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Portrayal of Subaltern Literary Concept in Alice Walker's "The Color Purple"

Abstract: Alice Walker is one of the most famous Afro-American women writers of our time and this is largely due to the novel "The Color Purple", an epistolary novel which is one of the most notable women's novel of 1980's in which Walker delineates women in different ways deprived of their freedom, rights, happiness, and force to live their life by sacrificing their needs and desires for male domination society by bestowing their heads. Men believe women as their private property and with them they can do whatever they want. In the novel men holds superiority over women. Thus the present paper studies about the subaltern characters of Afro-American women's destruction and inequality by the domination of male society.

Keywords: Gender Troubles, Male Domination, Racism, Sexism, Subaltern Literature

I. INTRODUCTION

Subaltern theme has become important that it is regularly used in various disciplines such as novels, dramatic studies, literary theory, films etc. In the context of globalization the word Subaltern means inferior in rank or of secondary importance. To the field of 'Subaltern Studies' three outstanding thinkers have contributed to it. They are, Antonio Gramsci, Ranjit Guha and Gayatri Spivak.

As stated by Julian Wolfreys people who are oppressed, marginalized, exploited on culturally, socially, politically and religious ground are grouped as 'Subaltern'. Thus Subaltern literature reflects diverse themes such as marginalization, oppression, Gender discrimination, disregarded women, neglected sections of society, subjugation of lower, working and deprived classes.

Antonio Gramsci says that the word 'Subaltern' is drawn from the Late Latin word 'Subalternus'. In Latin 'Sub' means 'under' and 'alter' means 'other'. So literally it indicates to any person or group of inferior position, whether because of class, race, gender, religion or ethnicity. Gramsci stressed it in terms of Gender, Race, Caste, Culture and Class.

GayatriSpivak includes oppressed generations, colonized people, blacks, working classes and muted women in the category of 'Subaltern People'.

B.K. Das opines GayatriSpivak laid the stress on gendered subaltern that is woman who was doubly oppressed because of her gender particularly in the Third World Countries. The Subaltern literature studies of a society who are under control by superior or leadership which makes individual to feel inferior and worthless. This paper studies about the subaltern characters of Afro-American women who are dominated by male gender in Alice Walker's novel "The Color Purple", is one of the most significant black women's novel of 1980's, in which we can see that how women lost their identity in particular how black women are facing many problems under dual oppression.

Alice Walker is an American black woman novelist, short story writer, poet, essayist and activist. Her writings explore multidimensional kinship of women with family and society and embrace the redemptive power of social and political revolution. A significant feature of Walker's writing is her openness to exposing personal experiences. Many connections can be made between Walker's own life and her female characters, and her emotional intimacy with her creations breaths life into her work for each new reader. Her renowned novel, "The Color

Purple” got published in the year 1982. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and won National Book Award in 1983. The novel has generated the most public attention as a book and as a major motion picture directed by Steven Spielberg in 1985. The publication of “The Color Purple” gained Alice Walker immediate and wide-spread recognition and transformed her from an important figure in black women’s writing to an immensely popular novelist.

Alice Walker sets her novel “The Color Purple in a black rural south. It is an excellent account of the life of poor black women suffers not only in a form of social ostracism due to gender and skin color but also women suffer greatly at the hands of black men. Walker through her characters shows the oppression that the female gender is put through by the patriarchic society. In the novel almost all the black male characters dominate women and treat them in an ill-mannered, violence and oppressive ways. Women are violated in different ways like physically, emotionally and sexual torture which makes women to live fearfully in their own society. Men treat them as worthless and inferior. This is notably evident in the life of the central character Celie, where she is mistreated more than a slave. This pictures the brutal action of the Afro - American males towards the black women in the community.

II. MALE SUPERIORITY

In every parts of the novel the attitude of superiority is so deeply rooted. Where the men are the decision makers. In the novel the male characters dominated women and do so in a violent and oppressive manner. The Color Purple talks about a young girl Celie, is the main character in the novel is burdened with a lot of adult responsibilities at her young age. After her mother passes away, she is taken out of school to take care of her sibling. Her step-father, Alphonso deprives her off a chance to get her education, and also sexually abuses her for his pleasure. Going through molestation by her own father, Celie grows with a cold insolence towards men. Her father constantly told her “you sure is ugly”. Her father told she was ugly and had the ugliest smile. The constant destructive comments from her father led her to accept

that she was an ugly woman. She lost her Self-confidence from her constant repudiation from men.

Later on Celie, was forced to marry Mr.Albert, cruel older man by her own father. Celie's husband beats her up to make her submissive and to reduce her status in the community. She was also deprived of her identity as a wife since Mr.Albert ruled over their marriage through abuse. Celie is passive and subservient young woman had two men in her life none of them showed love towards her. They are not only physically violent but sexually and emotionally abusive, making her to live fearful and feel worthless and inferior.

Celie is a suppressed black woman, who had lost her identity. Having been mistreated by both men in her life, she feels hatred and disgust towards men. She is the prime example of the voiceless black women of the era. Mary Grove Nicholas, the Free Love Advocate in 1885 described marriage as a complete destruction of women by explaining that women were considered to be men's private property. For example, the law many times allowed a husband to beat his wife. In the novel this very law can be seen through the action of Mr.Alert beating his wife Celie in letter 13 to which Harpo, his son asked why he beats Celie to which Mr.Albert replied "cause she is my wife". Followed by his son repeating the same action like his father Harpo beats his wife Sofia when she stands for her interest against her husband who beats her up believing that by beating her he can make his wife under control and he believes it is his right to do so as he is the legal sole husband of her.

III. INJUNCTION OF SILENCE

The novel voices theme of silencing the women's voice. Celie represents many other women who are forced to keep their voice not heard in the man's worlds. The novel opens up with a paternal injunction of silence, "you better not tell anybody but God. It'd kill you mammy". And proceed several lines later, "He start to choke me, saying you better shut up and get used to it" letter-3. These lines suggest that Celie is denied from the right to speak to raise

her voice against her step-father's sexual assault. She is not allowed to reveal her distress to any person except God so she expresses her grief in the form of letters to God. Celie's letters to God does not only show a cry for help but it also stands as mouthpiece of all the African American women who were faced the same situation.

Later on Albert, takes Alphonso's place as Celie enters his family life. She calls him as Mr._____ indicates that she is denied to approach to the man's world. A perfect example is illustrated by Albert's denial of female network as he prevents Nettie and Celie from corresponding after Nettie refused his lustful move. This denial of communication is symbolized by Mr._____ hiding Nettie's letters. One of the letters show to prove the silencing, as Nettie write "He said because of what'd done I'd never heard from you again" Letter-107. The man's world is represented by Alphonso and Albert denies Celie's voice, and she has to keep herself from mental illness by writing to God.

IV. WOMEN AS SEX OBJECTS

In the novel women were considered as sex objects where Celie got sexual abuses by her step-father and she later on gave birth to two children, Olivia and Adam. Celie in her marriage life submitted her to joyless sexual encounters with Albert, who treats her like an unpaid prostitute. She was mistreated by Mr._____ who used to urinate in her while having sex. Celie's gender makes her so much oppressed and due to being treated like an object for men to use and dispose of when satisfied. She has been oppressed where she cannot fight back and learns to live quiet and submissive.

V. COLOUR DISCRIMINATION

The greatest problem of the world is the color discrimination, especially for women. Afro-American also referred as Black Americans or Afro-American and in earlier times as American Negroes. Women of African origin in the United States of America having always

been keenly aware of the fact, class, race and gender oppression experienced by their people upon their lives.

The Color Purple took place during a period when racism was intensely deep in the society. The black people in the society were at the time seen as lesser beings compare to the white people. More so, the colored people in the novel are forced into a lower class through oppression, not only because of the color of their skin, but also because they are women. It is only the memories of the agonizing and painful activities experienced by their people in the white people like Mayor and his wife Millie believes that it is a great honor to be a white lady's house maid. But Sofia rejects to become a housemaid so she got hit by Mayor and police, put her on jail for twelve years in order to assert again their racial dominance.

The action of ill-treatment of African American women by both Black men and whites are as a result of the male beliefs that women are inferior and worthless. Celie is treated unfair and underhand by her husband Mr. Albert by being made to toil with Harpo on the family farm. As a result of that Celie is making profit for Albert and his father.

In the novel women are not permitted to receive education. They have to remain at home taking care of their husband, children, kitchen and farm. They are suffering a severe and damaging lack of basic rights by male society and cannot think to fulfill their dreams as they are expected to stay in four walls of their houses. For example Celie is denied an education very early in her life because of her female identity and she has to stay at home and care for Alponso, and the house. Her lack of education can be clearly seen from her letters in which she made errors in sentence structures like in spellings she wrote, "get as git" in letter -1, "cursing as cussing" in letter -2, "supposed as sposed" and "asked as ast" in letter -3 and letter- 6 and furthermore she wrote, "them did not comb" instead of "they did not comb". In addition, in the novel Olinka's girls were not educated because of the fact that they were female.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the novel Walker considers the position of black women in male dominated society where women's role resembles that of a slave. The subaltern female characters were subjected to racial and patriarchic forces that had manipulated their subjectivity and silence their voices. Walker in the novel expressed that black women in the society were oppressed and mistreated and they must raise their voices and lift their head held high in equal with men in socially, emotionally, economically, and politically to get their rights and gender equality. Thus Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" written in epistolary and autobiographical form, the slave narrative is able to shed light on the kind of oppression black women are put under, which has been a barrier for them to have the freedom to move forward in the society from object to subject.

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