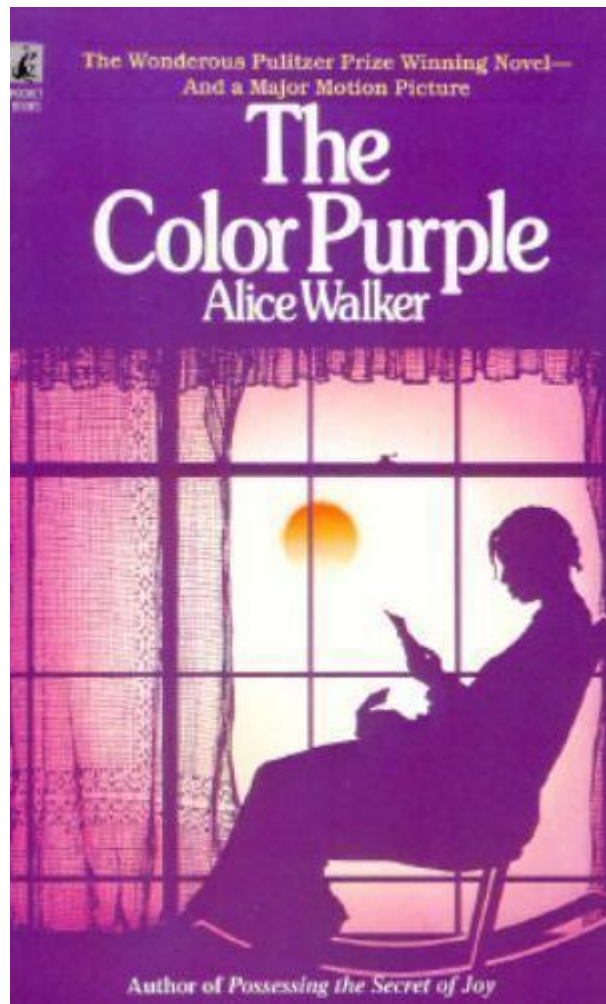


**Postmodern Prayer and Its Significance in Alice Walker's
*The Color Purple***

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Abstract

The Color Purple, the epistolary novel by Alice Walker which sprang up in the literary arena in 1982, has been celebrated since then and crowned with the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and also the National Book Award for Fiction. Though the novel has been subject to severe

criticism for its explicitness in sexual descriptions, violence, and handling of homosexuality, the element of bringing in God as the addressee has given complete freedom for her as the author and thereby has limited the readers to the job of eavesdropping communication. Her inexorable and unequivocal overflow sustained from the address to ‘God’ in the context, has displayed a perception balanced with privacy for the readers. On the other hand, Alice Walker has also mentioned in her introduction to the work in the 2014 edition that the work itself has not been frequently discussed on its spiritual appeal and relevance. This study aims at analysing the freehand that the author received because of the conceived privacy while communicating to God and at the same time unveiling the postmodern attributes in her description and cry to the audience of God. Her spirit to bring the picture of God with her epistolary communication and discussion in the novel forms the base of this study.

Keywords: God, Relationship, Conversation, Postmodernism, Difference, Existence

Introduction

The study on nature by Descartes and his views on human freedom and the existence of a supreme exert a powerful intellectual pull on us even today. Descartes finds that the emblematic content of the idea of God, which he finds inside him, “is so great that it cannot have originated from inside his own (imperfect) mind, but must have been implanted there by an actual perfect being, God” (Cottingham, 8). Interestingly in the context of the novel *The Color Purple*, we are intended to look upon the possibility of the “imperfect mind” which forms the base for entertaining an argument related to God in the post-modern world. Francis Schaeffer in his work “The God Who Is There” proposed the term “line of despair.” Generally thought process starts with philosophy, continues with art and music, saturates the culture, and then gradually seep into theology (Schaeffer, 28). Though it remains a preferred topic to discuss, its relevance in a novel of the postmodern world, to have a universal appeal with a secular tone is not an easy task. Alice Walker has been successful in bringing about such a conversation in *The Color Purple* and has created a perceptible audience in the postmodern world. It was possible for her because of the following artistic maneuvers:

1. The uncomplicated reflection on God by an “imperfect mind”

2. The portrayal of God as a friend of the oppressed and friendless
3. Keeping God above and beyond religion

The Uncomplicated Reflection on God

The question “who is God?” and “how does He look like?” have been deliberated by people for so many centuries. Most often than not what is mentioned in the scriptures have been analysed, interpreted and compared without changing even an iota of the belief that prevailed before the discussion. More than any discussion the most persuasive experience when it comes to understanding God is the testimony of an oppressed and uncomplicated human. The importance of it is also mentioned in Bible, “So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner.” (2 Timothy 1:8).

Speaking to God

Speaking to God in the form of prayers or requests, being driven out by the society and as a helpless human being is considered to be the eventual resort. The very thought that someone deserves the mercy of God because of the unutterable sufferings in life is accepted in the world of faith and religion. Nettie, in one of her letter clearly mentions the relationship between Celie and God when she writes, “I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God... And whether God will read letters or no, I know you will go on writing them; which is guidance enough for me. Anyway, when I don't write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart (Walker 117).”

Celie's Misery

Celie's misery first makes her to be the unacknowledged contender for God's mercy. The one who has suffered so much and prays for mercy, has even got the right to be annoyed with God. Whether she will be forgiven by God is not so important but the reason that has made her to fell so is something that the readers want to know. She, with her simple mind says the reason:

Dear Nettie,

I don't write to God no more. I write to you....Yeah, I say, and he give me a lunched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I ay, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown...If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you (p.173).

Her words out of deep pain and agony goes straight to readers and wins the favour of allowing her to have the right of speaking about God and her relationship with Him. The author uses this freedom to being the superior discourse with simple words as the observations and thoughts of the character through unfamiliar and pathetic experiences.

God as the Friend of the Oppressed and Friendless

In the novel, the term 'God' appears more than one hundred and seventy times. The first epistolary address to God is, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy (Walker 1)". There is the deep sense of the presence of God both with the oppressor and the oppressed and it is well captured to form the base of the narration. Celie in rural Georgia, experiencing a childhood of ceaseless abuse begins writing letters directly to God as she believed or made to believe because even the devil in the form of her step-daddy believed.

She first tastes the help of God when she gets impregnated and has to tell her mother about the father of the child. The presence of God is perhaps realised first through the existence of the term. "God" becomes a term on which she could pin the blame. She further says about the child, "She ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God's. Finally, she asks Where it is? I say God took it" (Walker 2).

When Celie finds her little sister stalked by her step-daddy and thinks about God, she writes "I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I'll take care of you. With God help (Walker 3)." Her sister, while writing back about her encounter with Mr. Albert, Celie's husband, she says, "I started to fight him, and with God's help, I hurt him bad enough to make him let me alone" (Walker 114). Here, for the first time, the beneficence of God in life is acknowledged in

their communication. Followed by that she lauds the grace of God with regard to the future of Celie's children, "Corrine and Samuel have a wonderful marriage. Their only sorrow in the beginning was that they could not have children. And then, they say, 'God' sent them Olivia and Adam" (Walker 5).

Celie, after establishing the where- about of her sister and her children has a transformed view with regard to the relationship of God when she says "I don't write to God no more. I write to you ... (Walker 173)". This leads to a serious conversation about God between Shug Avery and Celie which further explains the spiritual reflections from the point of view of an oppressed human being. However it is important to note that the need of the reliance on the term "God" or the existence of God gradually loses its sheen. This goes well with the audience as well as they do not perceive the character of Celie as pathetic as it was portrayed at the beginning.

The Help of God

Thus, the help of God in the novel, from the point view of the author is that the term helps to end the conversation without demanding a need to explain the forgettable incidents leaving them to the audience. On the other hand, a character, so pitiable like that of Celie needs sustenance for hope and justice though it is bound by decisions of the author. Finally, the character, as an evolved woman seeks the companionship of another woman, is a sure sign of emancipation.

Keeping God Above and Beyond Religion

The authority of the author lies in the way she helps the audience to behold the characters as per her discretion. The author strives to help the audience perceive the "perfect" experience in the novel through the narration. In the beginning, when Sofia was arrested, Celie prays in her own way. She fantasises,

"God coming down by chariot, swinging down real low and carrying ole Sofia home. I see 'em all as clear as day. Angels all in white, white hair and white eyes, look like albinos. God all white too, looking like some stout white man work at the bank. Angels strike they cymbals, one of them blow his horn, God blow out a big breath of fire and suddenly Sofia free" (Walker 85).

This innocence of her does not stay in the same way all along. She later evolves into someone who could be a part of a discussion about God philosophically. The conversation that begins with God's figure as "big and old and tall and gray bearded and white" goes to touch upon some of the basic but relevant questions. They analyse God and white people and it includes some sensational claims like "God wrote the bible, white folks had nothing to do with it" and "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it" (Walker 175).

The most significant point of the discussions is "God ain't a he or a she, but a It ... Don't look like nothing (Walker 176)". This gives a complete turn in the readers overall esteem of the substance of the discussion with the background that the white men do not listen to the suffering black people.

Finally from the simple reflections over the existence of God, there comes an attempt to interpret the passion of God. In a conversation Shug Avery tries to explain or justify the surprising attribute of God with the words, "God love everything you love— and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration (Walker 177)". Thus from innocent trust in God, there is a movement to understand the theoretical relevance of God and His existence beyond religion and culture.

Post-Modern Style

James Herman Olthuis (2012) says that "In contrast to Modernism's suppression of difference, the most distinctive feature of Postmodernism is its desire to embrace difference". He also adds that when modernistic thinking tries to identify or find out the solution to the problem, Postmodernism considers them reason illusions that need to be unmasked and also "marks them as dangerous to people everywhere".

Postmodernism emphasises the instability of everything and the creation of realities. Particularly in the time of principles, morality, political affairs, and education, no mention should

be made of general and constant notional foundations. Values are relative things that differ from culture to culture (Poosshafei, 2009). Help from God is sought in the novel but the question is if there is a desire to change the course of life and relationships with the people. God's help is sought for safety but not to change good into evil. There is never a hope for an evil man to change good or good to change evil. Even when it happens, there is no surprise or celebration and the difference exists and it is endured or ignored. It is even difficult to define good and evil except in terms of one causing physical or mental harm to another.

The desire to embrace difference in the novel *The Color Purple* is taken to new heights. The difference is loathed in fact by not even being given the recognition that it exists. The difference between coloured and the white diminishes in the focus and light is thrown upon the difference in the lives of men and women. More than the difference, the oppression in society gains importance and finally emancipation from the same. Celie, who has suffered in the hands of men right from her birth finally get a chance to decide the course of her life, with Mr. Albert. With the spirit of postmodern thought, she realises that she will not be able to make the differences disappear and considers living with it. This is clear when she mentions “ Mr..... done ask me to marry him again, this time in the spirit as well as in the flesh, and just after I say Naw, I still don't like frogs, but let's us be friends (Walker 257)”.

Ms. Doris

Another interesting character in the novel is Ms. Doris. She being an English woman travels to Africa to serve as a missionary, but all she wanted to do was write books. She felt everything to be alright in Africa and with her ulterior motives and her disguise says, “I saw nothing wrong with them as they were... I told them right off that their souls were no concern of mine (Walker 207)”. Here, the familiar concept of missionaries travelling to parts of Africa with the attitude of serving them has been juxtaposed with a contradictory motive which denies reaching quick and general conclusions that missionaries have always served the African people.

Implications

More than the discussions on theology, what gains strength when it comes to thinking about God is “the uncomplicated reflection on God by an imperfect mind” that has had a life of tribulations. Secondly, the suffering in the lives of the character in the novel has rendered audience to the tumults addressed to God and thereby confirming her right to speak to God amidst sufferings. The characters also open up the social conditions of the time and the inequalities and offer them grounds to discuss within the novel. It has also, with facts and narrations, questioned the methods and conventions of the world and thereby demands an attitude with the postmodern spirit, that is to accept and recognise the differences instead of wasting time on settling and resolving them, which will not happen without oppression or sacrifice from one side.

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