Abstract

This essay explores gender equality in the novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. The novel portrays how males, without any effort, are automatically accepted as the head of their household, their children and their family’s finances. The women, on the other hand, have to fight hard to claim equality. In my essay I demonstrate how Celie, the protagonist in Walker’s novel, is an oppressed person in the beginning, hardly knowing her own self, but through friendship with other women characters she becomes a strong, confident woman, claiming her independence.

In my first chapter I examine how Walker marvelously exhibits Celie’s lack of identity and how a women’s voice is silenced in a male-dominated society. Walker portrays female strength in three very different characters in the novel: Sofia, Shug Avery and Nettie. Each of them has a different influence upon Celie, but they all take part in helping her finding her identity, as I demonstrate in the second chapter. Sofia’s independence and strength help Celie to recognize how weak she is but Shug Avery’s kindness and love build her up and help her gain belief in herself. She gets to know, and accept her own body and it initiates her desire for selfhood. Shug awakens Celie’s desire for identity and opens her eyes to what a terrible man her husband is. By connecting to Shug both physically and emotionally Celie claims independence from him. In Celie and Shug’s love for each other they find strength to stand up for themselves and claim equality. Celie’s relationship with her sister Nettie is influenced by their lack of communication with each other for years. However, Nettie’s will to learn and later teach inspire Celie’s individuality. Celie’s relationship with Shug is by far the most significant friendship of the three.

In the last chapter of my essay I consider how Celie eventually gains full individuality by establishing a company that sews pants. She starts “wearing the pants”; that is, she takes control of her own life but does so in collaboration and acceptance of others.
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Introduction

The novel *The Color Purple* is the best-known work of author Alice Walker. The story takes place in Georgia in the 1930s and follows the protagonist, Celie, as she faces mental and physical abuse from the men in her life. The story tells of how she slowly overcomes her hardships to become a strong and independent woman. Qiana Whitted notes that the story is somewhat influenced by Walker’s own life as she grew up on a farm in Georgia, like Celie, and her family struggled to make enough money for her to go to school, like Nettie. Walker was the youngest of eight children and her father was a farmer, though better at math than sharecropping (Whitted 2014). Sedehi, Talif, Yahya and Kaur point out that a common view in Walker’s youth was that there was no need for black girls to be educated as they would have no use for their education (1328). This motif appears in the novel when Celie’s stepfather sees no reason for Celie to learn to read or write.

According to Maria Lauret, Walker had a strong relationship with her mother when she was growing up. Walker’s mother always found time to tell her stories even though she was extremely busy working as a maid and taking care of her own home. Walker’s mother was a good role-model and showed by her example that whatever she put her mind to, she was able to do. Walker looked up to her mother and took on the role of a storyteller as well. Unlike the closeness she experienced with her mother, she did not have a good relationship with her father and brothers (6). Lauret says the relationship was distant and negative, marked by sexism and violence (6). Lauret also tells of Walker when she was eight years old and her two brothers were playing with an air gun. One of them shot her in the right eye and after that she was blind in that eye. She also got severe scarring that came to influence her immensely (7). “The blinding makes her feel like an outcast, but it also causes her to grow up fast and to study the relationships she sees around her, through observation and reading, but also through writing poems” (Lauret 7). As a result, Walker did well in her studies and later received a scholarship to attend university, according to the *Encyclopædia Britannica* ("Alice Walker"). Walker won the Pulitzer Prize for *The
Color Purple and the book was later made into a controversial, but extremely popular, film.

In the novel, Celie has an exceptionally difficult youth. She is raped by her stepfather and ordered to manage a big home. Her stepfather gets her pregnant twice but takes both the babies away from her and makes her quit school. He then marries her off to an abusive husband. As a young girl Celie has everything taken away from her, her mother, her sister, her chance of going to school and her innocence. Celie’s life changes when she meets Sofia, her strong-willed, powerful daughter-in-law. Sofia stands up to the men in her life and lets no one tell her what to do. This makes Celie see how weak and powerless she is. When she gets to know Shug Avery, a famous singer and a known tramp, she learns to stand up for herself. Shug builds her up and gives her strength and confidence. She also experiences love and sexual pleasure for the first time with Shug. Late in life, Celie also gets inspired by her beloved sister, Nettie, who she thought was dead. Celie realizes her talent in sewing and starts her own company and moves away from her abusive husband. Her company blooms and eventually her husband asks her forgiveness and helps her in the company.

In this essay I will study the character of Celie in interaction with other characters: how she evolves from weak to strong. In the first chapter I consider why she does not feel equal to men early on and simply strives to survive all the abuse in her life. The friendship that Celie has with other women characters in the novel makes her more assertive and helps her to find her own identity – to accept herself as she is – as I demonstrate in the second chapter. Finally, in the third chapter I discuss how Walker demonstrates how important it is for Celie to be able to wear the pants; that is to gains authority and control in her own household – and in her own life.
1. Celie: a Survivor

The book begins when Celie is fourteen years old, writing a letter to God. Her stepfather has raped her and threatened to kill her mother if she tells anyone but God (Walker 11). Celie is quiet at first, afraid of voicing any of the bad things that have happened to her, so she takes to writing, as she has to put her emotions in some kind of words. At first, all that Celie knows is how to stay alive. In her letters she describes how she changes her body into wood so that she cannot feel the pain of the rape, as her defense mechanism kicks in. “He beat me like he beat the children. [. . .] It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man” (Walker 30). Celie does not understand what is happening to her as she knows nothing about sex. Her ignorance of her own body is apparent: “A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don’t bleed no more” (Walker 15). Daniel W. Ross also points out Celie’s ignorance; “even such a personal knowledge as menstruation comes to her by second hand” (71).

Celic gives birth to two children by her stepfather. He takes the babies away from her shortly after their birth and she thinks he has killed them. He gives them up for adoption, however. Her stepfather finds another wife after Celie’s mother dies, but he still continues to rape her. Celie’s main concern is to protect her younger sister, Nettie, from their stepfather: “I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick” (Walker 17). She manages to save Nettie from being raped by their stepfather. The deep love she has for her sister is influential throughout the novel.

When Celie is about twenty years old her stepfather marries her off to Albert, who has just lost his wife. Albert’s first choice was to marry Nettie but their stepfather says she is both too young and too smart and should become a schoolteacher. He says terrible things about Celie: “She ugly. He say. But she no stranger to hard work. And she clean. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it. [. . .] Fact is, he say, I got to git rid of her. She too old to be living here at home” (Walker 18). Meanwhile Celie lies in her bed and hears the whole thing, as she has been crying after just being raped by her stepfather.
In the few months it takes Albert to decide to take Celie for a wife, Nettie teaches her everything she learns at school. Celie was forbidden by her stepfather to go to school when she first became pregnant, even though she loved going to school. The reason he gave her was that she was too stupid to learn anything. So all Celie hears growing up is how ugly, stupid and worthless she is. All she knows is how to survive. What keeps her alive is her deep love for her sister Nettie and her way of channeling her emotions through her letters to God. Sedehi, Talif, Yahya and Kaur explain the importance of the letter-writing by pointing out that although Celie is not able to communicate with other people she vocalizes her miseries in a series of letters that she uses to express her horrible life (1328).

Albert, Celie’s new husband, becomes highly abusive of Celie, both physically and mentally. It is no wonder that she develops a fear of all men. Guo Deyan observes that she unresistingly places herself under the domination and authority of men (84). This fear of men and of God is shown by Celie’s lack of naming men in the story: “In a male-dominated society, women’s voice is silenced. Before her awareness of identity is awakened, Celie does not dare to speak out the names of those men who strongly command authority over her” (Guo 86). Celie finds a way around this by calling men Mr. ___ in her writings, omitting their names. She calls only a handful of men by their real names in her journals and Guo believes it is for the simple reason that those men could not preside over her (86). Sedehi, Talif, Yahya and Kaur also comment on this, commenting that because Celie was only a child when she was raped, she hates all men and has a great difficulty communicating with them or enjoying sexual relationships. In such a society women are considered “the other race,” inferior to men (1328-1329).

When life gets too hard for Nettie at home she flees to Celie and Albert’s house. Celie and Nettie have a short but wonderful time together but Nettie is shocked by how badly Albert’s children treat her sister:

Don’t let them run over you, Nettie say. You got to let them know who got the upper hand.

They got it, I say.

But she keep on. You got to fight. You got to fight.
But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive. (Walker 26)

Nettie has already found her independence, thus encouraging her sister, but Celie is far from it yet. The only thing she is worried about at the moment is staying alive since her living conditions are severe.

At first Albert is really nice to Nettie, as he is trying to get into her pants, but when she does not submit to his niceties he forces Celie to get rid of her. Nettie understands and does not blame her sister. Before she leaves, she promises to write to Celie. Celie feels terrible about kicking her sister out so in order to help her she tells her to go and find the black reverend and his wife, who is the only black woman Celie has ever seen with money. More importantly, she has Celie’s lost daughter, Olivia. Celie had just recently seen them together at the market and recognized her daughter straight away even though she was now six years old. This is where Celie starts fighting for her own identity, now that she has something to fight for: Her own daughter and her relationship with her sister. Slowly but surely she starts realizing her own strength through her relationship with Nettie and later with other strong women in her life.
2. Influence from Strong Women in the Novel

Celie is well into her adulthood when she encounters any extraordinary women besides her sister Nettie. After living on the farm under the abuse of Albert and taking care of his misbehaved children, she begins to find her own identity through her new friendship with Sofia and Shug Avery. Deyan Guo says that Celie gradually learns to appreciate her selfhood under the wholesome influence of strong female characters, but at the same time men tend to deny women’s existence as equal beings (85). Late in the novel, she is also influenced by the letters she finds from her sister Nettie.

2.1. Sofia: Outspoken and Powerful

Celie’s first glimpse of female existence beyond that of the battered wife or slave is through Sofia, the big and outspoken wife of her stepson Harpo. Celie puts her trust in God and the afterlife, but Sofia thinks differently, and slowly Celie begins to understand new possibilities in life. Celie writes about this in one of her letters where she documents her conversation to Sofia: “You ought to bash Mr. ___ head open, she say. Think bout heaven later. Not much funny to me. That funny. I laugh. She laugh. Then us both laugh so hard us flop down on the step. […] I sleeps like a baby now” (Walker 47). This totally new thought of bashing Albert’s head open is completely foreign to Celie. When she realizes the possibility through Sofia’s words, she finds it quite comforting; so much so that she sleeps better after that conversation.

Walker describes Sofia as “soldier-like” (31) and as “amazonian” (68). Tracy L. Bealer adds a description of Sofia as a physically powerful and emotionally headstrong woman who fights back with her strong body. She overwhelms Harpo’s attempts to physically dominate her (31). Bealer goes on to interpret Walker’s words by saying that Sofia’s powerful body is a physical example of the family support system that makes her resistance possible (31).
Sofia has a strong family support in her sisters where they stick together and support one another.

Guo describes Sofia and explains what a stark contrast she is to Celie, a powerful woman whose response to male abuse is totally different from Celie’s emotional shutdown, as Sofia fights back (85). Ross goes even further expressing: “Sofia is a black woman warrior; her aggression is her means to prevent others from subjugating her. Her defiance in the face of brutal treatment provides Celie a model of resistance against sexual and racial oppression” (71). Celie has a hard time understanding Sofia’s intolerance of abuse and the way she dares to fight back. One night Celie sits out on her porch listening to Albert and Harpo talking and it seems as if Harpo has turned to his father for advice on how to get Sofia to obey him. Celie writes about it in one of her letters: “He say, I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk. To tell the truth, he sound a little proud of this to me” (Walker 42). Celie is surprised at how proud Harpo is of not beating his wife. To Celie the Beatings are the status quo.

Candice Marie Jenkins observes that even though Harpo is born with this feeling of equality, he is raised to believe that men are superior to women. She further mentions that Harpo is in fact as much a feminist as is Sofia. However, because of outside pressure, Harpo continuously attempts to dominate Sofia. Jenkins also observes that she demands to be treated as an equal by him, therefore being the ideal role-model for Celie who never stands up to Albert (979). This goes to show that not only the women need to claim gender equality, but the men also, only in a different way. It is expected of them to be superior to women, but Harpo is different: He likes Sofia as an equal and he does not want to beat her. Harpo has a terrible role-model in his father growing up so he seems a bit ashamed for his failure to hit Sofia to obedience, as he knows that is what his father expects of him:

You ever hit her? Mr. ___ ast.

Harpo look down at his hands. Naw suh, he say low, embarrass.
Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let’em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating. (Walker 42)

King-Kok Cheung suggests that the reason why Celie counsels Harpo to beat Sofia is that she has thoroughly internalized the basics of female subordination as well as being jealous of Sofia’s strength against Harpo (167). Celie realizes her weakness around Sofia as she explains to her how she jumps every time Albert calls her. Sofia is surprised by this and pities her. This makes Celie upset and envious because she has seen how happy Harpo and Sofia have been for the past three years. Thus, jealously she says to Harpo: “Beat her” (Walker 43). Harpo does just that but it backfires as Sofia does exactly the opposite of what he intends the outcome to be and leaves him. Confronted by Sofia, Celie confesses her jealousy: “I say it cause I’m jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can’t. What that? She say. Fight. I say” (Walker 46). Disarmed by the confession, Sofia quickly forgives Celie and tells her: “All my life I had to fight. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me” (Walker 46). The two continue to talk and Sofia tells Celie how her weakness and helplessness remind her of her dear mother. Therefore she is full of sympathy for Celie and reconciles with her. Guo argues that this sisterly communication begins to arouse Celie from her inactivity and that it seems that Celie has managed to cast off her old self and is in fact ready for regeneration (85). Celie realizes her fault; it requires an effort from her to change, but she is starting to. Cheung points out that both the black warrior that Sofia is and her aggression are her means to prevent others from ruling over her. This defiance provides Celie with an excellent example of resistance against sexual and racial oppression (167).

Sofia’s influence is not entirely positive to begin with as Guo notes, Sofia makes Celie realize how powerless and subservient she is (85). Sofia is in a way bringing Celie to basics, teaching her what acceptable behavior towards her is. This is difficult for Celie, but it is necessary for her to start her renewal and her recognition of her own self.
2.2. Shug Avery: An Independent Woman

Shug Avery’s influence on Celie’s life is different from that of Sofia’s. Sofia shows Celie her weaknesses, but Shug builds her up and helps her grow and gain independence. Celie hears about the existence of Shug Avery while still living at home. Her stepmother gives her a picture of Shug, a famous singer and a known tramp. Celie is taken by the photograph and adores Shug’s beauty and looks at the picture often. Celie then marries Albert and Shug’s life gets intertwined with hers. Shug and Albert used to be lovers, but Albert’s family did not approve of her so he let her go, always regretting it. Early in the novel Shug becomes ill and nobody wants to take care of her as the people in town look very much down on her. Celie writes about it in one of her letters to God: “Dear God, Shug Avery sick and nobody in this town want to take the Queen Honeybee in. Her mammy say She told her so. Her pappy say, Tramp” (Walker 48). Even her parents do not want anything to do with her so she is an outcast in her own hometown. Celie proceeds to describe the town pastor’s opinion of Shug: “He talk bout a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner” (Walker 48-49). Albert has a soft spot for Shug and decides to take her in. He travels for five days to get her and brings her back in a bad state. Celie, always fascinated by Shug, is very excited to see her for the first time:

I don’t move at once, cause I can’t. I need to see her eyes. I feel like once I see her eyes my feets can let go the spot where they stuck.

Git moving, he say, sharp.

And then she look up.

Under all that powder her face black as Harpo. She got a long pointed nose and big fleshy mouth. Lips look like black plum. Eyes big, glossy.

Feverish. And mean. Like, sick as she is, if a snake cross her path, she kill it.

(Walker 50)

The first words out of Shug’s mouth are how ugly Celie is, but she does not mind and really enjoys taking care of her and Celie says: “Somebody got to stand up for Shug” (Walker 51). Celie takes care of her with a lot of warmth and affection.
Celie’s transformation begins with Sofia and is furthered by Shug. Shug and Celie become very close. They take turns in nursing each other. At first, Shug is in a bad state physically and Celie nurses her back to life. “I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia – or like she mama” (Walker 57). She has deep feelings for Shug straight away - feelings she never got to experience herself with her mother or her daughter. When Shug recovers, the roles reverse, with Shug becoming Celie’s nurse. Ross explains how Celie’s illness is, however, not physical but psychological: “Celie lacks identity. Shug awakens Celie’s desire for identity” (76). Ross goes on to say that Shug opens Celie’s eyes in particular when she sings a song she has written exclusively for her and it makes Celie feel grateful (76). Celie says in one of her letters: “First time somebody made something and name it after me” (Walker 75). Ross explains how the act of naming something after Celie assures the integrity of Celie herself. She feels she must be somebody to be the subject of a song. Naming a song after her is also “Celie’s first clue that language need not come under the jurisdiction of male authority” (Ross 77). This is quite an eye-opener for Celie, whose sense of self develops quite quickly through Shug’s friendship.

Guo points out that with Shug’s guidance, Celie’s vision is broadened. She is no longer obsessed with survival. She starts thinking about the world outside herself (85). “What the world got to do with anything, I think. Then I see myself sitting there quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr. ___. Us three set together gainst Tobias and his fly speck box of chocolate. For the first time in my life, I feel just right” (Walker 61). This is the first moment in Celie’s life when she genuinely likes her life. It is not all about surviving but also about the bigger picture, getting something out of life, enjoying it.

The physical relationship between Shug and Celie develops quite naturally. Ross notes that before Shug’s arrival, Celie had no desire to get to know her own body, but while nursing Shug, Celie finds her first erotic stirrings (71). She associates these new feelings with her faith: “I wash her body, it feel like I’m praying” (Walker 53). Celie has no knowledge of sexual sensation so she connects it to one of the few good things in her life, her faith.

Shug introduces Celie to the mysteries of the body and sexual experience, “making possible both Celie’s discovery of speech and her freedom from
masculine brutality” (Ross 71). In order to get to know sex, Celie must first get to know her own body. Shrug urges Celie to look at herself using a small mirror. Celie reacts much like a child who fears being caught by her parents and so she giggles and has Shug guard the doors. “Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose” (Walker 79). Her own view of her female organs is quite positive as she compares it to a rose. She is, however, still quite ignorant of her own body. “It mine I say. Where the button?” (Walker 80). She asks Shug where her most sensitive part is and Shug tells her and encourages her to explore even better. “While you looking, look at you titties too” (Walker 80).

Celie gets to know herself by looking at her own body and Ross comments:

To make a desire for selfhood possible, Celie must take a new perspective on her own body. Rather that defining herself in terms of fragmentation or of lack, she must learn to define herself synecdochally, seeing part of her body, specifically her genitalia, as a sufficient symbol of herself as a whole.

(Ross 75-76)

Celie is interested in exploring her own naked body and it gives her a new perspective on herself. When she starts looking, she wants to see and learn more about her own body.

By connecting with Shug, Celie discovers, not only, her naked body, but also her inner self. Guo points out that Shug’s arrival is a turning point in Celie’s life. “From Shug, she not only obtains the awakened sexuality, but also acquires the ability to love herself and others, and the ability to construct her identity” (Guo 85). Shug therefore has a very good influence on Celie, and on how she finds her place in this world. Shug not only has her explore her own women’s parts, but eventually they make love and Celie experiences orgasm for the first time. “Celie’s orgasm suggests a rebirth or perhaps an initial birth into a world of love, a reenactment of the primal pleasure of the child at the mother’s breast” (Ross 72). Celie never got to nurse her two babies as her step-father took them away from her right after they were born so the experience of suckling must have been very sensitive and maternal for Celie. Before having sex, Shug and Celie kiss a lot. “Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a lost baby too” (Walker 109). Ross declares that Celie’s life begins afresh here. “In discovering
and accepting with pride her own body, Celie initiates a desire for selfhood” (Ross 71).

Celie looks at her husband, Albert, with different eyes after Shug’s arrival. “I look at his face. It tired and sad and I notice his chin weak. Not much chin there at all. I have more chin, I think. And his clothes dirty, dirty” (Walker 52). She feels in some ways superior to him as she says she has more chin than he has. She is becoming increasingly more assertive as she grows stronger. Perhaps she sees him neutrally for the first time and looks at him objectively. She knows he was Shug’s lover so she is looking for something that Shug saw in him, but she does not see anything astonishing. In fact, she sees herself as at least equal to this man and perhaps even superior. Bealer asserts that the physical and emotional intimacy created between Shug and Celie helps Celie gain independence from Albert (36-37). Bealer also suggests that the novel is a fictional representation of what womanism would look like if it were a lived experience. She explains that Walker demonstrates how sexual dissatisfaction in women is the logical consequence of the effects that physical and dominative sex has on women. “Men instill and ensure subservience in women’s minds by and through dominating women’s bodies” (Bealer 29). By connecting physically, emotionally and sexually to Shug, Celie claims independence from Albert.

Shug shares her opinion about women’s independence when Tobias, Albert’s brother, comes for a visit one time and they talk about women. “All womens not alike, Tobias, she say. Believe it or not” (Walker 60). Shug feels the need to tell these two men that each woman has her own individuality. Sedehi, Talif, Yahya and Kaur support Shug’s observation and point out that this speech emphasizes the fact that women have different feelings, emotions and desires even though they are the same sex, but they all support and help each other in the novel (1331). Besides taking on the role of a supportive friend “Shug is like a mother figure who guides women in their lives” (1331).

As Celie matures and finds her own identity she starts to realize Albert’s meanness towards her. As she becomes more and more self-aware she cannot help but want to revenge herself upon him. Ross says that Celie becomes sickened by Albert’s cruelty towards her and believes she will feel better if she kills him: “Celie gets her chance when Albert commands her to shave him, a
command reminiscent of her stepfather’s pretended desire for a haircut. Sharpening the razor, Celie contemplates murder, but Shug holds her back” (Ross 79). Celie writes in one of her letters: “How I’m gon keep from killing him, I say. Don’t kill, she say. Nettie be coming home before long. Don’t make her have to look at you like us look at Sofia (Walker 134). This is where her new friendship saves her. Shug reminds Celie that Sofia’s violence got her into prison. Therefore she has learnt through Sofia’s troubles that paying back violence with violence is not a good idea and decides against it. Instead, she eventually speaks up for herself against Albert:

You lowdown dog is what’s wrong, I say. It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need.

Say what? He ast. Shock.

All round the table folkeses mouths be dropping open.

You took my sister Nettie away from me, I say. And she was the only person love me in the world.

Mr. ___ start to sputter. ButButButBut. Sound like some kind of motor.

But Nettie and my children coming home soon, I say. And when she do, all us together gon whup your ass. (Walker 181)

Celie shows tremendous strength in this speech and Ross says that “ultimately, the victim gains moral power over the oppressor” (80). Finally Celie finds the courage to vocalize her anger towards Albert.

Shug makes Celie realize how good she is at sewing and encourages her to go to Memphis and start her own business. With Shug’s encouragement Celie is able to leave Albert. “She intends to liberate herself from her husband’s dominance and follow her dreams” (Sedehi et al. 1331). Celie is very skillful at sewing pants and Shug keeps encouraging her throughout the process: “You making your living, Celie, she say. Girl, you on your own way“ (Walker 192). Ross observes: “With her newfound identity, Celie is able to break free from the masculine prohibition against speech and to join a community of women, thus freeing herself from dependence on and subjection to male brutality” (Ross 71).

According to Guo, the two women’s love, empathy and support of each other gives them strength to stand up for themselves and to find their own identity in a male-dominated society (85). They enjoy it while they are at it:
“Shug Avery helps her [Celie] recognize the precious value of herself, and she will be able to celebrate her own being. [. . .] Celie and Shug take great delight in their transformations” (Guo 85).

Lauren Berlant believes that Shug is the novel’s professor of desire and self-fulfillment thus having immense influence on Celie (842). Through her relationship with Shug, Celie finds real love and passion and after experiencing love and the sensuality of sex she is able to erase from her memory the perversion of being raped by her stepfather “the rapes themselves seem to disappear. Celie then recovers from the guilt and shame that had stood in the way of her ‘right’ to control her body and her pleasure” (Berlant 842). This is an enormously important part in Celie’s quest to find her own self and claim gender-equality.

2.3. Nettie: Appetite for Learning

Nettie is the prime example of a strong, black woman in the novel. As a young girl, she has a great desire for education and Celie tries to support her the best she can. “I tell Nettie to keep at her books” (Walker 14). Celie sees the need for studying even though she is unable to go to school herself. Early in their lives she encourages her sister. Nettie realizes that studying will give her more opportunities in life, along with greater independence.

Celic saves her sister from being raped by their stepfather and perhaps Nettie has a stronger self-awareness than Celie as a result. “Sometime he still be looking at Nettie, but I always git in his light” (Walker 15). When Celie leaves home to marry Albert, life gets more difficult for Nettie at the farm but she finds the strength to move away from her stepfather. She moves in with Celie and Albert but Albert cannot stand not having her so eventually he orders Celie to tell her to leave. “I tell Nettie the next morning. Stead of being mad, she glad to go” (Walker 26). They decide to stay in touch through writing but Celie does not
receive the letters that Nettie writes her because Albert hides them. It is a
terrible grief for Celie, who believes for a number of years that her sister is dead.

When Nettie leaves Celie and Albert she finds a place to stay with a
missionary and his wife. They hire her to help out with their two children and
also to help spread the gospel in Africa. Their children are in fact Celie’s children,
adopted. They sail to Africa and move to the town of the Olinka tribe where they
work as missionaries for most of Nettie’s life. Nettie starts a school and teaches
the children about the world as well as how to read and write. Nettie gets to
experience a totally different society with the Olinkas and a different type of faith
that opens up her world even more. Describing the life of the Olinka people,
Nettie writes to Celie that these people have a different version of the beginning
of the world than the one described in the Bible. To the Olinkas, Adam was not
the first man. This is quite a surprise to Nettie, who never before questioned the
truth of the Bible. The Olinkas think of Adam as the first white man and since he
was naked on the first days of the earth, to them, being white means being naked.
Realizing the Olinka’s different interpretation forces Nettie to open her mind,
respecting and accepting different types of culture and faith.

Even though Nettie has moved across the world she finds the same
contempt for women as at home. She realizes that gender inequality with the
Olinkas is even bigger than in America. She teaches the girls of the tribe to be
independent and study hard, but meets a lot of resistance by their parents. She
writes about this in another letter to Celie: “The world is changing, I said. It no
longer a world just for boys and men” (Walker 148). The Olinkas are not quite
ready for that and a father of one of the Olinka girls says to her that their women
are respected but they need someone to look after them:

Do not be offended, Sister Nettie, but our people pity women such as you
who are cast out, we know from where, into a world unknown to you,
where you must struggle all alone, for yourself. […] We understand that
there are places in the world where women live differently from the way
our women do, but we do not approve of this different way for our
children. (Walker 149)

Nettie has to fight hard for gender equality with the Olinka tribe, as at home, and
she clearly realizes her position. “So I am an object of pity and contempt, I
thought” (Walker 149). Nettie does not give up and through her teachings she gets to sow a seed of gender-equality among the members of the tribe by allowing the girls to study. “The boys now accept Olivia and Tashi in class and more mothers are sending their daughters to school” (Walker 156). This is a big achievement for Nettie. Her work is cut short though because the white man comes and builds a road right through the village and they are forced to go back home.

Celie reads about all this quite late in her life when she finally finds Nettie’s letters that were hidden away by Albert. Celie reads about her sister’s troubles with inequality among the Olinkas and is inspired by her. By reading about Nettie’s achievements Celie respects her sister even more than before and is of course ecstatic to discover that her sister is still alive and well.

Nettie has a strong sense of independence right from her childhood that strengthens as she gets older. In the beginning Walker portrays it by showing Nettie’s passion for education. When she gets older, Nettie does not accept the suppressive environment at home and leaves. She also encourages Celie to stand up for herself and not let Albert’s children treat her badly. Finally, she fights for the right of the girls of the Olinka tribe to study, like the boys, and she succeeds. When Celie finally finds her letters, she is getting older and wiser herself. She learns a lot from reading them and is inspired by Nettie’s strength. Cheung says that the way of the Olinkas confirm what Celie has learned from her friends Sofia and Shug Avery. “But it is Nettie who, by disclosing the arbitrariness of social conventions and the bias of certain orthodox religious teaching, finally confirms what Celie has learned from Sofia and Shug: “Nettie’s account of another world with a different set of rules, along with her singular example, makes Celie all the more convinced that, like Sofia and Shug, she must hold her own” (Cheung 167).
3. Wearing the Pants: Celie’s Self-Realization

Celie finds her identity towards the end of the book. She realizes that her own self is not worth any less than that of men. She starts wearing the pants in her family, and in her life in general. *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* says that wearing the pants, “originally put as *wear the breeches,*” means to “[e]xercise controlling authority in a household…. This idiom, generally applied to women and dating from the mid-1500s, a time when they wore only skirts, equates pants with an authoritative and properly masculine role.” We still use this idiom today and it applies perfectly to Celie. She steps out of an abusive relationship and starts wearing the pants in her own household, and in her own life. As Ross notes, Celie’s sewing means more than just making pants. “For Celie sewing represents not a means of covering up her castrated genitals but of binding together the sexes so that both male and female can ‘wear the pants’” (81).

Even though lost and weak in the beginning, Celie finds her way through her life by resisting the fixed gender roles and Sedehi, Talif, Yahya and Kaur point out that “Celie, revolts against fixed gender roles” (1328). She was unable to revolt on her own accord but by the help of her female friends she is able to fight. Guo notes that Celie gains strength and belief in herself when Shug declares she will not leave her until she knows for sure that Albert stops beating her (86). This gives Celie an affirmation that she is loved and that Shug cares enough for her to stay with them, to make sure that she is safe. Through her hardships in life she has matured and Guo compares her to a “hard-beaten bird [. . .] waiting for the feathers to fly.” (86). Celie has been given a fresh breathe of air and is ready to embrace new life: “Leaving everything old behind, old life, old notions and old self, Celie enters a world of creation. Her creation is substantialized by her newly acquired power of naming and the act of pant-making” (Guo 86-87). It can therefore be said that the pant-making gives her the feathers to fly. By that time she has also gained the strength to name men by their names. “At that time Celie has realized that naming represents the capacity to defend one’s selfhood” (Guo 87). Guo also suggests that the different and diverse patterns of pants that Celie designs reveal that she is well on her way to create a new life for herself (87). At first a survivor, she is now experiencing new life and all its colors. She is able to
say what she means instead of saying nothing - and then writing a letter to God about it. “Celie is finally able to articulate herself and realize that life is more than the matter of survival. Language has become an inalienable part of her determination to assert her own identity, to tell people who she is” (Guo 86). Celie shows her determination in a speech which also shows she has stopped allowing Albert and Harpo to oppress her and Sofia, and that she gets full support from the other women. This is a great turning point in the novel and shows clearly how much Celie’s confidence has grown:

Oh, hold on hell, I say. If you hadn’t tried to rule over Sofia the white folks never would have caught her.

Sofia so surprise to hear me speak up she ain’t chewed for ten minutes.

That’s a lie, say Harpo.

A little truth in it, say Sofia.

Everybody look at her like they surprise she there. It like a voice speaking from the grave.

You was all rotten children, I say. You made my life a hell on earth. And your daddy here ain’t dead horse’s shit.

Mr.___ reach over to slap me. I jab my case knife in his hand.

You bitch, he say. What will people say, you running off to Memphis like you don’t have a house to look after?

Shug say, Albert. Try to think like you got some sense. Why any woman give a shit what people think is a mystery to me.

Well, say Grady, trying to bring light. A woman can’t git a man if peoples talk.

Shug look at me and us giggle. Then us laugh sure nuff. Then Squeak start to laugh. Then Sofia. All us laugh and laugh.

Shug say, Ain’t they something? Us say um *hum*, and slap the table, wipe the water from our eyes. (Walker 181-182)

This excerpt shows how Celie’s strength has grown through the novel. The women who have supported each other through difficult times have finally gained the upper hand against the men who abused both Celie and Sofia. The women allow themselves to laugh out loud at the men as they hopelessly try to keep the upper hand. This excerpt also does extremely well in showing the
language Celie speaks in the novel. Nettie's language is a Standard English, but Celie speaks as she speaks. Pi-Li Hsiao says that Celie is speaking a “rule-governed language” (97). She points out that the Black English which is labelled as African American English today is used for Celie’s voice to be heard, the black, seemingly uneducated voice. “In order to make the black voice heard, Walker knows she has to compromise her position in a context where Standard English is the dominant language. However, she allows Celie no such concessions” (Hsiao 97). Hsiao adds that Walker has Celie speak vernacular as she “wants her to maintain her autonomy” (99). As the story progresses, Celie’s letters get “more and more sophisticated in vocabulary, sentence lengths, and subject matters” (Hsiao 97). That goes to show how much she has grown. She is able to put her thoughts forward in a more organized way without losing her sense of Black English. Upon starting her own business Celie is advised to speak more standard so she does not sound ignorant, but she refuses to do so and claims to be unable to think logically when speaking correctly. Perhaps Walker is showing us that Celie is true to her black heritage even though she has grown in the novel. Furthermore, Walker suggests that even though Celie comes from the lowest social status of a black, poor, seemingly ignorant woman, she is in fact a resourceful, smart woman who can support herself financially. Therefore we should not judge people from their dialect or social status. 

Celia comes of age in this novel. At the age of fourteen she is a victim, but slowly transforms to a victor who is not afraid of speaking her mind. “As a result of finding new friends, she becomes courageous enough to express her repressed thoughts and desires” (Berlant 430-431). Celie and her female friends in the novel free themselves from all limitations and find a way to shine towards the end of the book. “To sum up, all the female characters of this novel go through suffering and pain, but they resist and find their own path. They start to know their own talent and desires in life; therefore, with self-understanding they follow their path” (Berlant 430-431). By having Celie making pants Walker reveals how Celie takes control of her life, both emotionally and financially. She is no longer dependent upon anyone to shine. Through her friendship she has gained the confidence to become completely independent.
When Celie first arrives in Memphis Shug supports her but Celie’s pant-making business quickly takes off. Celie quickly becomes financially independent, she is well known for her sewing and loved by Shug, the woman she loves the most. Even Celie and Mr. ___ eventually meet as equals. Albert works on his bad behavior after Celie leaves him and repents. When they meet again he tries to make up for the past by sewing pants along with her and gives her some ideas about sewing shirts that suit her pants. He regrets his old behavior, but realizes that a simple sorry does not make up for all his wrongdoings. He cherishes being close to Celie and they slowly build a friendship.

Celite chooses a solid name for her company: Celie’s Folkpants. It implies that not only men wear pants, but they are for all folks, both genders and people of any social status. Berlant says that the unisexuality of the pants “deemphasizes the importance of fashion in the social context in which the pants are worn: following the ethical and aesthetic shift from worshipping the white male God to appreciating the presence of spirit and color” (852). The pants come in different shapes and colors and so does life. Celie wants her pants to suit everyone regardless of social status or gender.

Walker shows how full gender equality is achieved: the women characters need to insist on equal status since the males are born to the dominant position but the men also undergo change in the novel. Guo says that Walker’s male characters learn to accept women, not as objects but as having “equal status as human beings” (Guo 84). As Guo notes, the characters “discover in themselves the ability to love and to be loved” and to reach a “state of self-fulfillment and ... perfection” through pain (Guo 84). Therefore, both genders can be in control of their own lives; either or both can “wear the pants.”
Conclusion

In *The Color Purple* Celie is abused and oppressed by the men in her life. Walker portrays how male-oriented society is. The men automatically hold power over women. They do not have to do anything to be the superior gender. They are granted unconditional power over their home, their wife, the finances and their children. The women, however, need to fight for their independence; they need to exert major efforts to claim gender equality.

Walker shows that late in Celie's life she is able to overcome the sense of inferiority that has been drilled into her. She has also learnt to resist and reject abusive treatment, like that of her stepfather and of her husband, Albert. She has erased her memory of being constantly raped and abused by her stepfather through her experience of loving sex with Shug. She overcomes the effects of Albert’s abuse by finally standing up to him and leaving him. As Celie gets help breaking out of the isolation imposed upon her by abusive males, she discovers a different existence of support and perseverance. She starts reclaiming her family when she finds Nettie’s letters. Nettie helps Celie to find a will to carry on by being a good example for her with her desire for education and later with her fight for gender equality among the Olinkas in Africa. Sofia teaches Celie that women can be strong-minded and assertive. She shows Celie that it possible to live a happy life in an equal marriage.

Shug has the biggest influence on Celie, nonetheless, as she gives her unconditional love and adoration. She teaches Celie to love, enjoy life and be independent. She also teaches Celie to get to know her own body and Celie becomes quite proud of it. Shug’s love and care are a completely new experience for Celie. She slowly gains confidence and in the end stands up for herself against her abusive husband.

Through all the pain and the hardships, Celie finds her place in this world. She becomes strong and independent and realizes that women and men are equals, but the women need to claim equality. Celie does not achieve happiness until she is able to depend upon herself. Her successful sewing business and her growing self-confidence give her independence.
The Color Purple delivers a message still to this day about gender equality. It does not matter whether we are born black or white; men are still born with the upper hand in most countries. Women have to fight to claim equality. Women’s financial independence and companionship with one another supports them in finding their own independence and also the right to rule their own finances and being in charge of their families.
Works Cited


