

## Body Freedom in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

*Alice Walker'in Renklerden Moru'sunda Beden Özgürlüğü*

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the theme of body freedom and its importance in the journey to liberation in Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple*. The novel chronicles the struggles of Celie, a young black woman living in South America in the early 20th century. Celie's character is a true symbol of strength and resilience as she faces numerous obstacles in her path, including rape, discrimination and domestic abuse. Despite all the pain and suffering she has endured, Celie manages to find her voice and strength and be a source of hope and inspiration for those around her.

Through the experiences of the protagonist Celie, the essay examines the concept of body freedom and its role in challenging external control and oppression. It illustrates also that Celie's body freedom is intertwined with her journey to liberation as she gradually learns to reconnect with her body and appreciate its beauty and strength, she also develops a sense of self-worth and self-acceptance.

The essay also discusses the restoration of women's bodies as a crucial aspect of feminism and empowerment, emphasizing the need to confront societal attitudes and embrace diverse body types. Celie's transformation in body perception, clothing choices, and self-expression highlights the power of body freedom in her journey toward self-assurance, independence, and the realization of her own unique beauty.

**Keywords:** Body Freedom, Emancipation, Feminism, *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker

### ÖZET

Bu makale, Alice Walker'ın Pulitzer Ödüllü romanı " Renklerden Moru" da tasvir edilen beden özgürlüğü temasını ve onun özgürleşmeye giden yolculuktaki önemini araştırıyor. Roman, 20. yüzyılın başlarında Güney Amerika'da yaşayan genç siyahi bir kadın olan Celie'nin mücadelelerini anlatıyor. Celie'nin karakteri, tecavüz, ayrımcılık ve aile içi taciz de dahil olmak üzere sayısız engelle karşılaştığı için gerçek bir güç ve dayanıklılık sembolüdür. Celie, katlandığı tüm acı ve ızdıraba rağmen sesini ve gücünü bulmayı başarmış ve etrafındakiler için bir umut ve ilham kaynağı olmuştur.

Makale, baş karakter Celie'nin deneyimleri aracılığıyla, beden özgürlüğü kavramını ve onun, özgürleşme yolculuğunun bedeninin özgürlüğüyle iç içe geçtiği dış kontrol ve baskıya meydan okumadaki rolünü inceliyor. Yavaş yavaş bedeniyle yeniden bağlantı kurmayı ve onun güzelliğini ve gücünü takdir etmeyi öğrendikçe, aynı zamanda kendine değer verme ve kendini kabul etme duygusu geliştirir.

Makale aynı zamanda kadın bedenlerinin restorasyonunu feminizm ve güçlendirmenin çok önemli bir yönü olarak tartışıyor, toplumsal tavırlarla yüzleşme ve farklı vücut tiplerini kucaklama ihtiyacını vurguluyor. Celie'nin beden algısı, kıyafet seçimleri ve kendini ifade etmedeki dönüşümü, özgüven, bağımsızlık ve kendi eşsiz güzelliğinin farkına varma yolculuğunda beden özgürlüğünün gücünü vurguluyor.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Beden Özgürlüğü, Özgürleşme, Feminizm, *Renklerden Moru*, Alice Walker

### INTRODUCTION

Body freedom is a concept that encompasses the right to autonomy over one's own body, free from external interference or control. In Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, the issue of body freedom plays a significant role in the narrative, particularly in the character development of Celie. Celie's journey toward self-empowerment and liberation is closely tied to her reconnection with her body. At the beginning of the novel, Celie finds herself trapped in a life of physical bondage. She endures sexual abuse from her stepfather and later enters into a loveless and abusive marriage. These experiences severely restrict Celie's body freedom, as she is subjected to pain and suffering inflicted upon her. However, as the story progresses, Celie begins to challenge these restrictions and reclaim her autonomy. In her liberation journey, Celie learns to appreciate her physicality, confront societal standards of beauty, and assert her strength. The following essay will delve deeper into Celie's transformation and

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explore the themes of body freedom and self-acceptance in "*The Color Purple*," analyzing their significance in the broader context of female empowerment and liberation.

### Body Freedom in *The Color Purple*

Body freedom refers to the concept of body autonomy, which is the idea that individuals have the right to make decisions about their own bodies, away from external interference or control. This includes choices related to reproductive rights, bodily integrity, and personal appearances, such as clothing choices, hairstyles, and body modifications. It enables individuals to experience and enjoy their bodies' capabilities without anyone's controlling or judging.

At the beginning of the novel, Celie is trapped in a life of physical bondage. She is subjected to several sexual abuses by her stepfather, who does not see her as more than an object. He forced her into a loveless marriage with a cruel and abusive widower in order to look after his house and his children. Moreover, she has no right to say no. Celie explains the situation saying: "Mr. \_ marry me to take care of his children. I marry him cause my daddy made me. I don't love Mr. \_ and he don't love me" (Walker 1982, p.40) Walker here manifests that Celie has no control over her life or her body, just like all the African American women at that time. "A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something" (Walker, 1982, p.80).

Her abusive stepfather and later her husband Albert were constantly reinforcing negative messages about her appearance, leading her to accept these destructive beliefs. Having the darkest skin in her family, Celie was considered as ugly girl. She has been suffering because she didn't have the standards of beauty set by society. Celie accepted the disparagement about her appearance and started to see herself as ugly and ineligible for having a good life. This experience results in a profound disconnection from her body which leads her to view her body as an object of pain and shame. She internalizes feelings of worthlessness and self-hatred, and her body becomes a symbol of her oppression and subjugation. Celie's body freedom in this phase is severely restricted as she endures the pain and suffering imposed upon her. However, as the story progresses, Celie starts to challenge these restrictions. She learns from Shug Avery's self-assuredness and begins to view her body as something worthy of love and respect.

Adrienne Rich talks in her book "Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution" about the challenges that women face in society and the restrictions placed on women's bodies and the impact it has on their lives. Rich suggests that women have been historically limited in their intellectual pursuits because they have tried to distance themselves from their female bodies, resulting in reproducing old forms of thinking. She adds that in order for women to make intellectual advancements, they need to surmount old attitudes. She further explains:

"But fear and hatred of our bodies had often crippled our brains. Some of the most brilliant women of our time are still trying to think from somewhere outside their female bodies— hence they are still merely reproducing old forms of intellection." (1976, p.284)

Celie's reclaiming of her body is catalyzed by her friendship with Shug Avery, a strong, independent woman who becomes a catalyst for Celie's self-discovery. Shug encourages Celie to embrace her physicality, urging her to explore her sensuality, acknowledge her desires, and find pleasure in her own body.

Shug wants to help Celie understand and appreciate her own body, so she encourages her to look at herself naked in front of a mirror. Celie experienced a radiant feeling in her body. Additionally, Shug's gentle touch evoked a deep sense of happiness throughout Celie's entire being, an experience she had never felt before. This allows Celie to feel like a natural woman, to love herself, and rediscover her body.

Celie has experienced many sexual assaults and physical abuse, which led her to lack interest in exploring her own body. Her self-perception is limited to being ugly and unattractive. Her defensive mechanism was to suppress both her physical and emotional aspects. as Ross describes "But Celie's ignorance of her body is even more shocking than her desire to annihilate it, as her language makes clear." (Ross, 1988, p. 70-71). However, through her sexual relationship with Shug, Celie begins her journey toward independence. She has the courage from this experience to resist her husband's mistreatment and to gradually get the self-assurance she needs to lead her own life. According to Ross: "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, 1988, p.69).

Shug offers Celie a fresh perspective on her sexual life and her relationship with Albert. She educates Celie a new way to express herself about her physical body, leading to a newfound sexual consciousness to understand her body as a source of life, beauty, and pleasure is, as the researcher Linda Abbandonato suggests "it is her love for Shug that enables [her]...[to] construct a new identity within a feminine domain" (Abbandonato 1111) .

Celie comes to fully understand her body's autonomy as well as the power she has over it. As a result, Shug brings to light a previously unnoticed, unexplored, and concealed aspect of Celie's sexuality. Celie feels completely different since she has finally experienced love and becomes physically free "it feel like heaven is what it feel like, not like sleeping with Mr. \_\_\_ at all." (Walker, 1988, p. 98). It is a significant turning point for her, as she has never before experienced a sense of security and being genuinely loved. Through this exploration and eventual acceptance of her physical self, Celie begins to cultivate a desire for selfhood and self-acceptance. With this newfound understanding of self, Celie breaks free from the oppressive grip of male domination.

Alice Walker in this novel brings attention to the ways in which patriarchal structures and systems of power dehumanize and control women. The novel challenges the notion that women's bodies exist solely for the pleasure and convenience of men, emphasizing the importance of women reclaiming agency over their own bodies and asserting their right to autonomy and self-determination. Ross says that the perception of the female body as fragmented or torn is a common theme in Alice Walker's character Celie. He also highlights that women's bodies have been heavily exploited and targeted by male aggression, leading women to develop fear or even hatred towards their own bodies. He further explains that:

"One of the primary projects of modern feminism has been to restore women's bodies. Because the female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to fear or even hate their bodies." Consequently, "women often think of their bodies as torn or fragmented, a pattern evident in Walker's Celie. To confront the body is to confront not only an individual's abuse but also the abuse of women's bodies throughout history, as the external symbol of women's enslavement, this abuse represents for women a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status." (Ross 70)

Body freedom is also associated with positive body image regardless of societal beauty standards or expectations. As Celie discovers and accepts herself, she begins to have a sense of selfhood. Throughout the novel, Celie grapples with low self-esteem and a negative body image. She internalizes the negative messages she receives from society about her physical appearance, particularly her dark skin, and unattractiveness. However, as Celie gains confidence and learns to love herself, she starts to challenge these harmful notions and embrace her own unique beauty. She becomes convinced that her beauty lies in her ability to survive and endure despite the hardships she faces. She values her inner beauty, as she learns that beauty extends beyond physical appearance, which is based on the ever-changing standards of society. She realizes that beauty encompasses her resilience, inner strength, capacity for love, and her journey toward self-acceptance and self-worth.

This is evident when Mr. \_ belittles Celie by calling her ugly and claiming that she can't support herself without a skill, Celie acknowledges her poverty and physical appearance but asserts her existence with bravery and determination. " I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here." (Walker, 1982, p. 97). This moment marks the awakening of her female consciousness, as Celie gradually learns to affirm her own meaning and value in life. Instead of dwelling on her flaws, she chooses to pursue her dreams and achieves independence.

Another aspect of Celie's body freedom is her ability to express herself through her choice of clothing. In the early parts of the novel, she is barely clothed, as noted in the quote: "He say why don't you look decent? Put on something. But what I'm sposed to put on? I don't have nothing" (Walker, 1982, p. 3). Celie also had a fondness for wearing purple or red clothes, but her husband will not even allow her this simple pleasure, as he refuses to pay for it. However, as she gains more control over her life and begins to assert her identity, Celie starts to wear vibrant and expressive clothing with designs of her choice. This shift in her wardrobe represents her growing self-confidence and the assertion of her personal style and individuality. According to the researcher M. Teresa Tavormina :

"clothing not only covers us but also defines us. It is usually a large part of what we see when we look at each other, and different clothes give observers quite different impressions... Clothing can express its wearer's personality, or repress it so as to conform the wearer to someone else's definition of how people should look or act." (Tavomins, 1986, p.221)

Celie also chooses to sew and wear pants which is considered a revolutionary act for Celie because pants are seen as emblems of patriarchal authority that women are forbidden from wearing. Celie wants to challenge patriarchy by producing pants. She practically challenges this patriarchal society after knowing the real story of her family and that Alphonso is not her real father, she visits him wearing her pants which indicates that Celie is starting to understand the oppression and abuse she endures from the male-dominated family and society, "me and Shug dress up in our new blue flower pants that match and big floppy Easter hats that match too, cept her roses red, mine yellow, and us clam in the Packard and glide over there" (Walker, 1982, p.87). Celie learns from this experience to

bravely deal with this painful abuse and express herself through clothes. According to the American Writer Elaine Showalter “the woman expresses her individuality by choices of cloth” (Showalter, 2001, p. 67).

Celie's body freedom is akin to a process of rediscovering herself. As she begins to reject the negative labels and views imposed upon her, she uncovers a renewed sense of identity. Her initial acceptance of derogatory remarks about her appearance and worth contrasts sharply with her eventual realization that her body is her own to cherish and celebrate. This transformation underscores the profound impact of self-love and acceptance on Celie's overall well-being.

Celie's journey towards body freedom is intrinsically intertwined with her relationships with other women. The sisterhood that flourishes between Celie, Shug, and Sofia exemplifies the power of collective support in dismantling oppressive norms. Their solidarity becomes a force that challenges the status quo and empowers each woman to embrace her body and desires. As Celie witnesses Shug's bold self-assuredness and Sofia's unwavering defiance, she begins to shed the shackles of self-doubt. This dynamic illustrates that body freedom is not a solitary pursuit but a collective effort that flourishes when women uplift and empower each other. The bond between these women fosters an environment where self-love, agency, and autonomy are celebrated, demonstrating the transformative potential of unity in the fight for liberation.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, body freedom plays a crucial role in Celie's journey toward emancipation in Alice Walker's novel *"The Color Purple"*. Celie's initial experiences of sexual abuse and physical mistreatment lead to a disconnection from her own body and a distorted self-image. However, through the guidance and affection of Shug Avery, Celie gradually rediscovers her body and embraces her sexuality, ultimately attaining newfound body freedom and self-acceptance.

Furthermore, Celie's journey toward body freedom involves reclaiming her autonomy and asserting her individuality. She confronts societal beauty standards and embraces her own unique beauty, challenging harmful notions of attractiveness. Celie's choice of clothing becomes an expression of her newfound self-confidence and personal style, representing her growing self-assurance and the assertion of her identity. By wearing vibrant and expressive clothing, Celie breaks free from the constraints imposed upon her and asserts her own existence.

The concept of body freedom extends beyond physical autonomy. It also encompasses the liberation from oppressive systems and the restoration of women's bodies, which have historically been exploited and degraded. Celie's journey serves as a reminder of the significance of restoring women's bodies and empowering women to make decisions about their own bodies, free from external interference or control. Through Celie's story, Alice Walker explores the interconnectedness of body freedom, self-acceptance, and female empowerment. Celie's path toward emancipation demonstrates that embracing one's body and reclaiming one's autonomy are vital steps toward achieving true liberation and living a fulfilling life.

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