

The palette of pain: Colour symbolism in Alice walker's the colour purple

Sonika Sethi

Associate Professor, Department of English, SD College, Ambala Cantt, Haryana, India

Abstract

This article examines the strategic use of colour symbolism in Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Colour Purple* (1982). Through close textual analysis, this research demonstrates how Walker employs a sophisticated colour palette to underscore the novel's central themes of transformation, resilience, and spiritual awakening. The article pays particular attention to purple, white, red, and green as symbolic chromatic elements that reflect the protagonist Celie's journey from oppression to empowerment. By tracing the evolution of these colour symbols throughout the narrative, this study reveals how Walker's chromatic choices function as a visual lexicon that both enriches character development and reinforces the novel's exploration of race, gender, sexuality, and spirituality in early twentieth-century rural Georgia.

Keywords: Alice walker, the colour purple, colour symbolism, African American literature, feminist literature

Introduction

Alice Walker's masterpiece *The Colour Purple* (1982) stands as a seminal work in African American and feminist literature. Through the epistolary narrative of Celie, a poor, uneducated Black woman in the rural South, Walker crafts a powerful chronicle of transformation from oppression to self-realization. While scholars have extensively analyzed the novel's exploration of racism, sexism, and spirituality, this article focuses specifically on Walker's strategic deployment of colour symbolism as a literary device that reinforces and enriches these themes.

The novel's very title foregrounds the significance of colour, particularly purple, as an organizing metaphor. Yet Walker's chromatic vocabulary extends far beyond this titular hue to encompass a rich palette that includes shades of white, red, green, blue, and black. These colours do not merely provide descriptive texture; rather, they function as a symbolic language that charts Celie's evolving consciousness and the novel's thematic concerns. 'In her novel *The Colour Purple*, she brings out the special Blackness of the novel. It may be called a "painterly novel", casting its narratives in terms of the spectrum of colours in Black women's lives.' (S. Shukla, 726)

This article offers a comprehensive examination of Walker's chromatic symbolism as a cohesive system that operates throughout the text. By mapping the appearances, associations, and transformations of key colours across the narrative arc, this study demonstrates how Walker's colour symbolism provides a visual counterpoint to the novel's verbal storytelling.

Purple: From Royalty to Liberation

The novel's title immediately establishes purple as its central chromatic symbol, yet the colour itself appears sparingly within the text—a deliberate choice that enhances its symbolic power. The most explicit discussion of purple occurs in a conversation between Shug Avery and Celie:

"I think it pisses God off if you walk by the colour purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back" (Walker, 1982, p. 203)^[6].

This passage reframes purple from a colour historically associated with royalty and privilege—luxuries denied to Celie throughout her life—into a democratic symbol of divine beauty accessible to all who choose to see it. Purple becomes emblematic of Celie's developing ability to recognize beauty and pleasure in a world that has largely denied her both.

The rarity of purple's literal appearance in the text parallels Celie's journey. In the early portions of the novel, purple is notably absent, reflecting Celie's existence in a world devoid of beauty or pleasure. As Celie begins to discover her own agency and voice, purple emerges more frequently in the narrative landscape. Significantly, purple becomes associated with Celie's economic independence when she establishes her business making purple pants.

Walker's use of purple extends beyond its conventional Western associations with royalty to incorporate its significance in African American cultural contexts. In many African American spiritual traditions, purple represents transformation and healing—themes central to Celie's journey. Additionally, purple's historical association with the women's suffrage movement resonates with the novel's feminist themes. By the novel's conclusion, purple has evolved from a symbol of inaccessible privilege to represent Celie's hard-won liberation and self-actualization.

White: The Colour of Oppression and Purity

If purple represents the possibility of beauty and pleasure in Celie's life, white functions as its antithesis for much of the narrative. Walker subverts traditional Western associations of white with purity and goodness, instead portraying it primarily as a symbol of oppressive power structures. White is repeatedly associated with characters who embody or enforce patriarchal and racist systems, most notably in the description of Mr. ___'s father as having a "little white moustache" that emphasizes his authoritarian demeanor.

The oppressive connotations of whiteness extend to religious imagery, challenging the conventional Christian association of white with divine purity. When Celie imagines God, she initially pictures "a big and old and tall and graybearded and white" figure (Walker, 1982, p. 201)^[6]. This white God becomes complicit in her oppression, as

Celie notes that "He act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (p. 199). Celie's spiritual awakening involves rejecting this white patriarchal conception of God in favour of a more immanent divine presence that manifests in the natural world, particularly in the colour purple.

According to Holtzschue (2006, p. 40), colours can recall "six levels of response" in people, including personal relationship, influence of fashions, styles and trends, cultural influences and mannerisms, conscious symbolism-association, collective unconscious, and biological reactions to a colour stimulus. Regardless of the kind of response they create, colours are associated with feelings, although the meanings attributed to colours differ from one culture to another. According to Ševčíková (2008, p. 20), in Christianity, white represents purity, peace and conciliation. (Arikan, Arda)

However, Walker avoids simplistic colour symbolism by allowing white to carry multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings. In Nettie's letters describing Africa, white takes on different connotations. The white attire worn by the Olinka for special ceremonies represents purification and celebration rather than oppression. This multivalent treatment of white reflects Walker's nuanced exploration of race, religion, and power throughout the novel.

By the narrative's conclusion, white has been divested of much of its power. In Celie's reconciliation with Mr. ____, the once-oppressive whiteness associated with him has faded, replaced by a more human complexity. This transformation suggests that Walker does not posit a simple inversion of colour symbolism (where white is always negative) but rather a liberation from rigid colour-coded power structures.

Red: Blood, Violence, and Passion

Red emerges as one of the most viscerally powerful colours in Walker's chromatic repertoire, primarily associated with blood, violence, and eventually with passion and vitality. The novel opens with the threat of bloodshed as Celie's stepfather warns her, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker, 1982, p. 1) ^[6]. This implicit invocation of blood establishes red as a colour of trauma and silencing.

Throughout the early portions of the novel, red appears primarily in contexts of violence and female vulnerability. Celie's first menstruation, her sexual violation, and Sofia's beating by the police all invoke red through references to blood. Walker uses these associations to highlight the physical vulnerability of Black women's bodies in a society that devalues them.

However, as with other colours in the novel, red undergoes a transformation that parallels Celie's journey toward empowerment. Through her relationship with Shug Avery, red begins to acquire associations with passion, desire, and sexual awakening. Shug's red lips and vibrant clothing represent a liberated female sexuality that stands in stark contrast to Celie's sexually traumatic experiences with Mr. ____. When Celie begins to experience pleasure rather than pain in her intimate relationships, red shifts from a symbol of victimization to one of vital energy.

This transformation culminates in Celie's fantasy of murdering Mr. ____, when she imagines herself wearing a red dress while cutting his throat. While violent, this image represents Celie's psychological rebellion against her

oppressor and her reclamation of red as a colour of power rather than victimhood. That Celie ultimately chooses not to enact this violence reflects her character's growth beyond cycles of trauma and retribution.

Green: Growth, Healing, and Return

Green serves as a symbol of natural growth, healing, and renewal throughout *The Colour Purple*. The natural world, particularly as represented by trees, plants, and fields, offers Celie solace from human cruelty. Early in the novel, when Celie suffers abuse from her stepfather, she observes: "I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man" (Walker, 1982, p. 30) ^[6]. This identification with the natural world establishes green as a colour of both vulnerability and resilience.

The garden space becomes increasingly important as the narrative progresses, developing into a symbol of Celie's growing autonomy. Her cultivation of plants parallels her cultivation of self, with the cycles of planting, growth, and harvest reflecting her own cyclical journey toward wholeness. When Sofia returns from her traumatic imprisonment working for the mayor's family, Celie notes that "she look salt and pepper now instead of all pepper" (p. 107), suggesting that Sofia's vibrant life force (metaphorically green) has been partially drained by her experiences.

Green also figures prominently in Nettie's letters from Africa, where the lush landscape serves as both literal setting and metaphorical connection to ancestral roots. When Nettie describes the African continent, she emphasizes its greenness, creating a contrast with the more constrained natural environment of the American South. This juxtaposition suggests that reconnection with African heritage offers a form of growth and healing for the African American characters.

By the novel's conclusion, green has become associated with cyclical return and reconciliation. The garden that Celie tends with Mr. ____ represents their transformed relationship and shared commitment to nurturing life rather than destroying it. The final scene, set outdoors amidst the natural world, brings together the extended family in a celebration that emphasizes continuation and renewal—key aspects of green's symbolic function in the text.

Black and Blue: Identity and Suffering

While less prominently featured than purple, white, red, and green, black and blue also carry significant symbolic weight in Walker's colour system. Black functions primarily as a marker of racial identity, but Walker complicates simplistic associations by exploring internalized racism among her Black characters. Mr. ____'s preference for lighter-skinned women like Shug over darker-skinned Celie reflects the traumatic legacy of colourism within the Black community. Through Celie's eventual self-acceptance, Walker challenges these internalized hierarchies of skin colour.

Walker expresses remorse that blackness is not much respected and appraised. She despises those ignorant people who discriminate against themselves from their forebears and abhor their origin and living because of their dark skin, and she says that such people will certainly culminate in self-extermination. She emphasizes the fact: "the black woman is our essential mother — the blacker she is the more us she is — and to see the hatred that is turned on her is enough to make me despair, almost entirely, of our future

as a people” (In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens 291). (Tripathy, 2018)^[5]

Blue predominantly symbolizes suffering throughout the novel, drawing on its associations with the blues musical tradition. When Shug sings, her blues music gives voice to the collective pain of the Black community while simultaneously providing a vehicle for transcending that pain. Celie's gradual embrace of blue clothing items parallels her ability to acknowledge her suffering without being defined by it.

Albert always insists Celie to wear brown or navy blue coloured dresses which suggest oppression, and never allows her to wear red or purple, those colours which stands for happiness. Later on Celie reasserts her own individuality and likes and decorates her room with purple. (Indu, 2013)^[2]

The intersection of black and blue—terms often used to describe bruises—reinforces Walker's exploration of how violence marks the bodies and psyches of her characters. Yet the musical tradition of the blues also suggests the possibility of transforming pain into art, a key aspect of Celie's journey toward self-expression through her letters.

Colour Combinations and Patterns

Beyond individual colours, Walker employs strategic colour combinations and patterns that evolve throughout the narrative. In the novel's early sections, colours appear primarily in stark isolation or harsh contrasts, reflecting Celie's fragmented experience of the world. The memorable description of Sofia as "look like her face black with purple bruise" (Walker, 1982, p. 93)^[6] after her beating by police juxtaposes colours in a way that emphasizes violence and injustice.

As the narrative progresses, colours begin to appear in more harmonious combinations. The quilts that the women make together serve as a literal manifestation of this integration, with different coloured fabrics combined into cohesive patterns. This quilting imagery reinforces the novel's themes of community and the piecing together of fragmented identities into wholeness.

Walker introduces the art of quilt-making in the novel, which she herself has worked on while writing: "I bought some beautiful blue-and-red-and purple fabric. My quilt began to grow. And, of course, everything was happening. Celie and Shug and Albert were getting to know each other" (20). Quilting symbolizes female bonding, sisterhood, and togetherness. Walker's mentioning of the art of quilting reflects her respect and love for black cultural heritage. (Jubair, 942)

By the novel's conclusion, colours are often presented in natural combinations—the varied hues of the garden, the rainbow described in one of the final scenes. This chromatic harmony parallels the reconciliation among the characters and their increased ability to see and appreciate beauty in the world around them. The final image of Sophie, Celie, Shug, and Albert sitting on the porch amidst the colours of nature represents the culmination of this chromatic integration.

Absence of Colour

Equally significant as Walker's use of colour is her strategic deployment of colourlessness. Early descriptions of Celie's environment emphasize its drabness and lack of vibrant colour, reflecting her constrained existence. When Celie

first describes her surroundings at Mr. ___'s house, she focuses on dust, dirt, and decay rather than colour, suggesting a life drained of vitality.

Colour often enters Celie's world through Shug Avery, whose flamboyant dress and vibrant personality stand in stark contrast to Celie's colourless existence. Shug's introduction of colour into Celie's life parallels her introduction of pleasure, self-respect, and love. As Celie begins to assert her independence, her world gradually becomes more colourful, culminating in her creation of colourful pants and her renovation of her inherited house.

The transition from colourlessness to chromatic richness reinforces the novel's broader movement from oppression to liberation. By the narrative's conclusion, Celie has not only gained the ability to see colour—particularly the colour purple—but also to create and wear it, signifying her transformation from passive recipient to active creator of her experience.

Conclusion

Alice Walker's use of colour symbolism in *The Colour Purple* constitutes a sophisticated literary strategy that reinforces the novel's thematic concerns while providing a visual dimension to Celie's epistolary narrative. Through her strategic deployment of purple, white, red, green, and other hues, Walker creates a chromatic roadmap of Celie's journey from abuse and silencing to self-expression and empowerment.

This paper demonstrates that colours in the novel function not merely as descriptive elements but as a complex symbolic system that evolves alongside character development and plot progression. The transformation of colour meanings throughout the narrative—from purple as an inaccessible luxury to a symbol of democratic beauty, from red as violence to red as passion—parallels Celie's growing ability to perceive and create beauty in her world.

Walker's colour symbolism also engages with broader cultural and historical meanings of colour, particularly those relevant to the African American experience. By incorporating references to African colour symbolism alongside Western traditions, Walker creates a rich multicultural chromatic vocabulary that reflects the novel's exploration of heritage and identity.

The enduring power of *The Colour Purple* derives in part from this multilayered symbolism, which allows readers to visually imagine Celie's world while also understanding the deeper significance of its chromatic elements. Walker's palette of pain ultimately transforms into a spectrum of healing, demonstrating how attention to colour, both in literature and in life, can reveal previously unseen dimensions of human experience.

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