

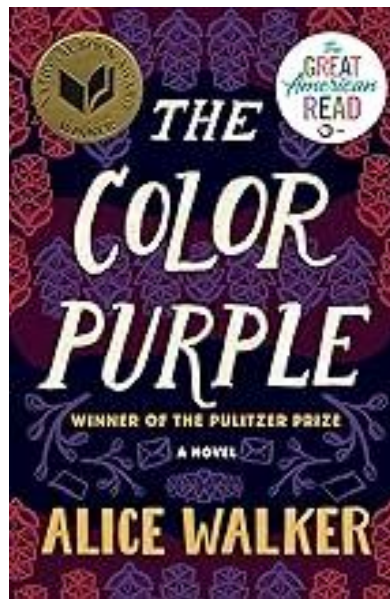
## A Study of Epistolary Narrative Voicing Ecowomanism in Alice Walker's Novel *The Color Purple*

**Ms. Suma Lalit Podnolanna, M.A., M.Phil.**  
Research Scholar, Dr. Homi Bhabha State University, Mumbai  
Email: [sulalitp.1@gmail.com](mailto:sulalitp.1@gmail.com) Ph.9833474058

**Dr. Savita Kishan Pawar**  
Research Supervisor  
Professor and Head, Dept. of English,  
Dr. Homi Bhabha State University, Mumbai  
Email address

---

---



Courtesy: [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

### Abstract

This study analyses Alice Walker's use of epistolary narrative in her most celebrated novel *The Color Purple* and discovers the merits of narrative style in propagating Ecowomanism. This famous woman writer pens about the miseries of suppressed black women. *The Color Purple* deals with the feeble condition of women in male dominated society and the way they existed unaware of their own self. Ecowomanism is a theory of

African American women thinkers who debunk the stereotypes against African Americans and expose the environmental works of Afro Americans to the world. This research paper aims at the protagonist's self-discovery who is a coloured, illiterate and quieted girl of fourteen years in the beginning of the novel but turns out to be an independent woman by the end of the novel. It also evaluates the impact of narrative technique in communicating environmental activism.

**Keywords:** Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, Epistolary Narrative, Narrative Technique, Self-Discovery, Black Female Experience, Ecowomanism.

## **Introduction**

**Epistolary narratives** are the stories narrated through the medium of multiple letters by one or more characters in the story. Though the usual form is letter diary entries, newspaper clipping and other forms of documents are also used in epistolary novels. The style is traced back to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* 1740, in which the female character Damsel writes a series of letters to her partner. The huge popularity received by Richardson, inspired many writers like William Hill Brown and Tobias Smollett in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But the style was less used in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, except few works like Bram Stoker's powerful epistolary usage in "Dracula" of 1897. In the 20th century most of the writers used few letters in their works, but there are very few examples of complete epistolary novels. Recently the genre has grown into emails, presentations and other recent forms of communications in writing and films. There are a number of American writers employed the epistles in their works to achieve various purposes. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* published in the year 1983, which uses the epistolary form extensively. The present study is limited to the use of epistolary form by Walker in *The Color Purple*. The main focus is upholding the merits of literary form by investigating the impact created by the writer selecting the form in spreading Ecowomanism.

Alice Walker constructed the theory of Womanism, to express the experiences of black women who were not included in mainstream feminism. With the development of women movements, feminists moved to ecofeminism and Afro American women thinkers to Ecowomanism. Ecowomanism is more inclusive, it advocates equality for all and exposes all kinds of oppression of men and women, other living beings and the mother earth. The

---

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 25:2 February 2025

Ms. Suma Lalit Podnolanna, M.A., M.Phil. and Dr. Savita Kishan Pawar

A Study of Epistolary Narrative Voicing Ecowomanism in Alice Walker's Novel *The Color Purple*

systematic theory of Ecowomanism is written by Melanie L Harris in her book, “Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth Honouring Faiths”. According to Harris, the important steps of Ecowomanism are: i) Honoring the experience and Mining Ecomemory, ii) Critical reflection on experience and ecomemory, iii) Womanist intersectional analysis iv) critically examining African And African American History and Tradition, v) Engaging transformation, vi) Sharing Dialogue (Harris M, 23-59)

## Literature Review

The tradition of epistolary narrative is found in the early English novels and used by many writers in different periods. But Alice Walker uses it in her magnum opus *The Color Purple* in entirely different mode. According to UKessays, “This technique allows Celie to speak for herself; she also gets to structure her identity and her sense of self by writing her letters. Celie’s letters, her growing ability to express her thoughts point to her spiritual development and also pave the way for her independence. The novel’s narrative technique is linked with the novel’s main thematic image of gaining an identity, of rebirth and of survival. Through the form, Walker also links a formal and western tradition to an oral and distinctly African American folk expression.”

Walker’s use of form does not restrict her from exploring societal issues of her times. “Walker revolves the story of her novel *The Color Purple* around two characters, Celie and Nettie, but actually she is talking about the whole society that is full of domestic violence which includes both physical and mental abuse, racialism and patriarchy (Zafar)

It is obvious for a learned character to use a letter but Walker makes Celie to write letter in broken sentences with the words she manages to learn from her sister. Along with Celie’s self-exploration, exploration of outside world she is exploring language and we find at the end of the novel an accomplished woman. So is the opinion of Weisenburger, Steven C, “Alice Walker takes a form with a firm set of associations and uses it to tell the story of someone opposite to the kind of person you normally would find as the main character of an epistolary novel”. (Steven,30)

Speaking about the themes used by Walker, Patricia Harris Abrams says “Walker explores themes, many of which germinate in her earlier short stories and poetry, which illuminate the human condition: loss of innocence, search for faith, the nature of human

---

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 25:2 February 2025

Ms. Suma Lalit Podnolanna, M.A., M.Phil. and Dr. Savita Kishan Pawar

A Study of Epistolary Narrative Voicing Ecowomanism in Alice Walker’s Novel *The Color Purple*

suffering and triumph of human spirit. Additionally, she examines some taboos in that relationship between women as well as between parents and children.” (Abrams) She also expresses the thoughts on use of epistolary narrative while writing “This epistolary method provides Walker with a means of revealing the past in order to provide an understanding of the source of the oppression of the black woman.” (Abrams) In the novel Nettie’s letters contain a lot of information about Olinka, an African tribe, with whom Nettie stays as a part of missionary. She writes to Celie about the hard work women do while men sit relaxed. She pens about their practice of female genitalia mutilation in bloody initiation rites. Exposing injustice is essentially a part of Ecowomanism. The letter form makes it easier for Nettie to report the experiences of Africa as it is to her sister.

By the literature survey it is apparent that Walker's use of epistolary narrative is different from the conventional practice of writing. The adoption of style was with a purpose and her craftsmanship has successfully fitted the style to narrate the modern period experience giving a new surge to the old literary technique.

### **Walker’s Use of Epistolary Narrative in *The Color Purple***

The novel *The Color Purple* is a story of Celie, a 14-year-old, young black American, unschooled girl. The misery of the protagonist in the novel is multi-faceted. She was mentally and physically abused continuously by her father, the truth of him being her step father was revealed to her many years later, towards the end of the novel. She was poor and uneducated adding to that raped and silenced by her step-father. She becomes more miserable when she loses her mother resulting in the entry of step-mother into the house. Conventionally the letters are written by the superior class learned character, but here it is inverse. She manages to write with the broken sentences which she has learned from her sister Nettie. As she cannot speak to anyone, she addresses her letters to God. In the essay it is rightly pointed out that letters were a ray of hope for Celie to express herself so that she can free her mind “Letters afford her a voice which otherwise she does not have” (StudyMoose). To any human being communication is a gift and having nobody to speak with is imprisonment. Celie being the victim of inhuman violence by people around her, this kind of isolation worsens her condition. In this context the letters play a crucial role in her story.

Ecowomanism encourages women to speak about their experiences. It is committed to fighting against female oppression. Walker, in using Epistolary narrative, gives an instrument to the readers to fight against oppression. The act of writing about the experiences helps the oppressed to relieve mental stress and gives a chance to ponder over the experience and makes them feel comfortable fighting against the oppression. Honouring experience is the first step in Ecowomanism. Writing is the best way of honouring one's experience. Letter form gives scope for writing the experience as experienced. The language and expression used by the writer has undergone transformation as the protagonist passes through various experiences and understands herself and the world around her. The language is used carefully; the dialect reinforces the charm of this old literary form.

Walker has used many letters in *The Color Purple* and the arrangement of the letter sequence itself is decisive for the story line. The suspense and the realistic account of travel in time and place is achieved through the narrative. The novel has 90 letters in total, and among them the first 51 are written by Celie. The remaining ones are of Nettie, sister of Celie, the only soul with whom Celie connects and establishes mutual understanding loving each other unconditionally. Critical examination is possible when others think about the experience. Alice Walker by making Celie write her experience, make readers and Nettie reflect on her experiences which is the second step in Ecowomanism.

One aim of epistolary novels is to give insight into somebody's thoughts. This form has aided Walker to present the inner voice of an African American marginalized female, her loss of identity, her position as silent sufferer, her search for identity, her self-exploration, her revolt, her struggle and finally independence. "The first twenty-eight letters Celie writes roughly constitute Kenosis. However, the loss or sacrifice of virginity--a loss or violent taking of her innocence--which should mark the end of the liminal period is the beginning of her kenosis. The opening inscription to the novel, "Tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy," gives the reader the first clue of Pa's dastardly deed--the apparently incestuous sexual molestation--that circumscribes Celie's life. She is sworn to secrecy by the force of Pa's authority and held in a speechless bond by fear of her mother discovering what has taken place." (Preston) So the narrative style has helped in revealing the female oppression in an effective manner as the narration goes in first person. It also exposes inner feeling of African American woman who is oppressed physically and mentally in her own household.

Ecowomanism concerns the oppression of black women, and also views it parallel to the exploitation of earth. The novel in a parallel line gives the account of colonization of African land by the Europeans.

The novel, written as a series of letters, permits Celie to speak for herself; She, in search of her identity, finds her lost or forgotten self and constructs it in the process of penning down her experience. The letters also express her growth in terms of ability to communicate, spiritual advancement, and also her journey towards independence in the family and society. The theme of the novel, gaining new identity and struggle for survival is also linked with epistolary narrative technique. There is a meeting point of western formal culture and African tradition achieved through this form of narrative. The study of African culture and accepting earth honouring practices are aims of ecowomanism. “Did you know there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago?” (p123) There are many earth-worshiping ways of Africans brought in the novel. The roof leaf tree is worshiped as God by the Olinkans. They also have an Ecomemory to share related to the roof leaf.

*The Color Purple* has the character Celie who is lonely and the letters are the finest medium for her to express her feelings. Unlike traditional epistolary novels Walker has introduced letters unread. Letters are meant to be exchanged to convey the message. But here all initial letters by Celie are addressed to God whom she thinks never listens. Her sister’s letters were hidden by Celie’s husband so were unread for quite a long time until Shug manages to find it and gives it back to Celie. Readers really don’t find a kind of conversation between the two in the letters, but they are written to express the sorrow, exploitation and helplessness by Celie. Nettie writes to send messages to Celie and to keep her informed about what is happening in her life. It also gives detailed information about African tribes and their culture. Critics say that Celie has never used her letter to ask about Nettie, but examining the traumatic condition in which Celie is in, with no formal education, we cannot expect more than what she has scribbled in the dialect she is familiar with. This local language also serves to downpour her feelings as she felt it and gives legitimacy to her writings. As giving emphasis on thoughts, feelings, and emotions is one feature of epistolary novels, both the sisters convey their moods, sentiments and thinking in their letters. They seem direct,



intimate and real as it is their own first-hand account of understanding. This frankness is also needed for an ecowomanist to speak about the injustice on women and on mother earth.

Though the letters are written by only two characters of the novel, it is not limited to two sisters. The story unfolds the experience of larger society and the sufferings of the Afro-Americans in general. Celie gives the accounts of Sofia's struggle, revolts and misery in her letters. It includes the suffering of popular women of the time with the character Shug. It also speaks about the mindset of African American men towards women. Mr. Albert in the course of the novel tells Celie that she is black; she is ugly and good for nothing. Inhuman treatment is not limited to Celie, Harpo too beats his wife and tries to control her. It is also the journey of African American society because the novel presents the societal changes that happen in the new generation, the changing mind-set of people.

The development of people by missionaries as against the helping hand of fellow people who wholeheartedly help and encourage one another is posed in the novel. The female bonding is another theme in the novel, the two sisters, Celie and Shug, Sophia and Celie all share strong bonding in the novel. *The Color Purple* voices against black lynching by referring to Celie's father's case and also Sophia who had to serve the whites household as punishment. In brief the novel mirrors the experiences of African American women and the society of the period. It is much more than the story of two sisters, it is about societal change, and it's about change in the mind-set of people in general and of the thinkers. At the end of the novel, Celie addresses the letter not just to God, her vision has broadened; "Dear God, Dear Star, dear trees, dear sky, dear people. Dear everything. Dear God," (p. 249).

## **Conclusion**

The epistolary form in the hand of Alice Walker becomes ironic due to her extraordinary craftsmanship. Walker uses it to explore the inner trauma of an African American downtrodden girl. Unlike conventional letter writers, Walker's character is poor and miserable. Celie, being not well educated, provides a multidimensional approach to the novel. Education and being able to communicate is promoted as a weapon against subjugation of women. The same can be used for voicing against exploitation of earth. It is Celie's story, it's African American's story, it is the voice of an Afro-American female, it's the revelation of many taboos, and it's about the entire society. The letters explore several

journeys here; Celie's self-exploration, Celie's growth in terms of using language, her spiritual journey, societal transformation, male-female relationship, racism, poverty, lesbian relationship, white missionaries, the life of Africans and their culture and environmental conservation. The conservative writers use it between the protagonists to exchange information and feelings, but Walker by not exchanging the letters gives more meaning to it. The timing of the letters also carefully arranged to give climax to the story which raises the importance of letters in the novel. The old form fitting the new situation creates magic by reviving itself.

---

### References

1. Walker Alice, *The Color Purple*, New York; A Washington Square Press Publication of Poket Books, 1983
2. Harris, Melanie L, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, Orbis Books, 2007.
3. Dieke, Ikenna, ed. *Critical Essays on Alice Walker*. West Port: Greenwood Press, 1999.
4. McKeever-Floyd Preston, "Tell Nobody But God" The Theme of Transformation in *The Color Purple*. 2007.
5. Aneeqa Zafar, 2015, Alice Walker's Use of Epistolary Narrative in "The Color Purple", Munich, GRIN Verlag, <https://www.grin.com/document/298761>
6. Maria Berg Jorgensen, *Women, Letters and the Empire: The role of the epistolary narrative in Alice walker's The Colour Purple*, University I Tromso, 2011.
7. Weisenburger, Steven C. "Errant Narrative and 'The Color Purple.'" *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1989, pp. 257–275. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/30225256](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225256). Accessed 23 Apr. 2021. Bib
8. UKEssays. (November 2018). The Color Purple Epistolary Novel English Literature Essay. Retrieved from <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/the-color-purple-epistolary-novel-english-literature-essay.php?vref=1>
9. Harris Abrams, Patricia (1985) "The Gift of Loneliness: Alice Walker's The Color Purple," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 8.



10. "The Color Purple: Alice Walker's Epistolary Novel." StudyMoose, 2 Jan 2017, <http://studymoose.com/the-color-purple-alice-walkers-epistolary-novel-essay>
- 

## **Bibliography**

1. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Epistolary novel". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 21 Feb. 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/art/epistolary-novel>
  2. [What is an Epistolary Novel? || Oregon State Guide to Literary Terms || College of Liberal Arts | Oregon State University](#)
  3. Walker, Alice, "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience", *Literary Cavalcade*, 54.3(2001):1-3.
  4. Walker, Alice, Interview by Claudia Tate. "Alice Walker".1983.
  5. McKeever-Floyd Preston, "Tell Nobody But God" The Theme of Transformation in The Color Purple.2007.
  6. Jackson, Kathy Dunn. "The Epistolary Text: A Voice of Affirmation and Liberation in So Long a Letter and The Color Purple." *MELUS* (Fall, 1998). Print.
  7. Hudson Weems, Clenora. "Africana 'Womanism'". *Out of the Revolution: the Development of Africana Studies*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, Inc., 2003.205 – 217
-