

Sisterhood in Alice Malsenior Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract:

Alice Malsenior Walker, an iconic figure in African American literature was born to Mr. Willie Lee Walker and Mrs. Minnie Lou Tallulah Grant on 9 February 1944 at Eatonton, Georgia. Her writings bring out the agony, afflictions and struggles confronted by the African and Afro-American community due to class, race and gender discrimination both inside and outside their community. She has written 20 novels and published a number of essays all reflecting the themes based on gender discrimination, patriarchal supremacy and imperialism of Americans. In *The Color Purple*, Walker portrays the drastic impact of patriarchal domination and brutalism over woman and how the female bonding facilitates them to survive such brutality. Celie, the protagonist of the novel had to bear all such slings from the age of twelve. Women supporting one another at the time of tribulation are the expression of their uniqueness. It binds them, comforts and provides them with a sense of security. Thus the concepts of sisterhood manifested in the novel aids, the protagonist for liberation. Celie's relation and bonding with Sofia, Shug Avery and Nettie leads to her liberation from the role as '*mule of the world*'. The study emphasizes on the solidarity of African women community and how they share their responsibilities among each other irrespective of blood relation. The study also lays emphasis on the liberation of woman characters highlighted in the novel through sisterhood or female bonding.

Keywords: Sisterhood, Female bonding, Liberation, Sisterly love, Women Friendship, African Women Bonding

Abbreviations used in the article are as follows:

CP - The Color Purple

ISOMG - In Search of Our Mother's Garden

AWLT – African Woman Literary Theory

BFT - Black Feminist Thought

Alice Malsenior Walker - An Exemplary Author and Activist

Alice Malsenior Walker, a prolific writer born on 9 February 1944 to Mr. Willie Lee Walker and Mrs Minnie Lou Tallulah in a sharecropper family, in Georgia. Alice along with her siblings she was exposed to racism, gender prejudice, class discrimination which was part of Southern life at that period in Georgia. Despite the unfair attitude of Americans towards the Africans, Alice's mother craved her to be an educated citizen to survive in this brutal world. Her mother supported girl's education and regarding this matter an American owner commented that blacks do not need to be educated. On this Mrs.Walker replied, "*You might have some black children somewhere, but they don't live in this house. Don't you ever come around here again talking about how my children don't need to learn how to read and write*".¹

From the statement its explicable that Mrs. Grant was unlike the other Black woman and she went against Jim Crows Laws and against landlords who expected the black children to plough the fields rather than experience the might of the pen and books. It was the sole effort put forward by her mother towards sending her to school and later to college that acted as reinforcement in her life ;an upliftment in her career and overall personality.

After an horrendous accident in her life at the age of eight that entirely changed her from a jovial child to an introvert one. She was wounded in her right eye with a BB pellet shot by one of her brother accidentally. Her childhood vivacity disappeared behind the "*hideous white scar*". To avoid the taunt of her peers, she engrossed herself into the world of books. She twisted herself to reading and writing where she could explore her imagination, and be herself. She became a voracious reader and showed her creativity in writings.

Alice read books of classical authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Phillis Wheatley, Toni Morrison and other woman writers. Through their writings she learned about the afflictions and brutality confronted by Africans against White supremacy. It also enabled her to understand people more realistically and also facilitated her to develop patience in sustaining a relationship. When she entered Spelman College, Atlanta in 1961, she got influenced by Reverend Martin Luther King Junior's speeches and protest movements against Americans-the imperialist. One such incident in her life made her to stand against the imperialist Lords.

In Atlanta, the Africans had to take the back seat of a bus, as per the rule. Alice deliberately took the front seat and on complaint of a white lady, she was forced to sit back of the bus. With this incident she realized, *“I knew I would never be able to live in this country without resisting everything that sought to disinherit me [...] I would never be forced away from the land of my birth without a fight”*.² (ISOMG, 144)

It was from this incident on that Alice started her career as an activist. She took great interest in Civil Rights Movement and other social issues related to the Black Community. She states that the Civil rights movement was a blessing as it united the African community as a whole to revolt against the white’s domination and fight for their freedom. Even when she encountered about the horrible experience of Toni Morrison and Zora Hurston’s life, she was speechless. When Toni Morrison was twelve years old, her house was set ablaze by the Whites. On the other hand Zora Neale Hurston had to pay the cost of speaking her mind. Alice too was criticized for her writings and to speak her thoughts. In her (Alice) writings she highlighted how the black men compensated for their frustrations by exploiting their own women. She also highlighted about women bonding that helped in the emancipation of women.

She tied her wedding knot to Mr. Melvyn Leventhal, a Jewish Law student on 17 March 1967. Her daughter Rebecca was born on 17 November, 1969. Later Rebecca too inculcated the literary talent of her mother and became a writer as Rebecca Walker.

She coined the word ‘womanism’ to describe black feminism. She states in her first collection of essays, *‘In Search of her mother’s Garden:*

“I don’t choose womanism because it is better than feminism [...] I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it, because I cherish the spirit of the women (the Sojourner) the word calls to mind, and because I share the old ethnic American habit of offering society a new word when the old word it is using fails to describe behaviour and change that only a new word can help it [...]”. (94)

Walker had written many essays, short stories and novels. Some of them are:

Once -1968

The Third Life of Grange Copeland – 1970 (1st novel)

Everyday Use -1973 (essays)

In Love and Trouble -1973(essays)

Roselily (essays)

Meridian – 1976 (2nd Novel)

Good Night Willie Lee I'll see you in the Morning – 1979 (Poem)

The Color Purple - 1983 (Novel)

In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose - 1983

Now is the Time to Open Your Heart- 2005 (Novel)

Finding the Green Stone - 1991

The Complete Stories- 1994

The Same River Twice :honouring the Difficult -1996

By the Light of My Father's Smile – 1998

Living by the Word – 1998

The Way Forward is with a Broken Heart – 2000

Devils My Enemy – 2000

Hard Times Require Furious Dancing -2010

Sisterhood in *The Color Purple*

Alice Malsenior Walker's *The Color Purple*, an epistolary novel won *The Pulitzer Prize* and *The American Award* in 1983. The novel depicts the grim state of black women in South Africa between the early 1900's and mid 1940's through Celie, the protagonist of the novel and how she got liberated. The central factor behind Celie's liberation was the power of female bonding or sisterhood. As per Wikipedia, "Female bonding is the formation of a close personal relationship between women. Female bonding is a term that is used in Ethology, Social Science, and in general usage to describe patterns of friendships, attachment and cooperation in women; or in case of Ethology, associations between females of various species." ⁴

In the novel, the patriarchal domination over the black woman using their physical might was as treating the woman as a mere swine ---- Mr. Alfonso's malevolence and Mr. Albert's vindictiveness to Celie and Harpo's spiteful attitude towards Sofia. Thus, a woman gets excluded into her domestic life, becoming solitary and makes them turn to other women for comfort, care, security and unity. Sisterhood undeniably is the crux in the novel.

Bonnie Thornton Bill's essay *Race, Class and Gender* as cited in Lynda Stone's book *The Education Feminism Reader* says: "The concept of sisterhood has been an important unifying

force in the contemporary women's movement.[...] this concept has been a binding force in the struggle against male chauvinism and patriarchy.”(42)

The women characters in *The Color Purple* –Celie, Nettie, Shug Avery, Sofia and Mary Agnes, all are knit into an intimate bonding of sisterhood. Celie's development and liberation into an independent individual became possible with this sisterly attachment. As Clenora Hudson Weems comments: “*Given that we know all too well how comforting sisterhood is, we must welcome it and its rewards for others as well as for ourselves. Thus, for the moment, let us reflect on how much more beautiful our world would be if all sisters simply loved each another. Our children would be more secure, for there would have not just one female guardian, but many to attend to their needs.*”(73)

The emotional attachment and understanding among women saves them from drastic effects of physical exploitation, domestic violence, and political instability. The African women enjoyed their togetherness. They narrate folktales, knit quilts, beautified their gardens and sang melodious songs. Walker considered them as artist who with colours painted their imagination. She emphasizes on bonding that the woman group share is due to the similar sufferings. Sarah Addison Allen in her book *The Peach Keeper* express: “*We're connected as women. It's like a spider web. If one part of that web vibrates, if there's trouble, we all know it, but most of the time we're just too scared, or selfish, or insecure to help. But if we don't help each other, who will?*” (CP)

‘The ‘quilt’ in the novel, that Celie offered to Sofia, when she was leaving for her maternal home is symbolic of their sisterly love they shared together. Similar female bonding is visible in the Olinka section also. Reverend Samuel appreciates the fact that women get along well with each other. It is through household chores that ladies share their work and nurse each other's children as in the novels Nettie takes care of Adam and Olivia- the adopted children of Rev. Samuel and Corrine. Nettie later comes to know that Adam and Olinka are Celie's children out of an unholy impregnation by her step-father. She recalls her past when her sister Celie took care of her just like a mother “*thinks about the time you laid yourself down for me.*”(CP)

The supremacist group treated the whole African community specially the African men as wretched creatures. They were thumped, beaten, exploited, disgraced and treated like hell. This affected them psychologically as one's manly identity got lost. Thus all the aggravations within them were taken out on their female counterparts by providing the same humiliation as African male had to go through at the hands of the Americans. In African

community, females had to undergo subjugation and oppressions resulting in alienation and urge them to develop sisterly love to neutralize the effects of patriarchy. A sisterhood is something that can only be understood by a female as Clenora Hudson comments:

“This particular kind of sisterhood refers specially to an asexual relationship between women who confide in each other and willingly share their true feelings, their fears, their hopes, and their dreams. Enjoying, understanding, and supporting each other, women friends of this sort are invaluable to each other. With such love, trust and security, it is difficult to imagine any woman without such a genuine support system as that found in genuine sisterhood.” (65-66)

The actual power of the community can be found in women’s alliance with one another. One such instance is Nettie’s letters that speak about the friendship among Olinka wives of the same husband and Celie finds Shug as her greatest support. Shug Avery, a blues singer and mistress of Mr. Albert motivates Mary Agnes to face the crowd at Harpo’s juke point. Celie was fascinated by the life Shug Avery was leading and she got emancipated from the depressive life she lived with Mr. Albert.

The unity of women is tested regularly throughout the novel and proves to be a threat towards sisterhood. When first Shug met Celie at Mr. Albert’s house, she treated her discourteously. Another instance visualized is in letter ‘Thirty-Six’ where Harpo wish to dance with his separated wife Sofia and Squeak, his girlfriend becomes envious. Corrine, the wife of Rev. Samuel accuses Nettie and Rev.Samuel of an affair. Her discrepancy allows us to understand the firm base on which sisterhood depends. Female unity is built on faith, trust, on believing and on sharing. Shug hated Celie and treated badly but later they got close together. Shug became the reason behind Celie’s liberation and provided her with the materialistic requirements essential to lead an independent life and earn her own.

‘The quilt’ section exhibits the bond shared among Celie, Sofia, and Shug. It symbolizes bonding of diverse personalities. In words of Walker: *“Let’s make quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains, she say. And I run git my pattern book[...].(CP,41)*In Letter twenty-seven again the quilting scene is mentioned where Shug Avery joins them , *“Me and Sofia piecing another quilt together.[...]She (Shug Avery) pick up a random piece of cloth out the basket.[...]Frown how you sew this domination thing.[...].”¹³ (CP, 54-55)*

In Olinka section also we find the bonding between a mother and a child. *“With the death of Tashi’s father she became attached to her mother. But the death brought her (Tashi) and her mother closer together.”¹⁴ (CP, 150)*

Rev. Samuel points out that Sisterhood is something that only women can understand and through their work gets united emotionally and mentally with other woman. As in the words of Alice Walker: *Perhaps I can help with her work. It is in work that the women get to know and care about each other .It was through work that Catherine became friends with her husband's other wives. This friendship among women is something Samuel often talks about. Because the women share a husband but the husband does not share their friendship,*"¹⁵ (CP, 150-151) Celie and Shug Avery's friendship is also beyond Mr. Albert's understanding. Shug's supported Celie in every matter and they got along so well together that later Shug revolted against Mr. Albert's behaviour with Celie. As stated in the novel - "*I never understand how you and Shug got along so well together and it bothered the hell out of me.*"¹⁶(CP, 246)

Celie's letters act as a testimony to the spirit of Black sisterhood as they suffered the torments and patriarchal superiority. The Black community has a strong female unity where the mother figure who hold the community and the individual families together.

Some critics even interpreted the novel as '*a quilt*', ninety scraps of communication from different people. The quest for self is an exploration of the private hidden consciousness of the Black woman As mothers ,daughters ,sisters, and friends to one another ,Afro-American women affirms one another's humanity and right to exist. A woman seeks her identity not only in outside world but also in her own home where she is always made aware of being a girl, a woman who needs to be submissive, docile, meek and obedient. The women group ought to keep their voice low before a 'Man'. At such point the women share their fears, and try to be a comforter to other women. This is what we observe throughout the novel. According to P.H. Collins, "*When I am with other black women I always laugh. I think our humour comes from a shared recognition of who we all are in the world.*"¹⁷(BFT, 97)

Thus Sisterhood is something that unites the women to not only share their feelings, affections, sorrows and opinions but also helps them to share their domestic chores, looking after children and their needs. It helps a woman to overlook their sorrows, to move ahead in life and get liberated just like Celie in the novel. She with the aid of other women started her own tailoring business ,had a new home and at last but not the least she got her family back - her children ,her sister and even Mr. Albert at last understood her importance. If people cared, shared, and lived with the feeling of togetherness – the planet would have been a better place to breathe.

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