The Scientific Temper
OCTOBER 2026 Vol. 17 (10): 6995-7005
ISSN: 0976-8653, E-ISSN: 2231-6396
DOI: 10.58414/SCIENTIFICTEMPER.2026.17.10.2573
A WEB OF SCIENCE JOURNAL

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reclaiming Selfhood: Identity Formation And Cultural Heritage In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* And *Possessing The Secret Of Joy*

PRAGYA RAWAT*[1], MANISH RANJAN[2], DEVENDRA KUMAR SHARMA[3]

[1] Research Scholar, Department of English and Modern European Languages, Banasthali Vidyapith, Newai, Rajasthan, India-304022 pragyarawat239@gmail.com ORCID ID: 0009-0004-6826-2311

[2] Associate Professor, Department of English and Modern European Languages, Banasthali Vidyapith, Newai, Rajasthan, India-304022 manish.ranjanbhu@gmail.com

[3] Assistant Professor, Department of English and Modern European Languages, Banasthali Vidyapith, Newai, Rajasthan, India-304022 devendra999iitr@gmail.com ORCID ID- 0000-0003-3772-0522

Corresponding author: pragyarawat239@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Afro-American literature has long grappled with questions of identity, cultural belonging, and its place within the broader canon of Western literature. While numerous studies have examined Black identity and feminist discourse, comparatively little attention has been paid to the historiography of Afro-American female identity through the lens of the female *Bildungsroman* and its relationship to cultural heritage. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the representation of Afro-American female selfhood in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The study adopts a qualitative research approach based on textual analysis, drawing on Black feminist theory as its primary theoretical framework. The findings demonstrate that Walker reconfigures the traditional *Bildungsroman* by portraying identity formation as a collective, cyclical, and culturally grounded process rather than a linear journey toward social integration. Through the protagonists' struggles with racial discrimination, patriarchal violence, cultural displacement, bodily autonomy, and psychological trauma, Walker foregrounds the interconnected roles of cultural heritage, female consciousness, and communal memory in the construction of Black female subjectivity. Celie's transformation in *The Color Purple* from objectification to self-articulation and Tashi's struggle with identity, tradition, and bodily autonomy in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* reveal how Walker challenges Eurocentric models of development while emphasizing the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and cultural belonging.

***Keywords**: Bildungsroman, Black feminism, Identity formation, Cultural heritage, Afro-American women's literature, Self-formation, Identity*

INTRODUCTION: THE FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN AND BLACK FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS

The *Bildungsroman*, or novel of formation, has long occupied a central place in Western literary tradition, tracing the protagonist's journey from youth to maturity, from innocence to experience, and ultimately toward social integration and self-realization. Originating in eighteenth-century Germany with Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship (1795-96), the genre has traditionally focused on male protagonists navigating public spheres of education, vocation,

Received: 5th October, 2026 **Accepted: 7th October, 2026** **Published: 28th October, 2026**

and civic participation. The female Bildungsroman emerged as a distinct subgenre, yet even these narratives often culminated in marriage or domesticity, reflecting patriarchal constraints on women's development and agency. Although the Bildungsroman is an integral part of the Western literary tradition, it has typically followed a path for young people as they move from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to experience, and ultimately into society and self-realization. Although it was originally developed by Goethe in late 18th-century Germany (Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship), it has traditionally dealt with men who are traveling through the educational, vocational, and political spheres.

The *Bildungsroman* reflects the interplay between individual growth and societal forces. Wilhelm Dilthey's concept of *Erlebnis* (lived experience) frames this development as historically grounded and subjectively lived, unfolding through stages of increasing self-awareness and purpose. In *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, this journey involves reconciling internal aspirations with societal expectations. Specifically, when delving into the Female *Bildungsroman*, Dilthey's ideas underscore how restrictive gender norms shape women's self-realization. Feminist critics argue that these narratives challenge traditional models by foregrounding struggles for agency and identity. Thus, Dilthey's framework reveals how culture and history intimately shape the evolving self, regardless of gender, but especially under patriarchal constraints.

"The *Bildungsroman* traditionally maps a male protagonist's journey to selfhood, yet when women undertake this journey, their paths are fraught with additional societal constraints," in Sarah Graham's work *A History of Bildungsroman* (2009). The *Bildungsroman* genre has typically focused on male characters, so it's not surprising that there are fewer works featuring female protagonists. For those who do, they often highlight how gender-specific challenges shape the coming-of-age experience. This aligns with the key arguments of the pioneering study on the female *Bildungsroman*. In female *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist's loss of self typically takes the stage. One attempts to gain control over one's thoughts and achieve liberation from bondage. Their primary focus switches to personal development and self-realization. Unlike male heroes, female heroes must reclaim the identity they lost during their young days. Female heroes must get freedom in order to mature psychologically and physically. Female Bildungsroman novels reveal how patriarchal structures and the society suppress women's creativity, growth and identity. These narratives depict female protagonists striving for self-discovery despite the psychological tolls imposed by socioeconomic and gender-based constraints. Maya Angelou's, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* reflects this journey, particularly for Black women. She writes, "If growing up is painful for the southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat" (6), capturing how awareness deepens suffering. Feminist scholars such as Susan Fraiman and Elizabeth Abel reframe Dilthey's theories to emphasize that women's paths to selfhood diverge from traditional male-centred models. Carol Lazzaro-Weis argues that identity is shaped by gendered social realities rather than by a fixed essence. She writes that the subject is "divided" and formed by psychological and political constraints. Simone de Beauvoir emphasizes how societal systems construct femininity. These critics expose how power structures shape and complicate female identity.

Afro-American women writers have radically challenged the *Bildungsroman* tradition and turned this story form into a means of interrogation of the complexities of Black women's identity formation in a world of racial, gender, and class oppression. One such transformative intervention can be seen in the works of Alice Walker, such as *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. These novels do not just accommodate the black female experience, but they in fact radically redefine the notions of growth, maturity, and self in Afro-diasporic settings, which the study structures as the study of *Bildungsroman*. Walker's protagonists, Celie in *The Color Purple* and Tashi in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* embark on journeys of self-formation that challenge linear narratives of progress. They are being shaped not by assimilation into dominant culture, but by opposition to the dehumanizing framework of dominant culture, by reclaiming cultural heritage, by fostering radical self-love. This article explores how Walker employs the *Bildungsroman* form to articulate specifically Black feminist concepts of self-making: where identity is forged through community, memory, and through the brave facing of past and present trauma.

The analysis begins with the premise that Black feminist theory offers critical tools and frameworks through which one can examine Walker's literary innovations. Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Barbara Smith, among others have expressed the idea that the oppression of Black women is not just race or gender oppression, but a combination of both. Rather, these scholars emphasise on intersectionality, the understanding that multiple systems of domination operate simultaneously and produce unique forms of marginalization. As Pragya Rawat et.al. are of the view,

"the process of identity formation for Afro-American women, making a significant contribution to study of the *Bildungsroman*, Afro-American literary history, and the broader collective history of the United States. The study, therefore, aims to the textual construction of identity by ethnic Afro-American women writers in contemporary *Bildungsroman* and describe the challenging *Bildung* of minority women in a culture where sex and gender oppression, racism, and classicism are all prevalent."

As Walker's novels explore these intersections, her main characters' explorations of self inevitably take place in the context of racism, sexism, economic grievance and cultural displacement. Moreover, Walker's work dwells deeply on the question of cultural heritage and connection to the ancestors. Both novels involve protagonists who have to deal with the negotiation of tradition in diasporic contexts, as well as with African cultural practices and colonial violence. It is a cultural dimension that differentiates Walker's *Bildungsroman* from the traditional European models and from many white feminist productions that assume specifically white epistemologies and communal ethics in the construction of identity formation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FEMINISM, BLACK FEMINISM AND THE FORMATION OF SELF

Women's Development from A Feminist Perspective

Feminist theorists have long critiqued classical *Bildungsroman* narratives for their underlying androcentric assumptions. The essence of Simone de Beauvoir's revolutionary thought was that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Such an understanding is a direct assault on the convention of the *Bildungsroman*, which makes women's confinement to a domestic sphere and to reproductive roles seem natural.

Second-wave feminist critics, including Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Marianne Hirsch, have analysed how female *Bildungsroman* navigate the contradiction between personal development and patriarchal socialization. DuPlessis argues that traditional female *Bildungsroman* often conclude with the protagonist's death or renunciation of ambition, reflecting patriarchy's incompatibility with female self-actualization. Walker's novels are not these constrained possibilities, but rather a series of radical possibilities in which women take control of their own lives, bodies, and stories.

Black Feminist Theory and Intersectionality

Black feminism centres on the unique occurrences of woman of African descent in their fight for equality and justice. It arose as a response to the shortcomings of white feminism in the 19th and 20th centuries, which often centred on the issues faced by white women while overlooking the intersectional struggles of racism, sexism and classism that women of African descent face. The experiences of sexism within the Abolitionist movement in 1920 and the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968), combined with the racial exclusion felt in the mainstream movement, prompted Black women to establish their own feminist organization. Black Literature emphasizes the plight of women of color, particularly from a sexual, cultural, racial and social point of view. These Black women were dominated by upper-class people, by white and even by patriarchal rule. This gained additional momentum addressing feminism and the sexual exploitation of black women inside white society. Black literature differs from the traditional European version. The Black feminist talks about race, class, gender and socio-political oppression in the journey of the protagonist to self-formation; therefore, a significant branch under the broader term of Feminism. The Black female challenges and rejects the dominant narratives that were imposed on marginalized Black women's voices. It also focuses on how the character forms their identity, fights against oppression and reaches their greatest potential. Bell Hooks, in *Ain't a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981) and *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996) argue that Black women's identity is structured by racism, sexism and classism. Where the main character achieves autonomy through social assimilation and education, Hooks, in her works, emphasizes the importance of resistance and self-recovery among the characters. In her works, she asserts that the growth of Black women is a continuous negotiation with white supremacist ideologies and patriarchal ideologies that seek to erase their subjectivity. The works of Bell Hooks give us a framework that allows us to examine how female protagonists move toward a radical self-definition through struggle, trauma and self-awareness.

Black female is included in mainstream feminist discourse, but it has been confined to the sidelines due to their unique yet essential concerns around racism and classism. Black female writers have delineated the distinction between black feminism and mainstream white feminism by depicting characters that interrogate the tenets and methodologies of white feminism, situating them within a framework of ethnic and economic disparity to emphasize the significance of the marginalized perspective. Francis Beal, in her essay *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female* (1970), criticizes the white women's movement for its restricted perspective. She ascribes, "[a]ny white group that does not have an anti-imperialist

and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the Black Women's struggle" (351). Thus, the experiences of oppression faced by black women in social and patriarchal contexts cannot be equated with those of white middle-class women, as the latter embody an intrinsic dialectic concerning their dual function as both oppressor and oppressed. In a patriarchal culture, their status is that of the oppressed, whereas the same white women function in the role of oppressor in the lives of black women. Blacks, especially women, are also addressed by the triple marginalization of race, gender and class. Their work foregrounds how black female protagonists in literature not only struggle against patriarchal constraints but also confront racialized and systemic oppression, making their journey of self-formation even more complex than that of other female characters. This socio-economic, political and racial phenomenon illustrates the status of white women through the notion of pharmakon. Kimberlé Crenshaw, an Afro-American legal theorist asserts "In a society where race, gender and class are viewed as separate categories, it is difficult to address how these categories overlap and shape the lived experiences of those who are multiply marginalized." Thus, shows how women of colour endure a 'triple marginalisation' based on their ethnicity, gender and often their class, therefore defining their experiences from those of white women or men of colour. As a result, their writing often speaks to the interconnected fight against both racial and gender-based injustice. For Black women, their engagement with feminism tends to be more collective than individualistic, more cultural than political. The evolution of Afro-American women's fiction reflects the profound interplay between sexism and racism in America. A persistent challenge in the oeuvre of these writers from the nineteenth century to the present lies in their attempt to utilize the full spectrum of one's voice and to convey each aspect of the 'Self.' As Veerendra Kumar Mishra in his work, *Modern Novel and Poetics of Self,* ascribes, the idea of feminism that has evolved over a period of time not only focuses on oppression but also looks for ways in which women can take control of their own lives and identities. A liberal feminist, Betty Friend, in her *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), has strongly argued that giving women full legal equality can empower them and improve their status by removing their inferior place in society. Many Black women writers use the term 'womanist,' coined by Alice Walker, to describe the special challenges they face in today's society; thus, 'womanist' is an alternative term to 'feminism' for Black women. Womanists have questioned how information is transmitted and how language, tradition and history have been suppressed along with women's voices by the dominant white society. As they have struggled to hear the women's harmony by means of their literature, Afro-American authors such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Anzaldua and others have recovered their African heritage as individual 'self' within slavery.

Womanism and Cultural Heritage

Walker's theoretical contribution, 'womanism', constitutes a pivotal framework for this investigation. In her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), Walker defined a womanist as someone who is "committed to the survival and wholeness of all people, both men and women." Womanism rejects the individualism that is often associated with white liberal feminism and instead emphasizes the connection between personal freedom and the welfare of the collective. In Walker's stories, the main characters discover themselves by engaging with other women and returning to cultural traditions rather than remaining isolated. Walker's womanist viewpoint underscores the significance of deriving knowledge from one's ancestors and cultural heritage. Walker's *Bildungsroman* asserts that engagement with African and African American cultural traditions is crucial for genuine self-formation, countering assimilationist narratives that necessitate protagonists to forfeit ethnic particularity. This is an effort to revalue cultural heritage that both devalues African cultures by white people, and elements of western feminism that devalue non-western cultures as inherently oppressive.

The Formation of Self in Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist theorists challenge the idea of selfhood itself, beyond the Enlightenment, individualistic conception. Hortense Spiller's explicates in her essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" the ways violence and trauma wrought by slavery undermined African families and challenged black subjectivity. Spillers's argument is that slaves were treated as 'flesh' and denied the status of 'body' that would grant them full humanity and kinship recognition. This historical trauma requires unique ways of self-forming for Afro-Americans. Rather than assuming a stable, pre-existing self that simply requires development, Black feminist approaches recognize selfhood as something that must be actively constructed against systems designed to negate Black humanity. Identity formation is thus a process of resistance, creativity, and radical imagination.

ASPECTS OF THE FEMALE *BILDUNGSROMAN* IN ALICE WALKER'S NOVELS

Reconceptualizing Development and Maturity

The conventional trajectory of the *Bildungsroman* is reversed in Walker's novel. Instead of innocence to experience, her protagonists embark on cyclical journeys, in which they repeatedly die and rise again, following a progression from social isolation to social integration. *The Color Purple* is a series of awakening experiences for Celie: discovering her own voice through letters, her ability to love through Shug Avery, economic independence through sewing, and finally spiritual wholeness. Likewise, Tashi in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* undergoes several metamorphoses an Olinka girl becomes an American expatriate, a faithful wife becomes a traumatized survivor, silence becomes testimony. This cyclical pattern is a reflection of the time and development concept held by Africans and African Americans which is different from the linear concept of the west. Walker's use of African cosmologies, which view life as circular rather than linear, is a focus on return and renewal as well as progress.

Community and Relationality

Walker's novels differ from traditional *Bildungsroman* in that they focus on the community as the locus of the self-formation, rather than individual achievement. The development of Celie in *The Color Purple,* is very much rooted in the relationships he has with other women, especially Shug Avery, Sofia, and finally Nettie. These connections serve as mirrors to help people recognize themselves, models for resistance and space for affirmation that are not found in the gender patriarchy. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi's path to selfhood is also one of relationships with women from different cultures, first with Olivia, the daughter of an American missionary; then with Lisette, her European therapist; and finally with Mzee, an Olinka woman who performed her genital mutilation. Different relationships can help with different parts of the process of understanding and healing oneself. Such a communal focus stems from Black feminist ethics that hold connection rather than separation as dearly as the value of a relational rather than an atomistic identity as Collins contends. Walker's protagonists are not self-created entities, but they are aware of themselves in relation to others, in relation to kin.

Voice, Narrative, and Self-Authorship

Voice and narrative authority are the central themes of both novels. The epistolary structure follows Celie's path of writing letters to God (a figure she originally pictures as white and male) and writing to Nettie, and eventually to telling her own story. When Celie starts referring to the audience as 'she,' having previously referred to God, she has come to understand that the audience doesn't have to be outside, criticizing and judging, but one that is equal, loved, and inside. Devendra Kumar et.al. are of the view that "Language is a power which decides the reality of standard, which becomes a linguistic benchmark for the speaker", which can be derived through the character of Celie. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Tashi's journey to selfhood also progresses through her relationships with women from different cultures, including Olivia, the American missionary's daughter who becomes her sister-in-law; Lisette, her European therapist; and finally Mzee, the Olinka woman who performed her genital mutilation. Every relationship teaches you something new about yourself and helps you heal differently. Collins says that Black feminist principles stress connection over separation and see identity as something that comes from relationships rather than being separate. This focus on community is in line with those principles. The main characters in Walker's books don't become themselves by separating themselves from others. Instead, they do so by seeing themselves in their relationships and family ties.

THE COLOR PURPLE: CELIE'S TRANSFORMATION FROM OBJECTIFICATION TO SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Epistolary Form and Narrative Development

The Color Purple starts with Celie, a 14-year-old girl, who writes to God after being raped by the man she believes to be her father. "You better not tell anybody but God," she says. It would endanger your mom's life. The terribly silent tone establishes the theme of the book: voice, testimony, and self-expression. The epistolary format allows readers to see how Celie's mind evolves through the years as she slowly evolves from being an object to a person with an identity. Initially, Celie's letters indicate that she does not believe she is useful. Violence towards women is what Celie sees herself in. She has been raped numerous times, her children taken away, and married off to 'Mister' (Albert), who treats her like he owns her and her sex. In her early letters, she doesn't seem to have many words or a sense of identity. This was because she did not attend school or was not told she was a smart person. Epistolary is a form that is used to resist and remain safe, however. So, Celie writes to God and tells Him that her experience counts and that she is a person and not an object. This is a subjective statement, which is not very strong, but it is the basis for development in the future.

Shug Avery: Catalyst for Self-Discovery

Transformation of Celie accelerates when Shug Avery comes to town. She was glamorous and a former lover of Albert, Shug embodies everything Celie has never been granted: sexual freedom, self-expression, financial independence, and self-love. Their relationship becomes one from Celie's care of Shug when she was ill, to that of deep friendship to erotic love. Shug teaches Celie to enjoy her own body and pleasure directly challenging the issues of sexual violence that have been the experience of Celie's body. Despite Celie's sexual history with men, Shug says to her, "You still a virgin" while transforming the definitions of sexuality from penetration and violation to pleasure and consent. This is an important moment in Celie's self-formation, because she has come to realize that she can enjoy pleasure and be tender with herself. In addition, Shug brings Celie to other spiritual notions. Shug rejects conventional Christian belief in God, and suggests instead that she believes there is a spirituality in nature, beauty, and love that is God. As Celie confesses her growing anger at God for allowing her to suffer, Shug counters by rejecting the white, male-dominated God of traditional Christianity and proposing a pantheistic belief system in which the world, beauty, and love are all god. In this theological reworking, Celie can unleash her anger and can imagine herself in a universe that not only does not condemn her but also celebrates her.

Economic Independence and Creative Expression

Another significant characteristic of self-formation is economic independence as Celie in the novel makes her own pants and stitches clothes. Making pants for women is a source of income and an expression of creativity, as it gives women the freedom to move and the opportunity to defy gender norms. The business enables Celie to provide for herself, to have value other than unpaid domestic service. But the symbolism of sewing pants should not be underestimated. Clothes that liberate women from the limitations of femininity, Celie is participating in collective liberation while gaining her own. Her creative work brings material independence and psychic satisfaction, and she can satisfy her drives to self-expression and to useful work.

Reconciliation and Wholeness

At the end of the novel, the novel's protagonist Celie is reunited with her sister Nettie, her children, and Albert is presiding over a multi-generational household on her inherited property. This ending has led to some of the most severe criticism from readers, as they find it too worthy of redemption, and believe that it downplays the long-term impact of trauma. But, from a womanist point of view, the ending is a confirmation of the potential for healing, wholeness, and chosen family.

The last letter that Celie writes start with the phrase "Dear God" but then goes on to say "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything." This cosmic address is an indicator of a level of self-actualization, of wholeness that is able to include the divine and the earthly, the spiritual and the material, the individual and the communal. Beginning to speak to an absent and a male God, then talking to all creation, reveals Celie's growth into the complete, integrated being.

Cultural Heritage and African Connection

Walker raises issues of cultural identity and pan-African awareness via the letters that Nettie writes while in Africa. Nettie's descriptions of the Olinka people give Celie (and the reader) pictures of African life, but they are not stereotypical and rather they tell the truth about the ravages of colonialism. By locating the history of the killing of Celie's and Nettie's real father because of his economic success, the reader is also exposed to a history of white supremacist violence against Black achievement. Nettie's letters serve as a bridge to this African connection that provides Celie with a broader sense of cultural identity. She does not physically go to Africa, but learning about the cultures of Africa and the way that she is a part of this culture helps her to understand herself as a member of an international African diaspora.

POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY: TASHI'S QUEST FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY AND BODILY AUTONOMY

Culture, Trauma and Identity

Possessing the Secret of Joy confronts readers with one of the most controversial subjects in contemporary feminism: female genital mutilation (FGM). Tashi, a minor character in *The Color Purple*, experiences genital cutting as an adult, in an attempt to define herself as Olinka and to question the cultural imperialism of the West. This decision is supposed to mean that Tashi culturally belongs, but instead leaves her in psychological and physical pain throughout her life. Walker's approach to this subject demonstrates the complexity of her womanist vision. She refuses to present a simplistic narrative that either condemns African traditions wholesale or romanticizes them uncritically. Instead, the novel raises issues about the impact of colonialism, of patriarchy, of internal oppression on cultural practices and people's relationship to tradition.

Circumcision takes place during adolescence in Tashi's case, as a means of nationalist fervour, in the resistance against colonial domination by the Olinka. She sees the ritual as a symbolic statement

of her African identity against the influence of Westerners, such as Olivia's parents, missionaries. But as the novel reveals, this is a 'traditional' practice that is designed to control Olinka women's sexuality, and many of them, like Tashi's mother and sister, resist it. The mutilation robs Tashi of her sexuality, causes chronic pain, leads to obstetric complications which cause damage to her son's brain, and leads to extreme psychological trauma, such as fugue states and violent impulses. Walker does not represent FGM as it would be represented by cultural relativism as a neutral 'other' as 'different' as it were but as a violence against women which should be faced and stopped.

The fractured Selfhood and Multiple Voices.

The novel's types of organization are a result of Tashi's split personality. Chapters switch between several narrators, such as Tashi herself as well as her husband Adam, son Benny, therapists, and more. This polyphony implies that Tashi is a self in disarray, fragmented among the various perspectives, and therefore not centred in a single and unified subjectivity.

Tashi's psychological split is evident in the alternate personalities she develops, such as "the woman with the parrot on her head", which embodies her suppressed rage and knowledge. The dissociative symptoms in this presentation are similar to those of current thinking on complex PTSD, demonstrating the very deep levels of disruption to identity formation that can be caused by severe trauma and the length of therapeutic engagement needed to achieve identity integration. The multiple narrators also take the edge off any one point of view, which you would expect to be an effect of Walker's desire to show multiple truths from a variety of angles. This method does not assume the colonizing position of 'knowing' and 'representing' the other totally, but instead recognizes the boundaries of any one perspective.

Therapeutic Journey and Historical Reckoning

Throughout the novel, Tashi's lengthy treatment by the European and American analysts is described. These sessions enable exploration of how colonial history, gender oppression and cultural dislocation intersect to create Tashi's trauma. Her therapists help her see that her suffering is not a pathology of her own, but rather it's a reaction to collective violence against women, perpetrated over generations. A crucial moment occurs when Tashi comes to understand that genital mutilation was conducted in Europe and America well into the 20th century as a 'cure' for female sexuality and masturbation. This historical disclosure undermines easy dichotomies of 'backward' African culture versus 'civilized' Western culture, showing the issue of patriarchal violence against women as a worldwide one that manifests in culturally different ways. The recovery of Tashi will take more than just psychological understanding, but concrete action. Eventually she faces and kills off Mzee, the tsunga (circumciser) who cut her, as the only justice for countless mutilated girls and women. The killings and the imprisonment and eventual execution of Tashi constitute the tragic climax of the novel.

Identifying as a Resisting Subject

Tashi's path to selfhood follows a more tragic arc, one than Celie's relatively positive journey toward integration and wholeness. In tragedy, however, Walker asserts the importance of resistance and of telling the truth. Tashi's trial is a time for the community to speak out against FGM, and a chance to teach her son Benny and others about the harms of FGM. The last words that Tashi utters before execution, 'RESISTANCE,' are Walker's vision of how identity is formed, which is related to political struggle. Self-formation is not just about personal growth but a process that must engage with systemic violence for Black women who are experiencing multiple oppressions. While Tashi finds her way to genuine selfhood in rejecting the practices that disavow women, even at the price of her own life, she does not seek to become a part of the existing social orders.

Cultural Heritage: Reclamation and Critique

Possessing the Secret of Joy presents a more ambivalent engagement with cultural heritage than *The Color Purple*. The first novel is mostly a paean to the culture of Africa as a source of strength and identity while the second is a declaration to separate cultural practices which affirm humanity from those which violate it.

Walker's position provoked a lot of controversy, as others thought that it revictimized the stereotype of African barbarism. But her work is comparable to that of African women's rights activists like Nawal El Saadawi and Efua Dorkenoo, who have successfully brought about change in their communities. These inner voices of resistance are seen to be magnified in Walker's novel. Walker's commitment "With Tenderness and Respect to the Blameless Vulva" suggests that she is going to honour women's bodies and sexualities as a counterpoint to practices that impact on them. In this commitment, cultural authenticity is not about unreflective conforming to tradition, but about ways of living which promote human flourishing and dignity.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: FORMATION OF SELF ACROSS BOTH NOVELS

Parallel Journeys, Different Contexts

Examining *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* together reveals both continuities and differences in Walker's vision of Black female self-formation. Both protagonists endure severe trauma rooted in patriarchal violence: Celie has been raped by her father and beaten by her husband and Tashi has undergone genital mutilation. Both are trying to achieve their own identity and independence when the communities in which they live can often reinforce their oppression as well as give them essential support. Their geographical and cultural backgrounds, however, are very different. Most of Celie's narrative takes place in rural Georgia, the country where the seeds of slavery, violence, and opportunity of the Great Migration take root in the Afro-American community. Tashi's narrative alternates between the fictional African country of Olinka and the U.S., and directly confronts the influence of colonialism on African societies as well as the complexities of cultural identity in the diaspora. These different contexts give rise to various self-formation challenges. Celie must overcome internalized worthlessness produced by constant degradation within a racist, patriarchal society that denies Black women's humanity. Tashi finds herself torn between opposing cultural allegiances, experiencing the attraction of African traditions and the seductions of modernity and Western culture, and also the dangers that exist in each patriarchal culture.

The Role of Community in Self-Making

The theme of the centrality of community to self-formation is emphasized in both novels; the community of women- Shug, Sofia, Nettie, Squeak offers alternative models and affirming relationships that help Celie develop. This community comes from experience and forms spaces of resistance within the dominant society.

Possessing the Secret of Joy is a more complicated story, as Tashi's connection to community becomes more complex. The Olinka community that claims her through circumcision actually violates her, while the American contexts that might offer safety feel culturally alienating. Tashi's attempts to heal her separation are significant therapeutic connections with Raye and Lisette, but these are not enough to heal Tashi's fragmentation. The novel suggests that when cultural practices themselves traumatize, community's healing potential may be limited.

Voice, Silence, and Testimony

The main themes of both novels are speaking up and shattering silence. In her epistolary narration, Celie describes how she went from writing in shame to proudly claiming her story. Her last letters exhibit an accomplished voice that is self-assured, giving, and accepting of all creation. More painfully and incompletely, Tashi's voice comes out. The various narrators imply that Tashi's story must be told from a variety of perspectives because she never fully incorporates her experience into a single narrative. However, like Celie's late letters, her testimony during the trial is an important act of voice-claiming. Both women understand that speaking the truth has benefits beyond self-catharsis and that their personal narratives relate to collective histories.

Spirituality and Cultural Heritage: Affirmation

Both novels show how spiritual change can help people heal, but in different ways. Celie's journey entails repudiating the white, patriarchal God who appears to condone her suffering and, instead, uncovering a pantheistic divinity inherent in nature and love. This spiritual transformation enables her to release her anger and to embrace her wholeness. Tashi's spiritual path is growing murky and more sinister. She is upset because the gods allowed her to be hurt and that she isn't following Olinka traditions. Others may consider her killing of Mzee a ritualistic sacrifice that seeks to atone for some great injustice committed in blood. But unlike Nel's peace, Tashi's is not going to be neatly spiritualized, and some traumas do not fit neatly into the spiritual category. Both of these books speak of the significance of African cultural heritage to Afro-Americans but do so in both positive and negative. African culture is represented in *The Color Purple* primarily in Nettie's letters, which are complex and laudatory. These letters show that African societies were beautiful, dignified, and fought against colonialism. The book says that learning about African heritage makes being Afro-American stronger.

Possessing the Secret of Joy is more critical and says that being loyal to your culture doesn't mean accepting things that hurt women. Tashi's tragedy is partly because she thought she had to choose between being true to her culture and keeping her body safe. According to the book, real cultural preservation must include changing bad habits. It says that cultures, like people, need to change and grow all the time.

Cultural Heritage: Affirmation and Critique

The novels embrace an African cultural heritage as integral to black identity; they both provide some affirmation and critique. Through the admiring

but complicated letters of Nettie, *The Color Purple* depicts African culture as a place of dignity, beauty, and resistance to colonialism. In the novel, the author implies that ties with the African heritage reinforce the identity of African Americans. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a more critical engagement that requires that cultural loyalty must not come at the cost of practices that do harm to women. In great measure, Tashi's tragedy has been the result of buying into a false dichotomy between cultural authenticity and body integrity. The novel makes the point that any real attempt at cultural preservation should involve a change of oppressive practices; cultures like people, need to grow and change.

Endings: Integration Versus Resistance

The two novel endings show different possibilities for the black female self. In the final chapters of *The Color Purple*, everything is integrated and whole: Celie is with her loved ones, is in charge of her land, is happy with herself and the universe. The joyful conclusion reminds us that healing and happiness can still happen even in the face of intense trauma.

Possessing the Secret of Joy concludes with Tashi's execution; there is no easy consolation to be taken from this tragedy. But even this conclusion confirms certain values: opposition to injustice; commitment to telling the truth; willingness to sacrifice for collective liberation. For others, like Tashi, selfhood may be found through resistance even unto death, through refusing to accept violations as natural or inevitable. Both paths validate the struggle toward authentic being.

These endings combined indicate that the formation of self may take multiple paths for black women to form themselves. For others, such as Celie, integration and wholeness are possible through community, creativity, and spiritual transformation. In others, such as Tashi, resisting to the very end, refusing to accept that violations are natural, inevitable, may be the only way to discover selfhood. Both journeys affirm the journey towards authentic being.

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXTS: TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

Historical Legacy of Slavery and Jim Crow

Walker's novels must be read in the context of the history of slavery's aftermath and Jim Crow's regime of racial terror. Violence against Celie mirrors the systematic rape, exploitation of labour, and separation from family of slave women. Likewise, the novel is about the economic fragility of early 20th-century Black Southerners. The challenges Celie and Albert face in holding onto their farm in the face of the violence and economic hardship faced by white people during the era are reflective of what actually happened in the past. The beating and imprisonment of Sofia conveys the terror that black people, especially those who exercised their autonomy and dignity, endured under Jim Crow. These historical circumstances determine the protagonists' potential for development. As Nitisha Seoda and Devendra Kumar Sharma, assert,

"women silence in literature and everyday life is frequently a reaction to the social and cultural norms and constraints they were raised with. Specifically, the limitations imposed by race, gender, and class prevent black women from fully expressing their path towards self-actualization. In our history, the problem of Black women's voices being silenced has been troublesome. Racism has historically supressed Afro-American women experience distinct from of silencing because of their race, class and gender."

Walker's novels assert that racist societies are actively hindering the development of blacks, unlike the classical *Bildungsroman,* which holds that social integration can be realized through educational means and merit. But self-formation must take place in other ways community, cultural resistance, spiritual transformation not in the traditional way of social upswing.

Migration and Displacement

Both novels relate patterns of migration and displacement in the twentieth century among Africans and Afro-Americans. Nettie's mission trip to Africa is a reversion to the Great Migration from the South to the North, which brought millions of blacks to Northern cities. In her letters, she establishes circuits of exchange between the African and the Afro-American community, envisioning pan-African solidarity.

Possessing the Secret of Joy more extensively explores displacement's psychological costs. Tashi's immigration to America creates a deep cultural alienation, but when she tries to go back the ritual circumcision causes a further aggravation of her trauma. For those with a colonial and diasporic past, basic concepts of cultural return are seemingly impossible. Identity needs to be constructed in the inter-cultural spaces, where the African and American experiences are known and witnessed.

Intersecting Oppressions & Resistance Movements

Walker's novels explicate the intermingling of racism, sexism, and class oppression among Afro-American women, in anticipation of what is now called 'intersectionality' theory. Black men perpetrate sexual violence on Celie, who is also being oppressed by a racist society, as an example

of how victimization does not rule out perpetration and how patriarchy transcends race. Black women who defy white supremacy are subjected to the double burden of punishment for breaking the racial hierarchy and the gender hierarchy of white supremacy. Black women who challenge white supremacy are punished for violating the racial hierarchy, and they are punished for breaking the gender hierarchy of white supremacy.

The novels also illustrate different forms of resistance, such as when Celie leaves Albert, when Nettie records Olinka traditions, when she expresses herself through music, sewing, and storytelling, when she strives to make a profit in the business world by joining with Shug, and when she speaks on the public stage as Tashi. These types of resistance illustrate the complex pressures of Afro-American women toward justice and dignity.

Twentieth-Century Feminist and Womanist Movements

The Color Purple was published in 1982 at a time when there was a great deal of controversy among feminists regarding race, sex, and intersectionality. Black feminists have attacked white feminist movements for their failure to include the concerns of Black women and their failure to recognize the differences in race and racism. Walker's novel suggests participation in these debates, because it focuses on the experiences of Black women and the need to address racial and economic oppression and gender subordination to achieve their freedom.

Walker's invention of the term 'womanism' instead of 'feminism' demonstrates a patriarchal sensitivity to the need for racial and cultural frameworks that focused on collective liberation for Black women. Throughout these novels, the term 'survival and wholeness of entire people' comes to the fore in the novels' focus on community healing in addition to individual growth or development.

CONCLUSION: REIMAGINING DEVELOPMENT, SELFHOOD, AND LIBERATION

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* completely rethink the *Bildungsroman* genre to look at the particular circumstances and possibilities of black female self-formation in the twentieth century. These novels illustrate how the classic trajectory of individual development and eventual integration into society is impossible for Afro-American women who are experiencing multiple forms of oppression. Rather, selfhood is achieved by challenging dehumanizing institutions, reclaiming culture, establishing alternative communities, and fearlessly claiming a voice and a narrative authority. Walker portrays several layers of self-formation: psychological healing from trauma, economic independence, spiritual transformation, erotic awakening, creative expression, and political resistance in both the protagonist Celie as she moves from a state of being objectified to one of wholeness, and Tashi as she struggles to find a cultural identity and autonomy in her body. These novels demand that we recognize and respond to not just the individual, but collective histories of violence and dispossession for black women. Of particular importance is Walker's connection with the cultural heritage. Both novels celebrate African and African American traditions as a source of strength and identity, yet the novels also critique patriarchal practices. It is a balanced strategy that avoids a Eurocentric view of the world's other cultures and a cultural nationalist blind spot. Walker contends that true cultural preservation necessitates change of oppressive components that cultures, like humans, must evolve and change to be conducive to human flourishing. Both *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* are epistolary novels, and both tell their stories in a manner that is highly polyvocal. *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, are epistolary novels, and both are narrator-multidyadic. These modes of narration foreground the voices of the marginalized, recognize the constraints of any one voice, and make visible that identity is created through language and storytelling. In this way, Celie and Tashi become subject by creating space for themselves in the system that attempts to render them object. Walker's novels are also significant in highlighting the importance of interactions between women in the process of black female self-making. These texts illustrate a dynamic of identity that is not individualistic but relational, that is, formed in webs of care, mentorship, and solidarity of women. Without the love of Shug and the example of Sofia, Celie will never transform; without witnessing and association with other mutilated women, Tashi's healing, though incomplete, requires her therapists' witnessing and her connection to other mutilated women. This emphasis on community is both an African cultural value and black feminist ethics that recognize liberation is not only personal, but collective.

Together, the different endings of these novels, one of integration and wholeness, *The Color Purple* and one of tragic resistance *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, imply the variety of possibilities and costs of Black female self-formation. Walker neither offers false optimism nor descends into despair. Rather, she speaks candidly about the healing that can occur through community and creativity, and the hurt and harm that can be caused by patriarchy and violence that may be

irreparable. Ultimately, Walker's contribution to the *Bildungsroman* tradition is that she refuses to accept the idea of development, maturity, and selfhood from black feminist perspectives. Her novels show that self-formation must always be political, cultural, and in alternative epistemological and political communities, for those who have had their humanity stripped from them. The paths that Celie and Tashi travel are paths of freedom both personal and communal, cultural and transformative. The texts are still highly relevant for the reader's day-to-day life today as they fight against racism, sexism and cultural imperialism. They provide visions of selfhood that are not dominant or isolated, but love, resistance, and connection. In reimagining the *Bildungsroman* as a vehicle for exploring Black women's self-formation, Walker creates narratives that challenge, inspire, and ultimately expand our understanding of what it means to become and to be.

Conflict of interest: None

Source of support: None

REFERENCES

Abrams, M. H. (2009). *A glossary of literary terms* (9th ed.). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M. (1972). *Dialectic of enlightenment* (J. Cumming, Trans.). Herder and Herder.

Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (B. Brewster, Trans., pp. 127–186). Monthly Review Press.

Andrews, W. L., Foster, F. P., & Harris, T. (Eds.). (1997). *The Oxford companion to African American literature*. Oxford University Press.

Beal, F. (1970). Double jeopardy: To be Black and female. In T. C. Bambara (Ed.), *The Black woman: An anthology* (1st ed., p. 351). New American Library.

Beauvoir, S. de. (2011). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage Books.

Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.

Combahee River Collective. (1977). *A Black feminist statement*.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Dearborn, M. (1986). *Pocahontas's daughters: Gender and ethnicity in American culture*. University of Oklahoma Press.

DuPlessis, R. B. (1985). *Writing beyond the ending: Narrative strategies of twentieth-century women writers*. Indiana University Press.

Hirsch, M. (1983). Spiritual Bildung: The beautiful soul as paradigm. In E. Abel, M. Hirsch, & E. Langland (Eds.), *The voyage in: Fictions of female development* (pp. 23–48). University Press of New England.

hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking Black*. South End Press.

hooks, b. (1990). Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness. In *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics* (pp. 145–153). South End Press.

Mishra, V. K. (2014). *Modern novels and poetics of self: Reading modernist Bildungsroman*. Authors Press.

Raboteau, A. J. (2004). *Slave religion: The "invisible institution" in the antebellum South*. Oxford University Press.

Rawat, P., Sharma, D. K., & Ranjan, M. (2025). The Afro-American female Bildungsroman in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research, 7*(1). https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2025.v07i01.65434

Seoda, N., & Sharma, D. K. (2023). Poetics of self in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*: A postcolonial Bildungsroman study. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, 15*(5), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v15n5.06

Sharma, D. K., Jha, P., & Kumar, N. (2015). The politics of language: Decolonization of Indian English. *MIT International Journal of Language & Literature, 2*(1), 11–16.

Smith, B. (Ed.). (1983). *Home girls: A Black feminist anthology*. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

Smith, V., Bachiler, L., & Litz, A. W. (Eds.). (1993). *African American writers: Profiles of their lives and works—from the 1700s to the present*. Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Co.

Spillers, H. J. (1987). Mama's baby, papa's maybe: An American grammar book. *Diacritics, 17*(2), 64–81. https://doi.org/10.2307/464747

Walker, A. (1982). *The Color Purple*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Walker, A. (1983). *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Walker, A. (1992). *Possessing the secret of joy*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Webb, C. L., et al. (2004). African American intergender relationships: A theoretical exploration of roles, patriarchy and love. *Journal of Black Studies, 34*(5), 623–639.

Whitehead, A. N. (1978). *Process and reality* (D. R. Griffin & D. W. Sherburne, Eds.). Free Press.