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QUEST FOR SELF: A BRIEF STUDY OF ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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ABSTRACT



Afro-american women are discriminated from their own community men and the White men and White women. These women have been considered to the least beings in the world. Even the basic rights are regretted for them. They have been marginalized in the society and are treated as slaves and low paid labourers. Black women have been undergoing class, race, social oppression and found voiceless against the odds of the society. This paper aims at bringing out the trials and troubles faced by women characters in the novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. Women urge to own a self-identity. This search for self is not an easy task especially when it comes to a Black Women. It axiomatically becomes a great matter of struggle. The character Celie is shown to be submissive and mild and had the fear of men. It is through education and economic independence that a woman is able to gather strength and courage and live independently in the society. *The Color Purple* has the theme of sexist oppression, patriarchal supremacy and oppression of Black women, class struggles and status of Afro-American women.

Keywords: victimisation, suppression, self realization, patriarchal supremacy, oppression of Black women

Introduction

The term 'Afro-American' vibrates the two communities introducing them to the world as the marginalized community. Due to lack of resources for their living, the Africans have been drifted as slaves to America. There emerged a disparity for the Black among the Whites due to their colour discrimination. The White community treated the Black community as slaves and regretted their basic rights. Education had been stripped away for the Black children and landlords insisted them to work in their fields at a young age. These people were made to work as domestic workers for low wages. They were restricted to speak in their mother tongue which allowed them to have an alternative communication as singing and acting. In many places

of America, segregation on the basis of colour was highly observed. There was humiliation and degradation due to the colour of the skin. The Black women faced suppression and oppression and also class and race variations. It cannot be averted that this aspect is mostly highlighted to the Black women by their similar gender of White. They have been treated as materials without a soul, flesh and blood. There has been discrimination on the reason of lacking education and are made submissive as they are unaware of their status in the society. There are few people who would support them physically, mentally or economically. A movement called 'Oppressed' began in support of the degraded Black women but it could not stay longer. The upper class Black women have not faced suppression to a

greater extent and hence has cornered the Oppressed group. This human-made domination has made the condition of the lower class Black women worse and has led to sexual oppression also. They have been crushed in the hands of the men of their community as well as the White men.

This paper advocates bonding among women and female creativity in order to gain strength and inspiration against the violence suffered by the burdened Afro-American women. Through a character Celie, the writer Alice Walker portrays the damaging effects of male domination and explores the frank treatment of sexism within the community of Blacks and also Whites in US and in Africa during the Second World War.

When she tried to defend herself by telling him the children were just frightened of him because he was drunk he beat her senseless. That was the first time he knocked out a tooth. He knocked out one and loosened one or two more. She wanted to leave him, but there was no place to go.

Alice Walker

African American writers like Maya Angelou, Deborah Gray-White, Harriet Jacobs, Maria Stewart, Melton McLaurin, Jaeda De Walt, Lyn Mikel Brown, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and many others emphasized through their writings on community, portrayed the powers and struggles of women in the male dominated society and thus developed a new and unique national aesthetic in literature. As a result of the Harlem Renaissance, Afro-American genre came up as a literary genre as 'the spring of Afro-American voice'. They realized that their Utopian ideals would not be achieved without paying attention to the relationships between Black men and women. Alice Walker, a feminist writer also belongs to the same Black community and has undergone this class, social racism and sexual oppression and knows well the pain of the Black women. Through her writings and characters, she has portrayed the marginalized life of the Black women and revealed the typical Afro-American society. Her writings brought an awareness of the system of violent racism of the South and the effects of it on the Black.

"Yet writing is more than an act of bringing ourselves into existence; it also determines the way we are shaped. Women's self-creation is influenced, impeded, constrained by language that has embedded in it the codes of patriarchal culture. For the black woman writer, the search for voice-the rescue of her subjectivity from the sometimes subtle, yet always pervasive, dictates of the dominant white male culture- is even more problematic" (Tucker, Lindsey. Alice Walker's The Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text, Black American Literature Forum).

The Color Purple is Walker's award winning novel (1982) and portrays the life of the Afro-Americans, their discriminated life, the suppression and oppression and sexual assault.

"The Color Purple represents a more explicit turning toward the question of the making of a text by a black woman. With this work, Walker has created a truly modernist text; that is, a text that manifests itself as an artistic production in which language is essential to the shaping of vision. She has created a text that shows language as power and has also demonstrated through this work what the nature of black women's discourse might be" (Tucker, Lindsey. Alice Walker's The Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text, Black American Literature Forum).

Walker has chosen the themes of suppression, disparities of power in American society, sexual oppression, healing through love and survival in her works. Her works are accessible to her readers.

"Like Dunbar, Walker was conscious of audience when she chose to compose in AAVE. Describing her mother's interaction with The Color Purple, Walker writes, 'She had not read The Color Purple before her stroke, beyond the first few pages, though it was deliberately written in a way that would not intimidate her, and other readers like her, with only a grade school education and a lifetime of reading the Bible, newspapers and

magazine articles' (Tucker, Lindsey. Alice Walker's The Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text, Black American Literature Forum).

The Color Purple's strategic fulfillment of the linguistic conventions of black literary realism nevertheless queers for both groups the normative portrait of African Americans traditionally found therein, as well as the more radical, nevertheless misogynistic, portrait of black self-love endorsed by the politics of black pride" (Lewis, Christopher S. Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker's The Color Purple).

The novel speaks of suppressed women, their struggle both in America and Africa. It is the story of Celie and Nettie who narrate their struggle to escape numerous acts of violence in their lives. Celie is a young black woman who suffers from not only from racist white culture but also patriarchal black culture while Nettie is her sister. The novel begins with Celie writing a letter to God, narrating what had happened to her. Her letters are not of Standard English but Black folk language.

"With Celie's first anguished letter to God, Walker enables the reader to enter into the private thoughts and emotional state of her traumatized, guilt- and shame-ridden, and depressed fourteen-year-old protagonist."

Celie has been sexually assaulted by her step father and this spins in her a burning desire of making a self-representation through writing. Celie's 'Pa' is a 'Walking phallus' (Badode 36) who tries to make Celie a substitution when her mother does not respond to his sexual needs. Pa repeatedly rapes the fourteen old Celie. Readers would be confronted with the ugliness of child abuse:

"You better not never tell nobody but God.

It'd kill your mammy" (Walker, p-3, l-1).

"Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (11), (Proudfit, Charles L. Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's "The Color Purple", Contemporary Literature)

" He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say you gonna do what your mammy wouldn't". (19)

We can see the callousness of Pa when he takes her two babies away from her and then makes arrangements to have her married to a neighbor of his age. Celie narrates the moments of her marital sexual involvement with Albert. It is an act of similar dehumanizing in which the conjugal act appears to look like rape.

"Mr. __come git me to take care of his rotten children.He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me. I say". (109).

Celie later comes to know that Pa is not her biological father. Above all she experiences her body as fragmented and possessed by her victimizers. The rape becomes an extraordinary force within her to search for voice. As Gabriele Griffin observes we can see that "*the body constitutes the site of oppression and become the source of permanent anxiety. The body dominates the novel... The central character has no control over her body and her physical environment. Victimized from an early age she is the object of perpetual abuse* (21).

"Another key to Walker's technique can be found in an interview with Mary Helen Washington in which Walker describes three types of black woman: first, the suspended woman, characterized mostly by immobility; second, the assimilated woman, a woman 'still thwarted', ready to move, but without real space to move into; and third, the emergent woman, a woman 'making the first tentative steps into an uncharted region" (Tucker, Lindsey. Alice Walker's The Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text, Black American Literature Forum, Proudfit, Charles L. Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's "The Color Purple", Contemporary Literature)

Shug is a singer of the same sex. Celie is attracted towards her courageous and independent way of living. The life of liberty of Shug made Celie fall in

love with her but finally at the end of the novel she has realized what life is and where lies the contentment.

“Black lesbian and lesbian allied writers of the 1970’s and 1980’s insisted on telling stories about black women who were excluded from black literary representation under the politics of black pride; they ‘looked behind the veil and explored broken families, domestic violence, and sexual abuse’ (Wall 797). “The policies of hegemonic blackness considered these experiences and identities ‘disempowering’ because they have typically been affiliated with vulnerability and shame” (Lewis, Christopher S. *Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker’s The Color Purple*, Rocky Mountain Review).

The White people treat the African women as slaves and would not wait for their approval or explanation. The Blacks have to abide to what the American society tells them. Women are discriminated in their own society and in the adapted environment also.

“White folks is a miracle of affliction, say Sofia” (Walker, p-98, l-27).

Sofia was a White American who was imprisoned by doing service, who felt that the American women have got no rights for themselves. She felt:

“Only white people can ride in the beds and use the restaurant. And they have different toilets from colored” (Walker, p-121, l-3-6).

“Niggers going to Africa, he said to his wife. Now I have seen everything” (Walker, p-121, l-10-11).

Male domination with racial violence prevailed with a diabolic power which had crushed even the strong-willed Sofia. Sofia undergoes a series of incidents when she rejects working as a maid to the Mayor’s wife. The devastating experiences of slavery and violence by Whites are portrayed by the author. Sofia is exposed to in the jail and her anguish and pain of being treated violently by the Whites would move the heart of any reader.

“They got one in a little store room up and under the house, hardly bigger than Odessa’s porch, and just about as warm in the winter’s time. I’m at the beck and call all night and all day” (100)

There is the discrimination of race to such an extent that Sofia is not allowed to sit in the front seat along with the Mayor’s wife while teaching her to drive. Neeru Tandon observes, “*the jail that Sofia is held is a metaphor for all black people caged by racism. For others, though they do not serve in a literal prison and instead and confined to servitude and domesticity within their homes*” (Ray 62)

Sofia’s husband continually attempts to dominate her but Sofia never submits silently to the dominance.

“In stark contrast to Celie’s silent obedience in Mr. ___’s home, Sofia demands to be treated as an equal by Harpo, while Harpo tries to imitate his father to rule in the private sphere. Harpo want to know what to do to make Sofia mind. He sit out on the porch with Mr. He say, I tell her one thing, she does another. Never do what I say. Always back talk (37).

Mr. Pa or Harpo represent the patriarchal fathers who are shaped by white racism in order to gain access to manhood through a violent patriarchy. Women’s progress initially has been opposed by men as women’s power and success would be a question to manhood. Due to this, there has been barriers to women’s achievements and progress.

Shug has not only been a supportive friend but also like a mother figure guiding women in their lives. The novel portrays all the female characters having a bond together and helping one another. Squeak decides to sing and Sofia promises to take care of her daughter. This bonding improves their life and helps them bring out their repressed talents and desires. These women “*defend themselves with words; they discover their potential – sound themselves out through articulation*” (Cheung, 1988, p. 162).

Initially Celie’s talents and desires had been silenced by father and later by her husband. Shug courageous and determined personality allows Celie to learn to express herself. Celie learns to sew pants which become popular with her family and her friends. She becomes financially independent. The patriarchal dominance which silenced Celie has been shrugged off. Shug says,

"you making your living, Celie ... Girl, you on your own way" (Walker, 2004, p. 193).

Thus *The Color Purple* portrays women's tolerance against racism, sexism and gender discrimination. Women are not inferior but are shown as such by the patriarchal society. This marginality "allows us to view [the] repression of the feminine in terms of positionality rather than essences" (Johnson, 2002, p. 170);

In "in Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Walker speaks about three types of black women:

the physically and psychologically abused black women, the black women who are torn by contrary instincts, and the new black woman, who re-creates herself out of the creative legacy of her maternal ancestors. (Dawson, 1987, p. 194)

The Black community has been differentiated even while travelling. They had been lagging behind in economical and social status.

"We all used the same cups and plates" (Walker, p-123, l- 21-22). I

Nettie experienced during her trip that the White missionary people had been generous and kind hearted. They moved freely with others with a nature of helping all.

"Hard times is a phrase the English love to use, when speaking of Africa" (Walker, p-124, l-15-16).

Nettie says that Africa once had all the richness but it was robbed off by the English. The civilization has fallen down in course of time. Nettie's letters to Celie reveals the depth of the novel. Celie has learnt through these letters that there is a world beyond her limitation. This helps Celie to come out of rural environment and gain an awareness of African life, a land where blackness takes with it multiple images and villagers have been exploited and women have been submitting silently to male oppression.

"You a low down dog is what's wrong. I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need" (Walker, p-180, l-24-26).

Thus with the help of Shug and Nettie's memories Celie slowly energized herself and transform into an independent woman. There is double victimization

in the novel. Celie undergoes this phenomenon for being a Non-white and for being a woman. She is put to suffer since childhood. After being molested by her step father twice, she becomes mother to two children and later sent away with Mr. Albert. She has been treated very badly by Mr. Albert who makes her life miserable using her only for his physical appetite. He also tries to exploit Nettie, Celie's sister but could not. He takes revenge on this issue separating Nettie from Celie. He continues tormenting Celie by hiding the letters written by Nettie. The novel brings forth racial discrimination existing in the U.S. There was no hope for Celie excepting to fight against this oppression. With the help of Nettie she began to read and write. Nettie did not want anyone to break their relationship. They decide to communicate through letters.

"When I don't write to you Nettie I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray" (Walker 110).

Writing, to Celie turned to be an instrument to stay alive. It has become as important as breathing. She writes about her painful life in her letters which are addressed to God. The letters are the only source for her to come out of her trauma. These acts of Celie looks like "shouting her rights in silence". "Long as I can spell Go-d I got somebody along". It looks like an outburst of her feelings and her "self". The men in her life slowly prevented her speaking and writing down her feelings.

Harris questions the possibility of an uneducated woman writing letters, "I can imagine a black woman of Celie's background and education talking with God... but writing letters to God is altogether another matter" (Harris 156)

With the help of Nettie, Celie gains basic knowledge. The novel portrays the relationships between women as multi-dimensional. Celie has a great love for her sister, Nettie. We find a similar relation with Sofia. Nettie and Sofia are independent women, unlike Celie. Nettie has had formal education from Ms. Beasley, her teacher who is an independent woman and is the one who teaches Nettie to lead an independent life. Nettie teaches Celie what she had learnt from her teacher. We can find a great contrast between Nettie and Celie. On the other hand, Celie is made submissive both by her step father and husband. Albert, Celie's husband

tries to disconnect her from Nettie, the only solace in the world. Sofia is bold and independent woman. She has a strong determination not to be a slave to man. Celie is always looks at Sofia surprisingly and admiringly who has a good physique and appears as a strong lady.

“She not quite as tall as Harpo, but much bigger, and strong and ruddy looking, like her mama brought her up on pork” (Walker 30).

Sofia is of the belief that women would survive only by possessing strong faith on themselves and great determination added with ability to fight when needed.

“All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers; I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain’t safe in a family of men” (Walker 38).

In one instance, she goes to prison on beating a White man. But Celie always admires her high spirits. Shug is Celie’s first friend and lover too. It looks to be an unnatural relationship for the readers but this is what makes Celie’s life meaningful. We can find motherly love between them. Albert loves Shug and brings her home. Celie takes care of her when she falls sick and this is how an intimacy between them develops. Shug sings a song and names it as “Miss Celie’s Song” to show her love and gratitude to Celie. Daniel Ross talks of importance of regaining of control of one’s own body for asserting one’s self thus:

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. (70)

The entry of Shug in the life of Celie has brought in many changes. Celie always believed that she is ugly and dependent woman. Celie compares Shug to her mother and says that Shug is more beautiful comparatively.

“This identification foregrounds the child's acceptance or non acceptance of his sexual organs” (Quoted in Ross 77).

Celie and Shug involve in a lesbian relationship. They have a different physical experience in their life. Celie has had weird experience earlier as she was molested by her step father many times and has given birth to two children. She never had pleasure out of it even after marriage. With Shug, Celie could get immense happiness which in fact has been similar to Shug. Celie feels true love for the first time.

Ross observes that "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" (69).

Celie breaks from the male domination. She becomes aware of her sexuality and her body once she begins to be in the lesbian relationship with Shug. Soon the letters from Nettie are unearthed. She finds immense happiness reading them and thus reunites with her sister. She comes out of the clutches of her husband. She soon comes to know that her father was not her biological father and that her children are not killed by him. She is relieved to see her children with Nettie and is happy to reunite with her children and sister. She moves back to her home and begins to live independently as a pants maker. To her astonishment and relief, Albert, Celie’s husband is reformed by her absence. She accepts him and establishes a friendly relationship with him. Her views about society have completely changed. She finally realized her ‘self’.

CONCLUSION

The domination of a particular sex over the other sex gives rooms for various troubles in the society. The novel, thus, reveals the victimization, suppression, unnatural relationship and self realization of the protagonist.

Walker has presented living characters to show the dominant patriarchal system and to erase the deviations in the society simultaneously. It is

important to note that male community would have to acclaim them and give equal rights for women. Education is primary concept here. It is through education, worldly knowledge, gaining their social status and identifying their 'self' thereby gaining economic independence that, women can fight against violence and show their potential lying hidden. All these systems are manmade. Even Bible traces out the differences that women are the secondary source and weaker sex than the male counterpart. These differences between men and women should be exterminated. Differences on the basis of class, race and sexist oppression are to be completely wiped off from the society thus establishing harmonious relationship among all. Identification of one's 'self' brings an awareness of an ideal path. This is aptly shown in the novel . Richard K. Prieb, in an article, "Literature, Community and Violence: Reading African Literature in the West, Post 9/22", talks of violence in any literature in broad human terms:

"They may overwhelm us with a sense of banality of violence, they may impress us our capacity for the demonic, or they may serve to leave us with some sense of the sublime. And we can see *The Color Purple* doing all these things. The novel examines violence and its potential to act as a destabilizing agent of identity, subjectivity and selfhood and it also shows how the lines of demarcation between perpetrators, victims and observers are blurred in the face of violence".

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