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Walker's *The Color Purple*: Portrayal of Celie's Struggle from Servitude to Sovereignty

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore Celie's struggle for independence in a male dominated African American society as depicted in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). Focusing on the lives of African-American women in the Southern United states during 1930s, it unfolds the events of black male brutality towards black women. It exposes the ways that the central character, Celie, pursues, when she proceeds to her long journey to freedom. Celie passes through a difficult path of racial/patriarchal oppression before she gets sovereignty. She accepts the solidarity of the female community to accomplish her quest for identity. Applying textual inquiry approach, the present paper highlights the role of deep female relationships in the life of Celie, a poor black girl. Celie becomes stronger when she gets support from other women, which helps her to emancipate herself from the evils of patriarchy and sexism. Celie's freedom goes through physical, then spiritual, and finally economic phases, specifically, when she establishes her own business. Narrating the accounts of under privileged black community, Walker clarifies that 'womanism' is the only medium that helps to liberate inconspicuous southern black women from patriarchy and structural racism and sexism. The harsh circumstances are the key factors which make African American community captive and black women's lives miserable.

Keywords: Oppression; patriarchy, servitude, sovereignty, womanism

Introduction

Walker's *The Color Purple* reveals the struggle of an African American woman named Celie and her escape from oppression and male brutality. An epistolary novel, made up of letters, written by Celie and Nettie, *The Color Purple* narrates the issues of racism, classism and gender oppression. Celie writes letters in non-standard dialect. She initially

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addresses to God because she has no one else to share this terrible knowledge and later addresses to her sister Nettie. Celie passes through many ups and downs throughout her life. Initially, she faces problems due to poor economic condition of her family and widespread racism in American South. And when she grows up, she becomes the victim of black male brutality. Celie's stepfather, Alphonso repetitively rapes and beats her. Then, he forces her to marry Mr. — (Albert), a widower, who has four children. Albert, who is in love with a Blues singer named Shug Avery, does not treat Celie properly. Like her father, he mistreats Celie and merely accepts her as a servant and an occasional sex partner. Eventually, when Celie gets the company of other women, she leaves Albert and moves to Memphis, where she starts a business of designing and making clothes and frees herself from her husband's suppressive control. Regarding Celie's struggle, Smith (2009), asserts, "With *The Color Purple*, Walker sets forth a modern myth of empowerment for African American women, one that liberates them from their history of oppression, subordination and silence" (p. 4). Smith argues that Walker's narrative reveals the story of African American women's liberation from subordination and oppression. Celie gets support from Shug Avery, and his rebellious daughter-in-law, Sofia, in her personal evolution.

Literature Review

Walker's *The Color Purple* unfolds the difficulties and gradual triumph of Celie, a black woman who was raised in rural part of Georgia. She resists the paralyzing self-concept forced upon her by her step father and husband. Reflecting on Walker's literary creations, Christian (1980) clarifies that Walker's works primarily focus on the struggle of black people, especially the struggle of black women. In *Black Women Writers*, she admits, "The focus on the struggle of black people, especially black women to claim their own lives, and the contention that this struggle emanates from a deepening of self-knowledge and love are characteristics of Walker's work" (p. 457). Christian's concern reflects the deeper aspect of walker's narrative, which is the depiction of black women's struggle. When Celie realizes that it is difficult to survive independently, she begins to make intimacy with other black women, especially those engaging forcefully with oppression. Celie's relationship with Harpo, a courageous woman and Shug Avery, an independent singer, helps her to get success in her mission.

The narrative exposes the issue of male dominance, violence, sexism, sexual abuse, and oppression. From the very beginning, it reveals the appalling condition of Celie, the protagonist. Celie is repeatedly abused by her step father Alphonso and later by her husband Mr. — (Albert). Alphonso threatens Celie that if she reveals the secret to others, it will kill her mother. As the narrative reveals, "You'd better not tell nobody but God. It would kill your

Mammy” (Walker, 2004, p. 3). Celie fears of her mother's death, therefore, she keeps the matter secret. She only reveals it to God through her letters. Alphonso's actions represent society's view on African American women. He treats Celie and her mother as an object, and offers her up to any man that comes asking for a wife. When Celie is forced into loveless marriage, it does not bring any better prospects for her. She is treated more or less like a slave in a slave auction.

Celie's stepfather convinces Mr. — (Albert) to marry her by informing him about Celie's submissive nature. Concerning Albert's dealing to Celie, Winchell (1992), in *Alice Walker*, expresses that Albert “looks her over like a head of livestock and marries her in desperation because he needs someone to cook and clean for him and take care of his four children” (p. 86). Winchell mirrors the black women's subjugation and exploitation in black communities. Black men treat black women like animals. Celie passes through the same sorts of circumstances when she is forced into a loveless marriage. As Celie narrates, “Mr. — marry me to take care of his children. I marry him cause my daddy made me. I don't love Mr. — and he don't love me” (Walker, 2004, p. 61). Celie's situation represents the situation of black women in general. Black males may be victimized by racism, but sexism authorizes them to perform as exploiters and oppressors of black women.

Celie gets constant abuse and oppression even after her marriage. She faces brutal physical and sexual abuse throughout her life due to the blackness and womanness of her attributes. Regarding women's subjugation, Jackson (1993), in *Women's Studies: Essential Readings*, states, “Gendered subjectivity can be seen as constituted ideologically, ensuring the continual reproduction of dominant masculinity and dominated femininity” (p. 9). Jackson explains the fact that gendered subjectivity is a type of constructed ideology which ensures the belief of dominant masculinity and dominated femininity. The women in Walker's novel face constant obstacles and lifetime abuse due to black people's gender biased attitude.

In the same line of argument, Estelle Disch describes about gender discriminatory attitude of the West. Disch (2003), in *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*, explicates that Western society has an “A and Not-A” system. “A” represents the “normal, dominant” gender, while “Not-A” represents the subordinate and different gender (p. 99). Disch's view is relevant to understand the situation of black women in American society. Society considers men as “A” and women as “Not-A” category. Celie and other female characters in *The Color Purple* fall in Not-A category, therefore, they become the victims of racist and sexist exploitation. Walker presents black women as docile and helpless creatures, who bear the scars of oppressive forces at every step. Analyzing Walker's literary creations,

Donnelly (2010), in *Alice Walker: The Color Purple and Other Works*, argues, "Walker's work gives a voice to those that have no voice: usually, though not always, poor, rural black women" (p. 7). Emphasizing the key concern of Walker's works, Donnelly demonstrates the circumstances of poor black women. She believes that her works give voice to voiceless people.

Walker introduces the concept of "womanism" in the novel. Womanism refers to a belief which exposes the everyday experiences of women of color. It reflects the predicaments of racism, sexism, and classism in African-American communities and helps to promote women's cultural and social identity, diversity and inclusiveness. As black feminism struggles to liberate the black women from brutal domination of the society, womanism also works by struggling against sexual, racial, heterosexual violence, and subjugation. Defining the term womanist, Walker (1983), in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* articulates, "Womanist . . . A woman who loves women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture" (p. xi). To Walker, womanist usually refers to courageous and willful behavior. She describes that one is womanist when one is committed to the welfare of humanity. Walker's definition of womanist highlights that feminism and womanism are two different concepts.

Through the characterization of Celie, Walker conveys the message that there is no difference between men and women and the patriarchal culture is abusive to all women. When Celie comes in the contact of other women and works collectively with them, she realizes that women are no way subordinate to men. They can be equal to men, in supremacy, in knowledge, and in matters of love and money. Feminist scholar Gloria Steinem, Walker's former colleague and close friend, praises Walker's talent. Elaborating her view that Walker helps to transform the lives of oppressed community, Steinem (1983) asserts that *The Color Purple* is particularly transformative because the "pleasure (in it) is watching people redeem themselves and grow" (p. 290). Steinem believes that Walker's main concern is to bring changes in the existing situation of deprived group. In the novel, Celie and Shug are presented as the two most abused women. They form a deep bond and their suffering brings them together in strong solidarity. When Celie returns to live in Georgia near the end of the novel, she is no longer weak and submissive. Her bondage with other women transforms her into a capable, self-assured female.

Material and Methods

The present research is qualitative in nature. Using textual inquiry approach, the researcher attempts to inquire about the situation of women in black community. This paper aims to explore Celie's lifelong struggle for justice and autonomy by examining

Walker's *The Color Purple*. To conduct this study, the researcher has applied both primary and secondary sources. The data is collected from the references and materials, such as textbooks, online resources, research papers, journals, theses, and other significant works, relevant to this study. This paper highlights how female bonding deals and heals women's wounds and makes them stronger and confident.

Results and Discussion

The narrative begins with a female character Celie, the protagonist and narrator. Reflecting on Celie's position, Schwartz (1998) describes, "Celie plays two roles in the novel; first she is the narrator and second she is the main character" (p. 7). Celie, a traumatized woman, belongs to a poor family. Being the oldest female sibling and due to her mother's illness Celie takes on her mother's responsibilities as the one who cooks, cleans, and looks after her younger siblings. As the narrative reveals, "By the time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time" (Walker, 2004, p. 4). Like her mother, she keeps herself busy in the care of younger siblings. Celie represents the maternal image. She reveals the situation of black woman/mother perfectly. Celie, an oppressed woman/mother, raises children in spite of many difficulties. She faces physical violence even though she does not run away from her responsibilities. When Mr. – (Albert) 's wife passes away, Celie works for the children's upbringing. She concentrates on every detail in the house and unconsciously starts acting like a mother, as the narrative exposes, "He got four children, instead of three, two boys and two girls. The girls hair ain't been comb since their mummy died . . . I start trying to untangle hair. They only six and eight and they cry. They scream" (Walker, 2004, p. 14). Celie maintains a good relationship with her husband's children and treats them well. Her husband mistreats her; even then, she shows hidden desire to be loved and cared for. Even by losing subject position and losing her identity, Celie demonstrates a commitment to motherly tasks. She shows that women are not only able to bear children; they also take more responsibility for infants and children than men do, and sustain primary emotional ties with infants.

Walker presents black people's tradition and racial exploitation through the representation of dehumanized characters. Most of the black characters shown in the novel live in substandard housing separated from the white population. They have their own cemetery, church, school and they are forced to wait in lines until the whites are served. It is common for the whites to beat the blacks and treat them as if they are animals. Even the poor whites consider themselves superior to any black. Through her work, Walker illustrates black people's struggle for survival in a racist social environment.

Celie's father's case is one example of racial oppression in American South. Celie's

real father gets murdered because of his prosperity in a world of white supremacy, where the blacks have no rights. Due to the black color of his skin, his prosperity makes him an outsider in a racially confined world and, therefore, he gets murdered. As Celie reveals “My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me” (Walker, 2004, p. 197). It shows the pathetic condition of the blacks in a racist society. Blacks are the victims of racist ideology. They have no rights; neither they can get prosperity, nor spend a peaceful life.

Sofia, Harpo's wife also faces the same problem. She is the victim of racial violence. When mayor's wife asks her to take the responsibility of her children, Sofia denies. Because of her disregard to white community, white woman beats her. As narrated, “She say, would you like to work for me, be my maid? Sofia say, Hell no” (Walker, 2004, p. 81). They send her jail and deprive her from her children because she refuses to be a maid in a white family. In jail Sofia gets tortured. As the narrator says, “They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot” (Walker, 2004, p. 82). Concerning black women's situation in a racist society, Hooks (1981), in *Ain't I a Woman*, explains, “White men may have discriminated against black women slaves in choosing to allow only males to be drivers or overseers, but they did not discriminate in the area of punishment. Female slaves were beaten as harshly as male slaves” (p. 23). Hooks clarifies that black women have to face the same sorts of punishment in a racist society as black men receive. Even in jail, black females get cruel punishment like males until they become submissive. The difficulties that Sofia endures demonstrate the difficulties of combating cultural and institutional racism.

Walker traces the lives of black women who struggle to secure a better life and a dignifying place. She focuses on women's painful experiences and their feminist and womanist consciousness. Celie, a victim of sexual and communal abuse, faces a lot of problems in her life. Besides all her duties, her step father rapes and impregnates her. Because of her immaturity, Celie does not understand about her pregnancy. She narrates, “Dear God: I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (Walker, 2004, p. 3). Celie's pregnancy along with her mother's sickness creates problems for her. She becomes the victim of her step-father's sensual desire twice, which paralyzes her physical and mental operation. She gets upset for a longer period of time. Explaining her abusive father's oppression, Froula (1989), marks, “The abusive or seductive father does serious harm to the daughter's mind as well as to her body, damaging her sense of her own identity and depriving her voice of authority and strength” (p. 147). Froula opines that Celie's abusive father Alphonso makes serious harm to his daughter's mind by damaging her physically and mentally as well.

Celie's victimization at the hands of Alphonso is too appalling and not different from other victimized women. Later, the corrupt man compels her to marry an older man who needs a worker in the farm, not a wife.

Celie's married life does not proceed smoothly. She faces many ups and downs. Her husband also oppresses her like her step-father. In spite of difficulties, she performs her responsibilities sincerely. Through her work, Walker illustrates the oppression of black people, especially the oppression of black women. Relating to Walker's narratives, Harris Abrams (1985) reveals that Walker reflects the social ills which other writers hesitate to explore. She asserts, "Alice Walker attacks head-on the taboos that most black writers shy away from . . . Like the author Zora Neale Hurston, whom she admires, Walker says she writes about taboo because she is not embarrassed by anything black people do" (p. 28). Harris Abrams exposes that Walker raises some distinct and prohibited issues in her narratives. Through Celie's character, she exposes how black women face incest and oppression and struggle to regain their self-esteem and confidence.

Celie transforms into a happy, successful, and independent woman when she meets other women and realizes her strength. She turns from a submissive and oppressed wife to an assertive woman. Regarding the strategies Celie uses to overcome the obstacles, Collins (2000), in *Black Feminist Thought*, describes, "The act of acquiring a voice through writing, of breaking silence through language, eventually moves her (Celie) to the action of talking with others" (p. 119). Collins discloses the fact that Celie prefers independence to protect herself from male oppression. Initially, she writes letters to God to break her silence. And later she begins her business of sewing clothes in collaboration with other women who are confined to a domestic role. Through her letters and business activities, Celie reflects her creative self-expression and strength.

Celie is not oppressed and ill-treated by the whites but she is oppressed by the males of her own race. Concerning Celie's oppression, Hooks (1990), in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, asserts:

It is obvious that most Black men are not in positions that allow them to exert the kind of institutionalized patriarchal power and control over black women's lives that privileged white men do in this society. But it is undeniable that they do exert a lot of power over women and children in everyday life. (p. 124)

Hooks exposes the fact that black women are not only oppressed just from the whites; they are submitted and terrorized within their own community. Though black men do not have institutionalized patriarchal power and control over black women's lives that white men possess in the society, they use power over women and children. Celie's initial victimization

at the age of fourteen demonstrates black men's brutality to their women. She establishes herself well within the traditional male female sex role of patriarchal society adopting to the cult of true womanhood, an ideology developed during the early nineteenth century that tied a woman's virtue to piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Like Celie, Sofia bears the same fate. She believes that "a girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (Walker, 2004, p. 39). Sofia opposes Harpo's mistreatment by beating him back.

Walker reflects the women's struggle and the reasons that have obliged them to be mute. The novel celebrates black people's consciousness through the narratives of women. Reflecting on Celie's consciousness, Collins (2000) opines, "Writing letters to God and forming relationship with other black women help Celie find her own voice, and her voice enables her to transcend the fear and silence of her childhood" (p. 125). Collins explains that Celie finds her voice by writing letters to God and forming relationship with other women.

Black women help each other to gain autonomy and protection from male brutality. Shug, for instance, refuses to leave Celie's house until she confirms that Celie's husband will not beat her anymore. Before leaving, she insists on teaching Celie the way to smile and love herself. The letters written by her sister also have a great influence upon her behavior and make her more confident as she knows that her children are still alive and that Alphonso is not her real father. Shug helps her in improving her sewing talent. The changes in Celie's life drive her to struggle for her rights. Gradually, she becomes independent. She goes to Memphis with Shug despite her husband's consent. Regarding Celie's transformation into an independent, creative woman, Trudier (1986) states, "From a used and abused woman, Celie emerges as an independent, creative business woman . . . She moves from being Hurston's mule, the beast of burden, to physical and mental declaration of Independence, to a reunion with her children and sister" (p. 14). Trudier reveals that the protagonist, Celie turns from being an abused black female to an assertive and self-independent businesswoman. Due to women's solidarity, she becomes more independent and vocal and finally it helps her to reunite with her offspring. Exposing Celie's transformation from object to subject position, Hooks (1992) expresses the similar view that Celie's constant struggle makes her pass from object to subject position which finally leads her to a capitalist entrepreneur. Like Trudier, Hooks also contends that it is Celie's efforts that help her to become independent.

In the same line of argument, Fraile-Marcos describes about Celie's transformation as an assertive human being. Reflecting on how she turns to a self-conscious human being, she in her work "As Purple to Lavender" notes:

From the meek, subdued, obedient, and accepting person . . . to a self-conscious human being who is just starting to appreciate her own worth. . . . Her inferiority

complex, due to violence, to male chauvinism, and to poverty, is being erased because of the supportive bonds between black women in the novel. (Fraile-Marcos, 2000, p. 122).

Fraile-Marcos explicates that when Celie knows her worth, she turns into a conscious human being and begins to appreciate herself. Her bonds with other black women help her to overcome the challenges of her life. By representing Celie, Walker shows how female bonding creates opportunities for black women. Walker's Womanism, a movement which states that women should stand for their rights and help each other to prove their identities while putting an end to men's supremacy, reinforces this idea. Defining Womanism, in *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*, Walker (1983) declares, "Womanism is an empowered form of feminism just as purple is a bold and empowered version of lavender" (p. 29). Emphasizing the importance of womanism for black women, Walker reveals that women should help each other to combat structural racism and sexism. Due to the close bonding between women, Celie and other women characters get out from the complex web of oppressive social values.

Conclusion

The Color Purple reflects the role of social values, culture, and racism in the life of black people, black women in particular. The plot is set in rural southern town, where black people's oppression by whites is common. Celie's father's case and Sofia's case are some examples of white people's brutality over blacks. The narrative also shows how patriarchy functions as a system of oppression in American South. Most of the black male characters are oppressive to women. They are not only physically violent, but also sexually and emotionally abusive. Celie and other female characters in the novel are trapped due to male dominance in the society. Celie's feelings expressed through letters represent the collective voice of all African American women who pass through similar circumstances. Walker presents black women docile but unsafe. Patriarchal values deem them useless, and inferior. They are treated as objects. Celie's oppression by the male members of her own race is comparable to that of the whites' domination over the blacks and males' domination over women. The novel emphasizes the fact that women are able to succeed if they work collectively and try to understand each-others' problems. When Celie realizes all this, she begins to develop her relation with other female characters. She becomes more independent and vocal. Her sister Nettie teaches her how to read and write and Shug shows her how to be beautiful, independent, and powerful. She also teaches her how to love herself. Sofia tells her how to persist and how to be strong in a patriarchal society. These four women help each other to undergo problems of race and gender in a society where women especially the

black women have no rights to speak. After undergoing a series of challenges, they become independent and liberated.

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