

The Growth and Empowerment of Women in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract

Writers use literature to express their oppression and suppression in their life. The African writer Alice Walker is one such writer who expresses her emotions through the novel *The Color Purple*. This novel reflects the life of African American women, who struggle to achieve independent identities beyond racism and gender bias. This research paper tries to explore how women are suppressed and dominated by masculine gender and how women play the role of masculine gender. The researcher highlights the despotism on black women with the help of the female character Celie in the novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker.

Key Words: Masculine, Feminine, Domination, African American.

Introduction

Society constructs masculine and feminine qualities. "Femininity and Masculinity or one's gender identity" (Spence 1985) states that masculinity and femininity are rooted in the social (one's gender) rather than the biological (one's sex). It is society which teaches the child what is to be a male or female. As the pass, the child learns by practice of gender role which are expected from one's gender. Gender roles which are shared by a boy or girl become their behavior. "Gender role might include women investing in the domestic role and men investing in the worker role" (Eagly 1987). In addition to this, media also play a very important role. Society defines the qualities of gender. As a result gender stereotypes are created. "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking that they don't have any" (Alice Walker). Though *The Color Purple* is a fictional novel, it is in realistic nature.

Celie's Childhood and Male Domination

The oppression against women starts from the birth of a child. As the child grows the oppression becomes crueler. In the mean time, the society teaches the child to cope with the cruelty of the masculinity.

Alice Walker introduces the character of Celie as fourteen year old girl. Her biological father was a shopkeeper and murdered by a group of white men. From the childhood Celie is forced to follow the traditional role of a woman as a girl by her father. She believed her step-father Alphonso to be her biological father. She was abused by him many times. Celie bore two children to him. Her mother was ill. She was helpless. Celie is warned not to reveal the truth about her pregnancy. The novel starts with the following line “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy”. When Alphonso introduced Celie to Mr. ___, he says

“But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest any way. She ought to marry first. She ain’t fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don’t need a fresh woman no how. I got a fresh one in there myself and she sick all the time. He spit, over the railing. The children git on her nerve, she not much of a cook. And she big already”

(Walker, *The Color Purple*)

The above description of Celie by her stepfather indicates the status of the women. Women are considered as things that are available in the market. As people could buy things for the benefit of their use, they could buy women too. Once the value of the things lost, they don’t bother about it, they just throw. Same way Celie’s stepfathers treated his wife and step-daughter. Women were not treated as human beings. There is no one to inquire about the sadness and happiness of Celie. Usually women are overjoyed to give birth to a child but Celie was never. Even she was not able to tell the identity of their biological father. Alphonso stole both of her children and gave to a local couple. Celie never know what had happened to her children. She could not question her father about the loss of her children. Such practices are being traced out in day today news paper, television and social media. Like Celie who found difficult to express her sufferings to society in the novel *The Color Purple* many women suffer out of out of domestic violence. It reveals the dominance of man.

Male Dominance in marriage

The marriage of a girl is arranged by the parents. It is being practiced in many places. Parents never bother about the wishes of the daughters. They take decision based on advantages. Wrong decisions lead to the conflict in the girls’ married life. Mr. ___ marries Celie without her consent. It is her father Alphonso who takes the decision on behalf of Celie. Mr. ___ wanted to marry Celie’s sister Nettie. But Alphonso offered his elder daughter Celie to marry. Mr. ___ accepted to marry Celie because he was a widower with four children. He wanted someone to take care of his four children who were born from his first wife. Celie was not happy about her marriage. Mr. ___ beat and treated her very badly. She bore all the sufferings. Celie was forced to have intercourse with him. She revealed her dissatisfaction of her married life to Shug Avery.

“Never ast me how I feel, nothing, Just do his business, get off, go to sleep” (Walker 76)

Celie had already experienced the same with her stepfather. Celie saw this as a business. Celie thinks that it was the duty of a wife to serve her husband what he asks. Mr. ___ makes a statement at Celie that “You can’t curse no body. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all” (Walker 204).

Celie replies to Mr. ___ “I’m pore. I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here” (Walker 205). Mr. ___ never considered Celie as human being with a soul. Mr. ___ reduced Celie as a and used her only to satisfy his sexual desires. Thus Celie’s marriage life was unpleasant.

Celie’s role plays of masculine gender

A comparison made with Emerson’s idea of Self Reliance and Celi’s life. “Individual strength and belief in one’s chosen path, will lead us to self-satisfaction” (Emerson Self Reliance). As the novel progress, towards the end, Celie started analysing herself. Shug Avery and Sofia helped Celie to nurture herself. Celie came out a life which was full of suffering and domination from male characters. She found herself a space to change and grow. Celie left the house and started living her life on her own terms. She found a job. She made money out of her work. She valued herself.

. “How wrong it is for a woman to expect the man to build the world she wants, rather than to create it herself” (Anais Nin). In the beginning of the novel Celie asked God to change her life. Alice Walker set the entire novel as a letter written to God. In the beginning Celie addressed those letters to God.

“Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (Walker, *The Color Purple*). Celie revealed all her problems to God starting from the abuse of her own father, loss of her children and mother, inhuman treatment of husband, separation from her lovable sister, tortures from her step children and so on. But she was never answered. The God Celie believed was the reminiscent of the men who have done harm to her. God did not listen to her because he was a man.

“He big and old and tall and graybeard and white, he wear white robes and go barefooted” (Walker 189).

Then she was forced to write letters to a silent God. Shug Avery taught her to understand who the real God was. After realization of her own, Celie deconstructs the image of God. She

constructs the image of God by the presence of her surroundings. The spiritual enlighten of Celie was identified by the words she used to address God in her letters.

“Dear God, dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples, dear everything” (Walker 286) Celie’s attainment of spiritual power helped to find God in nature. Then she could find God everywhere.

Conclusion

In the beginning of the novel Celie was merely following the traditional construction of femininity. She was not able to think on her own. She did not realize her power, she had within her. She was not able to act against male domination. But during the progression of the plot the other female characters like Shug Avery and Sofia taught Celie realize her power. Celie was able to fight back to bring peace for herself. Celie starts a new business sewing pants. With the help of Shug she becomes very successful, and she also learns how to love. Mr. ___ also changed and learnt great deal about life and love. They became friends. Celie’s sister returned. The family was reunited. The growth and empowerment of Celie in the novel *The Color Purple* signified as the growth of women.

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