



SRI RAMAKRISHNA ENGINEERING COLLEGE



Autonomous Institution, ISO 9001:2008 Certified.
Approved by AICTE and Affiliated to Anna University, Chennai
(All Eligible Courses Accredited by NBA)
Vattamalaipalayam, NGGO Colony Post

COIMBATORE-641022, Tamilnadu, India

www.srec.ac.in

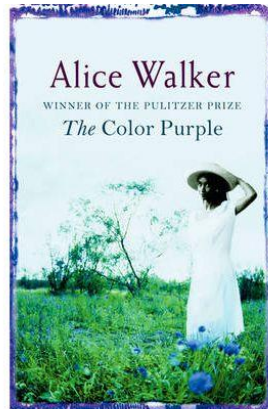
11th International Congress on English Grammar (ICEG 2014)
In association with Systemic Functional Linguistics

Grammar and Grammar Teaching: Changing Perspectives

Editor
Dr. Vathana Fenn

Alice Walker's Celie in *The Color Purple*

B. Mariappan, M.A., M.Phil.



Abstract

The paper is focused on the women who are the victims in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). This novel is one of the most representative novels of Afro-American Feminism.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 March 2014

Dr. Vathana Fenn (Ed.) *Grammar and Grammar Teaching: Changing Perspectives*

B. Mariappan, M.A., M.Phil

Alice Walker's Celie in *The Color Purple*

Mostly the Afro-American Feminism novels basically deal with the problems of Sexism, Racism, Gender Bias, Oppression of women, Slavery, Male-Female relationships, Preservation of black culture, effects of being colonized, etc. The central character of this novel is 'Celie'. This novel was awarded the Pulitzer prize.

Celie – a poor, barely literate Afro-American woman in the south struggles to escape the brutality and degradation of the ill-treatment afforded her by men. The novel chronicles the life of a poor and abused Afro-American woman who eventually triumphs over oppression through affirming female relationship.

Sold as Slaves

African men and woman came to the American continent as laborers (who became slaves) in a ship in 1619. From that time onwards, many more blacks were brought as slaves from Africa to America. As the cotton plantation owners needed more and more people to work in plantations, they bought them from the ship's captains and other agents, and made them work in fields and plantations. When more hands were needed, the slave ships caught more black people in Africa and brought them to New England and sold them as slaves.

African American Literature - Voice of the Race

African American Literature is the Literature created by African Americans. It is the voice of the race oppressed for several generations. It is heard in the groans of pain and strains of anger and protest. A study of black women inevitably leads one to the beginning of the Afro-American Literature. Apart from the slave narratives, the novels that are written in the early days are classified as abolitionist novels. The novels written between 1890 and 1920 are labelled as novels of accommodation and assimilation. The revolutionary elements in Afro-American fiction are found from its very beginning in the element of protest.

Slavery

Slavery is one of the themes for the African American writers after the Harlem Renaissance. White owners auctioned many of the black women when they found they did not need them. Many times that tore apart families. The problem of slavery continued for nearly 240 years after 1819. Apart from the pain of slavery and sexual abuse, most black women did not have good relationship within their families. Slave men were not allowed to

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 March 2014

Dr. Vathana Fenn (Ed.) *Grammar and Grammar Teaching: Changing Perspectives*

B. Mariappan, M.A., M.Phil

Alice Walker's Celie in *The Color Purple*

speak against whites. White slave owners sometimes sexually abused black women. When some black men had affairs with white women, they were lynched. After the First World War, many black people from the southern farms started to move towards northern ghettos. This movement from the south to the north prepared the ground for the literary renaissance, in other words, the Harlem Renaissance.

Quest for Identity

Quest for literacy, freedom and self-identity were common among black American writers. The quest for literacy seen in Ralph Elson shows us that man is always curious to do the forbidden thing. Here it is not as blasphemous as it was with Adam and Eve. Quest for self-Identity is also a particular concern of white southern writers like Gail Godwin.

Black Woman's Predicament

In Afro-American Literary history, the black women's predicament has captured an important place, and proves to be one of the most productive and sustained movements. The sustained focus on black male sexism has not done much in popularizing the segment of Afro-American literature; hence it does not appeal to most of the accomplished black male writers. In real life, the black woman may prove she is more than equal to the black male in the labour and the struggle for black people's progress.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Afro-American novel emerged only in the middle of the 19th Century during the charged debates over slavery and freedom in America. Actually, it was only in the 1920's that the novel became a fully recognised literary form according to the setup standards of the mainstream scholarship. At this time class and gender also became important social issues to be discussed.

Celie's Letters and Her Suffering

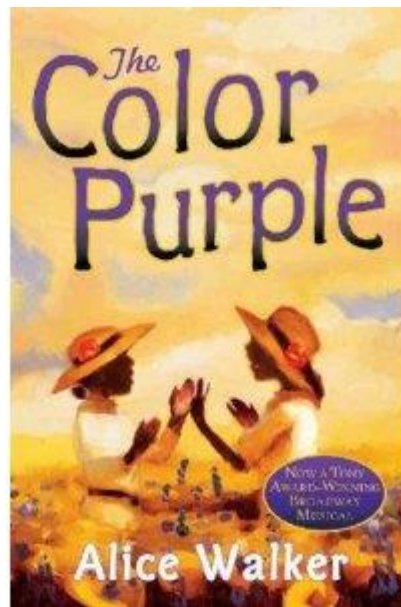
Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* weaves an intricate mosaic of women joined by their love for each other, the men who abuse them and the children they care for. In the first few letters, Celie tells God that she has been raped by her father and that she is pregnant for the second time with his child. Celie's mother is quite ill and after cursing Celie, she dies, leaving Celie alone to face her father. Celie then turns her attention to protecting her sister,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 March 2014
Dr. Vathana Fenn (Ed.) *Grammar and Grammar Teaching: Changing Perspectives*

B. Mariappan, M.A., M.Phil

Alice Walker's Celie in *The Color Purple*

Nettie, from her father's sexual advances. Celie soon marries Mr. Albert after her father strikes a bargain with the older widower and Celie finds herself in a loveless marriage, caring for her husband's four children and being regularly raped and beaten. Celie becomes fixated on Shug Avery, a glamorous blues singer who is her husband's mistress. Several years later, Celie eagerly accepts the responsibility of nursing Shug back to health, thus beginning a lifetime of friendship and love between the two women.

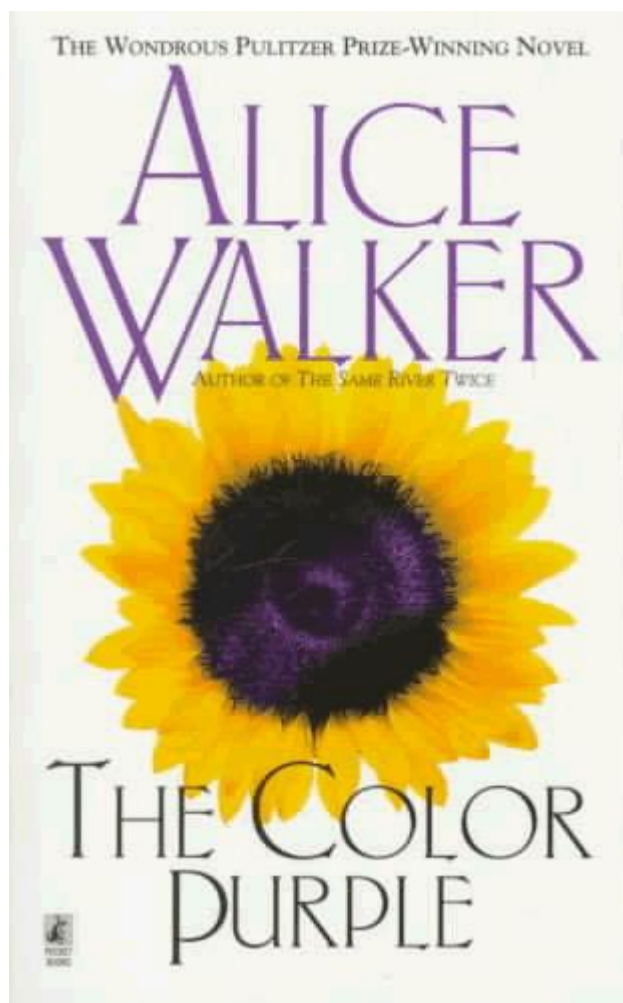


Comfort from Nettie's Letters

Nettie has become a missionary in Africa and has written countless letters to Celie, all of which Albert has hidden. Nettie, in spite of her upbringing, is a self-confident, strong, faith-filled woman. When Celie discovers Nettie's letters, she not only catches up with her sister's life, she also discovers that her own two children are alive and living with a missionary couple with whom Nettie works. Nettie's letters about their shared African heritage are a tonic to Celie, who becomes stronger and more self-assured every day. That confidence soon turns to fury - over her rapes, her beatings, and the love and affection the men in her life have kept from her. Nettie's letters also demonstrate parallels between Celie's world and the African world, the deep friendship and love that exists between two women, the deep love of a man for a woman, and the unrelenting structure of sex roles.

Confronting Her Father

Celie confronts her father with her new-found strength, and she has just learned he is her step-father and not really her biological father; this brings great relief to Celie, who now knows that her children are not her brother and sister. She also confronts Albert, leaves him, and moves to Memphis to live with Shug, a move that stuns and pains Albert. In Memphis, Celie, who started wearing pants when she gained her strength and self-confidence, opens a business as a pants maker. Later, after Shug has taken on a male lover, Celie visits Albert, and they develop a new bond that eventually grows into love and respect.



Attaining Some Financial Freedom

Nettie marries a widowed man who had adopted her sister's children and thus becoming a mother to her niece and nephew. Later, when Celie's father dies, she and Nettie inherit his home, creating financial freedom for the two women. At the novel's end, the two sisters are reunited, while Albert and Harpo have learned to take on new roles in the household and their relationships.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 March 2014
Dr. Vathana Fenn (Ed.) *Grammar and Grammar Teaching: Changing Perspectives*
B. Mariappan, M.A., M.Phil
Alice Walker's Celie in *The Color Purple*

Color Purple in Letter 12 – Can We Miss Color Purple?

It is noteworthy that the novel's title is alluded to in Letter 12, when Celie associates the color purple with royalty and longs for a purple dress. But the title undoubtedly comes from a passage near the end of the novel, in which Shug says that she believes that it 'pisses God off' if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."

In *The Color Purple* the true extent of this appalling violation of is made only too clear in a number of incidents. Celie herself writes:

“Bub in and out of jail. If his granddaddy wasn't the coloured uncle of the sheriff who look just like Bub, Bub be lynch by now” (19 Walker)

When Sofia is in jail for striking the mayor, Mr. Albert, Celie's husband, asks,

“Who's the warden's black kinfolks?”(20 cp walker)

The Worst Episode

The worst episode occurs when Mary Agnes is sent for by Sofia's family to gain her release, her own white uncle rapes her. The only weapon Celie's family has is literally that of blackmail. By reminding the warden and other powerful Southern whites of their sexual and familial relationships with blacks, they can help each other to survive. By the time Sofia is finally free, not much of her spirit remains.

A Slave in Her Own Home

Celie is introduced to us as a slave in her home, and she neither controls, nor possesses her own body. At the age of fourteen, she is raped by her (step) father, and sold by him into marriage to a man at least twice her age. Such is the evil of black male patriarchy as portrayed by Walker.

“Bell hooks finds it difficult to believe that Celie could ever be a writer- finding the time being the least of her problems” (22) Rosean

Walker's Message

Perhaps this lies at the heart of Walker's message. If Celie as a writer were fiction, then this would only assist Walker in signifying what has been lost from history.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 March 2014
Dr. Vathana Fenn (Ed.) *Grammar and Grammar Teaching: Changing Perspectives*
B. Mariappan, M.A., M.Phil
Alice Walker's Celie in *The Color Purple*

Moreover, it seems that this editor conveys some sympathy towards the male characters in the novel, for even Samuel's surname is erased. This could mean the narrator wanted to liberate them from those names given to them by their white owners. Although, it could equally signify that the fictional narrator is a radical feminist, keen to deny the names of the male characters, whilst overwhelmingly signifying it through Shug Avery, a woman who keeps her own name even when married. In the best of all worlds though, this editor would be Celie herself. Bell Hooks has also contributed to the controversy that surrounds *The Color Purple's* conclusion. The controversy concludes far too happily for Celie. Alison Light describes how her adult education class (composed wholly of women) reacted to it:

“what does it mean for a group of white students to see as ‘romantic’ the empowering of an impoverished, beaten, raped and abused Southern black woman?” (38) Rosean

Celie is saved from this fate in a crucial scene in *The Color Purple* which is similar to *Beloved*. The saddest part of Celie's story is how she first comes to be raped by her stepfather. When she was young, she had a passion for cutting hair. Her stepfather began to use these barber sessions as an excuse to rape her. It is by no means coincidental that the way Celie unconsciously reacts to the revelation that Mr. Albert has hidden Nettie's letters from her, is to stand behind his chair with his unsheathed razor at his throat. Celie behaves in exactly the same way as Sethe, as Henderson writes:

“Like the historian, Sethe is able to “re-enact” or “re-think” a critical moment from the past and is consequently able to demonstrate her possession of rather than by the past and to alter her own life history” (42) “Racism”. *Encyclopedia of Black America*. 1981.

Above all the other misrepresentations and abuses that Walker portrays in *The Color Purple*, is the one that states that abused Southern black women must be victims all their lives, and these are the ones that must be overturned above all others. As Walker herself has said, “I liberated Celie from her own history. I wanted her to be happy”. And in that she has succeeded admirably.

References

1. Bell, Roseann P. (Ed.) *Sturdy Bridges: Vision of Black Women in Literature*. Author's Press, 1979.
 2. Christian, Barbara. "Alice Walker", *Modern American Literature* Vol.3. Detroit: St. James P., 1999.
 3. Christian, Barbara. *Black women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition.1892-1976*. Westport: Green word, 1980.
 4. *Encyclopedia of Black America*. 1981. "Racism".
 5. Gaur, Rashmi. *Women's Writing Some Facts*. New Delhi: Swaroop and Sons,2003
 6. Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 1982.
 7. Wall, C.A. *Zora. Neale Hurston: Novels and Stories*. Canada: Penguin Book 1984.
-

B. Mariappan,M.A.,M.Phil
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Sri Ramakrishna Engineering College
Coimbatore 641 022
Tamilnadu
India
marsrec@gmail.com