

**Purple, Blue- Black and Blues: Womanist Discourses as
Resistance Narrative in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*'**

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Abstract

The Black women have always been the victims of racial and gender discrimination. The marginal space they occupy in the society, have made them aware of a need for sisterhood or bonding between women. The narrative in the black-womanist fiction acts as a resistance to the oppression suffered by them. These womanist discourses empower them and heal them. This paper attempts to mark these nature and music discourses that grant them self-esteem and individuality. These women “sing to the earth and to the sky and to their cassava and groundnuts. Songs of love and farewell.” Alice Walker defines the term ‘womanist’ as “womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender”. (Walker: xi-xii). These womanists “love music, love the moon, love the spirit... Love struggle. Love the Folk. Love herself.” The color purple spreads through out the novel and the blues music provides individuality to the black women. The fight for self-respect is frightening for Celie, the protagonist. She transforms herself in to a tree in moments of pain. “I say to myself, Celie you a tree.” Shug Avery, the Blue singer names Celie in her song, “Miss Celie’s Song” and thereby empowers her. These black women create an alternate garden, where they can celebrate blackness. The role of music and color purple as therapeutic, resistance, womanist discourse would be examined in this paper. The adaptation of this novel as a movie also uses color purple as a major visual tool to bring in to the viewer’s mind, the spirit of the black women. These visuals of color purple in the movie would also be examined as a narrative artifice in the marginalized discourse.

The saga of colored people unfolds through an African Odyssey across multi- women narratives in Alice Walker's fiction *The Color Purple*. The myth of Africa as a Dark Continent is debunked in re-writing the colored history, by depicting the white/colorless history as the new serpent in the garden of Eden. A land of astonishing geographical and cultural diversity, Africa – the birthplace of the human species, is home to thousand languages and three thousand tribes. The political, social ,racial and gender discourses are interwoven in to the narrative of Celie, the silent, victim protagonist rooted to her home and her articulate sister Nettie, the survivor who travels as a missionary , in the new context of Western colonization and religious penetration in to ancient civilizations as India, Africa and Burma .The indigenous natives of Africa is initiated into the benefits of the colonizer's religion ,in their exposure to the introduction of education and standardized English to the native Africans. This paper examines the use of multiple discourses of women in *The Color Purple* to subvert and resist the Western , colonial text on Africa. The women are doubly exploited within the family –victims of black community and white community.. Another alternate woman voice Shug Avery, a blues singer also empowers Celie, the mute, weak woman. The various political texts based on different nationalities /shades of black color- blue, blue- black, purple, chocolate brown ; attain the status of a discourse and the writer Alice Walker describes herself as a medium' in manifesting these multiple- texts.

The text creates and celebrates a black consciousness through poly-narratives of women. The writer, in turn transforms into a medium to sing the story of Africa. The plight of exploited, oppressed, isolated, helpless, lonely black women recur as a major theme in Black fiction .In *The Color Purple*, the woman's discourse of experience evolves in to a 'womanist' narrative. Alice Walker defines 'womanist' as "womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender"(Walker 1983: xi-xii). She further states that "A womanist is one who Loves music, Loves the moon. Loves the spirit... Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves Herself. Regardless" (Walker 1983: xi-xii). The ultimate desire to connect to the ancient ancestor is evident in these narratives. As Toni Morrison, another major Black-Woman writer aptly comments,

In order to write literature deeply rooted in the African- American culture of her community,she incorporates the major characteristics of Black art,that is oral quality,a choral note,myth,music,folklore,and, most importantly , the trope of the ancestor and memory. (Morrison,Toni 2008: 61)

In *The Color Purple*, the written, passive form of texts of Celie and Nettie is blended with the oral, powerful text of the Blues singer, Shug Avery, the 'Queen Honey Bee'. Words uttered as music attains power, in the Blues song, symbolic of the blue-black community. The oral texts of Blues music and nature, empower and heal the women. Nature heals and makes the woman wild with love. The letters of Celie and Nettie addressed to God gradually evolves in to a letter addressed to trees, stars, sky, peoples, everything and nature. The cultural text of Africa gains importance in her discourses. The epistolary written narrative contrasts with the magical, oral, musical Blues text. Angela Y. Davis in 'Blues Legacies and Black Feminism'(1999) establishes a connection between women Blues singers and Black Feminism.

...the blue lyrics of black women contribute a privileged discourse to analyse issues related to gender and sexuality in working-class black communities. Blue songs share with other forms of popular music their concern with love...Blue songs dealt with extramarital relations, domestic violence, ephemeral...partners, desire and bisexuality. Moreover, they were sung by women...Women blue singers challenged issues such as domesticity, marriage and motherhood, and even often exalted economic independence and sexual promiscuity. (Baldellou-Miquel 2007:71-73)

Thus women Blues singers redefined women's place and reaffirmed the identity of African-American women. According to Miquel Baldellou",the sexual politics described and defended in the woman's blues was imbibed by African -American women writers who infused their female characters and experiences with those of the women in blue songs".(Baldellou-Miquel 2007:73) Blues music was another available matrix or discourse for the black writers. The African women writers thus use Blues music /African cultural texts as a narrative to resist the oppression and thereby liberate themselves through these oral musical texts. Martha Mazurek states that

Walker assigns to herself a role of a mediator who records in the form of the literary discourse the African- American oral artistic tradition passed down to her by her mother....Walker turns to African - American women's everyday practices such as church singing, story- telling ,and taking care of gardens to trace expressions of their spirituality and art. In her mother's daily care of the garden ,Walker sees artistic expression of a creator.(Mazurek, Martha :1-14)

The Blues helped to construct a new black consciousness. The Blues music was condemned as Devil's music .This music articulated a collective experience of freedom,

created a new discourse of freedom and this form challenged the notion that women's place was in the domestic sphere. Shug Avery, the Blues singer who is able to control the patriarchal structure is called 'Queen Honey Bee' by Celie. Celie admires Shug, meanwhile Shug instills self-esteem in Celie. Shug teaches Celie to question patriarchal abuse. Celie feels that first time somebody made a song and named it after her—"Miss Celie's Song". The women sing song for themselves.. Squeak also sings about calling her as yellow, "But if yellow is a name, Why ain't black the same." These Blues songs raises the political discourse and the marginal space the blacks were assigned in the western society. Nettie reveals that Africans are described as savages by white people. The blacks are moved to the centre space through the narratives of Shug and Nettie. The religious narrative, the nature narrative and the native Senegalese Olinka tribal narrative created by Nettie, moves Celie's narrative to the centre. Celie is liberated and empowered using these womanist discourses. The color purple symbolize Celie's liberation and appreciation of life around her. Walker in her preface to the novel, talks about color purple—"this color that is always a surprise but is everywhere in nature". Walker discusses about shades of black-blue, black, brown and black and the superiority of the first race on earth- the black. Nettie writes about Olinkas, the natives:

They are the blackest people I have ever seen, Celie. They are blue-black. They are so black, Celie. They shine... I felt like I was seeing black for the first time and Celie, there is something magical about it. Because the black is so black, the eye is simply dazzled. (Walker, Alice:27)

The bluish-black color is attributed great power, as in all ancient civilizations. The Indian mythological Gods as Krishna and Siva are also depicted as bluish-black. Another political and nature narrative of Olinkas provide emancipation for the blacks. Nettie talks about how the white man displaces the natives from their land for economic purpose. She narrates the native legend of the roof leaf, where the chief of the tribe, out of greed tried to acquire more land and how he was punished by the nature, "For six months the heavens and the winds abused the people of Olinka". Finally the huts were covered with the roof leaf, the roof leaf became the thing they worship. People bowed down to it. "We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its humble way, is it not God?" (Walker, Alice 1982:81) Nature/Land is their God. They also believed that "a girl is nothing to herself, only to her husband can she become something." (Walker, Alice 1982 :83).

The round native houses are preferred over square, western houses. Olinka women are respected, they express their contempt for the missionary society:” Our people pity women such as you who are cast out, we know not from where, in to a world unknown to you, where you must struggle all alone for yourself.”(Walker, Alice 1982:85) .The native culture text of Africa proves to be superior and acts as a resistance narrative to the globalised, standardized western culture text. Nettie talks of an Africa with a rich cultural heritage, being slowly erased and standardized by the western political and economical powers. They destroy forests and replace them with rubber plantations. The indigenous culture is erased and wiped off by the western colonizer culture. .Hence the literature of the black is “political- every text is silent about something.”(Joy, James 2000:15).”The ancient mahagony trees, all the trees, ...everything of the forest was being destroyed, and the land was forced to lie flat...”(Walker Alice 1982:88).And the Olinkas, no longer owned their land.

The friendship or sisterhoods between Olinka women were as ancient as their relation to their land. “The women spend all their time in the fields, tending their crops and praying. They sing to the earth and to the sky and to their cassava and groundnuts. Song of love and farewell.”(Walker Alice 1982:89).Shug breaks Celie’s acceptance of a white God. Shug provides economic independence to Celie in creating a business out of stitching--- a home bound Celie travels with Shug to a bigger city. The religious text changes the perception of Celie- Shug transforms Celie’s vision of God to whom she used to address letters:

God is inside you and inside everybody else. I believe God is everything ...Everything that is or ever was or was will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you’ve found it...that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all...Everything. want to be loved. Us sing and dance ... trying to be loved. (Walker Alice 1982 :98)

This Indian philosophy of advaita, oneness/ divinity in nature is reiterated again , when Shug advises Celie to enjoy the sight of color purple in a field ,without ignoring it. Finally Celie is empowered and she is liberated –“I am so happy. I got love,I got work, I got money, friends and time. Nettie, on the other hand wants to save the Olinkas from the exploitation by the colonizer, the white man .But “Olinkas runaway to join’ mbeles’ or forest people who live deep in the jungle, refusing to work for whites or be ruled by them. The white woman writer Doris Baines makes a prophetic prediction for India and Africa:

...the signs are all over Africa. India too, I expect .First there’s a road built to where you keep your goods. Then your trees are hauled of to make ships and captain’s furniture .Then your

land is planted with something you can't eat. Then you're forced to work. That's happening all over Africa, she said. Burma too, I expect. (Walker1982:110)

The writer talks about the materialistic objects that the Olinka tribals are attracted to and hence they would work for the white people. She also talks about the Cherokee Indians who lived in Georgia and were forced to leave their homes.”They thought they were yellow or reddish brown ...because of white ancestors”(Walker Alice 1982:112)Corrine is a Cherokee Indian tribal, while Tashi retains the ways of Olinka tribes by undergoing the female initiation ceremony. Nettie and Celie's re-union after 30 years makes Nettie realize the need for the formation of a new church, in which each person's spirit is encouraged to seek God directly. She worries about her children's "African independence of opinion and outspokenness".(Walker Alice 1982 :121) .Alice Walker ,as a 'medium'/writer believes in the power of nature. Celie's salutation of "Dear God" is explained as her" desire to hear from an ancient ancestor". She is able to connect to her African lineage through her sister Nettie and she also returns to the "pagan transformation of God from patriarchal male in to trees, stars, wind ,sky and everything"(Walker Alice 1982 : preface).Celie is able to connect to that cosmic consciousness through her courage, and the womanist discourses with various women. The realization that she is Nature herself, a divine manifestation liberates her. These narrative tools, especially the color purple looms large in the film adaptation of the movie by Steven Spielberg. The color purple symbolizes freedom for the oppressed, silent woman, Celie- who represents the colored people of Africa.Celie's marginal discourse develops in to a narrative that occupies centre space. This narrative is equally a narrative of resistance .As Laura Beard observes, "women resist the cultural definitions imposed upon them in an effort to speak and name their own experiences." (Beard, Laura 2009:20).

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