

Black Women in America are Triply Burdened in Alice walkers novel The Color Purple

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Abstract

Black women in America are triply burdened. They, suffer from racial, sexual and class prejudices and are forced to occupy a very marginal place in male dominated America, making them feel insignificant, faceless, subservient and devoid of identity. The responsibility of giving them back their rejected humanity and their womanhood falls on the shoulder of black women writers. These writers can be labeled as black womanist writers. Alice Walker is one of those pioneers who believes in the black womanist movement. Alice Walker contends : "Black women now offer varied, live models of how it is possible to live. We have made a new place to move". Walker's women characters display strength, endurance and resourcefulness in confronting- "the twin afflictions" of racism and sexism and overcoming the devastating circumstances of oppression in their lives.

Keywords :Black women, Racial, Sexual, Oppression, self-awareness, mental exploitation, Sexual abuse, Selfscorn, Self- fulfilment.

INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker's Pulitzer prize winning novel, *The Color Purple* chronicles the life of a black girl, Celie who despite poverty, illiteracy, physical and mental exploitation, transcends her plight through self-awareness, and attempts to scale the subtle and warm dimensions of womanist consciousness. Walker tells Celie's story in the form

of letters first written to God and later to her sister Nettie. Celie writes to God to help her survive the emotional and physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her father. Moreover, Celie's attitude about her own self-worth and her perception of God emerges in these letters, and the readers quickly recognize that Celie believes she is totally powerless and worthless. Thus she begins her journey from powerlessness to the state of full empowerment and from self-abnegation to self-recognition.

The very first letter Celie writes to God indicates the miserable way she falls a victim to sexual advances and atrocities of her step-father. The father described in Celie's letters appears to be virile, tough and strong man-who represents Satyr like potency and who is like a walking phallus. When he finds out that Celie's mother cannot allow him to have sex, he tries to find out a substitute. Consequently, he makes brutal sexual attacks on Celie. He tells her, "You better shut up and git used to it"(21).

Her mother is relieved from her father's continuous sexual attacks. However, Celie is subjected to forced rape. As a result she becomes pregnant. To add injury to insult, her father asks her not to tell about this to anybody. He orders: "You better not never tell nobody but God. "It'd kill your mammy"(25). Hence she writes about her plight and fate to the almighty, God.

Celie's mother dies; Alfonso, her step-father, marries another black woman and marries her to Albert. However, Albert treats her like a beast of burden and at times beats her. Celie suffers not only at the hands of her step-father but also at the hands of Albert. To be wife means to be submissive, to be subordinate, to be obedient and to be a punch bag for the man. Albert beats Celie as and when he likes. Celie, in moments of extreme physical pain transforms herself into a tree. It is a telling example of a black woman's proximity to the passive and suffering agony of nature.

Thus Celie, a person who in the beginning is helpless, poor, black, ugly and sexually abused girl moves from her helplessness towards the state of complete independence and in the end expresses black womanist consciousness. The above said resume about Celie's plight as delineated in *The Color Purple* proves how her suffering of selfscorn is transformed into joy of self-love from which originates her compassion for her Black community.

Celie's encounter with other characters in the novel is incongruous and excruciates her mental agony. When the rebellious aspect in her comes out it serves her to be more potential, vigorous, vital and strenuous internally. The action in mind and physique is interwoven, so whatever she does is exponential to her inner self This inner self promulgates Celie to understand what life is. These experiences bring out a multi-faceted variegation and devour Celie's inner self to lead a pragmatic life all alone.

But after Shug's companionship, Celie moves from childhood to the state of a real human being, from total lack of identity to the state of recognized individual. Over a time, Celie Shug, Sofia, Squeak, Nettie, learn to love each other and respect each other individually. At the same time, they try to establish a fair and sound relationship with men basing on equality.

Walker as a Black Womanist writer and the staunch protagonist of Black Womanism, moulds all her creative energies in this direction in *The Color Purple*. As a Black Womanist fiction, *The Color Purple* is a novel about a dumb, speechless, half-literate and mule-like girl, Celie.

It is Shug who works as a transforming force in Celie's life. For example, Shug is the novel's professor of desire and self-fulfilment, and as such her "example" answer to Celie's question "what it is" is: "The most beautiful woman ever saw... I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like something tail. She grinning..."(37). Immediately Celie dresses exactly like Shug to keep her father away from raping Nettie. Before Celie possesses technical language about sex, pregnancy and her body, she learns from Shug about the connection between male sexual desire and the desire of men to exploit women.

Other than Shug, it is Sophia, another mentor of Celie, who teaches her about the knack of knowing the intricacies of bodily and mental experiences of woman. Sofia's varying responses to her environment illustrates the need for the development of the Black society which allows for an individual to define one's meaningful existence within the larger American society.

Naturally, the very presence and activities of Sofia makes tremendous impact on Celie's thinking. Thus Sofia unknowingly convinces Celie that the black women suffer not because of any inbuilt disabilities and faults in them but because of their sex and race and the lack of will to fight. Thus Celie's journey from a dumb, illiterate, ignorant, ugly black girl to the awakened and self-conscious woman is not a phenomenon that occurs at random. In fact, it is the result of the company of Nettie, her sister; Sofia, Harpo's wife; and Shug Avery, Albert's beloved. All these women stand united against racist and sexist tyranny.

Celie's manifold experiences bring out a pathetic vision of a dumb figure. She is carved not as a girl or woman particularly of her age but something more than of what she is. Motherhood may be a pleasure to some women but for Celie, like Meridian, Mem, Josie and Margaret most important characters of Walker, it is a burden. Celie is not allowed to love her own kids as they are taken away by her father.

Celie's physical exertion and mental turmoil make her know not how to fight but to work further.

When Albert's two sisters, Carrie and Kate, come home they appreciate Celie's ability to work. In their eyes she is a good house-keeper, good with children and a good cook.

To survive is of supreme importance for her and she does survive through all odds. Only after Celie meets Shug Avery, Albert's mistress and Sofia, Harpo's wife, she realizes that she can foresee a new life. Harpo feels that Sofia does not behave with him the way Celie behaves with Albert. He complains that she never does what he tells. When he consults Albert about Sofia's disobedience, he preaches his gospel: "Wives is like children. You have to let em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (99).

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Black women in America are triply burdened. They suffer from racial, sexual and class prejudices and are forced to occupy a very marginal place in male dominated America, making them feel insignificant, faceless, subservient and devoid of identity. The responsibility of giving them back their rejected humanity and their womanhood falls on the shoulder of black women writers. . These writers can be labeled as black womanist writers.

Alice Walker is one of those pioneers who believes in the black womanist movement. Alice Walker contends : "Black women now offer varied, live models of how it is possible to live. We have made a new place to move". Walker's women characters display strength, endurance and resourcefulness in confronting- "the twin afflictions" of racism and sexism and overcoming the devastating circumstances of oppression in their lives.

The term 'womanist' has been described by Walker in detail *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*. It is obvious, that black womanism celebrates blackness, black roots, the aspirations of black people, and presents a balanced picture of black womanhood. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi thinks that the black womanist will recognize "along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations" (98). Sherley Anne Williams has also approved and accepted this term propounded by Alice Walker. Its premises and compulsions demand, of course, that black woman must believe in the wholeness of community.

Since times of slavery, black womanhood has been destroyed, distorted, dismantled and abused with racial, sexual and inhuman practices by black men and white men and also white women. In the process, they have lost their genuine 'self' and have developed a triple consciousness-white, black, and female. This has ultimately been responsible for the destruction of their self-confidence and the feeling of being human. They looked upon themselves as chattel. They need to be educated and made aware of the need to recover from psychological and mental traumas of inferiority. This is possible only if their wholeness and roundness as women are restored.

Walker's *The Color Purple* processes out a manifold directive of Black Womanist consciousness. With larger ambits of perspectives that include both literary and socio-cultural perspectives, *The Color Purple* is a subtle proof of socio-political forces that always move an individual's pursuits of self-identity into projects of national identity. According to Linda Abbandonato,

The Color Purple's strategy of inversion, represented in its elevation of female experience over great patriarchal events, had indeed aimed to critique the unjust practices of racism and sexism that violate the subject's complexity, reducing her to a generic biological sign. But the model of personal and national identity with which the novel leaves us uses fairy-tale explanations of social relations to represent itself: this fairy tale embraces America for providing the African-American nation with the right and the opportunity to own land, to participate in the free market, and to profit from it. In the novel's own terms, American capitalism thus has contradictory effects. On one hand, capitalism veils its operations by employing racism, using the pseudonatural discourse of race to reduce the economic competitor to a subhuman object. In Celie's paternal history, *The Color Purple* portrays the system of representation characteristics of capital relations that creates the situation of nationalness for African-Americans. (129)

The relationships between Celie and others at the end of the novel close on a new note. Celie gets not only her maternal property but also her sister Nettie, son Adam, daughter Olivia, daughter-in-law Tashi as well as her own real black woman self. She also learns that her father who sexually abused her was not her real father, which absolves her from the sin of incest. In the beginning, she was totally dependent on others, by the end, she gained complete independence.

Walker, as a typical black woman writer, has chosen Celie's story as the story of black community where black women are both audience and subject. As a critique of an emergent social order of woman *The Color Purple* inverts itself to be again a critique of black woman and black women writing.

Illustration of Black Woman Writing, *The Color Purple*, both in its thematic and narrative structures, evokes a cultural notation for its community consciousness. A new sense of empowerment accomplished through Celie is an exact version of the black communities achievement of a space in culture. *The Color Purple* forms its own community of Black consciousness within which an endless process of creating new self-images and forming a force for change take place.

Walker as in many of her writings delves deeper to dig out the steeply laid strands of collective histories of black women in the forms of communal records. In the same way, *The Color Purple* exercises its obligations to form a cultural record of emerging Black women as a community.

CONCLUSION

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Walker feels deeply alienated by the dominant white culture which suppresses blacks with the economic system of sharecropping and a social system of segregation. The social segregation and economical suppression degrade the black's life in the Southern region.

Historically, black women have been directed into feelings of guilt about responsibility wfor the emasculation of the black male. Guilt as demonstrated in Walker's women, breeds a weakness that cripples. Women understand that despite the troubles their men see, men are actually able to get along well together.

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