

# **The Awakening and Development of Celie — An Archetype of Black Women in the American Deep South**

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**Abstract:** The Color Purple, which reflects the struggle of black women from obedience to struggle, from oppression to independence and from restriction to freedom. Through analyzing the vision of life in the American Deep South from the perspective of the key characters, the thesis reveals the double oppressions black women were under---the inside and outside discrimination in America, and sorts out the process of the protagonist Celie's self-awakening and self-development under the influence of these characters and environment.

**Keywords:** The Color Purple; Womanism; Double Oppression; Awakening

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## **1. Introduction**

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### **1.1 An Introduction to Alice Walker and The Color Purple**

#### **1.1.1 An Introduction to Alice Walker**

Alice Walker is one of the most important black female writers in the American literary world. The issue of black women has always been a key theme of Walker's writing. All her life, Walker fought for equality, freedom and independence for black people, especially black women. As an African-American woman, Alice Walker had already experienced oppression and personal tragedy in her life, which made her learn that it was essential for black people to find their own identity to improve their circumstances.

#### **1.1.2 An Introduction to The Color Purple**

The Color Purple (1982) is an epistolary novel, which has brought lots of praise and criticism to Walker. The novel consists of 92 letters, mainly tells the story of the legendary life of black Celie. The Color Purple not only tells of the heroine's new life; it also talks about the transformation of the black men who had oppressed her. Over time, black women and black men achieved a harmonious coexistence.

### **1.2 An Introduction to Womanism**

The word "womanism" comes from the black dialect "womanish". Both womanism and feminism are based on the resistance to male centers, and both regard the struggle for women's liberation and legal status as their own goal. Walker's womanism not only points out a way for self-consciousness and self-release for black women and women in misery, but also provides a model for harmonious coexistence for the entire human race.

## **2. Elements Affecting the Awakening and Development of Celie**

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### **2.1 Key Characters**

#### **2.1.1 Nightmarish Stepfather — Alphonso**

In fact, Celie's stepfather is a typical male chauvinist — his character is fierce, rude, and to some extent, he can even be said to lack humanity. He married Celie's mother, even though there were no feelings for her. He was a man who did a lot of evil things to Celie and her sister Nettie. At an early age, she had to wash clothes, cook meals and take care of her other siblings, doing what her mother couldn't do. Under the maltreatment and oppression of her stepfather, Celie gradually lost her sense of value and identity consciousness.

#### **2.1.2 Crude and Fierce Husband — Albert**

Albert was a widower with four children who brought Celie from her stepfather along with a cow. He regarded Celie as his property and took it for granted that this was Celie's life and destiny. He loved Shug so much, and in order to treat her, he almost exhausted all his tenderness. Black sisters pointed out a correct path for Celie, in their love inspired, and Celie summoned up courage to challenge male power. Her husband finally realized that his wife — Celie — was not his doll and confessed his fault to her, especially the serious destruction to her psyche and body. Albert's change of thought and action marked his maturity, and he became a man with a complete personality.

#### **2.1.3 Educated and Intelligent Sister --- Nettie**

Sister Nettie was a cheerful and beautiful girl who loved to learn and had a strong sense of self. She was more beautiful and more intelligent than her elder sister, and she also had more education. She experienced a lot when she was in Africa, and these experiences made her become more independent and mature. She never based her life value on marriage and she never liked to conform to men. Nettie's letters provided spiritual power for Celie's self-conscious awakening and rising up to fight.

#### **2.1.4 A Woman in Charge of Her Life — Shug Avery**

Shug was Albert's lover, she was attractive and popular with men, she was out of others' control and different from other black women. She was an upright woman who had her own life, with rich life experiences. Although she had experienced enormous ups and downs, she still had positive attitudes, and could love others and herself. When she lived in Mr. Albert's house, she developed a close relationship with Celie, rescued her from her outdated thoughts and helped her build an optimistic attitude towards her destiny.

#### **2.1.5 A Woman Who Dared to Fight against Male Abuse --- Sofia**

Sofia was not an example of a traditional woman. On the contrary, she was a bold woman who had a motherly trait and a strong personality. She dared to rebel against men and refused to obey her husband's orders, protesting against doing housework, taking care of children and doing farm work. She made a good example for Celie to fight against all manners of oppressions. Her strong will and determination let her husband finally succumb to her and realize that a couple should respect each other, rather than control each other. The arrival of Sofia helped Celie realize that women can get their own freedom and self-esteem by resisting men.

### **2.2 External and Internal Discrimination**

The one was racial discrimination which bounded them by slavery. Black Americans were deprived of their personal rights and became the equivalent of animals and property. Under the influence of religious beliefs, the ideas making up black

values were completely locked; the ethical values of the black society began to dissimilate; from then on, they were completely controlled by the white society.

The other one was the inside insult---gender discrimination. That could be traced back to their own race and their so-called husband. Under the influence of white racial discrimination, black men gradually lost their own self-esteem and self-confidence, and in order to seek spiritual venting, they transferred rude and oppressed ideas to the black female groups, hoping with the help of oppressing women to regain their own self-esteem.

### **3. The Process of Celie's Identity Exploration**

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#### **3.1 The Lost Identity of Celie**

At the age of 14, Celie swallowed her anger and was forced to do everything by others. Under the stepfather's coercion, she did not dare to tell others the truth of the matter to ask for help. She only kept writing to God to tell her heart's injustice, and comforted herself. When his stepfather became bored with her, he gave her to Albert like a thing. But the life in Albert's house was just another hell in her life, and she was still suffering a lot. She turned herself into wood and mechanically followed her husband's domestic way of life for many years. Nettie and Sofia encouraged her to fight, but she refused to fight. After a long time, the main elements of her female identity gradually became lost.

#### **3.2 The Awakening of Celie**

Sofia and Shug, two black women, played a major role in Celie's revival of her own humanity and the emergence of her self-awareness. With the help of Shug, Sofia and other people, and especially with her own struggle, Celie gained economic and political freedom, and her female consciousness began to awaken.

Sofia gave Celie a sight for sore eyes, Celie was moved by Sofia's courage and her spirit of pursuing equality. Celie gradually realized that she also had the meaning of existence and the right to pursue equality and fair treatment.

Shug helped Celie understand and appreciate her own femininity. With Shug's encouragement, Celie took the courage to stand in front of the mirror for the first time and face up to her body structure. She finally began to have a hearty, undisguised laugh, and a truly confident and beautiful smile. At that moment, it was the first time that she had found her body was beautiful and charming, and the female consciousness that had lain in Celie's heart for many years was awakened.

#### **3.3 The Development of Celie**

At this stage, under the guidance and help of Shug, Celie's sense of self-consciousness was completely awakened. She became a strong and independent woman who had an independent personality.

When Shug told Celie that Albert had been hiding letters from her sister Nettie, she finally could not bear it. At dinner, Celie showed her thoughts that had been suppressed for many years. She was no longer afraid of Albert, and she rebuked Albert's evil behavior with fierce words: "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong." (Walker 2006) And in front of the children, she also said, not shyly: "You was all rotten children. You made my life a hell on earth. And your daddy here ain't dead horse's shit" (Walker 2006). In the face of Celie's struggle, Albert became furious and cursed her in the most vicious way. Facing the insults of Albert, Celie no longer resignedly tolerated, but expressed herself: "The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot" (Walker 2006) and "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (Walker 2006).

After awakening, Celie founded the pants company. She bravely walked out of the family and into the society. With economic independence, Celie's vision gradually widened, her knowledge continued to grow, her character became stronger and stronger, she finally perfected herself, she won her dignity, she finally got rid of the fate of suffering, and she lived together with her sister and children forever.

## 4. Conclusion

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The Color Purple not only shows Walker's unique ideas and profound literary accomplishments, but also highlights her outstanding contribution to the cause of achieving equality for black men and women, as well as black national emancipation. It awakens the self-consciousness and national consciousness of black people. This novel encourages womanist consciousness and believes that black women have had the most extraordinary viability since ancient times, and that women should enjoy equal rights with men.

The novel has strengthened the black consciousness of black people as independent and equal individuals, strengthened the black people's national pride and cohesion, and led the black brothers and sisters to realize a bright future without race, gender discrimination and oppression.

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