

GENDER ISSUES IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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Abstract

The novel *The Color Purple* was written by Alice Walker, an American novelist who has given the insightful treatment of African-American culture. It could be spotted vividly in this novel. Alice Walker crafted each and every female character to expose the gender issues faced by the female community. Unlike other writers, Walker not only points out only the oppression and dominance of patriarchy but she has also chosen to provide the solutions to the female readers. Celie is the central character of the novel who felt helpless after being physically spoiled and tormented. She finds comfort and solace after she meets Shug Avery. Shug moulds confident Celie and finally Shug made Celie independent both sexually and economically. The relationship between Celie and Shug turns out to be a lesbian relationship. The answer to the gender issues is concealed in their relationship. Their relationship is more than just sex. It's not that a woman's emotional and sexual needs can be fulfilled only by a man, even a woman like Shug can make it possible. Gender is no more an issue to fulfill the desires and wishes.

Gender roles are social constructs or labels given to people based on behaviour, societal and cultural norms, and expectations (Abrams). According to Toril Moi, femininity is a culturally constructed framework. One is not considered a woman when she is born. Simon de Beauvoir states about becoming woman and that was quoted by Toril Moi in her work "Feminism in its Wilderness", "She becomes a woman" (Catherine Belsey).

Alice Walker is one of the most acclaimed novelists of America who won Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Color Purple*. She encapsulated almost many problems faced by the African American women by narrating the life experience of Celie, the protagonist. Her life was juggled in the hands of her stepfather and her husband. Walker beautifully crafted all the characters to exhibit the issues faced by them because of their gender.

Walker encountered an incident during her childhood and that became the foundation to lay out the so-called fact that women, in general, have to be good looking with appealing physic for a man. On the contrary, men have nothing to do with their appearances. Women are not complaining about the appearances and the physic of men while men are way too conscious about women's external appearance. Walker was hit by a BB pellet in her right eye and it left a scar. It severely affected her eye and made a visible mark. After this incident, Walker excluded herself from the rest of the world. She even mentioned this incident in an interview with John O'Brien that, "This made me shy and timid, and I often reacted to insults and slights that were not intended." (Walker). The society did not see what happened to her in an accident or an injury. People made fun of her scar and thought that that humiliation will make her feeble and as an unsuccessful woman. She grew up to the greater heights of winning the Pulitzer Prize.

The protagonist undergoes both sexual and mental harassment. When Mr. comes to meet Celie's father about him marrying Nettie, her father traded Celie instead of Nettie saying that "But I can let u have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain't fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice.... She Ugly" (Walker, *The Color Purple*). Celie has been objectified sexually. She was treated like a sex doll by her father and her husband. She was denied education and freedom since she was born a girl child. After the death of her mother, she took care of Nettie with more responsibility. She was overprotective of her. She sacrificed so many things to keep Nettie away from his father and Mr., In fact, she married Mr. only to keep Nettie away from him.

Throughout the novel, the male superiority could be spotted in almost every incidents. Harpo is so proud of his masculinity and he thought that he could gain control over Sofia by beating her severely. Sofia was an irresistible and determined woman who stood as an example for Celie. She mocked Celie for being too submissive and weak. Sofia did hard labour while Harpo was sitting at home changing diapers for his children. Here Sofia's attitude is like a man. Usually, men are the breadwinner of the family and women will take care of domestic life. Sofia is masculine than feminine.

Shug Avery is another character with whom none of the typical characteristics of female would be found. It is not that she is not possessing the female qualities. She is not submissive like Celie. She is independent, strong and she is not ashamed to express her sexual desires. She is bisexual. She broke all the

stereotypical sex conventions. Shug found the letters from Nettie. "Cause she the one you ever love" (Walker). Shug made Celie realise that Nettie is the only one whom she truly loves. Patriarchal community defined female should be sweet, subservient, modest, humble humility, etc. Shug doesn't fit into this framework. She is feminine in her own way while Celie completely fits into this framework. As Moi puts, according to Helen Cixous "Either women are passive or she doesn't exist." (Catherine Belsey 125). Celie remained passive and she doesn't react to any of the abuses and harassments. Celie says, "I don't fight, I stay where I am told. But I am alive." (Walker, *The Color Purple* 22)

Helen Cixous deconstructed the binary oppositions- male/female. Male is not the opposite of female. According to her, there are no such pairs like male or female or masculine or feminine. Julia Kristeva spoke about the position of a female in the society or in the hierarchy. In Kristevan terms, "that which is marginalised by the patriarchal symbolic order." (Catherine Belsey 126). Women are pushed to the periphery where men occupy the central position. Mr. and Celie's father occupied the dominant position at the center, Celie, Nettie and Sofia are pushed to the periphery by the means of sexual abuse and humiliation. Kristeva clearly stated that women are not even in the hierarchy. They are neither inside nor do outside and at times women desires and she taught her to appreciate her own body. Finally, Celie found her way to be independent not exist anywhere in the hierarchy. It is because women never made an attempt to know about their zone. The zone is in the wilderness. Shug was the one who taught Celie to be honest about her sexuality economically, sexually and emotionally, "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time." (Walker, *The Color Purple* 194)

This paper aims to convey that women should explore the wild zone to empower themselves. Women are not in such a pathetic state to be empowered by men. Women should not be ashamed to express their desires; physical, mental and sexual. This explicit expression will make women more courageous and hence women will not be referred as 'muted voices'.

Works Cited

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