



Black Feminism: Treatment of Women in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract: Alice Walker is one of the prominent Afro-American writers. Her novel *The Color Purple* (1982) deals with the sufferings of black women. Time and again, numerous writers have written about male's dominance over women. However, the fiction of Walker presents a feminist perspective. The present paper highlights the issues of characters from a womanist perspective. It also focuses on the females' struggle who belong to the black society. The present paper questions the class struggle among the black society and the utopian female world. It also throws light on the racism and sexism that work together to disgrace women's role and existence. The journey of the protagonist in the novel shows the dominance of the traditional gender roles. As a black woman herself, Alice Walker brings to light the hardships of black women in the current novel, *The Color Purple*.

Keywords: black feminism, gender biasness, black movement, sufferings.

Alice Walker (b.1944) is a renowned Afro-American novelist. She portrays the experiences of black women in a sexist and racist society in most of her works. One of her prominent novels, *The Color Purple* (1982) won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for fiction in 1983. Walker has depicted the plight of black women in this novel as well as many others. She projects how black women are exploited and maltreated not only by the males but also by the white women. Walker has, without a doubt, provided a voice to the voiceless females. She makes these females conscious of their identity crisis. Walker has, in a way, taught her female characters to be audacious by making them autonomous. Walker describes herself as, "A rather ardent feminist myself, I would like to spend a lot of time on the subjects of black woman and women's liberation" (Walker, *In Search* 150). Furthermore, Pamela A. Smith writes about Walker, "From the beginning of her writing life, it seems Walker has seen her role as voice for the voiceless" (Smith 05). The same notion can be observed through the character of Celie in *The Color Purple*.

The women's movements of the nineteen sixties were altogether different than the previous ones. These were a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) talks about the right to education to women just like the men in any society. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) portrays the unequal treatment given to women in regard to their education, marriage and motherhood. However, the feminism after the second wave of feminism changed drastically. It was no more limited to the rights of education, vote etc. women challenged everything that tried to place them secondary in the society. *The Color Purple*, written in epistolary form, presents the sufferings and struggle of black women through the character of Celie. In that century, women were suffering both physically and mentally. They were dominated by the male members in their family. It is because of all these things that the is century was also called a black century of all the African-American women. The fiction of Alice Walker has projected how the black people are neglected by the white people. Walker considers that there should be harmony between all the genders in the society. In an interview with blackfilm.com by Monikka Stallworth in March 2003, Alice Walker answered the questions related to the present novel. One such question was , "Do you ever consider *The Color Purple* somewhat a voice for those who have shared a similar experience?" (Stallworth 02) Walker replied to it by saying: "Absolutely.



Definitely – I mean, it is totally that. It’s a way to support men and women who are in abusive relationships, you know? Who are trying to figure out how we got into this positions, where after you know, 400 years of slavery, we’re still treating each other like slaves. You know it’s very much that kind of supportive art” (Stallworth 02).

Many drastic changes took place in the America of nineteen twenties. During this time, Americans enjoyed a flourishing economy. They had peace on both national and international levels. However, the same period brought many problems for the African-Americans such as economic struggle, racial prejudices, and gender stereotypes. In Walker’s *The Color Purple*, the main character Celie experiences many sort of struggles. She finds life extremely difficult in the prejudiced 1920’s South. Alice Walker seems to portrays her familial bonds and childhood lessons through Celie’s personal struggles, aspirations and accomplishments. It brings to light the negative stereotypes of the 1920s against women and particularly black women. Black women writers analyze the complicated social issues because of being black and women. They project the immeasurable and fathomless pain, injustice and horror of slavery. Ironically, the white female writers deliberately excluded the works of black women writers from literacy anthologies. Patricia Meyer Spack’s book *The Female Imagination* presents the definite apathy and complacency for black female writers. Still, there are novelists who have presented the pitiable condition of black women and one such novelist is Alice Walker. She discusses about abortion, rape, love, lesbian relation, nature, god and ancestors in her novels. Needless to say that most of her works project the role of women of color in culture and history. She says, “I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppression, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women” (Walker, In Search 250).

The current novel, *The Color Purple*, presents a story where the female characters bear various brutalities due to patriarchal system. However, these characters finally get out of the oppression and liberate themselves through self-empowerment and self-identity. A daughter has always been controlled by the father in a male dominated society. Similarly, a wife has been dominated by the husband. It is how the society has been formed from the time immemorial. The woman in such society is bound to be oppressed, exploited and silenced. Alice Walker has presented the same exploitation and oppression in her novel *The Color Purple*. This novel shows patriarchal domination in both the black and the white society. The female protagonist of the novel is Celie who is completely an alienated, dominated and suppressed character. The novel begins with the suppressing statement of Celie’s father, Alfonso. He says to her, “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d Kill your mammy” (03). Here, Alfonso attempts to threat and silence Celie after raping her. Celie addresses Alfonso as ‘Pa’ in the novel still it does not stop him from raping her. Alfonso silences her by saying that her act of speaking and revealing her inner self will literally kill her mother. Celie cannot raise her voice to tell her mother the truth about her father’s sexual abuse to her. This sexual abuse results into pregnancy, that too twice. Surprisingly, Celie’s mother dies cursing her and not her father. Additionally, Celie’s children are forcefully taken away from her by her father. Alfonso wants that the truth about his raping of his daughter could be buried away. “He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can”(04).

According to Walker, ‘womanism’ is a “consciousness that incorporates racial, cultural, sexual, national, economic, and political considerations” (Brown, 04). The fiction of Walker does not represent one woman in particular. Her protagonist represents every woman in every society. Walker rebels against the topics and the themes which are far away from her reserved culture. She is not only concerned with political or civil rights but also with ethnic and cultural rights. She also discusses about the female sensibility. Her



protagonist in *The Color Purple* breaks her silence. She refuses to accept her oppression. In fact, she influences other female characters in the novel. Walker points out that it is the result of slavery which causes the sufferings for black women more than the white women in the society. Celie as Carolyn Heilbrun describes her is "outsider twice over" (Williams, 37). Celie feels twice outsider once because she is a woman and the other one because she is black. She has to handle the penalty of sexism throughout the novel. Showalter justly says in this matter that black woman is both "the other woman, the silenced partner" (Showalter, 214). *The Color Purple* presents a protagonist who speaks and writes Black English as a language that she uses to express herself. Ironically, American white people don't count it as a language itself. Still, Walker uses her own black diction and inspires everyone with the beauty of the language which leads to appreciate the beauty of the black culture generated in this language. Walker distinguishes her culture from the culture of the whites. She proves that her heritage and origin as black is completely different from the white one still she expresses her thoughts for both whites and blacks.

Walker's views on critical issues such as culture, race, gender and ethnicity can be clearly seen through her works. She classifies the black female characters and divides her women characters into three categories of women. The first type of female characters are known as the "suspended Woman". These women are oppressed by the males in particular and as well as by the society. These female characters can't do anything to defend or protect themselves. Such characters are found largely in the literature of nineteenth and early twentieth century. The second type is called "assimilated woman". These women try hard to identify themselves with the white society. They tolerate the physical violence. They also suffer from a psychological need to be accepted. This type of female characters can be seen in the 1940s and 1950s literature. The last type is "emergent woman". Women who belong to this category have the necessary awareness of her needs and abilities. They lead their lives depending on their choices. They share their experiences with others. They are also aware of their oppression by males and try to get rid of it. This type is typical of the 1960s. After 1970s, critics introduced a new category that is known as "liberated woman". The liberated woman knows her desires. She works hard to discover her abilities and goes with it. (Tyson, 394)

In the patriarchal society, a man beats a woman to give her the idea about him being the superior one in the relationship whether it is his daughter, his wife or his daughter-in-law. Celie works hard day and night yet she is beaten repeatedly by her father. Usually, her father does not even need a reason to beat her: "He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church...I may have got something in my eye but I didn't wink" (07). She is again beaten by her father for dressing up in a way which he considers is other than the normal clother: "He beat me for dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway" (9). Women are beaten not only by their husbands but also by their sons. In the present novel, when Harpo stoned Celie "He pick up a rock and laid my head open" (14). Mr.-- does not punish his son for such inhuman action because he himself had been beating Celie and when Harpo ask his father why he beats her Mr.--replies "Cause she my wife" (23). Celie's sufferings continue to surround her. Mr.-- too beats Celie. He does not find in her anything like Shug Avery whom he loves. Shug asks Celie the reason behind it: "What he beat you for?" (72), Celie replies, "For being me and not you" (72). Mel Watkins observes, "To Albert, who is in love with vivacious and determinedly independent blues singer named Shug Avery, Celie is merely as servant and an occasional sexual convenience" (01).

It goes without saying that marriage plays an important role in everyone's life. In any patriarchal society, a girl gets married as per her parent's decision. Similarly, in the present novel, Celie was just handed over by her father to Mr.--so that he could get rid of her. Mr.-- agrees to marry Celie when her Pa



tells him that “She ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she is clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it . . . She can work like a man” (10). Moreover, Mr.-- marries Celie as he needs someone to look after his children. Celie remarks: “Mr.-- marry me to take care of his children. I marry him cause my daddy made me. I don’t love Mr.--- and he don’t love me” (61). After her marriage, Celie continuously suppresses her anger when she is tortured by her husband, Mr.-- . Celie once states: “He beat me like he beat the children.... He say, Celie, git the belt . . . It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man” (23).

Walker reveals the discriminatory practices within black society. Surprisingly, there is intra-racial racism inside the black society. In her novels and stories, Walker discusses the internalized racism and shows how people in color believe in their inferiority to whites. She also presents the way institutionalized racism is being practiced. The protagonist in *The Color Purple* speaks and writes Black English as a language. Celie uses this language to express herself. Walker seems eager to distinguish her culture from the culture of the whites. She even attempts to prove her heritage and origin as black. Through her works, Walker expresses her thoughts about both whites and black. Celie's life changes when she meets Shug Avery (once love interest of Mr.--) and Sofia (daughter-in-law of Mr.--).

Another example of burdened relationships can be seen through the relationship of Alfonso and his new wife. Celie’s father gets married once again and brings a new mum. Celie thinks that she will rescue her from the tortures of her father however her new mother never utters a word about it to her husband. On the contrary, she remains quiet and only cries in her room. Surprisingly, Alfonso doesn't beat his new wife and never treats her badly. Still, she never says anything at all. Probably, it's her inner fear of the male's power. It is also a possibility that she knows that her words do not make any difference. She is aware of the fact that she will not be heard.

The novelist has portrayed two female characters in this novel who consider themselves to be strong women and question everything and challenge all the patriarchal notions about women. One such character is Shug. Celie describes her as: "Shug Avery standing upside a piano, elbow crook, hand on her hip. She wearing a hat like Indian chiefs. Her mouth open showing all her teef and don’t nothing seem to be troubling her mind” (07). Shug’s character is contradictory to that of Celie’s character. She is comfortable with her body and sexuality. She is beautiful woman who knows how to "domesticate" Mr.-- . it is also a fact that people around her , don't respect her. They talk all sorts of things behind her back. The father of Mr.-- refuses to let his son marry her because “his daddy tol him I’m trash, my mama trash before me, His brother say the same” (109). People around her call her "Queen honeybee" and while her father calls her "Tramp". Nobody comes to help her when she falls ill and she is all alone in the farm. This is another face of silencing. Since silence doesn't only mean to ban someone from the verbal speaking. It is the social and the cultural pressures which lead to stop speaking or to hesitate about speaking her mind. Shug determines to get back her power by acting like a man. She begins to use the male diction in order to enter the male's area. Celie observes: “Shug say, girl you look like a good time, you do. That when I notice how Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl you look like a good time.... how some woman they hugging on look like a good time” (72).

To put it briefly, it can be said that the current novel projects various female characters and it is through these characters that Walker has shown how the men or the society behaves with women, for their being women and foe being both black and women. Black feminism became popular in the Western countries in the 1960s and 1970s. In the United States, the most popular black feminist movement was



abolitionist movement. This movement focused on putting an end to slavery in the country. It also tried to ensure the equality of all citizens. Black feminism does not talk about dismantling the social constructions of the dominant communities only. It also attempts to promote the economic and social development of black women. The fiction of Walker is replete with the examples of black feminism. She shows the oppression of black women. The protagonist of the novel, Celie, symbolizes a good house wife who looks after her husband and his children. Simone de Beauvoir mentions in *The Second Sex*: "one is not born a woman; rather one becomes a woman" (03) and the character of Celie justifies the same point.

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