

RACISM IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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Abstract

The color purple is a woman's story about pain, suffering, endurance, and friendship, a story of hardship and hope, of reunion and reconciliation. Walker depicts how the black women have been oppressed due to their relationship with black men and only the sisterhood that can make the black women free and empowered. The Color Purple is more concerned with politics of sex and self than with the politics of class and race, its unrelenting, and severe attacks on male hegemony, especially the violent abuse of black women by black men, is offered as a revolutionary leap forward into a new social order based on sexual egalitarianism. The novel ends with happiness and reconciliation. Walker emphasizes the universal oppression of black women in The Color Purple. According to Walker, a womanist is a black feminist or feminist of color..with outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. A woman who loves other women, sexually and or nonsexually.

Introduction

Walker's women in purple build a wall of camaraderie around themselves. They share in each other's pain, sorrow, laughter and dreams, and come to each other's rescue. They are sisters in body as well as in spirit and the spirit cannot be broken. They find God in themselves and they loved her fiercely. The women in Alice Walker's fiction do not understand the complexity of their problem because their limited worlds cannot help them and they are forced to do everything haphazardly. The distinctive feature of these women is the massive quality with which they carry their suffering. Some are generous and proud. Some are forgiving even to the men who mistreat them very badly. Gallery of women in Alice

Walker's work is the living example of man's inhumanity to woman. The focus of our attention will be Alice Walker's womanism. Alice Walker's in an interview with John O' Brien said: "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival of whole of my people. But beyond that. I am committed to exploring the oppression, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women.

The concept of oppression entails "any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society". Race, ethnicity, class and gender are inextricably linked together, and even though African- American men have also been the victims of oppression in American women, since they also faced oppression in terms of gender, in a different way than African-American men have.

The first dimension concerning economic oppression , relating to the exploitation of black women's labor, is present in the fact that Sofia is more or less forced to work for the mayor, because she is punished if she resists. The Mayor's wife asks her to become her maid, but Sofia rejects her offer. The Mayor then slaps her for disrespecting him and his wife, to which Sofia reacts by hitting him back. As a result, Sofia is sentenced to work as the mayor's maid for twelve years. Moreover, Celie is economically dependent on Albert, though this dimension remains in the background.

The second dimension regarding political oppression is explained by Collins as the denial of the vote, but it is present in the novel on a more personal level in the male domination that exists in the novel. Celie does not receive proper education, because she is taken from school by her stepfather when she becomes pregnant. She is only literate because her sister Nettie taught her how to read and write. Her father also takes her children away from her, rapes and beats her. He also forces her into marriage with Albert, who beats her as well, his excuse being that it is because Celie is his wife. Although the political dimension may not be as clear as first sight, it is definitely present in a way in which women are treated as the lesser persons in American society.

The third and last dimension, which considers ideological oppression in terms of stereotypical images of black women, can also be found in *The Color Purple* in several scenes where images are reflected upon the characters. The characters are aware of the gender roles that American society expects from them, and feel pressure to behave according to these socially constructed images. For example, Sofia and Harpo feel like they need to adhere to the particular gender roles that are seen as normal in society, even though it is not what either of them wants. Harpo likes to do women's work and working in the household, while Sofia likes to do more physical work. This clearly describes the fact that the characters know what they will be happiest if they let go of that pressure and take on the role in the marriage that they would want for themselves. In a way, Walker criticize this ideological oppression, by reversing the stereotypical gender roles and creating female characters who have more masculine characteristics, and vice versa. Moreover, Celie criticizes Albert when he mentions to her that he thinks Shug acts like a man. She tells him that she thinks the characteristics that he appropriates to men, are womanly.

The domination made by men in the novel starts from the beginning of the novel. "You better not never tell anybody but God. It'd kill your mammy". In *The Color Purple* the role of male domination in the frustration of black women's struggle for independence is clearly the focus. Walker explores this theme in the love triangle of Albert, Shug Avery and Celie. Celie and Shug become friends, and their friendship even evolves into a sexual attraction between the two. Albert tells Shug that he physically abuses Celie. Apart from the critiquing of black female oppression and heterosexism, black feminism can be identified in the fact that Walker challenges socially constructed gender roles by reversing them, and the way in which the characters attempt to resist the oppression they face. Sexism, meaning that she is less important than her male counterparts.

Conclusion

Sexuality binds oppressions of race, gender and class together. In the novel, sexuality is present in male domination of female sexuality, in the oppression of gender and the pressure of adhering to stereotypical gender role. However, there are also strong female characters present in the novel, and there is a change of consciousness throughout the story. Some types of oppression that black feminism deals with are present in *The Color Purple*, including sexism, hetero sexism and the “culture of dissemblance”. However, not all aspects of black feminism are represented in the novel.

Besides black female sexuality, *The Color Purple* has many themes that are at the centre of black feminism. Works of fiction such *The Color Purple* were written to promote political and social change, and deals with notions of sexuality, gender, race and class. It has become an important part of American literature, gaining a lot of popularity since it first came out in 1982, and even more after the release of the film adaptation. Therefore, it is an influential work in American culture.

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