

Steven Spielberg's The Color Purple and Realization of Female Characters

Yuxuan Yang^{1,a,*}

¹*International School of Tanganyika, Masaki, Dar es salaam, Tanzania*

a. yuxuan-yang@istafrica.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This essay delves into the transformative power of female solidarity in Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple*, with a focus on how the film uses the contrast between the male and female gaze to underscore the importance of Celie's relationships with other women. The detailed exploration of cinematic techniques, such as camera angles and lighting, effectively highlights how Spielberg underscores the importance of these connections in Celie's path to self-empowerment, which emphasizes these crucial connections and contributes to the narrative's portrayal of Celie's evolution from subjugation to self-empowerment. The essay argues that the male gaze in the film serves to objectify and diminish female characters, while the female gaze offers a path to empowerment, fostering empathy, mutual respect, and self-realization. Ultimately, the film is presented as a profound commentary on the strength of female solidarity in challenging and overcoming systemic oppression, with the bonds between women playing a pivotal role in Celie's journey toward independence and liberation.

Keywords: Female Solidarity, Male and Female Gaze, Cinematic Techniques, Female Self-awareness, Systemic Oppression.

1. Introduction: Information about the film and its original novel

The Color Purple is a 1985 classic feminist film directed by Steven Spielberg, based on Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel [1]. Alice Walker, the first Black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in American history, is best known for coining the term "Womanism." She serves as a powerful voice for Black women in America, with much of her work focusing on themes of feminism and the Black experience. Walker delves deeply into the inner lives of her characters, portraying their resilience in the face of resistance, their suffering within a prejudiced society, and their eventual journey toward self-awakening and independence [2]. This unique focus has made her one of the most significant writers in contemporary American literature, as she addresses topics that others often overlook, embodying the principles she passionately believes in. After its publication in 1982, *The Color Purple* earned Alice Walker three major American literary awards and is widely considered one of her finest works. The novel tackles important themes such as religion, race, and sexuality while also reflecting the societal realities of its time. Due to these distinctive features, the book holds a significant place in the history of American literature. Western literary circles have extensively explored and discussed the unique character development and intricate plot [3]. Because of the popularity and significance of the book, it was remade into a movie a few years later. The movie's

director, Steven Spielberg, known for his sensitive and respectful approach to filmmaking, brings his unique touch to this project, as he has done with iconic films like *Jaws*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Catch Me If You Can*. Set in the early 20th-century American South, the film portrays a society entrenched in patriarchy and racism [4]. The protagonist, Celie, begins as a voiceless, oppressed woman, subjected to abuse by her father and husband [5]. Through her relationships with her sister and friends, Shug and Sofia, Celie begins to see herself as deserving of love, respect, and freedom [6]. These bonds provide the support she needs to reclaim her identity and assert her independence. Unlike other movies that approach to feminist film criticism in the early seventies, those Work of this sort called to our attention the ways the imagery of women in our culture recurrently portrayed them through a limited, constraining, and ultimately oppressive repertory of characterizations [7]. But in *The Color Purple*, the author has provided another role for female characters; they can have their own identity and growth, not just simply a man's accessory or an object that can be gazed at at will [2]. Like the novel, the film has sparked significant discussion within feminist circles, addressing the intersections of race, gender, and class. It tackles heavy and often taboo subjects like racism, sexism, and domestic violence, which were rarely discussed due to the conservative nature of the era. The compelling storyline and outstanding cinematography, which captures the Southern landscape and uses light and color to enhance emotional tones, contribute to the film's lasting impact. In this essay, I will argue that in *The Color Purple*, Spielberg illustrates the transformative power of female solidarity in overcoming systemic oppression by emphasizing the differences between the male and female gaze, reflecting the importance of Celie's relationships through cinematic techniques, and showcasing Celie's journey towards self-awareness and freedom.

2. First Section: Male and female gaze in the film

The differences between the male and female gaze are vividly portrayed in *The Color Purple*, using classic cinematic approaches that highlight the stark contrast in how the same person or situation is perceived through these lenses. The male gaze, as conceptualized by feminist theory, refers to the way women are depicted from a male perspective, often reducing them to objects of sexual desire and stripping them of their agency and individuality. This gaze objectifies and over-sexualizes women, prioritizing their physical appearance and their capacity to gratify male desire over their personhood [8]. This concept was first introduced by film theorist Laura Mulvey, who argued that traditional Hollywood cinema tends to align the camera with a male viewpoint, thereby encouraging the audience to adopt this perspective and view female characters primarily as visual pleasure objects. In *The Color Purple*, the male gaze is prominently displayed, especially in the way male characters interact with Celie, the protagonist. When male characters look at Celie, they often see her not as a person with thoughts, feelings, and a distinct identity, but as an object to be controlled and exploited. For instance, Celie's husband, Mister, treats her as property, a mere commodity he has acquired. This dehumanizing treatment is starkly illustrated when he orders her to turn around, as if she is an item for inspection rather than a human being. The camera reinforces this objectification by adopting a low-angle shot, in figure 1 when Celie is viewed by Mister or other male characters, making her appear small, insignificant, and powerless. This visual technique subtly conveys the sense of pettiness and inferiority imposed on Celie by the male gaze. The audience is made to see her as the men in her life do—subjugated and diminished. In stark contrast, the female gaze in the film offers a profoundly different perspective. The female gaze, as opposed to the male gaze, focuses less on a woman's physical appearance and more on her internal world—her thoughts, emotions, struggles, and strengths. This gaze seeks to understand and empathize rather than to possess and dominate. In *The Color Purple*, this gaze is most clearly embodied in the character of Shug Avery, Celie's friend and eventual lover. Shug's gaze upon Celie is one of appreciation, love, and respect. She sees Celie not as an object but as a whole person, deserving of care, attention, and affection. When Shug looks at Celie, the camera

angle shifts to a more straightforward, eye-level shot. This angle reflects equality and mutual respect, offering the audience a glimpse into the warm and affirming relationship that sharply contrasts Celie's interactions with the male characters. Moreover, the director, Steven Spielberg, skillfully uses camera angles and the actors' facial expressions to emphasize the differences between the male and female gaze. When Celie's husband looks at her, the camera adopts a high-angle shot from his perspective, which not only reinforces the power imbalance but also encourages the audience to view Celie through his oppressive lens. The audience sees her as he does—beneath him, both physically and metaphorically. In contrast, like in figure 2, when Shug gazes at Celie, the shot is levelled, removing any sense of hierarchy and instead creating a feeling of intimacy and connection. This change in perspective is crucial in helping the audience shift their own gaze—from one of judgment and objectification to one of empathy and understanding. The film also underscores how the male gaze often fixates on women's physical appearances, especially when those appearances are deemed striking or sexually appealing. The male characters in the movie are frequently shown evaluating women based on their looks, reducing them to mere objects of desire. This gaze is not only dehumanizing but also deeply unsettling, as it strips women of their agency and reduces their value to how pleasing they are to the male eye. For example, Mister is initially attracted to Shug because of her beauty and her glamorous image as a singer. His interest in her is driven primarily by her physical allure rather than by any genuine appreciation of her personality or talents. In contrast, the female gaze in the film, particularly from Celie's perspective, is less concerned with physical appearance and more focused on internal emotional conflicts and the strength of character. Celie's view of Shug, for instance, evolves from awe of her beauty and confidence to a deeper appreciation of her kindness, resilience, and the love she offers. This shift from external to internal appreciation highlights the different ways men and women in the film relate to each other. While the male gaze devalues women by focusing on their physical attributes, the female gaze humanizes them by recognizing and valuing their inner qualities and emotional depth.



Figure 1: From the scene, we can clearly see the differences between the female/male gaze



Figure 2: Shug resonates with Celie's pain; the father only cares about Celie's sister's appearance.

3. Second Section: Relationships that impacted development

In the film, relationships are crucial in helping Celie recognize her self-worth. The story focuses on her familial bond with her sister and friendship with Shug and Sophia. These relationships ultimately help Celie break free from the constraints of a male-dominated world and achieve personal growth. These relationships with other women are pivotal in Celie's transformation, each playing a unique role in helping her break free from the oppressive male forces that have shaped her life. Celie was not perfect at first because of the Patriarchal environment she grew up in and also because of her experience of being dominated and abused by males; those factors made a female who had already lost self-awareness. However, the relationships she developed with female characters in her life have turned it over, the support she got from them enables her to reclaim her life and identity, empowering her to reject the forces that have tried to define her. Nettie, Celie's sister, is her first and most vital connection. Nettie's unwavering love and belief in Celie's worth offer her a glimpse of hope and self-respect. Through Nettie's letters, Celie gains a broader understanding of the world beyond her immediate suffering. Nettie's teachings, especially in reading and writing, build a strong base for Celie's future independence. Learning to read and write empowers Celie by giving her the tools to express herself and maintain a connection with Nettie later. Harpo's wife, Sophia provides Celie with a radically different example of womanhood. Strong, assertive, and unwilling to be dominated by any man, Sophia's defiance of Harpo's attempts to control her challenges Celie's acceptance of her own subjugation. Although Celie initially advises Harpo to beat Sophia, reflecting her internalized toxic, patriarchal mindset. Sophia's resilience and refusal to be abused show Celie that women can stand up for themselves and earn respect. Shug, Celie's husband's lover, plays perhaps the most significant role in her life. Shug is everything Celie is not—confident, sexually liberated, and unapologetically independent. Through her relationship with Shug, Celie experiences love and desire in ways she never imagined. Shug's affection and respect help Celie see herself as worthy of love, sparking her journey toward self-acceptance and independence. Shug encourages Celie to express herself, both emotionally and creatively, leading Celie to discover her talent for making pants—a powerful symbol of her newfound autonomy. Shug also helps Celie confront and overcome the trauma inflicted by her father and husband, enabling her to break free from their control. Together, these relationships form the foundation of Celie's personal revolution. They help her realize that her worth is not defined by her obedience to men or her capacity to endure suffering but by her strength, creativity, and ability to love and be loved. By the end of the story, Celie has evolved from a passive, oppressed girl into a confident, independent woman. Her journey highlights the power of female solidarity and the importance of challenging and overcoming the societal norms that perpetuate women's oppression. Ultimately, Celie's relationships with Nettie, Sophia, and Shug each contribute to her understanding of self-worth and femininity, guiding her toward liberation. Their support enables Celie to reclaim her life and identity, empowering her to reject the forces that have tried to define her. Through these relationships, Celie survives and flourishes, embodying the resilience and strength these women have helped her discover within herself [9].

4. Third Section: Techniques used to convey the depth

Although both the original novel and the movie primarily focus on the significant roles that female characters play in helping Celie achieve her final transformation to liberty, it is important to recognize that male characters also play a crucial part in shaping her character. Celie's father and Mister, her husband, are two male figures who, ironically, profoundly impact her development. Her father's unethical control and abuse strip Celie of any confidence to stand up to men, molding her into a submissive girl who believes she is powerless. Mister's brutal behavior further reinforces her belief in her inferiority, continually pushing her down. This demonstrates that men inevitably play decisive

and important roles in Celie's growth and development. However, despite their efforts to dominate and victimize her, their abuse ultimately drives Celie to assert herself, overcome their oppression, and move toward contentment and independence. Rather than breaking her, their cruelty catalyzes her empowerment [10]. To convey the depth of these connections and the emotions within these scenes, the director skillfully employs a technique known as first-person narrative. In literature, this narrative style allows readers to experience the plot directly from the perspective of a character, offering intimate access to their thoughts, emotions, and personal reflections [11]. This approach typically utilizes personal pronouns like 'I,' 'me,' 'we,' and 'us,' creating a solid connection between the character and the audience. In film, the first-person narrative is adapted to the visual medium by using camera angles and shots replicating what the character sees, just like in figure 3 that camera shows the resonate between Celie and Shug by using first person narrative. This technique shows us the character's physical surroundings and invites us to engage with their psychological state, making the audience an active participant in the character's journey. By seeing the world through the character's eyes, we are drawn deeper into the story, experiencing their fears, hopes, and triumphs as if they were our own. This method is compelling in creating an emotional resonance with the audience, as it blurs the line between the character's experiences and our own, making the narrative more immersive and impactful. The result is a profound sense of empathy and understanding, as we are not just observers of the story but are involved in it, feeling the weight of every decision and the impact of every moment as if we are living it ourselves. In *The Color Purple*, the director employs this technique multiple times to highlight the significance of these relationships. For instance, in figure 4 when Celie and her sister are forced to separate, they clap their hands across fences and air. The camera first focuses on Celie's movement and then shifts to her sister's, creating a powerful feeling of being right there with Celie, or even just being Celie, saying goodbye to her sister. Similarly, in the scenes featuring Celie's friendships with Shug and Sofia, the director uses the same technique to make the audience feel like they are Celie, sharing her experiences and emotions. This approach draws us into the story and deepens our connection to the characters.



Figure 3: first person narrative that Celie and Shug resonate with each other



Figure 4: first person narrative shows the connection between those close relationship.

5. Concluding the story and provide a meaning to the whole movie

Finally, Celie's journey towards self-awareness and freedom was really difficult. Set in early 20th-century America, where men are largely dominant and women face severe oppression, the film shows how women start to awaken to their own power [12]. Celie, who her father and husband have suppressed from a young age, struggles to see her own value. However, her friend Shug plays a crucial role in changing this. When Shug encourages Celie to smile and accept herself, it's a turning point. Shug's message is clear: stop letting the outside world dictate your worth and be brave enough to recognize your own value. This newfound self-worth is what empowers Celie to stand up to her husband and eventually escape from him, fight back just like how showed in figure 5. She no longer sees herself as inferior; she understands she has her own value and refuses to be dominated.



Figure 5: Celie finally recognised her value and was able to resist the dominant power.

Now, let's go back to the film's title: *The Color Purple*. What is the actual meaning of the color purple? At the movie's beginning, Celie and her sister are seen running through a field of purple flowers, a time when Celie is still under oppression. Midway through the film, Celie is in a similar field of purple flowers while talking to Shug, symbolizing her growing self-awareness. By the film's end, when Celie is reunited with her sister, she is fully liberated, both in spirit and body. *The Color Purple* symbolizes Celie's journey toward freedom and self-realization. Shown in figure 6, as she moves through these purple fields, it reflects her path from oppression to liberation, illustrating how she finally breaks free and embraces her true self. Overall, the film was expressed in counter-narrative, as African American women in the early 20th century were a group that has historically been marginalized both in society and in cinematic representation. The film creates a counter-narrative to the dominant stories traditionally centered on white male experiences. The film uses specific cinematic techniques, such as close-up shots and lighting, to emphasize the intimacy and importance of these female bonds [13]. For instance, the scenes between Celie and Shug often feature warm lighting and close-up shots that highlight their growing affection and mutual respect. This contrasts sharply with the cold, distant shots used to depict Celie's interactions with the men who oppress her. Additionally, the narrative structure, which traces Celie's journey from submission to empowerment, further underscores the argument that female solidarity is crucial in challenging and overcoming the

oppressive systems that seek to silence women. The combination of all these aspects and the film's overarching message made it enduring in not only feminist film history but also the overall film history [14].



Figure 6: Different purple flower scenes hinting at different stages of Celie.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Color Purple* stands as a powerful cinematic exploration of the transformative impact of female solidarity in the face of oppression from male and racism. Through Spielberg's skilful use of the contrast between the male and female gaze, the film illuminates Celie's journey from subjugation to self-empowerment. The relationships she forms with Nettie, Shug, and Sofia prove pivotal in her realization of self-worth and autonomy, challenging the male-dominated world that has sought to define and diminish her. Cinematic techniques like camera angles, first-person narratives, and symbolic imagery, such as the recurring motif of purple flowers, deepen the audience's connection to Celie's emotional evolution. Ultimately, *The Color Purple* highlights the strength and resilience of its female characters and delivers a profound message about the importance of community, self-discovery, and the power of love in overcoming oppression. Spielberg's adaptation of Alice Walker's novel remains a testament to the enduring bonds that empower women to reclaim their identities and reshape their destinies.

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