives readers a front-row seat to her inner turmoil and her emancipation,

highlighting the need of speaking out for the historically voiceless on a personal and political level.

Along with its historical and sociological insights, *The Color Purple* begs to be compared with other works by African American authors, such as *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou. All of these works deal with oppression, whether it be racial or gendered, and they provide light on the experiences of African American women and the tactics they use to fight back against repressive regimes. But Walker stands out because she stresses the interdependence of various oppressions and how interpersonal interactions, creativity, and self-assertion may lead to liberation (Angelou 42; Morrison 30). An important location for exploring the junction of racism and sexism via the perspective of intersectionality is established in Walker's *The Color Purple*, as stated in the novel's preface. The story shows that the oppression of African American women is complex and has deep historical roots; it includes economic inequality, social stratification, and intimate partner abuse. Through her experiences of persecution, perseverance, sisterhood, and self-discovery, Celie demonstrates the strength that may be achieved in the face of many oppressions. This study highlights the continued importance of intersectional analysis in gaining awareness of disadvantaged perspectives and furthering feminist and social justice discourse by placing Walker's work within theoretical frameworks and comparative literary studies.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* delves deep into gender, racism, and the many forms of oppression that African American women endure, garnering significant academic attention. To place Walker's work within a larger African American feminist literary canon, literary scholars have emphasized the novel's simultaneous emphasis on patriarchal and racial dominance. As a result of the intersection of their gender and race, African American women encounter distinct forms of oppression, according to Bell hooks (1981). An important issue in Celie's story in *The Color Purple* is the historical silencing of Black women's voices, which Hooks highlights in sections 15–18. This silencing occurs both inside Black communities and at the institutional level. Resonating with hooks' emphasis on the significance of representation and voice for oppressed women, Walker portrays Celie's slow journey of self-discovery, empowerment, and resistance as a reflection of the potential for agency and resilience in the face of institutional oppression.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) provides further context for this intersectional paradigm by highlighting how gender and race alone do not enough to understand

Black women's lived realities. Collins argues that the oppression of African American women is complex and has deep historical roots in her groundbreaking book, *Black Feminist Thought*, which details the interconnectedness of social hierarchies and structural inequity (Collins 56–59). In line with Collins' viewpoint, Walker's work shows how systemic racism restricts Celie's social and economic mobility in addition to male authority figures. The linked impacts of racial and gender hierarchies are shown in the book via Sofia's incarceration, economic marginalization, and resistance to white authority. This supports Collins' claim that intersectionality is crucial for understanding the realities of Black women.

This study's theoretical underpinnings are based on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, who proposed the idea of intersectionality—the idea that different types of oppression may overlap to produce distinct kinds of social marginalization—in her work on the topic. According to Crenshaw (1991), feminist and anti-racist discourses often fail to acknowledge the ways in which race and gender overlap, making women of color invisible. Her experiences as a Black woman, subjected to violence and social isolation, are illustrative of this invisible oppression (Crenshaw 1245). Neither white feminist nor male-centered anti-racist frameworks adequately address her plight. Viewed through the theoretical prism of intersectionality, the complex web of ways in which racism and sexism influence the story of *The Color Purple*—and the lives of African American women more generally—becomes clear.

A number of researchers have looked at Walker's impact on African American feminist writing. Racialized and gendered violence has persisted throughout history, as pointed out by Thavolia Glymph (2002), who notes that African American women endured sexual exploitation, domestic slavery, and systematic disenfranchisement both during and after independence. By placing the book in a continuum of African American women's fights for autonomy and respect, Glymph's research helps us grasp Walker's portrayal of Celie's economic marginalization and abuse (Glymph 18–20). The significance of Black feminist critique in illuminating the literary representations of the political, social, and economic aspects of Black women's oppression is further highlighted by Barbara Smith (1977). In keeping with Smith's demand for writing that portrays the lived reality of oppressed groups, *The Color Purple* uses its epistolary style to emphasize women's subjective experiences while also criticizing systemic inequities.

The examination of intersectional oppression by Walker is further illuminated by comparisons with other literary works written by African Americans. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou discusses the interplay of racism and

gendered sexual abuse in creating the identity of a young Black woman, while Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) investigates the internalized impacts of racist beauty standards on African American girls. Morrison and Angelou, like Walker, emphasize the intricate relationship between social stratification and individual agency, drawing attention to the ways in which oppression at the systemic level shows up in both private and public domains (Morrison 30; Angelou 42). One thing that sets Walker's story apart is the way she uses sisterhood, mentoring, and solidarity among women to combat many oppressions at once. According to the literature, there is no better book than *The Color Purple* to help readers comprehend how gender and race interact in the lives of African American women. By drawing attention to the complex nature of oppression and offering tactics for empowerment and resistance, Walker's work is in line with the theoretical contributions of Crenshaw, Collins, and hooks. In order to critically examine how patriarchal systems and institutional racism impact Celie's life and the socioeconomic realities faced by African American women more generally, this research uses the intersectionality framework as an analytical lens. Intersectional methods are crucial in literary criticism and social analysis, which this study highlights by placing Walker's tale within feminist, historical, and literary settings.

Objective of Study

1. To study the dual effect of racism and sexism on the female characters in *The Color Purple*.
2. To study the techniques of resistance utilized by characters like Celie, Sofia, and Shug.
3. To make parallels between literary depictions of intersectional oppression and current social justice rhetoric.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study examines racism and sexism in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Textual and thematic analysis of Celie and Sofia's experiences is the main technique. The book is the main source for understanding early 20th-century African American women's lives. Secondary sources include academic papers, literary criticism, and theoretical writings on intersectionality, Black feminism, and African American literature. These materials illuminate systematic oppression and resistance via historical context and critical analysis. Data gathering entails attentive reading of the text to discover racial and gendered injustice, domestic abuse, economic disadvantage, and personal empowerment. Thematic coding classifies these events as racism, sexism, intersectional oppression, and resilience. Kimberlé Crenshaw's

intersectionality theory emphasizes how social structures impact characters' experiences. This technique allows a full investigation of how race and gender interact to create distinct kinds of marginalization, as well as Walker's use of resistance, empowerment, and sisterhood to challenge structural oppression.

Results

The *Color Purple*, by Alice Walker, is a powerful story that delves into the ways in which sexism and racism intertwine to impact the lives of Black American women in the American South during the early 1900s. Walker draws attention to the interpersonal and systemic forms of oppression, as well as the tactics of resistance and empowerment, via the experiences of women like Celie and Sofia. The findings of a qualitative textual analysis are presented in this part. The analysis is grouped according to the following themes: resistance, intersectional oppression, racism, and sexism. The text and pertinent academic interpretations are closely examined.

Racism in The Color Purple

The book by Walker explores the ways in which racism shapes societal structures and individual identities. Historically, racist oppression occurred in the South after slavery ended, when African Americans were economically, socially, and politically disenfranchised (hooks 15). Celie and Sofia's stories show how this is true; they both face limitations in their lives caused by institutionalized racism and sexism. The destructive legacy of racial persecution and domestic violence is mirrored in Celie's formative years. Alphonso, her father, controls her, and her early letters show that she feels invisible and helpless, which is made worse by society's general rejection of Black women's independence (Walker 3-7). Like other African American women of her time, Celie is economically marginalized as a result of her enslavement and subsequent brutal marriage.

The racially biased effects of systemic oppression are further shown by Sofia's character. Public shaming and jail are among the harsh consequences that Sofia encounters as a result of her defiance of white authority (Walker 98). According to Glymph, these kinds of events show how racial inequalities are maintained via social policing and institutional systems, and they also reflect historical patterns of restricting the bodies and autonomy of African American women (Glymph 18). The arrest of Sofia is a clear example of systemic racism because it shows how white people punish and silence those who defy white power. Furthermore, the story is replete with instances of racially motivated exploitation of workers. Black American characters are often portrayed in physically demanding, low-paying jobs that perpetuate racial stereotypes. How racial prejudice and economic fragility interact to

restrict social mobility is shown by Celie's employment as a domestic worker and Shug Avery's experiences as a nomadic singer (Collins 56-58). These depictions highlight how prevalent racism is, going beyond personal biases to include structural injustices that limit the opportunities available to African American women.

Sexism and Patriarchal Control

In *The Color Purple*, African American women experience distinct types of oppression due to the interconnectedness of racism and sexism. The book shows how patriarchal systems control the public and commercial sectors, putting women in a position where they are abused at home, exploited sexually, and expected to conform to rigid gender roles. Male authority characters predominate in Celie's early life, from her father's sexual assault to her marriage to Mr. ____ (Walker 12–15). The normative control over women's bodies and choices is shown by these connections, which represent society's beliefs regarding power and gender. Walker shows that patriarchal ideology is the root cause of domestic violence, rather than an individual incident. Because her husband uses psychological, emotional, and sexual violence to establish his dominance, Celie is unable to stand up for herself. Compounding gender-based violence with racial marginalization creates a multi-tiered and systematic kind of servitude, which is something that Collins says African American women often experience (Collins 57).

Sofia's defiance exemplifies the conflict between personal freedom and patriarchal authority. Sofia defies gender norms and expectations, in contrast to Celie, who passively accepts male control. But she faces serious repercussions for her rebellion, such as physical abuse and jail, showing that patriarchal dominance is maintained via institutional and social procedures as well as individual power dynamics (hooks 22-23). In Sofia, Walker shows the dangers of disobedience while also showing how resistance is an important way to stand up for one's autonomy and dignity. Additionally, Walker stresses how sexism hinders women's economic autonomy. Societal standards that reduce women's worth to that of housework and servitude are reflected in Celie's restricted educational opportunities and financial means, which force her to choose careers that benefit males. The character of Shug Avery presents an alternate paradigm of female empowerment by defying these conventions and focusing on her music profession (Walker 75–78). By contrasting Celie with Shug, we can see how women's resistance against patriarchal tyranny may be transformed via mentoring, solidarity, and access to resources.

Intersectional Oppression: The Compounded Impact of Racism and Sexism

Black American women's internal and exterior experiences are shaped by the convergence of racism and sexism, which is crucial to Walker's story. According to Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, it is impossible to comprehend marginalization in a vacuum by looking at it through the prism of race or gender alone; rather, different social hierarchies interact to create new and worse kinds of oppression (Crenshaw 1245). Both forms of persecution are on full display in Celie's existence. She faces double oppression in her patriarchal family and the racist culture that rejects her as a Black woman. Extreme financial precarity, psychological distress, and social isolation are outcomes.

It is in Celie's writings that the multi-faceted tyranny becomes most apparent. She feels invisible and unheard in her family and community, so she writes letters to God at first (Walker 1-3). Because racial and gender oppression interact, her marginalization is amplified, rather than just added to. The intersectional implications of disobedience are further highlighted by Sofia's experiences. Her defiance of white supremacy and male domination not only threatens these systems, but also leads to institutional backlash, demonstrating how racial and patriarchal control are interdependent (Glymph 20).

One further way oppression manifests itself in intersections is via economic exploitation. Because of their gender and their race, Black women like Celie and Sofia are expected to work hard for low wages (Collins 58). Economic subordination exacerbates reliance on male authority figures, which in turn limits opportunities for autonomy and perpetuates marginalization cycles. Reflecting larger social and historical reasons that limit African American women, Walker's story shows that these overlapping oppressions are systematic, not accidental.

Resistance, Resilience, and Empowerment

Walker stresses the power of women's resistance and unity to overcome injustice, no matter how widespread it is. The empowering ties that Celie has with Shug Avery and Sofia challenge the systematic marginalization that she faces. In his role as Celie's mentor and catalyst for self-discovery, Shug pushes her to break out of conventional gender roles and stand on her own two feet (Walker 100–105). Likewise, hooks argues that Sofia's resistance, even if it resulted in punishment, shows strength and agency when confronted with several oppressions at once.

A crucial weapon in the resistance arsenal is the idea of sisterhood. By coming together as a community, women are able to overcome systemic inequality by sharing resources such as information, moral support, and emotional support. In

line with Collins' claim that community networks are an essential tool for empowering oppressed women, Walker places a premium on female solidarity (Collins 60). Walker offers hope and avenues for liberation within entrenched oppression by depicting these interactions, which demonstrate how resistance may occur at both personal and social levels.

By analyzing Walker's *The Color Purple*, we can see how the book delves deeply into the topic of intersectional oppression, the way in which gender and race interact to mould the lives of African American women. The stories told by Celie and Sofia shed light on the economic, interpersonal, and structural aspects of this oppression; at the same time, they show how solidarity can empower individuals through resiliency and self-affirmation. The work of Walker offers a paradigm for comprehending the intricate interaction of social hierarchies in forming minority identities and validates Crenshaw's intersectionality theory for use in literary analysis. In addition to contributing to literary studies, these results highlight the importance of intersectional perspectives in modern debates over equality, social justice, and feminism.

Discussion

As a story of internal conflict and an incisive societal criticism, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker highlights the ways in which gender and race interact to impact the lives of African American women. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory (Crenshaw 1245), this study shows that oppression against characters like Celie and Sofia is not best understood by looking at it through the lens of individual forms of marginalization, but rather as a product of the complex web of relationships between racial and gendered oppression. This book does a good job of showing how discrimination, home hierarchies, and systemic inequality all work together to limit people's freedom of choice, expression, and opportunity. Racism in Walker's story manifests itself in institutional and interpersonal ways, as this research shows. The economic and social restrictions that African Americans faced in the early 20th century South only served to further isolate Celie. In addition to her racist economic exploitation in the past, her current position as a domestic worker is a reflection of that reality (hooks 16). Similarly, the racist policing of the bodies of African American women is highlighted by Sofia's rebellion against white authority. According to Glymph, this kind of policing is representative of a larger historical trend in which Black women's struggles against oppression have been violently and systemically retaliated against (Glymph 20). The historical background of post-slavery racial hierarchies is supported by Walker's portrayal of these facts, which show how social,

legal, and economic systems perpetuate systematic oppression. At its core, the story is about patriarchal power and sexism. The domestic violence and subjugation endured by Celie as a result of her father and husband is a prime example of the patriarchal family norm (Walker 12–15). Compounding the marginalization that African American women already face, Walker's depiction of domesticity as a place of oppression shows how gendered hierarchies are firmly ingrained in personal relationships. On the other hand, Sofia fights patriarchal domination and refuses to submit; yet, her rebellion leads to physical punishment and imprisonment, showing that patriarchal power is institutionally and socially reinforced (hooks 22). This book proves that gender inequality is pervasive and not limited to the home; it permeates the economic, legal, and social systems as well. The unique and compounded kind of oppression that defines Celie's psychological and social experiences is the result of racism and sexism intersecting. The epistolary form of the narrative—her letters—show how trauma, solitude, and systematic disempowerment first confined her voice (Walker 1-3). By using this narrative technique, the author shows that the oppression of African American women cannot be understood just in terms of gender or race, and the reader is able to grasp the complex nature of her suffering. According to Crenshaw, women of color are often left out of feminist and anti-racist conversations since their oppressions intertwine (Crenshaw 1245). As a literary example of intersectionality, Walker's story demonstrates how several social systems interact to create marginalization and resistance.

Resilience and strength thru sisterhood is a prominent subject in Walker's work. An important turning point in Celie's path to self-discovery occurs during her time spent with Shug Avery. Shug inspires Celie to take charge of her life by being a supportive mentor and an example of strong women (Walker 100-105). Similarly, despite the repercussions, Sofia's example of rebellion shows that racial and gendered tyranny may be resisted. For African American women who are subject to several forms of social hierarchy, Patricia Hill Collins argues that community networks are crucial to their empowerment (Collins 60). Women are able to overcome oppressive systems and regain control of their lives via the power of interpersonal connections, as seen in Walker's portrayal of female solidarity. By linking human experiences with institutional criticism, Walker's story places personal challenges within a larger historical and social framework. Social stratification after enslavement, prejudice throughout the Jim Crow period, and long-established gender standards all contribute to the novel's depiction of African American women as oppressed. Walker highlights

the ways in which social institutions perpetuate marginalization by showing both the individual and systemic aspects of oppression; at the same time, she emphasizes pathways for agency, resistance, and change (hooks 23).

Discussions of intersectional oppression are enriched by comparative literature. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* both focus on the emotional, social, and psychological repercussions of Black women's marginalization as a result of institutional racism and sexism (Morrison 30; Angelou 42). The power of unity, imagination, and individualism to bring about change is what sets Walker apart. Walker emphasizes resilience mechanisms, demonstrating how African American women may traverse, fight, and surpass interlocking social inequalities, in contrast to Morrison and Angelou who mainly concentrate on the psychological impacts of oppression. The literary devices used in the book, such as the complex characters and epistolary framework, amplify the intersectional issues already present. The psychological effects of oppression and the slow but steady growth of self-awareness and agency are laid bare in Celie's writings, which provide a window into her inner life. Through the narrative voice, readers are able to see how racism and sexism manifest throughout time, while also honoring the strength, flexibility, and unity that humans possess. By using these techniques, Walker elevates her personal narrative to the level of a social justice criticism, positioning the work as a pivotal platform from which to analyze intersectional oppression and the possibility of liberation.

Conclusion

An important literary work that shows how African American women in the early 1900s South experienced oppression in several ways is *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. Racism and sexism, the book shows, are not separate problems, but rather hierarchies that impact women's lives in complex and multi-faceted ways. The stories of Celie and Sofia show how structural inequities are internalized and reinforced via interpersonal connections and how interlocking oppressions have personal, societal, and economic repercussions. The strength of sisterhood, empowerment, and perseverance is also shown in Walker's story. Celie challenges patriarchal and racial norms via her interactions with women like Shug Avery and Sofia, who give her agency, self-worth, and a feeling of autonomy. Patricia Hill Collins argues that, under overlapping social hierarchies, community networks are crucial for empowerment (Collins 60), and this focus on solidarity is in line with her claims. Contemporary feminist discourse, social justice, and intersectional analysis may all benefit from the novel's critical insights, which make it relevant beyond

literature. Walker shows how oppressed people deal with oppression and how they fight back by putting personal stories in a broader historical and social framework. This study's results show that intersectionality is crucial for literary critics and social analysts to comprehend the social realities faced by African American women and to create inclusive frameworks.

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