

Communal Bonding and Trauma in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Dharitri Kaman

M.A in English

Department of English and Foreign Languages
Tezpur University, Tezpur, Assam, India

ABSTRACT:

Female bonding is a relationship that develops among the women in the society. And the bonding among the women is necessary for the development or growth in the minds of the women. Though we claim that women should be given equal rights in the society as men but in some way or the other the inferiority of women in the society cannot be totally ignored. Even if women are given equal rights or treated equally as a man, the bonding between the opposite genders will not be able to give women the strength and support they will receive from their female partners. This paper aims to show the bonding among women in the society where they are always considered as inferior to male members of the society.

KEYWORDS: Women, communal bonding, trauma, sisterhood, mother-daughter relationship, racism

INTRODUCTION:

Alice Walker is born to the family of sharecroppers in Eatonton, Georgia. She is the winner of Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Color Purple* (1982) and also the winner of American Book Award for fiction. It is written in the epistolary form. The novel describes how the bonding among the female characters changes the life of the women in the society that is dominated by the patriarchal system. The bonding among the women in the novel helps in the development of the characters in the novel. This novel portrays various issues which lead to form a kind of bond among the women in the community of the Blacks. Oppression can be considered as a factor which makes the bond stronger among the women. Oppression of women by the patriarchal society results in the absence of the individual identity of women. The power of male domination is experienced by every woman in the Black society. Female friendship can be considered as a refuge from oppression and the male dominant society. In this novel, female bonding helps the protagonists to break free from the male dominated society and it also acts as a search for one's identity.

COMMUNAL BONDING:

"You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy." The novel begins with this sentence and the story of Celie is told within the context of this treat and the story is about breaking the silences. Celie is a character shown by Alice Walker as someone who is trapped in world of oppression. Her struggle to break free from the network of racial, class, sexual and gender ideologies to which she is exposed leads to the bonding with other women characters in the novel.

When a woman is dominated in the society, the woman is seen as 'other' by the male in the community. This novel also depicts the concept of 'other' in the society. Not only the women but the Blacks as a whole are considered as the 'other' by the whites. In case of the Blacks, women are discriminated not only by the male figures but also they are discriminated because of their race by the whites in the society. Women face racial discrimination and also gender discrimination in a community where they are expected to remain silent each and every moment.

Female bonding is not only the bonding of friendship among the women. But it can also be the bonding of sisterhood and also the bonding of motherhood among the women in the community. In the novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker describes all these bonding in the community of the Blacks and also how the women finds their individual identity with the help of their female bonding.

The novel opens by describing about a young girl named Celie and her plight caused by her father by abusing her. Celie is raped by her father and as a result she gives birth to two children. Her father not only abuses her but also try to abuse her little sister named Nettie. But Celie promises God that she will protect her sister from her father in every possible way. Soon Celie is married off to Mr _ who came to ask Nettie's hand. After her marriage Celie comes in contact with other female characters in the novel. One of them is Sofia, Harpo's wife who is exactly the opposite to Celie's character. After that, comes Shug Avery who later on develops a close bonding with Celie. The marriage between Celie and Mr_ is not a proper one. He use to dominate Celie and beats her to keep her under his control. Only after Shug Avery's coming to their life, the relationship between Celie and Mr_ changes a little and he stops beating her. During Shug Avery's stay at Mr_ house a kind of friendship starts between Celie and Shug which helps in the development of Celie in her life later. Nettie is separated from Celie after Celie's marriage to Mr_ but towards the end of the novel both the sisters are united. As the novel develops we come to know that whom Celie and Nettie thought as their father is only their stepfather and they also discovers the story about their parents. While Nettie stays away from Celie, Nettie develops her own life with a family who form a part of a group of people called Missionaries. This family is the one who adopts Celie's children. Along with them Nettie goes to Africa to spread the work of the missionaries. After Corrine's death, Nettie gets married to Samuel. The novel ends with the uniting of the two sisters, Celie and Nettie and coming back of Shug to Celie.

This novel mainly portrays Celie as the protagonist whose life develops as the novel progresses. The novel also introduces us to other women characters like Mary Agnes, Corrine, Odessa, Olivia, Tashi and others. The bond that develops among the women in the community is clearly depicted in the novel. This bond among the women character help the characters to find their identity in the society.

BOND OF SISTERHOOD: The bonding between Celie and Nettie is the bond of sisterhood. Both the sisters are different in their personality. From their childhood we find that they are dominated in the society by the patriarchal system. The behavior of the father towards Celie and Nettie is not good. He used to beat Celie and he made her pregnant. And after that he also tries to abuse Nettie. Their father also abuses their young mammy. According to Celie, "I know I'm not as pretty or as smart as Nettie, but she say I ain't dumb". (*The Color Purple* 11) It shows the difference between Celie and Nettie. Nettie loves to learn new things and also teaches them to Celie but Celie thinks that it is beyond her reach to learn new things that her sister teaches her. Celie is submissive to every situation and does not have a voice of her own. After her marriage to Mr_ she used to obey each and every word of her husband. But Nettie is the first one to encourage Celie to fight against Mr_ and his children. Nettie says that she has to fight against them, against the society who always thinks that women can be dominated. So Nettie is the first one to encourage Celie to fight. As both the sisters have different personalities their life also changes in different way as they grow up. Nettie is the one who makes her life as she wanted it to be. She is not submissive like Celie and after running away from her father and Celie, Nettie started her life with the missionary family. She is the one to travel to different parts of the world and spread the knowledge she acquired in her life. Though Nettie is away from Celie for many years there always has been a bond between them. The bond is so strong that when everyone thought that Nettie would not return home after the accident but Celie always knew in her heart that Nettie is alive and one day she will return home.

Nettie's education helps her to move around different places. As a missionary she moves away to Africa. Her letters help Celie to know about the world beyond her living. She came to know about places and things which would not have been possible for her to reach without Nettie's letters. And Celie also discovers her own family history.

CELIE AND SOFIA:

The bonding between Celie and Sofia is beautifully portrayed in the novel. Sofia is Harpo's wife. Sofia is a powerful figure in the novel. Harpo the first son of Mr_ who also develops the idea that woman should always be dominated by the husband. Here also the idea of oppression is applicable. According to Harpo, "Women work. I'm a man". (*The Color Purple* 22) It clearly shows Harpo's view about woman. When Mr_'s sister Kate asked Harpo to help Celie by bringing the water, he said that that only woman works and

since he is a man he do not have to work. But Sofia is opposite to Celie. She uses to fight with Harpo. She is the first woman Celie meets who is able to fight against the man who tries to abuse her. Harpo wants to keep Sofia under his control and when his father says that Sofia is his wife and he can do what he wants to her, he wanted to control Sofia. Once when he asked Celie how to control Sofia, Celie advised him to beat Sofia. But it did not work. Later Sofia comes to know that Celie encouraged Harpo to beat her. And Sofia says that she is jealous of Sofia because she can fight but Celie cannot. After this a strong bond develops between them. Celie reminds Sofia of her mother who always used to obey her father. She used to fulfill each and every demand of her father as Celie does to Mr_. Celie and Sofia starts to make quilt together and it seems a medium which binds both of them together in the society where they are always given the lowest position. It can be said that Sofia paved the path for Celie's self-realization.

Sewing helps in the establishment of a bonding between Celie and Sofia. When Harpo asked Celie how to control Sofia, Celie suggested him to beat his wife. She was jealous of Sofia because of her courage to fight against her husband. And when Sofia comes to know about Celie's suggestion she returned the curtains and thread to Celie. But later Sofia and Celie both worked together to make quilt. And when Sofia went to stay with her sister, Celie gave her the quilt. The piecing of the quilt symbolizes female bonding, sisterhood and a mutual commitment to Sofia's equality in her marriage.

Making of quilt shows strong bonding of women to face the attack of patriarchal society. In the novel even the male figure like Albert also faces patriarchal domination. Though Albert loved Shug Avery his father did not allow him to marry Shug and he could not go against his father's wish. So Albert's father can be said as a tool of patriarchy. Next to his father is Albert's brother Tobias who is unhappy about Shug's staying with Albert. He also tried to create a rivalry between Celie and Shug. And when Tobias came to visit Albert, Sofia and Celie were working on a quilt which shows the bond between the women.

CELIE AND SHUG AVERY:

The strongest friendship or bonding can be seen in the relationship between Celie and Shug Avery. The novel portrays the character of Shug in such a way that it breaks the conventional society where woman are always dominated by man and she also teaches other characters in the novel to find their own selves and to be independent. Shug is considered to be the 'other' in the society. Shug Avery does not act as women in the society are expected to be. She lives her life in her own ways. As Alice Walker writes in the novel, "Shug Avery, Shug Avery, Carrie say. I'm sick of her. Somebody say she going around trying to sing. Umph, what she got to sing about. Say she wearing dresses all up her leg and headpieces with little balls and tassles hanging down, look like dressing window." (*The Color Purple* 21) According to Carrie, Shug is different from the women in their society. From this it is clear about Shug's position in the society. It is a woman's view about another woman who is considered as the 'other'. Shug is considered different because she used to sing around in different places. In a society where women's position is under men and a woman has to do all the household activities, Shug has the courage to make her own identity. She is not dependent on any man. Shug's dresses are also considered as something which is against the way women should dress in the society dominated by man. She is discriminated in such a way that even the preacher could not stop himself from commenting on Shug. According to Alice Walker, "He talk about a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk about slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner." (*The Color Purple* 42) According to Celie even the preacher talks about Shug. People in the society think about Shug the worst they could think about a woman. She is also considered as the Queen Honeybee. Everyone in the society enjoyed her songs or everyone knows about her but when she is very sick no one in the town where she has come to perform wants to take care of her. At this time Mr_ brought Shug home and asked Celie to take care of her. Celie was happy to meet Shug but it was not the same case with Shug. Before meeting Shug, Celie had already formed an image of her in her mind. And she is happy to meet Shug in her own house.

The concept of 'other' is applicable in case of Celie from the view of Shug Avery. Celie is different from Shug. Celie lives in the conventional patriarchal dominated society and she is submissive and silent. Mr_ and her children never respected her as a woman. Moreover everyone considers Celie ugly. Her stepfather

said to Mr_ while giving her in his hand that Celie is ugly. And after Mr_ brought Shug to his home, when Shug saw Celie she also commented on Celie's appearance. As Alice Walker writes, "You sure is ugly, she say, like she ain't believed it." (*The Color Purple* 44) According to Celie, in addition to the others in the novel Shug also believes that Celie is ugly. Celie is always treated as an inferior being and ugly. And Celie accepts her conditions and she could not gather her courage to fight back. According to Harris, "Celie is a woman who believes she is ugly, and she centres that belief on her blackness." (On *The Color Purple*, Stereotypes and Silence 157)

NETTIE:

When Nettie along with the missionary family went to Africa to spread their teaching to the people of Africa they are also viewed by the African people as the 'other'. As Alice Walker writes in the novel, "You never saw such curious faces as the village folks surrounded us with. At first they just looked. Then one or two of the women touched my and Corrine's dresses." (*The Color Purple* 135) According to Nettie the villagers were very curious to about the people who are different from them. The way they dressed is different from the villagers in Africa and they so viewed them as the 'other'. The missionaries wanted to educate the girls of Olinka but the people there do not believe in the education of the girl in the society. When Nettie asked a mother about the education of the girls, she came to know about their views from the mother's answer. They consider woman as someone who cannot be independent but she has to be submissive to her husband. Woman should be always dominated and she can only be the mother of anyone's child. Again Alice Walker writes, "He spat on the ground. Who are you? Three grownups and two children. In the rainy season some of you will probably die. You people do not last long in our climate." (*The Color Purple* 146) According to Tashi's father the other people who come to their land cannot adjust themselves in the African land. He came to talk about Tashi's education. A girl child's education is not given importance in African society. This view is different from the missionaries who want to spread education. So the African society always viewed the missionaries as the other. Life of Nettie can also be interpreted from different perspective.

Nettie is considered as a other woman who does not have her own identity and develops the role of black missionary who tries to develop the oppressor's ideology on the people with proper self-sufficient culture. For instance, the Africans in the village of Olinka. It shows the way how society considers women as subjects: neither represented within the white mainstream nor able to construct a selfhood outside it, so Nettie is divided internally, and experiences her subjection as otherness.

BONDING: Though in the beginning, Shug considered Celie as ugly but when Celie looked after her during her illness there developed a bond of friendship between them. It grows into such strong bonding that Shug's company provides Celie the courage to challenge her abusers. Celie begins to find a new self with the help of Shug. When Shug recovers, Harpo invites her to sing in his jukejoint. Celie wanted to see Shug singing. As Walker writes, "At last I git to see Shug Avery work. I git to watch her. I git to hear her. Mr_ didn't want me to come. Wives don't go to places like that, he say." (*The Color Purple* 69) According to Celie woman do not have their own independence. It shows how Celie is dominated by her husband. She is not allowed to do whatever she likes. Celie wanted to see Shug singing but her husband would not allow her because she is married and married women are not allowed to go around to such places. When Mr_ went on telling all the things that his wife is restricted to do Shug replied against it. Again Walker writes, "Good thing I ain't your damn wife." (*The Color Purple* 69) According to Shug it is good that she is not Albert's wife. Here the difference between Celie and Shug can be seen. Celie is the one who remained silent when her husband said that wives are not allowed to go to such place. She should have protested against it. But she did not. Instead of Celie, Shug raised her voice for Celie and Mr_ allowed Celie to go with Shug. Shug is slowly making the path for fulfillment of Celie's desires.

Shug also dedicates a song to Celie. As Alice walker writes, "First time somebody made something and named it after me." (*The Color Purple* 70) According to Celie for the first time someone thought her to be important. The song is important for Celie because she has been part of a creative process. It is like Celie is given a new identity by Shug. Celie found her own self. Her friendship with Shug gives herself a voice.

So when Shug tells her that it is time for Shug to leave, Celie tells her about Mr_. How he used to beat her for not being Shug. After knowing the truth Shug promised Celie that she would not leave her until Mr_ stops beating her. Shug also taught Celie to love her own self. Celie's feelings were buried inside her but when she met Shug she opened up her mind about the story of her rape by her stepfather. Shug also told Celie about herself and her children. She also helped Celie by taking the letters Nettie wrote to Celie. Mr_ had hidden all the letters and Celie had no idea whether her sister is dead or alive. It seemed she had found her lost sister once again. Celie was so angry with Mr_ that that she wanted to kill him. But Shug stopped her from doing it. When the time came for Shug to leave for Memphis she decides to take Celie along with her. The friendship between Celie and Shug brought some changes in Celie. She is able to take her own decision now. She does not need to be under her husband and so she did not ask Mr_'s permission to go with Shug. When the news about Celie's going with Shug is announced everyone in the family is surprised including Mr_. When Mr_ said her that he thought her to be happy with him and wanted to know what is wrong with her she could raise her voice against him. It is clear that Celie found her own self and wants to leave the life she had been living for so long. All this has become possible only because of Shug.

While living with Shug Celie found her new freedom. Shug does not treat her like her servant but she encouraged Celie to utilize her talent. According to Shug, Celie is not her maid. She brought Celie away from Mr_ so that so can be independent in some way, away from the male dominated society. Celie started making pants as she had started this at her home itself. Pants become the means of discovering Celie's unrecognized talents and it also suggest mobility. It is represented as a freer form of clothing which women are forbidden to wear. Celie's pants associated with freedom and movemwnt. First she made a pair for Shug, then for Squeak, Jack, Odessa and many others ordered for Celie's pants. Celie ended up her work of making pants as a source of financial independent. Celie not only gets her own job but also a house left behind by her father and also her sister Nettie returned to her life along with her children.

The friendship between Celie and Shug Avery transformed one another into a better person. It helps Celie to fight for her progress and individuality. It shows women supporting and encouraging each other in different ways. Celie was ignorant of her own self. In the patriarchal society she has suffered from the community since she is a woman but this friendship made her able to fight against the society. She no longer thinks about society, no longer cares about her husband and she is happy with her own self and own freedom.

In order to find her own self, it is important for Celie to be able to name things. She always refers to her husband as Mr_, to her father as 'him' and even Samuel as Rev Mr_. She thinks that all men can exercise their power over her. And when Shug Avery mentions Mr_ by his name Albert, it took some time to realize who Albert is. But she transforms to a strong character in the novel.

Not only Celie but the other characters also find some changes in themselves because of the communal bonding among the women in the male dominated society. Squeak also found a voice of her own. She always used to be submissive to Harpo but later she had the courage to protest against his calling her 'Squeak' and demanded that she should be called Mary Agnes. It is also a search for identity. She also moves singing around different places by leaving her home. Though at first Squeak was dependent on Shug's songs but later she created her own songs. All these show women fulfilling their desires without remaining suppressed in the conventions of the society. Also towards the end of the novel Sofia worked as a clerk in Celie's store.

The bonding that forms between Sofia and Miss Eleanor Jane is more than servant and mistress. Though Sofia worked in the mayor's house, Miss Jane was fond of Sofia. And later we find Miss Jane taking care Henrietta. She came to know the reason why Sofia worked in their house and so she decided to look after Sofia's household. It shows the bond that forms between women irrespective of racial difference.

Each and every woman in the novel helps one other in some ways or the other. The bonding between them is a kind of bond within a community separated from the men. When Sofia went to jail, her children were looked after by her sister Odessa and Squeak. And later when Squeak wanted to sing around in different places her child has been cared by Sofia. So in some way or the other the women help one another.

The women characters in the novel like Celie, Shug, Sofia, Nettie etc. are different in their thoughts, feelings and desires. And in the patriarchal society their desires are not respected. The oppression that Celie faces in her life is symbolic of the patriarchal power in the lives of women everywhere. The friendship of Celie with Shug enables her to bury her sadness she experienced in her earlier life in the paternal domain and construct her own identity within a feminine domain. The friendship with Shug is an escape from patriarchal law. Female bonding has the power of nullifying the rivalry created by the male figure and uniting everyone.

This novel not only shows the transformation of the female characters but Mr_, Celie's husband also brought changes to his own life. The man who always used to beat his wife starts helping Celie in her work of sewing.

Also in the African society, the bond between the women is such that the women get to know each other and care for each other in their works. The men of this society has more than one wives and it is through the medium of work that the wife of a person becomes close to his other wives. And it develops a kind of friendship among the women.

MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP:

Mother- daughter bonding in the novel can be studied in case of relationship of Celie and her mother. According to Lindsey Tucker, "the words of the father 'It'd kill your mammy' sets up the patriarchal silencing, namely the separation and linguistic isolation of mother and daughter by creating sexual jealousy between the two, resulting in the severance of important female bonding." (*The Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text*) As Alice Walker writes, "She die screaming and cussing." (*The Color Purple* 4) Celie writes about her mother. It shows her mother's anger at her. Celie is raped by her step father and she gets pregnant. This develops jealousy in her mother. As her mother is sick, she is not able to give what her husband wants and she used to get angry when Celie gets pregnant. So the bonding of Celie and her mother is also destroyed the system of patriarchal domination.

Another mother-daughter bonding can be studied in case of Tashi and her mother. Though in the African society as depicted in the novel by Alice Walker girls in the society are not allowed to get education. They believe in the patriarchal system and consider that woman should always be dominated by man. Woman cannot become independent in the society and they can fulfill only one thing and that is to become the mother of someone's child. But after the death of Tashi's father, her mother decided to go against the conventions of the society and she wants Tashi to continue learning. It shows the supportive bond between Tashi and her mother.

RACISM:

Alice Walker also portrays the issues of race in *The Color Purple*. The ability of this text to analyze issues of class and race results in the text's ability to expose sexual oppression. The incident where the Reverend Mr_'s wife was buying cloth and where the clerk called her gal can be said as related to racial discrimination. The lynching of Celie's biological father and his brothers is also an incident of racial discrimination. They are hanged because they were successful in their business. And the white merchants complained that they were taking away the black business away from them. It signifies the lack of African-American to the 'American Dream.' Again the incident of Sofia and Miz Millie is also seen from this context. From the words of Miz Millie it is clear that black people can sit by the white only when they have anything to teach or any work to do.

CONCLUSION:

The Color Purple can be studied as a depiction of Black women's life in literature. It is like women facing challenges of the Black community and fights for freedom not only for them but for the entire race. This

novel studies the different bonds women can share. They might be bond of sisterhood, friends, mother-daughter bond or even enemies.

WORKS CITED:

Harris, Trudier. "On The Color Purple, Stereotypes and Silence" *Black American Literature Forum* 18 4 (1984): 155-161 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2904291>/date of access: 16 April 2017

Tucker, Lindsey. "Alice Walker's The Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text" *Black American Literature Forum* 22 1 (1988): 81-95 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2904291>/date of access: 15 April 2017

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. 2004. London: Phoenix, 1982. Print.

