

RESEARCH ARTICLE



THE COLOR PURPLE: A SEARCH FOR SELF

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge of post colonial traits and traditions offer a close meaning to The Color Purple. No works emerge from the vacuum; it represents a society or a period. The novel The Color Purple narrates the sufferings of Afro-Americans and men’s oppression. Alice Walker does not limit herself to the struggles alone, but offers solutions. She advocates women’s freedom and urges them to own a self identity. The search for self is not an easy task, and when it comes to a black woman, it becomes a great matter of struggle. This paper is an attempt to light on the cruelties and struggles undergone by the protagonist in the Afro-African society.

Keywords: victimisation, suppression, unnatural relationship, self realization

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INTRODUCTION

Patriarchal society provides little hopes for women. They are forced to wear a mask that misfit their real identity. Women are often projected as weak and fragile and placed second to men. Her wishes and rights are subjected to the decision of the men in the society. This biased and false representation leads to the denial of dignity and even worsens it. In the modern times, the women in the society start to pen their agony and injustice met from the hands of dominating public through writings. Authors 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 other continues to portray the powers and struggles of women in the male centric society.

Origin

African literature is an unexplored territory, developing a new and uniquely national aesthetic in literature. Afro-American, a literary genre, came into existence as a result of the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem Renaissance is ‘the spring of Afro-American voice’. It was a time when once forgotten writings were revived and American Black writers received recognition within the frame of the black literary tradition. The new outlook articulated a new concept in literature and the Black voice played a

role. But in the black society, it rejected the role of women and started to show the oppression of Black Men. Hooks observes:

Oppression of black men during slavery has been described as de-masculinization for the same reason that virtually no scholarly attention has been given to the oppression of black women during slavery. Underlying both tendencies is the sexist assumption that the experiences of men are more important than those of women and that what matters most among the experiences of men is their ability to assert themselves patriarchally. (1982: 22)

Double victimisation:

In *The Color Purple*, a black woman, Celie undergoes double victimisation. She is victimised for being a non white and for being a woman. From the beginning, she is put to suffer. She is raped by her step father twice and becomes mother to two children. Celie faces abuse even for her looks and is sent with Mr. Albert. At the hands of Mr. Albert, she receives ill treatment, slave like life and he uses her only for his physical appetite. At a point of time, he tries to exploit Nettie, sister of Celie, but couldn't. As revenge, he separates Celie from Nettie. Thus Celie was denied her only consolation. The revenge does not stop there; Albert continues torments and tortures Celie by hiding the letters from Nettie. Celie was left with no hope but to fight against this oppression.

Suppression of thoughts:

The novel reveals the inner agony and feelings of the protagonist through a number of letters. The epistolary novel thrived at the height of the British imperial ambitions. This novel is set against the backdrop of the First World War, when racial discrimination was there in the United States. Nettie teaches Celie to read and write as they do not want anybody 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). Celie writes about her life and the pain in letters. These letters are addressed to God. Only through these letters, Celie could write the day- to-day life and get out of her traumas. Men in Celie's life constantly prevent her from speaking and the act of writing down her feelings is a way of

"shouting her rights in silence". Writing, to Celie, is an instrument to stay alive and, therefore, it's as important to her as breathing: "Long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along". It is the outburst of her feelings and her "self". 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). Celie is able to write with the basic knowledge she received from Nettie.

Sisterhood and unnatural relationship:

The relationships between women are multidimensional. The protagonist, Celie lives with great love for her sister, Nettie and the sisterhood between Celie and Sofia is also given focus. Both Nettie and Sofia are independent women, unlike Celie. Nettie has undergone a formal education and highly influenced by her teacher, Ms Beasley, who is an independent woman. This creates a consciousness in Nettie and decides to live as an independent woman. She tries hard to exert all the possible ways to teach Celie. Nettie teaches her to write and read. On the other hand Celie is suppressed by both her father and husband, which makes her very submissive. She accepts them as masters. Nettie keeps on writing to Celie, but none of the letters reached her hands, as Mr. Albert, Celie's husband, hides them from her notice. He disconnects the only solace of Celie in the world.

Sofia is a bold and independent woman with sheer determination to be not a slave to man. She has a good physique and appears as a strong lady who is surprising to Celie: "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 believes that women can survive only by fighting. "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). She beats a white man and is sent to prison. Celie finally admires her rebellious spirits.

Shug Avery is Celie's first friend and lover too. This seems to be an unnatural relationship, but it makes the life of Celie meaningful. There is motherly love between them. Shug is truly loved by

Albert and brings her home. When Shug is badly ill, Celie takes care of her and they develop an intimacy between themselves. Shug sings a song and name it as "Miss Celie's song" to express her gratitude to Celie. Shug creates an interest about the body, physical appearances and its beauty. They embrace and share their love. The importance of regaining the control of one's own body for asserting one's self is outlined by Daniel Ross in these terms:

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)

Self realization:

Celie believes that she is an ugly, dependent woman. The entry of Shug in her life brought a change in Celie's life. A child begins to see her identity by relating to her mother, but Celie has admiration for Shug and says that she is more beautiful than her mother. "This identification foregrounds the child's acceptance or non acceptance of his sexual organs" (Quoted in Ross 77). For Celie, seeing Shug's body begins the primary step toward this identification. They involve in a lesbian relationship. Both of them have different physical experience in their life. For Celie, it is a matter of hatred. Because she was raped by her father many times and gave birth to two children and even after marriage, she never had made pleasure out of it. For Shug, physical relationship gave immense happiness. When these two unite, Celie feels true love for the first time. Ross notes 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 becomes aware of her sexuality and her body after the lesbian relationship with

Shug. When she sees her in the mirror, she could realise her identity and can break from the male domination.

The hidden letters are unearthed at last and Celie gets immense pleasure in reading them and she could feel the reunion with her sister. She resists against her husband and comes out of his clutches. When Celie comes to know that her father was not her biological father and her children are not killed by him, she becomes relieved. Nettie finds the children and Celie finally gets united with her children and sister. She moves back to her own home and she lives independently as a pants maker. Her views about society completely changed and she could be able to maintain a friendly relationship with her husband, who was reformed by her absence in his life. When she could realise her "self", it brought a change in her life and male dominancy becomes impossible in her life.

CONCLUSION

Walker says that there should be a harmonious relationship between men and women. It should not affect each other. The domination of a particular sex over the other sex gives rooms for various troubles in the society. Identification of one's own self can create an ideal path for the future. Underestimating one's self will make an object of suppression. The novel, thus, reveals the victimisation, suppression, unnatural relationship and self realization of the protagonist.

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