

A View to Feminism in Alice Walker's The Color Purple

Ms.M.Haritha

M.A., (English Literature), Nadar Saraswathi College of Arts and Science, Theni

Abstract- Feminism is considered as one of the important areas in the world literature. Several long years ago, writers have created the women characters as in the traditional sense that how women should be and not to be. Most often they have given only the inferior roles to the women in the literature, as wives, daughters and mothers. These stereotypical images simply reflect only the traditional images of women both in the family and in the society. The writers are not involved themselves to project the self awareness and self realization of woman characters in the story. Thus this present paper takes this as its focal point to derive how the female author Alice Walker is engaged her to portray the self realization and self awareness of her protagonist, Celie in her novel The Color Purple. Furthermore, the key steps and methods used by Alice Walker to derive the real awareness of her protagonist in her significant work The Color Purple is also discussed and brought to light.

INTRODUCTION

Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1978) speaks about the contributions of female writers in literary history. As pointed out in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, Showalter identifies four models of differences which are as follows: The biological model is the most extreme; if the text somehow mirrors the body, this can reduce women merely to bodies. .

Showalter's linguistic model of difference posits women speaking men's language as a foreign tongue; purging language of "sexism" is not going far enough. . . Showalter's psychological model identifies gender difference as the basis of the psyche, focusing on the relation of gender to the artistic process. It stresses feminine difference as the free play of meaning outside the need for closure. Showalter's most important contribution has been to describe the cultural model that places feminist concerns in social contexts, acknowledging class, racial, national, and historical differences and determinants among women, but offering a collective experience that

unites women over time and space a "binding force". (199-200)

Showalter uses the term "gynocritics" for feminist criticism which studies women as writers. The other feminist works which represent gynocriticism are Patricia Spack's *The Female Imagination* (1975), Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (1976), Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (1978), and Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists* (1980). Ellen Moers analyzes the 'feminine' metaphors in the nineteenth century fiction in her works. She finds women writers quite interesting as she reads them as a woman. Patricia Meyer Specks concentrates on sexuality in personal life. She addresses issues like adolescent development, self-perception, and passivity and independence in her discussions. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Women Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (1979) focus on the existence of a female aesthetics.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) is the most celebrated novel which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for Fiction, struggles in life for survival. The novel depicts the life of a black girl, Celie who despite poverty, illiteracy, physical and mental exploitation transcends her plight through self-awareness to gain respectable place in the American society. Celie first writes letters to God to help her to survive the spiritual, emotional and physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her step father, Alphonso and later on her husband, Mr. ____ *The Color Purple* depicts in an epistolary manner thirty years of a struggle in the life of Celie, a poor Southern black woman who is victimized physically and emotionally both by her stepfather and her husband, Albert. While in her teens, Celie is repeatedly raped by her stepfather, who sells her two children she bore of him. Celie is eventually placed into a loveless marriage with Albert, a widower who for the next three decades subjects her to beatings and

psychological torment. Celie writes letters describing her ordeal to God and to her sister, Nettie, who escapes a similar fate by serving as a missionary in Africa. However, in the company of Albert's mistress Shug Avery, a charismatic singer, she gains self-esteem and the courage to leave her marriage. Shug is even responsible for Celie's reunion with her children sold by her stepfather, Alphonso and with Nettie at the end of the novel. She begins her journey from powerlessness to the state of full empowerment and from self-abnegation to self-recognition. Walker also chronicles the oppressed and miserable lives of the black women Shug and Sofia who valiantly to gain respectable position and place in society. All the women folk in the novel have to suffer at the hands of their men folk. It describes the ill treatment given to the black women by their men. At the same time the novel highlights the awareness among the black women about their self-status and rights.

The Color Purple tells us a story of two women in love with one man. The character of Shug Avery, a dynamic singer whose real name is Lillie but is called Shug, is a transforming force in Celie's life. Walker knows very well that she was writing a story of two women who marry to the same man that completes the love triangle in all its symmetry is Celie and Shug's love for each other. Womanist consciousness is clearly seen in the relationship between the Celie and Shug. Walker's idea of womanism is ingrained in the novels under discussion. For her the term involves, "in bonding of women as a continuation of the struggle for self-definition and affirmation that is the essence of African American means." She portrays a galaxy of black women who love other women as being "whole" or "round women" and have concern in a culture that oppresses entire black community. Women in these novels-- Margaret, Mem, Josie, Meridian, Celie, Nettie--stress the sense of solidarity and sharing, the sense of community, that brings about blossoming in self and society. They demonstrate consciousness of their continuous exploitation and slavery due to color and gender. Like Sula who quests for creating her own self and coming to terms with her identity as a black and female in Toni Morrison's Sula, they fight valiantly against their oppressors to quest their identity in sexist and classist society of America. Ruth, Meridian and Nettie believe in change which is essential for the survival and harmony in society. They show

indomitable female spirit and vitality that help for their empowerment. As a result they become self-reliant and challenged their men that they can survive without them.

However, reversal of gender roles is seen in the couple Sofia and Harpo, a son of Albert whose face looks like a woman's face. He truly enjoys woman's works like cooking and washing dishes, while Sofia does a field work and traditional man's work. They fight constantly "like two men" getting Harpo the worst of beating. Perhaps Walker shows this kind of irony in order to predict the reversal of roles that is likely to take place in the near future. Some of these oppressive black men undergo a metamorphosis when they realized their follies in the course of time. Grange Copeland repents for what he has done to Margaret and determines to provide most facilities and security to his granddaughter Ruth, the child of the future. He even kills his son Brownfield and prefers to go in jail hoping that she will be free and happy in his absence. Brownfield compounds one of the greatest sins in Walker's fiction that is the refusal or inability to change. Ironically, his death makes possible the completion of change in the life of Ruth, his daughter. Albert too changes in the end and gives utmost love to all. Albert discovers reflection which makes him a defined person who can accept the responsibility for his mistakes and the suffering he has caused to his wife. His apparent psychological return to roots, though inadequately motivated, is primarily a portent of a healing process. Truman, Meridian's husband in the novel Meridian, changes when he realizes his mistake of marrying a white marcher woman Robinowitz looking at her color. Being womanist Meridian wholeheartedly forgives him and allows him to stay with her. As a part of womanist strategy, Walker shows sexual and emotional bonding between black.

REFERENCES

- [1] Feminist Readings / Feminists Reading, 2nd ed., London: Prentice Hall, 1996. Mills, Sara.
- [2] "Authentic Realism," Mills and Pearce, pp.56-90.
- [3] Showalter, Elaine. Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing,
- [4] Oxford: Clarendon, 1991. Print.

- [5] Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. London: Women's Press, 1992. Print.
- [6] Warhol, Robyn R. "How Narration Produces Gender: Femininity as Affect and Effect in Alice
- [7] Walker's *The Color Purple*," *Narrative*, Vol.9, No.2 (2001), pp.182-87.
- [8] Women: Alice Walker and Calixthe Beyala," *New Literature Review*, Vol. 37 (2000), pp.59-74.