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Ms. Simran Sodhi

Research Scholar, Dept. of English

Singhania University, Jhunjhunu

Rajasthan, India

simransodhi1993@gmail.com

Dr. Pramila Gupta

Principal, guides

S D Institute of Educatio for Girls

Ambala, Haryana, India

Subordination of African women in the novel *The Color Purple*

Abstract

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is a novel written in an epistolary form in the year 1982. The novel is about the coming of age of an African woman in a repressive and hostile environment of South America. The story is about women's struggle against the dominant ideology of patriarchy in America as well as Africa. Women in the novel live in a male-dominated society, which is both racist and sexist in nature. Female characters are subject to all forms of oppression in the novel, which finally leads to their mental and physical subordination. Black women in the novel are triply oppressed as they are subjugated because of their colour, class and gender. However, the novel not only brings the struggle of women in this patriarchal society alive but also depicts how their inner strength to fight these evils in the society. These acts of courage ultimately help them in carving their their own identities and leading them to the path of self-discovery and self-realization.

Keywords: Racism, Feminism, Oppression, Black women, Patriarchy

Walker's primary character Celie is a fourteen-year-old uneducated girl who is victimised at the hands of her stepfather and later her husband. Celie is repeatedly raped by a man whom she believes to be her father, but later she discovers that he was actually her stepfather. She is shunned, denied the voice of her own and always told that she is an ugly woman. Celie's letters to God are her only means of self-expression. She's threatened by her stepfather Alphonso who after raping her used to say "you better not never tell nobody but God. I will kill your mammy" (Walker, 1). She, therefore, decides that she can best endure her survival by making herself silent and invisible. Celie's letters to God are her only means of self-expression. She is impregnated twice, and her stepfather takes both her children away from her. She is also made to separate from her sister Nettie who leaves the house to save herself from the sexual advances of Alphonso and later Celie's husband. Celie's married life is also miserable as her sexual encounters with her husband Albert are sordid and unloving. She is married off only to look after his children, work on the farm and to submit without any objection to all of his demands. Celie's husband Albert has an affair with Shug Avery, who is a wonderful and empowered woman in the novel. Celie feels immediately drawn towards this beautiful and independent woman who later empowers Celie with her love and care. Celie is also meant to accept her husband's affair with Shug to the extent that Albert slept with Shug despite having his wife in the same house. Fidelity is never considered as an essential virtue by men, although the same behaviour in a female is condemned in society. Shug, being independent and liberated women, is attacked by the church preacher for her loose character and way of life . We learn that Shug in this society has a reputation of a woman of dubious character who dresses provocatively and has some sort of "nasty woman disease". This clearly brings out the double standards existing in the male-dominated society of South America.

The novel deals with feminist issues along with the racial prejudices prevalent in the society. Celie's biological father was lynched in the novel for being a successful businessman and thus, a threat to the whites. The racial component of the novel brings out the pathetic condition of black women who are doubly oppressed because of both racial and patriarchal oppression. Sophia is a powerful and physically strong woman with a strong character. She fights for what she wants and believes to be right. It is through her character that novel first challenges patriarchy as a dominant ideology. She marries one of Albert's children Harpo. Being physically strong, Sophia is more capable than Harpo in sustaining hard labour. Harpo's insecurity about his masculinity makes him seek advice from his father on how to make Sophia do what he wants. Albert's response is "Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a sound beating" (Walker, 36). She is not cowed down by her husband Harpo, who tries to beat her into submission rather turns the tables on him and beats him up. It is really unfortunate that during the course of the novel, Sophia has to face mutilation, brute labour and unjust imprisonment because of racism. Walker develops the theme of racism through the white mayor's family. Sophia is accused of 'sassing' the mayor's wife, and it is because Sophia refuses to work for the mayor's wife that she is put behind bars. Mary Agnes, Harpo's girlfriend, tries to free Sophia from jail but is raped by her white uncle who was the warden in the jail. Women in the novel face all forms of physical violence.

The *Color Purple* is a womanist text which depicts Celie's journey to reclaim her identity and her self confidence. Walker's womanism is her brand of 'feminism'. It was during the peak of the Feminist movement that she rejected the term 'feminist' for "womanist" as feminist movement often excluded life and concerns of ordinary women belonging to lower classes especially black women. She defines womanist as a 'feminist of color' one who possesses strength and persistence for personal growth. Alice Walker says "I am preoccupied

with the spiritual survival of the whole of my people. I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" (Walker, 250). Walker, through the representation of Celie and Nettie, challenges several patriarchal notions about family, women's identity and their role in the community.

Alice Walker, through Nettie's experiences in Africa, shows the disciplining of the African American woman's body. Women were terribly oppressed and were given no education or independence. All women of the Olinka tribe had to undergo the cruel practice of female circumcision and facial scarring. Alice Walker clearly attacked this barbaric practice as an attempt to discipline women's bodies and affect their sexuality. Sandra Bartky in her essay "Foucault, Femininity and Modernisation of Patriarchal Power" argues that every moment of a woman's life is scrutinised and judged on the basis of disciplinary practices which try to discipline her body. Women should condition themselves in order to achieve the 'artifice 'of femininity' and achieve "a body of a certain size and configuration" to help identify them as female. These practices give the impression that the production of femininity is entirely voluntary or natural, but the truth is that women have internalised these practices. Patriarchy is an oppressive and non-egalitarian system of sexual subordination which aims at turning women into docile and compliant companions of men. In this novel, Tashi of Olinka tribe undergoes female circumcision and has her genitals cut. The whole idea of disciplining a woman's body is averse to Nettie who regards it as dehumanising but understands it to be a custom which enables the Olinka tribe to cling to its tribal identity in a changing world. Nettie's letters in the novel widen the scope of the novel as it is through her letters that Celie becomes conscious of another world outside hers. Racist and patriarchal oppression that Celie experiences in American south parallel the tragedy of Olinka people who like her face patriarchal, racist and imperialist oppression.

The womanist perspective in the novel which helps women to stand up against the unfair treatment they receive at the hands of men and this they do through helping and nurturing one another. Women, even those who have interests in the same men, bond together to support and sustain one another throughout the novel. The bond between Mary Agnes and Sophia is stronger than their mutual claim on Harpo's affection and love. Mary Agnes endures rape for Sophia's sake so that she could get out of the prison and later Sophia looks after her children when she goes off to become a singer. The bond of sisterhood is essential in the novel as Sophia's ability to fight comes from her strong relationship with her sisters. Nettie's relationship with Celie helps her to survive in the harsh conditions of Africa. It is the strong bond between Olinka women, which helps them to find an alternative space within patriarchy, and it makes polygamy bearable for them. Many instances in the novel depict how these females free and liberate each other. Shug teaches Mary Agnes to sing, Albert's sisters take Celie out for shopping when no one else does, Sophia's sisters look after her children when she is in the jail, Nettie also takes care of her children for thirty years in Africa, Eleanor Jane, a white woman, cooks nourishing food for Sophia's daughter Henrietta and Celie nurses Shug back to health and inspires her songwriting.

Celie's bond with Shug Avery is one of the most critical aspects of this novel. It is the presence of Shug's love in her life that gradually helps her to recover her history, sexuality and spirituality and a sense of self. Shug remains Celie's most constant friend and companion throughout the novel. She assumes different roles of mother, confidant, lover, sister, teacher and friend, which bring about radical changes in the life of Celie. Celie understands that beauty is not real unless it is first found within, and it is Shug who makes her feel better about herself and find her true beauty within. Celie also realises that Shug's true beauty lay in her confidence and her strength of character. Shug opens her eyes to new ideas about religion, empowering her to believe in a non-patriarchal version of God who

loves her the way she is. At the beginning of the novel, Celie sees God as a white-bearded man, but later she abandons this image of God and finds her own meaning of God. She starts admiring the natural world and its beauty, in all its richness and variety. Celie begins the last letter of her book with "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples" (Walker, 292).

The quilt metaphor in the novel picks up Walker's womanism. Quilt in the novel symbolises the power women gain by productively channelising their energies. Celie opens a pant sewing business with Shug that empowers her by making her a financially independent woman. The quilt, composed of diverse patterns sewn together symbolises diverse women coming together in unity and pulling themselves together through their fragmented lives and gain identity and self-confidence. Many critics state that the quilt is a powerful symbol depicting new beginnings in the life of women. Celie turns around her dreadful past and starts leading a happy and contented life by the end of the novel.

Walker's novel *The Color Purple* challenges patriarchy through the depiction of gender role reversals. In Celie's letters, we are told that Harpo loves to do womanly things like cooking and housekeeping, whereas Sophia loves doing manly things like fixing up the roofs. We are told Harpo looks like a woman and Celie at Harpo's juke point says that when Sophia talks to Harpo, she sounds like a man giving compliments to a woman. Celie talks about her own self in the novel that when she saw Shug naked for the first time "she had turned man". Walker, through such examples, is telling us the need for both men and women to break out of their gendered roles determined by patriarchy. Walker's womanism is different from feminism in which she believes that ultimately man, woman and nature are all one and should live in harmony.

The title of the novel is a significant symbol which clearly depicts suffering and pain in the lives of women. Sophia's swollen and beaten face is described as the colour of

'eggplant' which is purple in colour. Purple is also the colour of Celie's private parts, which is the site of her sexual violation. From a symbol of sexual oppression in the early part of the novel, the colour 'purple' in the turns to signify liberation and increasing freedom for women. Purple is a bright colour that is used by Walker to symbolise new beginnings and rebirths at various points in the novel. Celie experiences something of a religious rebirth when she goes to a field of purple flowers with Shug. She starts imaging god as somebody she can relate to more efficiently as a god of beauty who created beautiful things like the colour purple.

The Color Purple is a great novel written in an epistolary form that won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National book award for Fiction. It was later adapted into a film of the same name. Upon its publication, The Color Purple became a very controversial novel followed by heated debates about black cultural representation. Many male African American critics complained that the novel reaffirmed old racist stereotypes about pathology in black communities and of black men. Critics accused Walker of focusing on sexism at the expense of addressing notions of racism in America. The novel has been under the frequent attack of censors because of the explicit content of the novel, particularly in terms of violence against women. Nonetheless, there were many supporters, especially among black women who praised the novel as a feminist fable. The film of this novel got an overwhelmingly positive response from black female viewers, and people swarmed movie theatres to watch the groundbreaking film.

Mel Watkins, in a 1982 New York Times book review suggests that The Color Purple is anything short of literary gold." The cumulative effect is a novel that is convincing because of the authenticity of its folk voice...a striking and consummately well-written novel. Alice Walker's choice and effective handling of the epistolary style has enabled her to tell a poignant tale of women's struggle for equality and independence". (The New York Times, 1982)

Alice Walker was bombarded with a lot of questions regarding her novel, and people questioned the explicit depictions of rape and incest as a characteristic of black masculinity in her novel. Walker challenges this perspective in an interview stating "why shouldn't I be tough on men? This is a country in which a woman is raped every three minutes. Where one out of three women will be raped during their lifetimes, and a quarter of those are children under twelve. If I write books that men feel comfortable with, then I have sold out. If I write books that whites feel comfortable with, I have sold out" (Rosenfeld, 1982).

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