

A Thematic Study of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Harnam Singh, M.A. Eng., UGC NET, Research Scholar

=====

Abstract

The Color Purple is one of the most outstanding novels by an Afro- American author Alice Walker. She shot to fame with the publication of this novel in 1982. It is tale of victimization, sufferings, suppression and self-realization of fourteen years old black girl in Afro-American society. Having faced horrible trauma throughout her life the girl holds her later life and establishes her own identity. This paper is an attempt to unravel the different thematic issues of the novel which Alice Walker tries to bring out, be it a rigid patriarchy, racial discrimination, sisterhood or lesbianism. It unravels how self-determination can turn victorious and how one can overcome difficulties.

Keywords: Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, Narrative, Victimization, Suppression, Lesbianism, Discrimination, Resistance

Many readers consider *The Color Purple* as one of the greatest novels by Walker which won prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 1983, awarded for best fictional work in America. Subsequently, it also grabbed American National Book Award in 1983. Later on it was adapted for movie by famous American director Steven Spielberg and acclaimed great success. Although many critics criticize this novel for portraying black men too harsh, yet it achieved great success and became one of the most outstanding novels in Afro-American literary history. It helped Alice Walker to enter in the group of great black authors like Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and others. She earned worldwide appreciation and established herself as a significant novelist.

The novel portrays a story of fourteen years old black girl Celie, who has to spend her life under dire poverty, having no formal education at school or college. She is a victim of fate as well as man-made society, where women never get free space. One can say that it is a tale of victimization, suppression, submission and domination. Celie confronts with physical, emotional and psychological trauma throughout her life. Her life was made hell by her allusive step Pa Alphonso, who brutally rapes and impregnates her twice. She lost in the wilderness of isolation when her Pa sold out her children without her consent. Then he forcefully makes her to be married to Mr. Albert, who brutally beats and rapes her. Her life becomes hell.

Subsequently, she faces more emotional pangs when her younger loving sister Nittie got separated from her. She was the only solace to Celie's miserable life. Although at the middle of the story one comes to know that Celie finds some good people around her, who support her to overcome her submissive nature. At the end she tries to live her life happily and becomes self-dependent with the help of some people like Sofia, Shug and others. Celie becomes a kind of business person who runs her own business of making pants. She reunites with her children and her sister Nittie. They begin to live together and happily at their own home which was left by her father for them at Georgia. Thus one comes to know that it is tale of horrible sexual abuse, emotional as well as physical sufferings of Celie and it portrays her redemption from all these sorts of atrocities.

An Epistolary Novel

The Color Purple is an epistolary novel i.e. written in letter forms, in which characters exchange their thoughts and expressions through letters. M. H. Abrams defines epistolary novel as a narrative completely woven in letters or "conveyed entirely by an exchange of letters" (Abrams 256). *The Color Purple* is written in a series of ninety letters which reveal struggling life of its protagonist Celie and other characters. They express their feelings and expressions through letters. All the letters are written by Celie and her sister Nittie, initially by Celie to God and later by Nittie to Celie and so on. In the very beginning Celie exposes her so called step Pa's sexual assaults. In a letters to God Celie exposes how her step Pa warns her "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker 3). He warns not to share her bitter experiences with anyone else, thus she decides to write to God and consoles herself. Later on she begins to write her sister Nittie, when she comes to know that her sister is alive and has regularly been sending letters to her from Africa. Thus, the whole novel is woven in the form of letters.

Slave Narrative

The Color Purple appears to be a reflection of slave narratives. It depicts true picture of African society where black people were forced to become a slave and not treated as human being. In this prolific novel Walker portrays struggling life of black people in very inclusive manners. The novel traces the rural life of Georgia, where black people are treated inhumanly. They are lynched by white people and force to become slave. One comes to know that Celie's father was also lynched by white people due his black appearance. Celie comes to know about deprived life of her father through Alphonso. He tells "Your daddy didn't know how to git along, he say. White-folks lynch him. Too sad a story to tell pitiful little growing girls, he say" (164).

He was tortured and miserably succumbs to death. Hence it depicts Celie's conflicts and her confrontation with the social reality of the world. Moreover, Walker wants to narrate the life of black womens' struggle for survival and selfhood in Afro-American society where they were treated as slaves.

Gender and Racial Discrimination

The novel exposes the politics of man-made society, where women are always kept deprived of their rights to do anything and beaten up brutally as Celie tells Harpo that Mr. “beat me like he beat children” (23). Walker interrogates the politics of society where women are not treated equal as men. They are not allowed to have formal education at school. Celie reveals “The first time I got big Pa took me out of school. He never care that I love it. Nittie stood there at the gate holding tight to my hand. I was all dress for first day. You too dumb to keep going to school, Pa say” (11). Subsequently, one comes to know that Olinkan society does not believe in educating women. In a letter to Celie, Nettie tells how women are discriminated on the basis of gender and never get an opportunity to be educated like men. She tells that “The Olinka do not believe girls should be educated . . . A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something (140). Women are considered weaker and less intelligent. The other aspect depicted by Walker is racial discrimination. Many characters in this novel face racial discrimination at various occasions. Walker tries to expose this trauma through Sofia, who is quite energetic girl but faces racial discrimination. She fights throughout her life to establish her own self-identity. She tells that woman needs to establish her own identity with ability to fight and resist against unwanted encroachment. She says “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” (39). At one point she has to go prison for beating a white person. She is tortured in jail and compels to work like professional labourer.

Love of Females

Although *The Color Purple* is a tale of horrible victimization and sufferings yet it has a lot to do with true love i.e. the love of two sisters namely Celie and Nittie. They are major characters in this novel who suffers throughout their life but never lose hope to survive in any circumstances. Celie cares a lot about Nittie’s education and imagines her as to be a teacher in future. She is always ready to sacrifice her life to save Nittie. She saves Nittie from brutal sexual assault by Mr. Albert. She does not want to make Nittie to be married with him and says “take me instead of Nittie” (9). Many other characters in the novel show true feelings of fraternity. Most famous example is Shug’s selfless love towards Celie. Though she has been lover of Mr. Albert yet she is quite dedicated to help Celie to bring her out from that polluted web of patriarchy. She is Celie’s first friend and as well as her lover too. She motivates her to live life happily and full of dignity. Celie also shows good spirit towards her. She cares a lot when Shug falls sick. To show her love and gratitude to Celie, Shug sings a famous song namely “Miss Celie’s Song”.

Another character is Sofia who teaches Celie to be self-depended in the sophisticated environment of patriarchy. The most important thing Celie learns from Sofia is to resist against unwanted assaults by other people. Even Mr. Albert’s sister tries to help and console Celie at her

home. She visits there and motivates her to take stand against her husband and others. She asks Celie that “You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can’t do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself” (22). Thus female characters show deep sympathy of sisterhood at many points.

Lesbianism

Celie was raped brutally by her allusive step Pa and later by her cruel husband against her will. She was never ready to have physical relation with them. In fact, she never feels sexual desire with Alphonso and Albert. She was never prepared mentally to have sexual intercourse with them. They fuck her like dog. In the very beginning Celie explains her miserable condition at home when her step Pa fucks her brutally against her will. She says “He never had a kind word to say to me. Just put his thing against my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it” (3). Thus she was victim of unwanted sexual assault.

Later on it was Shug’s love for her which makes her sexually attractive and active too. They usually sleep together which makes her to have sex with her. In a bed “Shug don’t actually say making love. She say something nasty. She say fuck” (102). It is for the very first time that Celie “feels something real soft and wet” (103) and truly wishes to make love with Shug. They love each other and feels good to spend time together.

Resistance and Awareness

Moreover, *The Color Purple* is a tale of miserable sufferings and self-realization. It is a story of quest for self. Celie remains victim of patriarchy and fate throughout her life. She faces uncountable physical as well as emotional traumas and spends her time under male supremacy. Despite having all these sorts of pangs she proves herself and establishes her own identity. She fights with her fate as well as male domination. She takes stands against all these kinds of atrocities; she had to face in her life. She leaves Albert’s home forever and runs her own business of making pants. She affords her own house to live in. She earns enough money to live happily at her own home and exclaims “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” (194). In the end, time and fate also favours Celie. She reunites with her loving sister Nittie who brings Celie’s children back home. It gives her great feelings of contentment. Thus she finds her own ways of life.

Conclusion

To conclude one can find that *The Color Purple* is very heart touching novel which unravels the rigidness of society where women are always taken as secondary things. There would be no objection if one hails it as the most prolific feminist text because of its prolificacy of women characters. All the women characters show deep sympathy for each other and try to overcome their problems. They resist and stand against all barriers which create hindrances in

their life. Having bitter experiences in her childhood Celie overcomes nicely and reunites with her loving sister and children. Her friend and only true lover Shug helps her to fight against rigid structure of patriarchy where woman never gets space to express herself. The novel portrays the true love of women for each other which supports them to resist against inequality and discrimination. It brings new beginnings for her life.

Works Cited

Abrams, H.M. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning India Private Limited, 2012.

Donnelly, Marry. *Alice Walker: The Color Purple and Other Works*. Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 2010.

George, Olakunle. "Alice Walker's Africa: Globalization and the Province of Fiction." *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 53, No. 4, 2001, pp. 354-372. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3593524.

Hillenbrand, Margaret. *Literature, Modernity, and the Practice of Resistance*. Brill, 2007.

Smith, Felipe. "Alice Walker's Redemptive Art." *African American Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 1992, pp. 437-451. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3041916

Tucker, Lindsey. "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text." *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1988, pp. 81-95. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2904151

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, Updated ed., 2014.



Harnam Singh, M.A Eng., UGC NET
Research Scholar
Central University Himachal Pradesh
Dharmshala, Distt. Kangra
Himachal Pradesh India
Pin 176215
harnambharmouri99@gmail.com