



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 9. Issue.1. 2022 (Jan-Mar.)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
EN 1118
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

COLOUR AS A MOTIF IN *THE COLOR PURPLE* BY ALICE WALKER

AMAR DEBNATH

Lecturer in English, Women's Polytechnic, Hapania, West Tripura, India
Email: newamar2010@rediffmail.com



Article information

Received: 11/03/2022
Accepted: 25/03/2022
Published online: 31/03/2022
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.9.1.192](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.9.1.192)

ABSTRACT

The Afro-American novelists have often taken up their skin colours as agenda in their narratives. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker also deals with the motif of 'colour' as mentioned in the title itself. Colours hold diverse significance for different cultures around the world. Colours influence human feelings and emotions and also have a larger impact on religious and cultural beliefs. Afro-American literature is centred mostly around the delineation of the identity crisis of the African Americans within the larger American society. The Black-White dichotomy has been a significant issue in the body of African American literature. Racism, based on skin colour has been a predominant theme in the narratives by Afro American novelists. In modern times, the major struggle that the newer African American community faces comes from within dismantling their own issues in society. In *The Color Purple*, there are numerous examples of how black people became their own worst antagonists. The author is obsessed with the motif of colour helplessly throughout the narratives. This paper would explore the usage and implications of colour and how it imbued the consciousness of the characters in the novel.

Keywords: Racism, Afro-American, Identity, Colour, Culture.

Introduction

The eminent artist, Pablo Picasso, once said that Colours follow the changes in emotions. Human emotions and colours have, indeed, a corresponding relation with each other (Cherry). Mankind has been obsessed with colours from time immemorial. The shades of the colours are universal but the meaning and significance people attach to them are entirely culture-specific. For example, in certain cultures, the colour 'black' is considered to be the representative of evil or a negative vibe, while 'white' is taken as something divine, pure and positive. The Hindus wear white at the funeral but the Christians wear black on such sad occasions. Again, at weddings, the bride in the Hindu tradition wears red or other bright coloured costumes whereas the Christian brides wear white robes. Thus, a specific colour does get associated with different emotions and situations in different cultural contexts. The symbolic use of colours invariably found its way into the delineation of various emotions in literary works across the world.

In the Preface of the book, the author, Alice Walker, declares that the purple colour is always a surprise but is everywhere in nature. The central characters are found extremely obsessive with the colours, especially purple. This paper is aimed at investigating the motif of colour throughout the novel. The study also attempts to reveal how the hopes and aspirations of the characters are modified by the consciousness of colours. This paper

also finds out how the expression of inner happiness and struggle are visualised through the representation of colours.

Africa has always been always associated with black, dark, covert and uncivilized by Eurocentric points of view. Before the American Civil War (1861-1865), African American literature primarily focused on the issue of slavery, as indicated by the sub-genre of slave narratives. During the American Civil Rights movement in the 1950s, authors such as Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about issues of racial segregation and Black Nationalism. The issue of racism and the presentation of a distorted image of Africa have been the apple of discord for many Afro American writers. The Africans advocate their seniority regarding the existence of human beings on earth. The Africans consider themselves as earlier civilized people who merely fell on "hard times" to be known as "inept savages". Some also advocate that the coloured (non-white) peoples had been in the history of mankind long before the whites (Kontein).

Observation and Discussion

We are confronted with the affinity to 'black' colour throughout the novel. Nettie, the sister of the central character Celie, in her letter from Africa mentions about the Senegalese by saying that they (the Senegalese) were the "blackest people", so much so that they shine. Nettie's comments on the beauty of African teeth, in contrast to those of the English people, are celebrations of black people. She is obsessively trying to prove black supremacy over the 'decaying' and 'pale' whites. She tried to convince her sister Celie that black is not a symbol of ugliness. Similarly, the mention of black and white colour appears again and again in the conversations of Shug and Celie. To Celie, the Classical deities have always been represented from the Eurocentric point of view: white skin, white robes and even white hairs. Celie used to imagine God as a white male who is the possessor of eternal bliss. But Shug made her re-imagine the marvel of divinity and made her believe that it is ever present in nature. The interaction with Shug made her chase that old white man (God) out of her head. The transformation that Shug brings about in Celie makes her visualize the beauty of all creations of God irrespective of what colour they are in.

Apart from the black and white colours, there are plenty of mentions of 'purple' in the novel. In earlier times, the purple colour used to be associated with aristocracy and status symbol in the Roman Empire. The person, who was allowed to wear *togas* (piece of long cloth worn around the body) with purple in it, was considered respectful (Cartwright). Thus, in the West, this colour came to be associated with authority and power. Hence, the search for purple coloured cloth by Celie and Kate in the cloth shop is symbolic search for liberation. The wearing of dull coloured clothes by the protagonist is an indication of being oppressed physically and psychologically. Celie's desire for happy colours like red and purple in the beginning of the novel is actually laden with greater significance. Celie, eventually, finds her own identity and independence with the moral and spiritual guidance of Shug. This liberty is indicated in the closing part of the novel as Celie makes pants for Sophia that are red and purple in colour. She decorates her own room with red, purple and yellow. Thus, the 'purple' in the novel remained a motif throughout; taking a course from innate desire to viable reality. This colour represents Celie's transformation as a person and her sense of belonging in society.

Throughout the novel, there are several instances where the colour purple is imagined as a manifestation of beauty as Celie perceives. In fact, she is obsessed with the colour which symbolises royalty, superiority, power and beauty. Celie mentions a lot about purple flowers, dresses, and other beautiful things that are in purple. In the closing part of the novel, she surrounds herself with purple and thus the motif of 'purple' colour made the title of the novel as the most appropriate.

The colour purple is a combination of red and blue which is symbolic of human blood and divinity respectively (Abbott). The colour purple is thus, often associated with Jesus Christ; a divine innocent. When Sophia is arrested for attacking the mayor's wife, Sophia's beaten up face is compared to that of a purple eggplant. It is also corresponding to the bruises and sufferings that innocent Celie had borne. Thus, the colour purple in the novel also becomes symbolic of the pain and suffering that innocent women had to face due to gender and racial discrimination. Celie, actually, redefined the colour purple from representing her pain and suffering to beauty and liberation, as the narrative progresses. Celie's fondness for purple is revealed when she

went to the store to buy some clothes for herself but fears as her husband would not approve her of buying 'too happy' colours. But when she was empowered, she made pants for Sofia with one leg be purple, one leg red. She dreamt Sofia wearing these pants, will be extremely happy. Thus, we the readers, get acquainted with her innermost emotions that are revealed.

Conclusion

In many Afro-American narratives, the black people who once used to be treated as slaves and sub-humans turn on each other in order to gain some sort of power. The people became their own antagonists in an attempt to demonstrate supremacy. Celie is very much disappointed at the black people who did not truly admire their own black-skinned people and vaguely try to imitate the white-centric 'naked' (colourless) beauty. In fact, the novel has plenty of such examples of racist conflicts between black and white colours. Celie, indeed, led a miserable early life, suffering physically and mentally. Even her married life with Mr. ___ was terrible. It was Shug Avery who helped her to reborn spiritually. Her life was dark and pathetic for her association with blackness. She is even afraid to be associated with bright colours. But when she was financially and spiritually liberated, she is no more afraid of black. Moreover, she painted her own room in bright colours like the affluent whites. All her life she longed for bright colours like purple and red. She was convinced that blackness is ugly and inferior. In the conclusion, it can be said that the motif of colour is successfully used by the novelist to depict the internal transformation of Celie.

References

1. Abbott, Shari. "The Meaning of Colors in the Bible?" *Reasons for Hope* Jesus*, 27 July 2015, reasonsforhopejesus.com/the-meaning-of-colors-in-the-bible/. Accessed 29 Mar. 2022.
2. Cartwright, Mark. "The Roman Toga." *World History Encyclopedia*, World History Encyclopedia, 11 Sept. 2019, www.worldhistory.org/article/48/the-roman-toga/. Accessed 29 Mar. 2022.
3. Cherry, Kendra. "Color Psychology: Does It Affect How You Feel?" verywellmind, 2020. www.verywellmind.com/color-psychology-2795824. Accessed 29 Mar. 2022.
4. Hughes, Langston, Arnold Rampersad, and David E. Roessel. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Knopf, 1994. Print.
5. Kontein, Trinya . "The Image of Africa in Alice Walker's the Color Purple." *Academia.edu*, 2017, www.academia.edu/9846743/The_Image_of_Africa_in_Alice_Walker_s_The_Color_Purple?auto=download. Accessed 28 Mar. 2022.
6. Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*, New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2011. https://www.bayaprobooks.com/classic-books/the-color-purple-pdf-download/