

RACIAL INTOLERANCE AND SLAVERY IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

1. Dr. Jyoti Syal, 2. Gayatri Kumari Sharma

1. Assistant Professor, 2. Research Scholar

Department of Humanities & Social Sciences,

Maharishi Markandeshwer Deemed to be University,

Mullana, Ambala, Haryana. India

ABSTRACT

The novel *The Color Purple* by Pulitzer Prize winner Afro-American writer Alice Walker, is an exploration in survival and growth of black women in America in a racist society. In this novel, Walker has clearly shown that the black woman is double jeopardized and oppressed by male patriarchy and racial discrimination. The black woman faced the reality of double discrimination of both race and sex. The identity and freedom type of concepts were absolutely unknown to the black woman. She is not safe even at home. At home a black woman had to face gender discrimination and outside she faced racial discrimination as well. Thus, through her writings, Alice Walker has very deeply and closely exposed sexism and racism that affected the black woman in America. The themes of her most of the novels are the struggle of a black woman in racist, sexist and violent society. Though the blacks gained their rights to equality through law but in reality they are still considered as slaves and inferior to the white and face racial discrimination, subjugation and hatred feelings. The case of black female is the worst. It becomes very difficult for a black female to establish her identity in such a hostile environment. She suffers at the hands of both black as well as white men and as a result had to fight for her survival both outside and inside the home.

The Color Purple is concerned with the complex question of racism and its horrors. It presents a realistic, disturbing and horrific picture of slavery. But Alice Walker shows that her female characters are so daunting that they cope with the hostile situations and establish their identity in spite of all odds.

Key Words: Colour, racism, discrimination, black, purple, slavery.

Abbreviations used: TCP= The Color Purple

Alice Walker, a prolific writer in multiple genres, is the author of novels, poetry, short stories and essays. Her writings have been translated into many languages. Walker became famous in all over the world when she won Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1983 as well as the National Book Award for her novel *The Color Purple*. The novel deals with the story of a black female who struggles hard not only against patriarchal black culture but against a racist society as well and establishes her identity. The novel was sold like a hot cake. Later on in 1985 the novel was adapted into a movie with the same name directed by Steven Spielberg. The main theme of Walker's works are the struggle of black people especially women and their lives in a

society which is very violent and where gender and racial discrimination is very strongly prevalent. Walker's female characters collect their inner strength and learn to raise their voice against their oppression and find love, affirmation, harmony with their lives and become source of inspiration for other females also. Other significant contribution of Walker is that she has coined a new word 'womanism' which means 'a black feminist or feminist of color'. By coining this new word for black feminism she has broadened the concept of feminism.

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Sofia, a fierce and strong female character behaves strictly against the systematic oppression of a black American society which demands from its female members complete subservient to the White as well as to its black male members of the family. But Sofia does not accept such a subservient role neither in her family nor in the society. As a result she has to suffer a lot. In her family Sofia is not ready to play the role of a traditional dutiful wife who always accepts and fulfills the demands of her male master. Neither she accepts the White supremacy. She fights back her husband Harpo tries to boss over her with an iron fist as per her step mother-in-law Celie's suggestion. One day Celie tells Harpo to beat his wife Sofia in order to control her and Harpo tries to do so but is taken very hardly by Sofia. Then she goes to Celie and wants her to admit her wrong aloud. Sofia is a strong character who had never let any male member of her family to impose patriarchal control over her. Nor she let any white to be the master of her destiny. One day when Sofia was going to town along with her children there she met a white mayor and his wife. The mayor's wife Miss Millie specifically noticed the neat and clean children of Sofia and asked her if she would be her maid, "... All your children so clean and she say, Would You like to work for me, be my maid?" (*The Color Purple*, p.53)

Sofia, very strongly, refused her proposal by saying 'Hell no'. Miss Millie, a white, was not ready for such a response from a black female as in her opinion it was an honour for a black female if she worked for a white female. But Sofia took it as an insult to her dignity. The mayor was also stunned at this answer and slapped her. "Mayor look at Sofia, push his wife out of the way. Stick out his chest. Girl, what you say to Miss Millie. He slaps her." (TCP, p. 53)

At this Sofia was outraged and attacked the mayor with full force. Then the police was called and gave Sofia a very good beating and the white mayor and the police beat her nearly to death. The police didn't spare even Sofia's children. Their heads were banged together. At this Sofia asked the prizefighter, who was along with him, to take the children home. She was left half dead. Her ribs were cracked. Her nose was torn and loosen on one side. Her one eye was blinded. The size of her tongue had become that of an arm of a person. Her whole

body was swollen. She was unable to talk and walk and the police dragged her off to prison an exploration in survival and growth of black women in America in a racist society. In to make racial dominance sure. She was in such a horrible condition that Albert was unable to understand why still Sofia was alive. Sofia was imprisoned and even in the prison her condition was the worst. All day from five to eight she had to wash clothes. Her face had become yellowish. In the jail everything was nasty. The cell in which she slept was very nasty. She was not provided even proper food there. If she complained against it, they would strip her and would make her sleep on a cement floor without light. "Food bad enough to kill you with it. Roaches here, mice, flies, lice and even a snake or two. If you say anything they strip you sleep on a cement floor without light." (TCP, p.93)

Sofia was so hopeless that she never took vengeance from the white folk or her oppressors but she expressed all verbal anger. She told Celie about her dream of murdering the gatekeeper of the jail and her oppressors who were responsible to send her to jail. Even after coming out of the jail Sofia would continuously think about killing them. an exploration in survival and growth of black women in America in a racist society. In

"...the jail that Sofia is held is a metaphor for all black

people caged by racism. For others, though they do

not serve in a literal prison and instead and confined

To servitude and domesticity an exploration in survival and growth of black women in America in a racist society.

In within their homes". (Ray, 62).

Although Squeak tried hard to let Sofia free from the prison but brutally raped by the prison Warden. After spending years of submission in jail, proud and independent Sofia became a hopeless lady, who is badly shaken. The torture and the beating had broken Sofia down physically and mentally. She was unable to say no to any work asked her to do. The three years confinement had made her to lose her colour and weight. After three years of imprisonment Sofia is sentenced to work for the Mayor's wife as a maid. Even at the mayor's house her condition was not good. There she would have been living just like a slave. She had to do all types of household chores and to take care of her children. She was not given any type of freedom. She was not allowed to even see her kids. Once when she met her grown up children, they did not recognize their mother. The black complexion of her body has increased the intensity of Sofia's punishment. There Sofia lived in a very very small storeroom up under the house. All day and night she was at their beck and call even then she was not free for anything. "The mayor's wife was shopping-going in and out of the stores- and her maid was waiting for her on the street and taking the packages." (TCP, p.74)

Whenever Miss Millie would go to stores for shopping, Sofia would wait outside. She was not allowed to move inside with her as it was disgraceful for a white master to move with a black servant. While learning how to drive car from Sofia, Miss Millie refused to sit side by side with her in car because she was a black and it is disgraceful for a white to sit side by side with a black. She had to instruct her from backseat or from outside. "She say, have seen a white person and a colored, Sitting side by side in a car, when one of 'em wasn't Showing the other one how to drive it or clean it." (TCP, p.61)

Sofia had very badly been treated by the white Mayor's family. She considered herself as a slave. They would never appreciate whatever she would do for them. 'I'm at they beck and call all night and all day. They won't let me see my children. They won't let me see no mens. Well, after five years they let me see you once a year. I'm a slave, she say.'(TCP,p.61). Though slavery was abolished legally but whites were still treating blacks as slaves and would oppress them in different ways. Even Miss Millie's six year old son also was very harsh and showed disrespect to Sofia. By putting his hands on his hips he not only ordered but shouted at Sofia to throw ball at him. When Sofia rejected, he kicked her. The racial discrimination was so much rooted in the nerves of a child that he took pride in such discrimination. Although he was unaware of the racial discrimination prevalent in his society and his such discriminatory behaviour was an imitation to her parents way of dealing with the blacks. No doubt Sofia was raged but she decided to do something positive out of this rage. Miss Millie's daughter Jane loved Sofia just like her own mother. But Sofia did not want to see her as she was white and moreover she had suffered a lot at her house.

Another character in the novel who faces horrors of racism is Celie's father who was a successful businessman and progressive. He owned his property by the dint of his hard-work. but the white merchants were jealous of him and thought him responsible for stealing their white as well as black customers. He lived in a world where a black was not allowed to be successful. So the white decided to teach him a lesson. One night his shop was burnt down and he along with his two brothers was dragged from the house at midnight and hanged. So it was unbearable for the white to digest the success and upliftment of any black more than them. When Celie's mother saw the mutilated and burnt dead body of her husband and his two brothers, she become mentally unstable. She became half dead. She had property but she had no one to take care of it. Then she married an evil and lusty character Alphonso who made her pregnant every year. The repeated pregnancy made her mentally more unstable and weaker and she died. When Alphonso's wife was unable to give him sex, he raped her daughter Celie and made her the unwed mother of two kids and gave her two kids to someone else. Later he married Celie to a brutal person who was already married and was the father of four rotten children. He insisted Celie's dear sister Nettie to run away from the house. Thus racism not only brought disaster in the life of Celie's father but the life of each and every member of the family was ruined.

Squeak, Harpo's mistress is another victim of racial discrimination who approached her white uncle Bubber Hodges in order to get Sofia release from prison. Bubber Hodges was the warden of the prison where Sofia was imprisoned. But the white warden did not spare even his niece and raped her as she was black.

Thus Walker shows that the strategy of racism was deep-rooted and consistent in America which not only degrades and gives inhuman treatment to the black especially black female but spoils their whole life. Walker gives importance to friendship and love. This is only strong bond of friendship and love especially between women irrespective of any discrimination of colour that brings upliftment and may save a person from any type of discrimination whether racism, sexism etc. In case of Sofia, Miss Millie's daughter, Miss Eleanor Jane established good relations with her and brings freedom for her. Miss Jane was the only sympathetic white person in her house. Even after getting her freedom, Miss Jane continued to be in touch with Sofia and took her as her second mom. Miss Jane also took care of Sofia's sick daughter. Thus even the critically acclaimed white society can also show genuine feelings for the black if there is a bond of love and friendship between them. Walker emphasises on love and affection between ladies which reduces our problem. For example Squeak is raped very brutally in order to get Sofia release from jail and in return when Sofia comes out of her enslavement she promises to take care of her children until Squeak gets success as a blue singer.

Walker shows that though slavery has long been abolished from America but it is only the trade that has been abolished. The white still think themselves superior to the black and they are still prejudiced against for their colour. They are not given due respect. The concept of equality is still away from the minds of the white. But through the example of Shug Avery, a blue singer who lives her life on her own terms, Walker shows that it is quite possible for the black female to establish her identity in a white community.

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