

Celebration of Black Female Identity: An Analysis of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Dr. Sakunthala

M.Phil, Ph.D., D.Litt, Professor in English (Rtd.) S.N.College, Shoranur, Kerala

Abstract: A critical exposition of the history of the Black woman's life and condition shows that as a Black, she has had to endure all the horrors of slavery and, living in a racist society as a worker, she has been the object of continual exploitation. Since times of slavery, Black womanhood had been destroyed, distorted, dismantled and abused with racial, sexual and inhuman practises by black men and white men and women. In the process, they have lost their genuine self and have developed a complexity in themselves. Inspired by the new Women's Movements, the black woman was urged upon to overcome her long suffering and raised her voice boldly and courageously in her own writings. The novels that emerged during the latter half of the seventies exhibited a strong feminist perspective as black women writers involved themselves in the task of forging powerful and positive images of Black womanhood. The novels of the late seventies and the eighties continue to explore these themes- that sexism must be struggled against in black communities and that sexism is integrally connected to racism

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Colour, race and gender segregated the human beings as the privileged and the cursed, the master and the slave, the civilised and the savage and so forth. This is particularly menacing in the case of Black woman. A critical exposition of the history of the Black woman's life and condition shows that as a Black, she has had to endure all the horrors of slavery and, living in a racist society as a worker, she has been the object of continual exploitation. Since times of slavery, Black womanhood had been destroyed, distorted, dismantled and abused with racial, sexual and inhuman practises by black men and white men and women. In the process, they have lost their genuine self and have developed a complexity in themselves.

One of the foremost preoccupations of Black woman feminists has been to subvert the denigrating image of Black woman. The healing of the wounds inflicted by slavery and racism is attempted through subverting these images. Inspired by the new Women's Movements, the black woman was urged

upon to overcome her long suffering and raised her voice boldly and courageously in her own writings. The miserable condition of Afro-American women has been depicted by Afro-American writers such as Zola Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and many others. The novels that emerged during the latter half of the seventies exhibited a strong feminist perspective as black women writers involved themselves in the task of forging powerful and positive images of Black womanhood. The novels of the late seventies and the eighties continue to explore these themes- that sexism must be struggled against in black communities and that sexism is integrally connected to racism.

Alice Walker (1944-), the American short story writer and novelist is best known for her novels *Meridian* (1976) and *The Colour Purple* (1982). An avowed feminist, Walker coined the term 'Womanist' to mean a Black feminist or feminist of colour. To embody her own vision of Black Feminism and to name her philosophy, Alice Walker describes herself as a 'Womanist' rather than a feminist, because she believes that Womanism is better than Feminism. Black Feminism existed because the racism that black women experienced was not adequately addressed by the mainstream Feminist Movement which was led by white middle-class women. Alice Walker added the term 'womanist' into feminist vocabulary to depict her idealistic point on the issue of gender. Resistance to patriarchal power structure is the common ground of both womanism and feminism. Womanism is not only concerned with double marginalisation on the basis of race and class but is also committed to restructuring society through dismantling all boundaries.

Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple* narrates the life of a Southern Black girl, Celie, living in Georgia in the 1900s. Celie, despite her victimisation by a racist and sexist culture, transcends her destiny and attempts to reach new dimensions of womanist consciousness. In her

fiction, Walker seeks to transform the 'suspended' woman into an 'emergent' black woman.

As black women always live under patriarchal rules, they do not regard themselves as free people who can control their own lives. Celie, the protagonist in *The Color Purple*, believes that the only way to survive in her husband's house is to obey his rules, tolerate his beatings and to remain silent. However, she finds her voice and starts to stand up for her rights. That is the reason why Maples believes that: "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is a liberative text that showcases a method by which her character, and ostensibly African Americans, can situate themselves within the world. It follows that the novel is inherently related to the notion of growth" (Maples,1). In fact, Celie's subjectivity develops as she perceives her desires in life and intends to follow them with the help of other characters; she grows through the process of writing and befriending other characters. Celie is silenced by an external source and experiences the nullification of subjectivity and internal voice, but throughout the novel she starts to find her voice and expresses herself.

Celie, has faced oppression mainly from the men in her life. She is repeatedly raped by her stepfather, whom she first believes to be her father. She gets pregnant by him twice, and he takes both the children away. Besides raping and impregnating her, her stepfather beats her and forces her into a marriage with a widower Albert, in the novel often referred to as Mr.- who is in love with a Blues singer Miss Shug Avery. Albert treats Celie as a servant and "an occasional sexual convenience" (Gates & Appiah 16).

As the novel unfolds, Celie's stepfather warns her not to tell anyone about the fact that he rapes her. Because of this intimidating patriarchal injunction, "You better not ever tell anybody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker, *The Colour Purple* 1), Celie is obliged to remain silent, but she needs to tell someone; therefore, she writes letters to God and explains all the misery which has been forced upon her. In Kristeva's words, women should revolt if they intend to have pleasure, as they achieve happiness by "confronting obstacles, prohibitions, authority, or law that allows them to realize themselves as autonomous and free" (7). Here, Celie should confront the patriarchal system which confined her for a long time. Moreover, the revolt transforms an invisible Celie into a visible one. Walker puts black invisible women, who are absent from classical

literature and history, into the spotlight and permits them to speak and act. Language is in the hands of men, and they dominate women with it; men decide what, to whom and where women can express themselves, as Kristeva holds, women are "excluded from the single true and legislating principle, from the Words" (21), because without words, women cannot have independent personality. Men force women not to use language as speaking helps them to gain a sense of identity. In fact, "no person is your friend who demands your silence or denies your right to grow" (1).

During the course of the novel, the readers witness Celie's change from a small girl who is abused continuously into a mature, young woman. Improved by her friendships with other women, especially Shug Avery, Albert's mistress, and by her younger sister, Nettie, Celie decides to leave Albert and moves to Memphis. She starts a business there, designing and making clothes, and becomes a businesswoman and earns her own money. In the novel, black feminism is unsuccessful at first because women are unaware of the existence of their problems. They suffer in silence as each one of them feels that the problems are unique to their lives. Celie shares her experience with Shug after realizing that black women do not have to tolerate oppression in the society. However, her ability to open the issue leads to her realization that her problems are not unique, and she makes a conscious decision to end the oppression.

Self-esteem is one of the issues dealt with by black women in their writings. But Celie initially lacks this characteristic. Even though she has the idea to liberate herself from the clutches of male domination, she is too dependent to assert her black womanhood. Celie has led a passive life and even she is not aware of her inner talents and potentialities. She needs the intervention of someone or the other to constantly keep reminding her of her personal value. She is linked to Shug Avery, who consistently shows her ability to ensure her own well-being. Shug becomes a good mother for Celie and provides an environment for her to reveal her true feelings and to establish a stable and autonomous self. She is brought home by Albert so that Celie nurses her back to health. Celie is not even informed of anything about her. But still, she serves her with love, devotion and admiration, "I wash her body, it feels like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 51). Shug hates and shuns Celie in the beginning, but later starts liking her and she takes the

place of Nettie and brings out the true self of Celie and restores her dignity and self-respect. She literally helps Celie attain transcendence. She moulds Celie into a new being and supports her endeavor to build up a new identity within the feminine domain.

The characters in *The Color Purple* have womanist traits. Through Celie, Shug Avery, Sofia and Nettie who are the major characters in the novel, Walker suggests that women can get an upper hand at some point, by challenging the authority of their husbands and oppressors, and daring to overcome all odds. These women also have great love for their people and the culture of their community, love women and men sexually and non-sexually and in search of their self, the women become audacious, outrageous and courageous.

When she gets confirmed that Albert hid her loving sister's letters from Africa, she curses him like a supernatural being. She shouts: "Until you do right by me, every thing you touch will crumble" (213). Shug is startled to see Celie's wrath against her husband which is unbecoming. Albert, unable to understand the situation, tries to humiliate her as he does earlier: "Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (213). No longer afraid, she continues her curse, feeling as if the words came to her from another world: "Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail....Every kick you hit me you will suffer twice....The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot" (213). Finally, she asserts her selfhood as a human being in this world: "I' m pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook. But I'm here" (214). It is a positive and creative move towards self-recognition and establishment of worth. Celie affirms the supremacy of speech over physical and material despotism which are the elements of patriarchy. Her assertion reflects her reaction against stoic passivity.

The arrival of Shug Avery makes the turning point in Celie's life and their friendship affords Celie a process of growth and self-discovery. Shug changes the course of the novel when she comes to live with Albert and develops a good relationship with Celie, she supports her family and keeps sexual relations with Celie. As a Blues singer, she paves way for the upliftment of Celie. "Shug's occupation as a blues singer foregrounds the ways in which she fulfils this role in Celie's life. She provides Celie with the means, the vocabulary and the methodology with

which to find and sing her own song, her truth, her self-worth and her desires" (Gillespie 2011).

Shug becomes the embodiment of the feminist existential and becomes Celie's teacher showing her how to find pleasure in her own body and to follow the intuitions of her own mind. Shug, who is Celie's talisman, contributes the most to Celie's transformation and her initiation into black womanhood. She guides her very sympathetically to regenerate her feminine urge, physical beauty and to love black sisters. Both women get closer due to their adverse and lowly position in their lives. Celie begins a new life of independence because of her relationship with Shug who serves as a vehicle through which Celie gets empowered to challenge the oppressions over her. Shug has grown strong and independent by being true to her own experience. From the basic intensities of friendship and love, their relationship is based on interdependence and trust. It covers all aspects of life – sexual, moral, economical and spiritual.

Shug Avery's relationship with Celie, however, does not remain on the level of lesbian love, but its goal is to make Celie self confident and to develop her ability to appreciate herself, and to discover whatever is valuable around her, or using Shug's terminology, whatever is 'purple' in life. It is also this relationship that develops a kind of sensitivity in the heroine that later makes her able to enjoy heterosexual love as well. As women have been ignored, misrepresented and mistreated in literature and history, in this novel, Walker intends to highlight women's suffering and shows how they can get rid of the misrepresentations by proving their abilities, and how they gain power through relationships with other female characters. For example, Shug realizes that Celie does not have any sexual feelings when she sleeps with Mr.- . Moreover, she perceives that Celie does not know her own body; therefore, Shug decides to make Celie familiar with her body. To express her desires, Celie should first know them. One of these desires, which have been silenced for years, is sexual desire, and Shug helps Celie to recognize it in herself. "Here, take this mirror and go look at yourself down there" (Walker, *The Color Purple*,74).

In fact, one can consider the evaluation of the female body as the site of self-awareness and self-esteem. Thus, in *The Color Purple*, "a crucial moment in Celie's transformation comes when she perceives the beauty of her genitalia" (Byerman 321). Shug teaches

Celie to enjoy herself, to know her body and to appreciate her female productive organs. In fact, with Shug's encouragement, Celie's self reclamation begins as she sees her own genitals for the first time. For the first time, she perceives her sexual desires with the help of another woman. As a result of this repossession of her body, Celie is able to gain selfhood through spoken language. In fact, as she was forced to forget about rape, she was ignorant about her sexual organs as well. However, as soon as she knows her productive organs, she becomes able to express her repressed desires as well.

Besides helping Celie to get to know her body, Shug encourages Celie to perceive her talent for sewing and improving it. Walker's main reason to establish Celie as a successful entrepreneur is to give her economic independence, besides her aesthetic-vision, in a capitalist society. Celie, like a skilled and experienced artist, does various experiments with designs to seek perfection.

I sit in the dining room making pants after pants. I got pants now in every color and size under the sun. Since we started making pants down home, I ain't been able to stop. I change the cloths, I change the print, I change the waist, I change the pocket. I change the hem, I change the fullness of the leg. I make so many pants. Then finally one day I made the perfect pair of pants. (218-219)

In the words of bell hooks, "*The Color Purple* transcends the narrow boundaries of any specific classifications and slotting to affirm the integrity of her artistic vision" (480). It enables Celie to decide to leave her husband Mr.- and move to Memphis with Shug to begin a new life, because she wants to utilize her inner talents to make both ends meet. "I am so happy, I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. What else could any person want?" (222). *The Color Purple* can be called a womanish novel, not merely because two central female characters become 'lovers', but because women are positioned as central, and sharing a rich, inner life bonding against male tyranny and giving and receiving practical and political support. As Adrienne Rich describes, "sewing or weaving emphasizes woman's transformative power" (101). By sewing Celie narrows the gap between the sexes, making pants for both men and woman. To Alice Walker, art is a primary source to which women can resort to for obtaining their own selves in a restrictive society where women's crashed individualities can be

regained by employing diverse forms of art. Subsequently, underscoring the role of art in society, she asserts art should "make us better; if [it] doesn't then what on earth is it for?" (Walker 34). *The Color Purple* is a novel charting "a way of travelling to a point of arrival, an invitation to wander and secure a habitation free from all domination" (Singh 35).

Sofia, Harpo's wife, represents the plight of the female in rebellion. Sofia's struggle for a meaningful existence displays her strong will power and ability to transcend the racist and sexist society. She struggles for self-respect and dignity, and she stands in contrast to Celie in her effort to put up with the male-dominated world. She tells Celie that she had been fighting all through her life, right from her childhood: "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house" (Walker 42). She is put in prison for fighting back when slapped by the Mayor.

But Sofia is a unique breed of a woman. She is assertive, aggressive and would never allow anyone, not even her husband, to step on her toe. Sofia shows Celie how to live with one's husband with self-esteem and dignity. She believes in 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth', regardless of who committed evil to her. When Harpo one day beats up Sofia to make her obey all his orders, Sofia fights back and the amusing fact is that contrary to what Harpo was used to - a man beating up a woman without any resistance or challenge - Harpo is beaten up by Sofia until his face is just a mass of bruises and his lips get cut.

As a mute observer, Celie watches Sofia's daring attitude towards Harpo as a wife with great astonishment. Her attitude is not mechanical like Harpo, so she is fed up and decides to leave. Her forthright behavior works as an eye-opener to Celie. Celie recognizes the difference between her relationship with Mr.- and Sofia's with Harpo. Sofia is outspoken and she guides Celie not to bear torture and encourages fighting and reacting against suppression. Sophia retorts "you ought to bash Mr.- open...Think of heaven later" (44). Sofia is able to escape gender discrimination by leaving her husband and Sofia's bold statement against Harpo brings a dawning impact on Celie that female passivity is not the only possible response to male domination. In Sofia, she sees a woman who is not dependent on man for maintaining her existence in the world, not a

victim of circumstances, but a controller of circumstances.

Symbolism is another style that Alice Walker uses in the novel. Pants represent independence, individuality, and strength to Celie as she liberates herself from Mr. - 's control. They help her to breach gender lines when she decides to wear them; they bring her economic freedom when she begins making them as a business. Just as the idiom 'wearing the pants in the family' is used to describe someone who is in control, pants help to define and shape Celie's control over her own life. To Celie, needles are a means to create something worthwhile by uniting items that on their own are insignificant. Because they take parts and give them meaning by making a whole, they are a positive force in her life and in fact these needles lead to Celie's success as a seamstress and a business entrepreneur.

It is through her relationships with other female characters that Celie is able to cast off the patriarchal dominance which silenced her all those years. In *The Color Purple*, women tolerate racism, sexism and gender discrimination, but they unite with each other. Through sisterhood, women realize their talents, verbalize them and follow them. "By thinking and acting women can overcome man-made barriers to their humanity" (Dawson 132). This novel envisions a better future for Black people through union. In fact, through sisterhood, female characters get rid of their marginalized positions in the family and recreate their subjectivity by recognizing their needs and talents, expressing them and finding ways to improve them. This transformation occurs because of the concerted effort of a team of women, namely, Nettie, Sofia, and Shug Avery. In the novel, it is the trio, Shug, Sofia and Nettie who succeed in bringing about a radical change in Celie. Walker "sees the possibility of the empowerment of Black women if they create a community of sisters that can alter the unnatural definitions of woman and men" (Johnson 210). Shug shows Celie alternate ways of living in a patriarchal and heterosexual culture and Nettie teaches her to be proud of her African heritage and to recover from racial inferiority complex.

Walker's novels are a celebration of Black female identity established through a fight against the forces of racism and sexism. The African American women search for an identity and rediscover and redefine their self in their journey and they emerge from being silent and marginalised and the objectified 'Other' to

speaking 'Subjects', occupying the centre stage. Walker, through her women characters celebrates communal harmony by bringing all of them together towards the end of the novel. The novel starts on a very pessimistic note and ends up in a note of optimism. To conclude, *The Color Purple* affirms that though woman is forced to live under the dominance of man, either father or husband, if she is courageous enough and have the confidence to make a better life for her, then it can be possible for her to start a brand-new story. Celie is one of the good examples of those brave women who build a new life for themselves and to declare their identity as working and self-confident women. Starting with great wounds in her psyche, Celie becomes one of the leading voices to show the possibility of a new, better life, without the pressure of men and without their help.

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