

The Color Purple: An Abused African American

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ABSTRACT

The Color Purple is hailed as a classic book in exploring the pathos of black women in social context. Its strength derives from the regeneration of the multitude of characters with the protagonist Celie in the forefront. Walker focuses on racial, political and sexual issues while they highlight women's struggle for survival. Her true intention in writing this novel is to give voice to black women and to provide them with a path to follow in order to emancipate and get their freedom. Walker shows us the evolution of her major character, Celie, a poor, barely literate southern black woman from being a sexually abused child to a passive wife and finally to an emancipated woman. Walker focuses on Celie, who is trapped by racist and sexist oppression and the way she seeks to define herself is through the use of language. The work reveals the plethora of violence in the form of harsh economic, social and emotional crisis facing the blacks. Celie's relationship with her step-father and husband is characterized by sexual oppression in the patriarchal society in America. Celie endures a barrage of rape and harshness that causes her to experience her body as fragmented and as being possessed by her victimizers.

Key words: Color Purple, fragmented, patriarchy, blues singer

INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker depicts Celie's experience of subjugation in a male dominated society, her sexual abuse by her father and husband and how she successfully comes up from submission and subjugation to a self-realization and thereby attaining emancipation. The journey of self-discovery that Walker's protagonist, Celie, undergoes is accentuated by an internal understanding of God that is woven into the structure of the novel. Alice Walker has projected her women characters as victims of violence, especially in domestic space, curbs women's resistance and fractures her subjectivity as it poses threat to both her wholeness and the establishment of a whole black nation. It is an epistolary novel, a work structured through a series of letters. Celie writes about the misery of childhood incest, physical abuse, and loneliness in her letters to God. It is a novel that begins with a fourteen-year-old girl's cry for help. Celie has suffered repeated rapes

and brutal beatings by the man she believes to be her father, Alphonso, it begins with a patrimonial injunction of silence: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy”. Celie’s story is told within this threat: the narrative is about breaking silences, and, appropriately, its formal structure creates the illusion that it is filled with unmediated “voices.” According to Carole J. Sheffield, “The right of men to control female body is a cornerstone of patriarchy. Violence and the threat of violence against females represent the need of patriarchy to deny the woman’s body of her own property”. Throughout the story, Celie is told to keep quiet about what has taken place between her and her father Alphonso. “He starts to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don’t never git used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook”. The fact that Celie in moments of extreme physical pain transforms herself into a tree is a telling example of “a black woman’s proximity to the passive suffering and agony of nature”. (Badode 38). In the same way when people compliment her on how good she is to Mr. ---,s children, she says, “I be good to them. But I don’t feel anything for them. Patting Harpo back not even like patting a dog. Its more like patting a piece of wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chifferobe” (31). Such comparisons with nature suggest dehumanization, retreat from feeling, a conscious aloofness of individual from feeling, a conscious aloofness of individual from surroundings as a result of lack of self-worth and self-esteem.

Celie endures a barrage of rape and brutality that causes her to experience her body as fragmented and as being possessed by her victimizers. 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). A similar comment is voiced by Deborah Mc Dowell in her essay “Regarding Family Matters” in which she cautions the ways in which black women’s bodies are reduced to the terrain upon which white and black men enact a struggle for power and control over literary landscape.

Celie’s daughter-in-law, the African woman Tashi, also the protagonist of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, has to endure cultural violence to achieve a deeper bond with her African roots. She becomes a victim of her people’s ceremonies, a rite that years earlier had left her sister dead in a pool of blood. The ritual female circumcision and facial scarring are practices which leave African women joyless and spiritually dead as they struggle “to reconcile the two warring cultural consciousness” (Ray 63)

The paper looks at three female characters from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) and their respective contribution to the development and growth of Celie’s identity. Such analysis supports the relevance of Shug, Nettie and Sofia, and it demonstrates the fundamental role they play over the main character in Walker’s work. This research draws upon mostly gender issues, and each character is related

to a specific aspect in order to examine how each one contributes to the Celie's empowerment as a woman. It can be observed, therefore, how Shug, Nettie and Sofia become an exemplary image in terms of sexuality, education and behavior, respectively, thus providing a new image of the African-American woman at the beginning of the twentieth century. The aspects explored are contrasted and supported in view of Black Feminist theories in order to provide arguments that defend the importance of African-American women's sisterhood to combat the oppressive presence and power of black patriarchy. Shug, Nettie and Sofia a great impact make on Celie, who probably would not have experienced an empowerment without the help of those three women and sisters.

Blacks in America were neglected and ignored as third class citizens and black women were relegated to a separate entity because of their sex. The evils of racism and sexism have critically affected the lives of Afro-American women. They were discriminated in terms of class also, as they were considered to be belonging to the lower class. They had to work very hard to make their both ends meet. In her book *Ain't I A Woman*, Bell Hooks portrays the status of the black women:

Black women are one of the most devalued female groups in American society, and they have been the recipients of a male abuse and cruelty that has known no bounds or limits. Since the black woman has been stereotyped by both white and black men as the "bed" woman, she has not been able to ally herself with men from either group to get protection from the other. Neither group feels that she deserves protection..... most young black men see their female companions solely as objects to be exploited..... referred to black female as "that bitch" or "that whore". Their perception of the black female as a degraded sexual object is similar to white male perceptions of the black female. (108)

During 1960s, black women met racism while participating in the feminist movement. They were not allowed to participate in various conferences. They were not studied or represented in the faculty of Women's Studies Departments. White women advocated and supported racist ideology and acted as racist oppressors at the individual level. The Black Feminist Movement was formed to address the evils of racism, sexism, and classicism. The needs and requirements of black women were ignored by the black men in the Black Liberation movement and white women in the Women's Movement. Proponents of black feminism argue that black women are positioned and discriminated within structures of power in quite different ways from white women.

The height of discrimination is witnessed from the fact that the word "black" meant black men and word "woman" meant white women. Consequently, black women did not exist anywhere for them. Black women writers took the responsibility of raising a social consciousness and promoting change in their society. They took various steps in the construction of black cultural identity.

Stephen E. Henderson in the introduction to Mary Evan's book *Black Women Writers* remarks:

Obviously, Black women did not begin their involvement with literature in the 1970s, and one of the refreshing aspects of the revaluation mentioned above is not only the reappraisal of Phillis Wheatley or the discovery of Zora Neale Hurston, but also a deepening realization of the role that black women, both known and unknown, have historically played in building the institution of black literature. (xxv)

The author of poetry collections and essays, short stories and novels, and a staunch activist for Black civil rights, women's equality, and peace, Alice Walker contributed significantly to African-American literature. She is a brilliant chronicler and a strong advocate for black women and this is exemplified in her treatment of black women in fiction. She primarily deals with the lives of poor black women. In her fiction, she gives voice to these voiceless women. Walker emerges as an optimistic writer as her female characters, despite the problems they face like racism, patriarchy, false economic system, etc., delineate hope and emerge economically independent. Her female characters recognize their talents and strengths while encountering marginalization and oppression. Her characters bring to them their autonomy and economic independence.

The Color Purple is Walker's landmark novel which makes her the first Afro-American woman to have got the Pulitzer Prize for fiction as well as the National Book Award. Walker's popularity rests on this novel and its subsequent movie production. Harris writes, "The novel has become so popular that Alice Walker is almost universally recognized as a spokeswoman for black people, especially for black women, and the novel is more and more touted as a work representative of black communities in this country" (155). The novel traces the story of Celie, an ugly black girl who is so many times raped and impregnated by her step father, Pa (Alphonso). Consequently, she gives birth to two children by him- Olivia and Adam who are taken away from her. Unfortunately, Celie remains barren throughout her later life. She is married to Mr. (Albert) who makes her life hell. She suffers all kinds of oppression. However, with the passage of time she overcomes her problems and emerges as triumphant because of the economic independence that she gains. Walker writes the novel in the epistolary mode. Celie, after being raped by Pa, writes letters to God. He threatens her that she should not disclose his story of her sexual abuse to anybody. Celie also writes letters to her sister, Nettie. However, her life gets completely changed with the coming of Shug Avery (a blues singer) in her life. She comes to the town to sing a song at a local juke joint. Celie and Shug develop a lesbian bond and love each other. Celie also interact and develops a good relationship with her step daughter-in-law, Sophia, who is an assertive and a very bold woman Gerri Bates says,

Female assertiveness is Walker's way of delimiting women's space. She liberates Sofia from

submissiveness, making her a mouthy free spirit, a challenge to a powerful system. Shug is an adventuresome blues singer with fine tastes and without limits on her sexual preferences. Nettie, too, asserts herself by escaping her stepfather's house rather than succumbing to his unwanted advances. Her escape takes her all the way to Africa. (95-96)

Walker, through the character of Shug, affirms an empowered femineity. She is seen as an element of change in the novel. Her real name is Lillie, but she is named as Shug, short for sugar. As a blues singer, she is very successful and wealthy. Celie says that, "She sing every weekend now at Harpo's. He make right smart money off of her, and she make some too.

Plus she getting strong again and stout" (*The Color Purple* 71). She has travelled to so many places and is quite sophisticated due to her good financial condition. Throughout the novel, she seems to have chosen her own path and pleased herself with her own ways, means, and lifestyle. She sleeps with whomever she pleases. She has a number of affairs with various people, most of them very young. About her, Celie comments:

She singing all over the country these days. Everybody know her name. She know everybody, too. Know Sophie Tucker, know Duke Ellington, know folks I am never heard of. And money. She makes so much money she don't know what to do with it. She got a fine house in Memphis, another car. She got one hundred pretty dresses. A room full of shoes. She buy Grady anything he thinks he want. (*The Color Purple* 101)

Acting more manly than most of the black men, she holds down a prosperous career, owns her own home, directs her affairs with different men and women, and enjoys a very important position as a musician in her society. Celie asks Shug what she needs for breakfast, she replies that she wants, "orange juice, grapefruit, strawberries and cream. Tea." and further tells her, "Just gimme a cup of coffee and me my cigarettes" (*The Color Purple* 49) which depicts that she is economically much sound. Because of Shug's economic independence and empowerment, she never stays at one place or with one person always. She has got a big house about which Celie says, "She work late, sleep late, get up late.... It a big round pink house, look sort of like some kind of fruit. It got windows and doors and a lot of trees round it," (*The Color Purple*). Her sound financial state helps her keep many boyfriends.

Celie's growth from a coward person to a woman of independence is all because of Shug. She takes Celie to Tennessee where she starts the business of making pants. Her business flourishes beyond expectations and she makes much money. As she says:

I sit in the dining room making pants after pants. I got pants now in every color and size under the sun. Since us started making pants down home, I ain't been able to stop. I change the cloth, I change the print, I change the waist, I change the pocket, I change the hem, I change the fullness of the

leg. (*The Color Purple* 191)

She also gets the inheritance of the land and the house after Pa's death. Shug makes Celie leave her life of victimhood and become a new woman. Although abused, ignorant, powerless, and timid, Celie can't be completely called a weak woman. Honest and upright, she cares for every person whosoever is related to her. She not only achieves sexual liberation but also economic and spiritual liberation. She finally takes charge of her life and manages to achieve a very dominant role with property and gets a home and money which she can offer to her sister and children when they come back from Africa. Shug enables Celie to find a career in making pants and gives her a home in Memphis while she establishes her new business. She suggests to her:

Let's put a few advertisements in the paper, she say. And let's raise your prices a hefty notch. And let's just go ahead and give you this dining room for your factory and get you some more women in here to cut and sew, while you sit back and design. You making your living, Celie, she says. Girl, you on your own way. (*The Color Purple* 193)

She herself wears pants and breaks the gender stereotypes. The business of making pants is her economic liberation. Sophia is an assertive woman and does not back down from a fight. She marries Harpo, Celie's stepson. She has masculine tendencies and does physically demanding work around the field and house, thus making her both ends meet. She sustains the hard physical labor very well, even better than Harpo. Later on, she divorces Harpo because he has not been able to accept her independence and free will. Unfortunately, her independence, caliber, strength, and boldness land her in prison for twelve long years for sassing the white mayor's wife.

Mary Agnes, a minor character (Harpo's second wife), goes to Memphis with Shug. She becomes a blues singer and elopes with Grady, Shug's ex-husband to become a drug dealer in North. With Shug's help, she carves out a career of singing for herself and makes a very good living from this career. Thus, these women, despite the oppression, marginalization, and subjugation they face, emerge successful only after attaining economic liberation. Walker emphasizes that economic independence can make black women life happy lives and enable them to carve out their innate talents. Shug breaks the stereotypes and lives in a world of her own as she attains economic liberation. Celie's growth from a timid girl to a brave one is due to her business of making pants. Sofia works hard in the fields and makes quilts. Squeak receives popularity after she makes singing her profession.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* represents the African American woman as a symbol of hope and resurrection for humanity. She insists the significance of bonds between women as a means to contend with racism and sexism. It's a novel that portrays the gradual forming of a new black woman, Celie, who

evolves from patriarchal oppression to awakening and independence. Walker emphasizes that women would learn to make 'room' for themselves. The women characters of the novel prove Walker's idea by facing the challenges boldly. Walker does not eliminate men, as it considers their transformation too. The transformation of men and the improvement in women's situations envision a better future for black people. Women perceive that through friendship they can realize their dreams, follow them in society and achieve them. The ray of hope even in despair is the important aspect of the novel. Thus, *The Color Purple* examines the quest for wholeness, for communication in a world of fragmentation and alienation.

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