

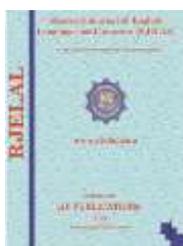


FEMINISM IN ALICE WALKER'S "THE COLOR PURPLE"

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Abstract

The Color Purple is a tragic description of a woman Celie, a young black girl born into poverty and segregation. She is raped twice by her stepfather and becomes mother of his two children. Then she is bound to marry Mr.____. The very foundation of the novel is the ordeals and struggle of an unfortunate black lady who is deprived of love and care. She meets Shug who helps her to overcome the harsh conditions she has been in and becomes strong and self-dependent. She learns that women can be equal to men in power, knowledge and finance. Gradually, Celie discovers the power and joy of her own spirit, freeing herself from her past and reuniting her with those she loves. This paper is concerned with the feministic aspects of Walker's novel, *The Color Purple* through the characters of Shug, Celie and Sofia.

Keywords: Feminism, Black woman, Spiritual Awareness, Women Empowerment and Exploitation.

Introduction

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine."

These words of Simone de Beauvoir in her famous work, *The Second Sex* forced to think once again about the female, her psyche and her status in the society. Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Anita Desai, Shashi Despande, Margaret Atwood, Bharati Mukherjee along with Nissim Ezekiel and Amitav Ghosh are outstanding writers whose portraits of society and life are picturized by a vision distinctively feminine and different from prevalent images. Literature expresses the psyche of women, especially in terms of their political, economic and social situations and focuses on women's rights.

From this feminism, comes the awakening in black women section also. Black women writers deny the image of black women as portrayed by white female or black male writers. These writers try to change the status of women in society. Alice walker is one of them. Alice's famous novel, *The Color Purple* is a vivid picture of domination and oppressed women are shown to be treated as play things. Alice Walker wrote,

"This book is the book in which I was able to express a new spiritual awareness, a rebirth into strong feelings of oneness."

The Color Purple tells the story of a black woman Celie raped by the man she believes to be her father and then forced to marry an older man she despises. It is narrated through letters from Celie to God and later to her sister Nettie. This novel tries to focus on the struggle of black women for their own identity and gender equality. When Celie was raped twice by her step father Alphonso, she became the mother of

his two children Adam and Olivia. Later Celie is married with Mr. __ who can be labeled as alter ego of her step father. He treats her like a beast Celie writes,

“Mr. __ marry me to take care of his children. I marry him because my daddy made me. I don’t love Mr. __ and he don’t love me.”

Celie at fourteen is half literate her sufferings at the hands of her presumed father and then at the hands of her husband can be given a framework only through her letters. Her experiences are so degrading that she can’t admit them to anyone but to god. That is why her father tells her, ‘*You better not never tell nobody but God.*’ Celie feels nothing for her own body as well as for sex because of horrible experiences of rape in the past and loveless marriage in the present. Walker successfully brings out the fact that the black women seem to find no way of men’s behavioural pattern, which is violent. Celie realizes the futility of her existence with her husband Albert and his children. She submits to his ill treatment and accepts everything he does. Called ugly and worthless often by her father and her husband, she accepts their judgement:

“He beats me like the children. Cept he don’t never hardly beat them. He says Celie, git the belt.....It all I can do that not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man.”

Celie’s faith is childlike and it undergoes a number of alterations as the novel progresses. She realizes that God is not as she really thinks an old white breaded blue eyed. Nettie and Shug help Celie not only to understand and accept her own individuality but also to change her concept of spirituality. Shug rejects the narrow church and its false perceptions, preferring to have a personal religion in which God figures, ‘*Not as a she or he but a It.*’ Shug is of the view that:

“God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God..... It ain’t a picture show. It ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else,

including yourself. I believe God is everything.”

The beating of wife in American society seems to be an accepting thing when Harpo asked his father why he beat Celie, Mr. __ says, ‘*cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All woman good for __.*’ For Mr. __ wife means to be obedient, subordinate, play thing, submissive and to be a punch bag for the man. Celie considers herself a tree, which is the example of a black woman’s passive and suffering agony of nature.

A sense of racial tensions runs throughout the novel alongside the feminist issues and religious ideas. The story of Sofia in the novel illustrates the hazards of being black woman. She can does fight for what she wants. When her husband Harpo beats her even when he loves her a lot, she protests and said, ‘*I love Harpo, she say God knows I do. But I’ll kill him dead before I’ll let him beat me.*’ But her revolutionary behaviour results in her dreadful experience at the hands of the police after she dares to ‘talk back’ to the white mayor. When Mary Agnes approaches her white uncle, who is a warden, about releasing Sofia, she is raped by him. The warden knows he does not have to worry about being charged with raping a black girl. Even the poorest of the whites consider himself superior to any black.

Shug Avery is the most liberated character in *The Color Purple*. But she also suffers verbal attack from the church elders because of her lifestyle and for her sexual liberation. It is Shug who liberates Celie, guiding her into emotional, sexual, financial and spiritual independence. Shug helps Celie not only to understand and accept her own individuality but also to broaden her conception of God. Shug admires the natural world and its beauty, in all its richness and variety including sexuality. According to her, there is a strong similarity between sexual satisfaction and worship. The tittle of the book signifies this philosophy. Shug is of the view that.

“Pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field.....and don’t notice it.”

Celie’s sister, Nettie is also a strong character like Shug in the novel. She escapes from her home when her step father desires to exploit her sexually after

Celie and becomes part of a missionary. Nettie's religious experience is different to Celie's. Nettie like her sister realizes that the narrowness of conventional belief closer rather than opens the way to a personal contact with the Almighty. The ultimate goal of Samuel, Corrine, Nettie and other members of missionary is to convey the powerful message,

"We are not white. We are not European. We are black like the Africans themselves. And that we and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere."

Alice Walker strongly believes that refinement can be done only through self-education. Gradually Celie learns that she is more than being just a slave. The women in the novel support one another throughout the novel in order to sustain self-reliance. The bond of sisterhood is important between Celie and Nettie; Sofia and Mary Agnes; Celie and Shug and between Tashi and Olivia. Celie is able to change her status of a sexually abused slave woman and free herself physically, economically and spiritually with the help of Shug and Nettie. Her decision to leave Albert and enter into the creation is a mark of self-respect. Celie, Shug, Nettie, Sofia and other female characters suffers a lot but able to free themselves from all the harsh conditions in which they live. Both the sisters, Nettie and Celie complete a personal journey towards a deeper knowledge of God as the novel ends, Celie last letter begins:

"Dear God, dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God."

Thus, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is a good representation that pronounces women's voice to breakout from any oppression that is based on gender differences. The female characters of the novel prove Walker's idea of making room for themselves by facing the challenges boldly. Celie's pants making is an important symbol of her freedom. The message of the novel is that women must stand against the unjust treatment they receive and they must do this by helping one another. The views and ideas of feminism in the novel cover the idea of freedom to break from the constraining patriarchal ideology, freedom to fight

against oppressors obtaining freedom by financial independence. Rita Mae Brown Comments:

"The color purple is a work to stand beside literature for any time and any place. It needs no other category other than the fact that it is superb."

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