
The Epistles of Experience: Creating an Authentic Feminine Space

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ABSTRACT

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Literature examines how women in society function within their specific cultures and circumstances to encounter the challenges they face in life. Despite fragmentation in their lives--like quilt makers, they piece together the scraps of their existence to form an integrated and complete whole. The imagery of the quilt plays a significant role in African American women's writing. The quilt is a narrative device essential to the storyteller's technique. As the narrator utilises the quilt in telling the story, it becomes an integral part of the fiction. It functions as an intrinsic component of narrative and plot and not as a helpful metaphor. For Alice Walker, the writing process is similar to the art of quilting, which necessitates assembling various patches belonging to different textures and transference from one narrative space into another. Accordingly, the most significant feature of African American quilts is their "promise of creating unity among disparate elements, of establishing connectedness amid fragmentation" (Kelley 176).

Many women in cultures throughout the world exhibit resilience and power in the face of obstacles and vicissitudes. In the fiction of American women for several decades, the quilt has served as a trope for understanding structure, character, theme and other standard elements of fiction. Theoretical writing of the feminist critics abound with images of 'text and textile, thread and theme, weaver and web' (Showalter 224). Showalter uses this trope to draw similarities between the development of piecing and the writing of female experience. In her essay "Piecing and Writing", Showalter states that knowledge of piecing, the technique of assembling the fragments into an intricate design, can provide the contents in which we can interpret and understand the forms, meanings and narrative traditions of American women's writing. (227)

Alice Walker's epistolary novel, *The Color Purple*, resembles a quilt woven out of various pieces of painful experiences of life. Like a quilt, Walker juxtaposes the traumatic experiences of the doubly displaced women positioned under the yoke of slavery. Walker writes from her experiences as a Southerner, African American, and woman. The letter format she follows in *The Color Purple* allows Walker to speak for a community. For Walker, writing forms part of the complex process of achieving personal autonomy.

The Color Purple is an unconventional autobiography of an oppressed black woman's journey from sexual slavery to self-definition. It is about personal transformation and empowerment. It is the process of Celie, the protagonist writing herself into being and consciousness. The novel *The Color Purple* resembles a giant quilt woven from various pieces of painful experiences of slavery. Like a quilt, the novel brings together the repressed memories and experiences of a

doubly peripheralised woman, Celie, destined to be under the yoke of slavery. Showalter emphasises the ideological value of this quilting activity, which has served different causes through different ages.

The quilting parties allowed women to legitimately get out of the house and meet each other without needing to justify themselves. The purpose of the quilting parties was to sew together and engage in the art of recycling. The patchwork quilt is primarily about making the new out of the old. In the quilting parties, women began to find a voice and protest against the established order and the right to vote. (Chouard 53)

The quilters documented not only the world around them but their inner world – a landscape of their love, hopes, wishes, wounds, fears, and dreams. The quilt became their confession in cloth, a form of visual music. Like life songs, they never knew they were singing. The quilt was the consummate symbol of their femininity, comforting, protecting, and embracing all their life, accompanied through their rites of passage. It also became their 'magic carpet', creative and emotional release.

The connection between America and the patchwork is also linked to the notion of emancipation. A metaphor for the national cultural identity, the patchwork liberates and respects ethnic and social specificity, in contrast to 'The Melting pot' that blends all individualities. According to Elaine Showalter:

Patchwork questions the monolithic concepts of American exceptionalism. It incorporates contemporary concerns for gender, race and class in (de)finately able to adapt to the constant contemporary mutations, becoming a symbol of American identity at the fin de siècle. The ruling elite has an American ideology; the people have their patchwork quilt (rather than melting pot) American multifariousness; America is so many forms of ethnicity, many patterns of thought, many ways of life, many cultures, many American literatures (quoted in Showalter (167,168).

The history of Africans in America is filled with stories of pain, injustice and humiliation. It is not as pleasing as a colourful African heritage that can be fabricated, like a quilt, from bits and pieces one finds attractive. It is a natural heritage comprising of real people who deserve respect and admiration. Celie, the protagonist in *The Color Purple*, is essentially an object, entirely a passive woman who has no power to assert herself through actions or words. Like her unfortunate ancestors, Celie is abused, brutalised, and dehumanised by her male masters. Celie sees herself, physically and emotionally, living in irreconcilable fragments. Her anecdotes from life in the first few letters were very poignant. She has been torn from childhood by Pa's incestuous rapes and has endured tormenting experiences. He separates her from the two children she bears and isolates her from Nettie, her sister, the only person close to her, when she forces herself into a marriage she does not desire. Her life continues to be a series of sacrifices in her relationship with Pa, Nettie, and Mister. Celie has been fragmented into pieces and given away to others, mainly at the insistence of men who dominate her.

The American quilt documents the art of African American women. Women artists who work in the fabric are often marginalised. It is because cloth is linked to womanhood and domesticity, and things associated with women are often seen as inferior. The process of making a quilt and the product of the quilt itself provides an opportunity to give an outlet for thwarted energies. The quilt is made of fragments, bits and pieces of discarded garments. In effect, it results in reconciliation between relations –between people. All these diverse designs of different

generations of relatives are sewn together to make it a united material.

Like the American quilt, Celie's life, quilt, and writing are composed of discontinuous pieces. Her chosen form of self-expression, letter writing, consists of short, discreet units of fragmented prose, broken off and interrupted by the demands of her life. Nevertheless, Walker quilts that discontinuity into a poignant narrative, making Celie work with text and the textile. The epistolary genre in *The Color Purple* helps the reader track Celie's psychological and physical development. Her epistles evolve from the first childish letters that revealed doubt and ignorance to the mature ones that deliberate her progression to self-definition; Celie transformed her writing into a vehicle of truth and self-expression when she was forced to be silent. As her letters include the voices, speeches, and texts of other characters, she constructs her identity by interacting with other women who contribute to her self-definition. The author shows her awareness of the deep interconnection between her writing and other writers' works, as revealed by her confession, "I learn that the writer's pen is a microphone help up to the mouth of ancestors and even stones of long ago." (Walker 144).

As Deborah McDowell notices, the epistolary style emphasises Celie's isolation and desperation and validates Celie's independent voice. Celie's letters are a refuge from the patriarchal world, which initially does not allow her to voice her problems. As a result, these letters rupture the silence imposed on her and symbolise her underlying to be emancipated. Celie perhaps chooses to write as she has no one to talk to about her sufferings. She is isolated from her kith and kin and feels desolate and depressed. This marginalisation left only one possible 'trustworthy' relation, God, until Shug (her husband's mistress) entered her life. Celie can understand what is happening to her through the epistles. For Valerie Babb, writing enables Celie to "fix the events of her life, thereby lending them coherence," through writing, the protagonist review, think and reflect on those events (Babb 111). Wendy Wall suggests that writing has different functions for Celie-- it is symbolic and a literal rewriting. Celie can "define herself against the patriarchy and thus . . . 'reinscribe' those traces and wounds upon her body inflicted and imprinted by others. (Wall 86)

The letters being first addressed to God (an abstract addressee) and then to Nettie (who never answered the notes), they are advantageous to Celie rather than the addressee. The desperate Celie writes to preserve her life, to ease herself, just as Walker has said of her writing to stay alive, to survive. "Writing poetry is my way of celebrating with the world that I have not committed suicide the evening before". (Walker 61)

When Celie tells her experience, she creates, at the same time, a tangible element, "Letter" gives meaning to her sufferings since they are in front of her eyes; she can read them and try to understand them. Since Celie's husband intercepts Nettie's letters, Celie does not hear from them, her sister, for years. However, when Shug discovers the letters and reads them with Celie, Celie feels as if she was born again. Even if Nettie is physically absent, Celie is morally present through her letters. (Walker 112) Celie receives essential information about her family and past from Nettie's letters, about their 'real' father, apart from their materialistic importance, about "Pa", who, in reality, is only their stepfather. This valuable information has a significant impact on Celie's psyche. For Celie, writing becomes a means of structuring her identity.

In *The Color Purple*, the quilt also symbolises a bond between women. Walker weaves the novel in the form of a colourful quilt. Like motifs in a quilt, various patches of painful experiences Celie, the novel's protagonist, had to go through since the age of fourteen. The

novel, an epistolary patchwork of fragments, unfolds the miserable life of Celie. Celie's stepfather rapes her and gives her in marriage to a neighbour farmer, looking for a mother or maid for his children. The story evolves through the many letters Celie writes to God and, later, her sister Nettie, a missionary in Africa. Patriarchy silences and removes her from the only person she loves, Nettie. Mr.- thinks Nettie and Celie's continued contact is a threat. By depriving Celie of Nettie's letters, he can make her emotionally empty, and she will not have the will to fight back. Like her mother, Celie will 'stumble blindly' through life and perform whatever task is necessary to survive. Robbed of her self-esteem and repeatedly reminded that she is "black, pore, ugly a woman nothing at all" (176)

In the novel, Celie's writing merges with her speech, and her voice evolves in her letters until she can release it upon the world. Similarly, Celie's spoken word empowers her in the story world, while it is her letters that exist in the real world printed to read.

Linda Abbandonato locates the roots of *The Color Purple* back in Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748). He remarks that it opposes a canon of men writing stories about women and a tradition of silencing women's stories by refusing to publish them (Abbandanato 1107). Black women are voices from the margins, whether they speak as Black or women. In Walker's essay "In Search of Mothers' Gardens," she writes about the quilt in the Smithsonian Institute that an anonymous Black woman made, and Walker says, "if they could locate her, she might turn out to be one of their grandmothers". In Walker's short story "Everyday Use", the quilts have a special meaning. In this story, the bond is between women of several generations. When Mamma moves her fingers to touch the quilts, the patches in the (handmade) quilt, she reaches out to touch the people the quilts represent.

Quiltmaking and letter-writing are significant in *The Color Purple* because they work to piece together Celie's fragmentary world. Walker herself draws the analogy between her writing of *The Color Purple* and quiltmaking. After she bought some fabric and obtained a quilt pattern from her mother, her quilt "began to grow. Celie, Shug, and Albert were getting to know each other". (Walker, 358; Tucker, 88). Walker comments on the interdependence of writing and quilting in her essay "Writing *The Color Purple*" (In Search, 355-60). After searching for a place to make her characters feel comfortable enough to speak, she waited to compose her mind and worked on her quilt. Quiltmaking and writing are part of the same process in the life of Alice Walker and within the text of *The Color Purple*.

The quilt makers make patchwork quilt by cutting or ripping her fabrics apart by making use of old clothes or crisp new cotton. A patchwork quilt would not be a reality without that rending. This deconstructive act is a creative act of courage, confidence, and faith. Tearing the fabric seems an appropriate place to begin because being torn is a familiar experience for women. Celie's life illustrates this. By quilting her experiences in the form of an epistolary novel, Alice Walker gives the text the power of the quilt to warm and comfort the user. The quilted work strengthens the bonding and establishes connections to the past. The novel, as quilt, enables the author 'to lay to rest' 'an unspeakable story about a period of American history. Through the epistles in *The Color Purple*, Walker emerges as one of the humanist voices of our times. The epistles help Walker transforms her alienation and heritage of slavery into an ultimate victory. She survives the oppressive circumstances through her powerful voice and writings.

Many of Alice Walker's writings discuss the idea of female creativity as a means of resisting oppression and the transcendence that may occur through such artistic activity. In quilts made from rags, stories, and blue songs wrung from life experiences and gardens raised from rocky

soil, black women for generations have passed down to their daughters a need and ability to create art and beauty from the artefacts of daily life. Walker celebrates in her works the wellsprings of creative spirituality that have empowered black women to become resilient and resolute in life.

Jacques Lacan writes, "we can never say all things, nor all things to all people. We can only say something to someone, somewhere. Appearing to be a syncretising and unifying art, patchwork is the art of the individual, picking upon something," somewhere it is the work of 'someone', or of 'some-ones', it is an often collective enterprise but at heart always idiosyncratic: if in one sense it is always the same story (of thread and fabric and composition), it is never precisely the same. Sewn with time, around which it is woven and bears the marks, patchwork reinvents itself in each of its quilts, and it is structured around the desire for 'alter-ation' in which its power resides. "Only you can tell your story". To say and say again: something, somewhere, to someone. (Chouard 55).

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