

Discrimination and Oppression of Race, Class and Gender in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Dr.V.S.Shakila,

Assistant Professor,

Department of English,

The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women,

Sivakasi.

Email: shakilavs19@gmail.com.

Abstract:

The Color Purple is an epistolary novel written by Alice Walker, who is a renowned American novelist, short story writer, Poet and social activist. This novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the National Book Award for fiction for its wonderful depiction of an abused and oppressed African American woman's struggle for empowerment. Alice Walker became popular with the publication of *The Color Purple*. This novel focuses on African women's struggle for gender, political, racial equality and survival. It brings out the connection of gender and race to oppression and discrimination that causes psychological trauma in the African women. The novel clearly portrays the multifaceted violence suffered by the black women especially the protagonist Celie, who intends to follow her desires. This paper explores the African women's struggle against discriminations like race, class, gender, violence of the female characters, particularly the protagonist Celie who tries to find a place for herself in the society.

Keywords: race, sexual oppression, incest, psychological oppression, discrimination

Alice Walker is the first African American woman writer to win the Pulitzer prize in fiction. She is a prolific and highly admired novelist, essayist and a poet who is noted for her insightful treatment of African American Culture. In all her works, Alice Walker reflects the issues of gender, race and self-exploration. Her novel *The Color Purple* is a notable work which won her the Pulitzer prize. This novel deals with the plethora of violence faced by the Blacks, particularly women in a patriarchal society. It is a powerful and expressive novel about the black women's struggle for political, gender, racial equality and more over for surviving in the society. Through her female characters like Celie, Sofia, and Squeak, Alice Walker clearly exposes the race, class and gender discrimination and oppressions inflicted by the society on African American women during the early 20th century.

The Color Purple is about a fourteen-year-old girl Celie in rural Georgiana who lives with her younger sister Nettie and progeny of half brothers and sisters, mother and Alphonso, her stepfather. Her mother is worn out in childbearing and soon dies. Celie lives a life of abuse. She lives like a slave in the house. She takes care of all the household works like cooking, dusting and taking care of the other children. She is not allowed to go to school by telling that she is 'too dumb to keep going to school' (9). Alphonso abuses and ill-treats her. He goes to the extent of raping her twice as a result of which Celie becomes a mother of two in her early age itself. Even worse is that Alphonso takes the babies away from Celie and sells them for money. Alice Walker has portrayed Celie's life as a representation of the female slaves whose children were taken away and sold for monetary benefits by the slave masters during the 20th century. Celie feels guilty of committing incest thinking that Alphonso is her father but later towards the end of the novel she comes to know that he is her stepfather.

Alphonso threatens her stating, 'You'd better never tell nobody but God: it'd kill your Mammy' (1). This line reflects the dominant concern—male oppression. Celie fears this powerful male figure just as any other black woman and fails to seek protection from the sexual abuse. Celie gets affected physically and psychologically. Scared at the threat of Alphonso, she writes her story and whatever she thinks and aspires in a form of letter to God. She is ashamed of what has happened to her. Through these letters she tries to escape the tragic situation and strives for her survival. Initially she writes to God and later to Nettie and then she reveals it to Shug which makes her feel free. She writes all these letters as an outlet of her tragic condition by an act of self-

affirmation. Her broken and simple language in the letters reflects her depressed mental and emotional state of mind.

Alphonso abuses her constantly stating that ‘She ugly, Don’t even look like she kin to Nettie’, ‘She tells lies,’ ‘she a bad influence on my other girls,’ ‘She ain’t smart either’ (8). She hates herself and looks at her body as source of exploitation. Alphonso thinks that Celie is of no use to him anymore and hence trades her off to Mr. __, a widower with children. Despite her pain she tries to protect her sister Nettie from Alphonso. In order to protect her sister, she agrees to marry Mr. __ and becomes a stepmother to his Children and a sexual servant to him. Celie helps Nettie escape Alphonso by asking her to live with Celie. But Nettie is forced to leave the place by Mr. __, when she tries to educate and raise Celie’s self-confidence and self-esteem. This incident troubles her more for she wanted to protect Nettie. She believes that Nettie can be helped only by the minister’s wife. So, she sends Nettie to Samuel, the Minister and Corinne, his wife to take care of their children Olivia and Adam. Towards the end of the novel she comes to know from Nettie that Olivia and Adam are none other than her own children by her stepfather Alphonso.

This novel is a representation of the Black women to become aware of the subjugation they experience. Slavery has granted freedom to the slave masters to abuse every female slave. This is evident through the miserable life of the protagonist Celie. She is beaten, abused, exploited, and humiliated by Alphonso, Mr. __ and even by his children. The oppression of men is reflected when Harpo, the eldest son of Mr. __ says ‘Women work. I am a man’ (21) when he is asked to help Celie in her works. Harpo thinks that it is the duty and responsibility of women to work and not men. Kate, Mr. __’s sister tries to help Celie and advises her, ‘You got to fight them, Celie...I can’t do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself’ (21). But Celie fails to follow what Kate says and bears all the pain caused by Mr. __. This proves that Celie has lost her sense of individuality and identity. All her life she has been aware only about the inhuman behavior of people around her and is unaware about any other behavior.

Celie is represented as a victim of oppression and is not at all treated like a human similar to any other black women. The relationship between Albert and Celie is the representation of black-on - black violence. Albert does not even look at her face. This can be noted when Celie says ‘He look at me. It is like he looking at the earth’(20). He considers Celie just as a substitute for his deceased wife who is supposed to take care of his kids and do the housework. He is more like a

dominant master- like husband who believes that she is his slave and he can do whatever he pleases to do with her. Albert's interest on other women like Shug Avery proves that he does not consider his marriage with Celie as a worthy relationship and regards her only as his slave. Thus, Celie reflects the neglected emotions of the black women who suffer in a male dominated society.

Walker tries to expose oppressions and domestic violence experienced by black women in a patriarchal society. Celie says that she compares herself to a tree and talks to herself telling that she should remain like a tree when she is abused by her husband. This shows the agony and physical pain she bears when she is beaten up badly by Albert. This also reflects the proximity of the black women who remains passive and bears the agony in themselves. Harpo's wife Sophie's arrival makes Celie understand that women's passiveness is not the only response to male domination. Celie realizes the difference between the relationship of her with Mr._ and Sophie with Harpo. Sophie is an independent girl who is not a victim of the circumstances but a controller of the circumstances. Sophie stands up for herself in all situations and fights for her right and identity in a male dominated society. Celie finds Sophie's straightforward behavior as an eyeopener to her. She confesses her story to Sophie. Sophie feels sorry for Celie and advises Celie to fight back for her individuality. Sophie tries to impart some of her courage saying, "You ought to bash Mr._ head open... Think about heaven later' (42). Sophie's relationship makes Celie understand that she was lacking her individuality and identity all her life and the need for self-realization in life.

Celie's liberation and awareness of self is further enhanced by another woman character called Shug, who is the mistress of Mr._. Initially Shug's attitude towards Celie is rude and mean. But the love and care of Celie makes Shug love Celie. Shug takes the place of Nettie and tries to bring out the true self of Celie. Celie observes the way Shug treats Mr._, as another fallible human being. Shug is the epitome of feminist existential freedom. She rejects the traditional way of living and opts a life of sexual freedom. She confronts Celie when Mr._ opposes her to go and makes her feel as a valuable person by dedicating a song. Later when Celie reveals her about loveless sex with Mr._, she teaches her how to love her body and find pleasure in her own body. She unburdens her traumatic experiences of sexual brutality, abuse and humiliation. She acts as caring mother to Celie and leads to Celie's liberation of self. Their relationship leads to lesbianism.

Walker clearly projects the relationship between black women's lesbianism and classism, sexism, racism of American society. The lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie is the result of her search for a role model, a kind of an alternative to get rid of the trauma experienced in the past. Mary Agnes is another character who is represented as a woman of sacrifice in order to resist the male dominated society. She is often called as "little Squeak", as she is conditioned by the society to respond feebly and warmly to everyone, particularly men. She is also a victim of oppression as Celie who gains her self-identity towards the end. When She is brutally raped by the warden, she realizes her self-worth and power. She shouts at Harpo "Shut Up, Harpo. I'm telling it" (95). She fights with Harpo and decides to leave Harpo just as Sophie. Squeak stands strong as an independent individual towards the end by self-actualization.

Walker presents the unfair treatment of the blacks by the whites through her characters. The characters like the Mayor and his wife are white people who assumes that working as the white lady's house maid is a great honor. When Sophie refuses to work as a maid for the whites, the mayor and the police beat her up in order to reaffirm their racial dominance. She is put in prison just because that she is a black woman who hit the white woman, eventually she is made to work as a maid in the mayor's house. She is not allowed to see her children for twelve years together. Sophie is the representation of black woman who is able to escape the gender discrimination but is unable to fight the racial dominance in the society. Miss Millie even says, 'Have you ever seen a white person and a colored sitting side by side in a car, when one of 'em wasn't showing the other one how to drive it or clean it' (104). These lines reflect the racial dominance of the whites upon the black.

Through Nettie's letters that records the history of African Americans, Celie comes to know about the effects of racism and the issues of racism. Discovery of these letters enables Celie towards self-discovery and resistance. She also comes to know about her past. She learns that Alphonso is not her real father and is relieved from the guilt of incest. Her real father is killed by the white merchant which is also a monetary enslavement upon racial violence. At this phase Celie undergoes transformation and recovers her voice and confidence. She curses Mr._ saying that 'I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice says to everything listening. But I'm here' (207). By doing so she asserts her self-esteem and regains her individuality as a human being. She boldly leaves Mr._ and goes with Shug and establishes a female centered house full of beauty,

love and laughter. She manages to support herself by trading pants. She breaks the male dictated stereotype and attains liberation. Celie develops physically and psychologically by Shug and becomes more confident when she learns that Nettie is alive. Walker gives references to Quilting which was believed to be the work of 'an anonymous Black women from Alabama' and believes that African American women have inherited this skill from their ancestors.

The bonding between the women characters in the novel depicts that it is a necessary ingredient for freedom of their self. Walker tries to insist that the survival of women in the society is possible only by the strong support provided by women among themselves. The basis of this support and relationship is not dominance but sharing which helps women regain and redefine their self. Celie- Nettie and Celie- Shug share a significant relationship which helps Celie triumph over her oppression and brutality of the patriarchal society.

Walker, through her characters represents the whole community of women living under oppression and discrimination. The black women in the novel undergo the sexual, monetary and racial oppression. Celie is presented as an individual who is trapped in the whole range of oppression and discrimination of race, class and gender. Celie struggles hard to liberate herself from the fear of her husband and moves from helplessness to an independent individual. She creates her own world full of black feminist consciousness. Thus Celie, the humiliated and oppressed and misused one is transformed into an independent and liberated woman towards the end of the novel.

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