

Resisting Oppression in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract – *The Color Purple* is a 1982 epistolary novel by American author Alice Walker which won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Taking place mostly in Georgia, the story focuses on the life of African-American women in the Southern United States in the 1930s, addressing numerous issues including their exceedingly low position in American social culture.

The Color Purple unfolds the panorama of black female reality of the neo-slavery period that takes shape in the smithy of black male brutality towards black females, racial/patriarchal oppression and misogynist assumptions. The novel focuses on the process of the self-discovery of an unlettered black southern woman. It traces the gradual growth of her radicalization and empowerment through female bonding, education and self-employment. The black feminist analysis reveals how black female radicalism, embracing of womanhood, exploration of black heritage and resultant self-determination bring to fruition Celie's quest for identity and history.

Celie succeeds in her quest for identity and history by developing an understanding of her roots and heritage and acquiring the awareness that she has a right to happiness, passion, creativity and emotional fulfillment. To exercise her rights as an individual, Celie learns to resist the advances of black men who hinder her self-fulfillment. Alice Walker has been vehemently criticized within the African-American community for her portrayal of black men as abusers and rapists. In *The Color Purple*, Walker establishes a "feminist culture" by focusing attention on the under privileged and inconspicuous southern black women, who suffers not only at the hands of the white society but also due to black male oppression. The adverse criticism of the theme of black male brutality in *The Color Purple* seeks legitimacy from the belief that the patriarchal practice of sexist politics symbolizes black opposition to racial oppression. Thus the black male aggression against black woman is camouflaged as reaction to social victimization; Bell Hooks regards this perspective on black male brutality as an expression of the pedagogy of patriarchy and rhetoric of Black Nationalism which collaborate in oppressing the black woman. Albert, Celie's malevolent husband, embodies the black male chauvinism and the patriarchal assumptions and tendencies, analyzed by Bell Hooks. In the absence of another benevolent black male character, he seems to represent the majority of black American manhood. Alice Walker has refuted the allegation that she has presented Albert in order to tarnish the image of black men in general and create a schism between black men and women. Besides establishing the interlink ages of race and gender in *The Color Purple* Alice Walker reinforces her position as a "womanish" writer. Despite being labelled a womanish text, *The Color Purple* does not fall into a specific genre category. It represents the "blurring of genre conventions". Alice Walker reinterprets the genres and uses them in a post-modernist sense, diverse from the traditional practice. It strikes us as an epistolary novel, a Bildungsroman and a historical novel all in one.

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The Color Purple adopts the narrative technique of the eighteenth century epistolary novel of sentiment. The epistolary form enables Celie, a black southern woman to speak for herself. By writing letters, Celie discovers a means of structuring her identity and discovering herself. The novel unfolds itself in "the process of Celie's writing herself into being and consciousness, of her growing power and control as a writer" (Bloom 185). The novel's narrative structure is closely linked to the theme of search for identity and history. The ingenuity of Alice Walker lies in

revising the genre conventions of the sentimental novel. Alice Walker unfolds the narrative of the novel through a series of letters, which are not dated and numbered. It is a device, aiming at preserving the verisimilitude of the narrative. The letters, written by Celie and her sister, Nettie, reveal political consciousness and throw spotlight on the contemporary, social, political and cultural scenario. Due to the peculiarities of consciousness and the novel demands to be read intensively. Clues and hints within the letters reveal the social set up of the

period. In the opening letters, there are references to wagons and the closing letters reveal the appearance of cars. The time span of the novel is roughly about forty years. There are also large time spans between the letters, sometimes about five years. The epistolary form has enabled Alice Walker to press into service the resources of a western tradition for exploiting the creativity of African-American folk expression. In this regard, David Bloom makes an the vernacular has invested an old and somewhat rigid form with new life" (Bloom 68).

The Color Purple records the voice of Celie, an illiterate southern black woman, who is raped by her stepfather and then married to Mr. Johnson, who could make use of a good worker on his farm. Threatened by her stepfather that she had better tell no one but God about her rape at his hands, Celie starts writing letters to God. The entire novel comprises of Celie's letters to God, then to her sister Nettie, and of Nettie's letters to Celie. After her children are separated from Celie and her sister Nettie escapes the advances of Mr. Johnson and leaves for Africa with missionaries, Celie sinks into isolation. With the passage of time, she develops affinity with an extended family which includes Shug, her husband's mistress who is a juke singer and the strong and rebellious Sofia. With the help of the black sisterhood, Celie overcomes oppression and acquires an identity and a sense of her history. In the end, Nettie and Celie's children are reunited with Celie. Mr. Johnson mellows down and develops respect for Celie and her new found independence.

Celie's evolution of self is slow and gradual. Her journey to self-realization is a long and arduous one. Linda Tate contends that Celie's transformation stems from her "ability to take control over defining oneself naming oneself" (204). In the beginning, Celie is mere "nothing". Mr. Johnson rebukes her "who you think you is?..... You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam you nothing at all" (IkennaDieke 164). At this stage Celie accepts Mr. Johnson's contention that she is a mere "nothing". She lives a desolate existence. She cannot even begin her narrative by stating, "I am" due to lack of self-confidence and self-acceptance. As a result, Celie suffers silently and passively. As a result of her silence in the face of oppression, "Celie has been fragmented into pieces which are given away to others" (IkennaDieke 164).

Her life is a series of sacrifices to her father's ruthless desires, to her sister's safety and to Mr. Johnson's cruelty. She leads a devastated, hopeless life after being abused by her father and her husband and her separation from her children and her sister. She lacks a sense of belonging and self.

As the novel evolves, Celie gradually moves towards self-acceptance and later self-assertion. She asserts herself for the first time when she takes the decision, on her own behalf, of leaving for Memphis with Shug.

She boldly announces her existence on earth, "I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook....but I'm here" (205)

In Memphis, Celie, for the first time, gives expression to her dormant potentialities and creativity. In a letter, written to Nettie, from Memphis, Celie communicates a new and positive vision of herself: "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time And you alive and be home soon. With our children Furthermore, Celie, for the first time at the close of this letter, signs emphatically, thereby revealing her new sense of self that she, has acquired through her relationships and her business.

'your sister, Celie

Floppants, Unlimited

Sugar Avery Drive

Memphis, Tennessee" (212).

Celie comes close to acquiring a sense of identity in Memphis, which opens up new for her and brings her in contact with the world at large. From newspapers, Celie learns about global happenings significant that Celie is reborn in Georgia. Her discovery of self in the south marks her wholesome acceptance of the south and all that it represents. By returning to the south, Celie acquires a sense of belonging and roots. The import of the theme of black sisterhood in *The Color Purple* can be fully understood only in the southern perspective.

At the end of the novel, Nettie and Celie's children also return to the sustaining south. Celie's experiencing extreme joy and fulfillment after reunion with her long separated family marks the final step in her quest for identity. Alice Walker has been criticized for the unrealistic, fairly late ending of the novel. The ending of the novel "creates a utopian vision of new southern community" (Prekins 127). However, the ending of the novel is also redemptive as the celebration in the end marks up for the misery with the novel begins. Nettie and Celie's children return home to Georgia, their "mothers' gardens" to seek integration with the community from which they sprang. Celie's reunion with her family coincides with the American Independence Day.

As white Americans celebrate their independence from England; black Americans spend the day celebrating each other. In a clever twist, Alice Walker uses this traditionally white holiday to mark the emotional, social, economic, and spiritual independence of Celie.

The Color Purple, an odd miracle of nature, symbolizes the miracle of human possibilities. Celie succeeds in her quest for an identity because she recognizes the strength of the south, integrates with

her race and refuses to internalize the alienating influences of the western white tradition. Celie's evolution from a self-effacing woman to a woman whose consciousness allows her to gain control over her life is inspiring. Celie however would not have been able to attain a sense of self entirely by herself. Nettie, Shug and Sofia who form a close sisterhood aid her in her quest for identity. In this context, *The Color Purple* focuses on southern black female survival and transcendence. In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker clearly "lays out for us the theme that dominates her work continuity and creativity in southern black women's lives" (Wade 88).

"sister's choice" is the pattern of the quilt Celie and Sofia create together. The quilt becomes a symbol of the "female bonding that restores the woman to a sense of completeness and independence" (Inge 320). Quilting together creates a well-knit female community in a world that represses female expression.

Besides dealing with Celie's self-discovery, *The Color Purple* also focuses on Celie's quest for history. In this sense, it is also a historical novel that chronicles Celie's coming to terms with the legacy of her race and her roots. It affirms and makes black history. It traces the history of the blacks from Africa to the suburbs of the USA. The novel captures Celie's developing a sense of her roots and history. Celie's distinct identity is defined by her transformation from a meek subservient woman into an angry and assertive woman. She wants to Kill Mr. Johnson for concealing Nettie's letters from her and thus blocking her channel of communication with her sister. Nettie dissuades her from taking recourse to violence and persuades her to be tolerant. Moreover she imparts the liberating knowledge of their racial legacy to Celie and enthuses her to emerge successful in her quest for history.

Thus by tapping the creativity of the epistolary form, Alice Walker has created an internal dialogue, comparing and contrasting and finally reconciling poor and middle class, educated and uneducated, African and Afro-American heritage. Nettie's letters to Celie constitute the sub text of the novel. From vastly different points of view....the two sisters gradually come to identical realizations about the nature of life, blackness, and men and women (Wade 96-97).

Celie attains this happiness by reconciling with the past. In the process, she also helps others like Albert to make peace with their surroundings. Like her prominent African American predecessors, Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston. Alice Walker focuses on black female identity and wholeness. In this sense, the impact of *The Color Purple* on African American literature and culture has been abiding.

CONCLUSION

The black feminist approach also underlines the opposition of men to the emancipation of women and the varying responses of the male and female characters to the emerging social order, which enables women to assert themselves and gain economic independence. It focuses on the existential project of the female characters In the novel and brings into focus their womanish slant and exclusion of men from their sisterhood and struggle for self-realization and empowerment.

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