

Celie's Journey from Trial and Tribulation to Triumph in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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ABSTRACT : Alice Walker is an Afro American poet, novelist, short story writer, critic, essayist whose focus has been to delve deep into the lives of black women. She is “committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women.”(O'Brien 192).Awarded Pulitzer prize for fiction and National Books award for *The Color Purple*(1982) in 1983 hers is a self-conscious and complex contribution to contemporary writing that can be approached from multiple perspectives. This paper intends a critical analysis of *The Color Purple*, a novel about womanhood and the coming to consciousness of spirit, focus is also on the exploration of notion of self after the heroine goes through excruciating trial and tribulation to eventually locate herself and make her presence felt. The protagonist Celie is lovable, believable, downtrodden, semiliterate, rural black woman subjected to sexual abuse by her step father and ruthless husband. The novel narrates triumph of her pure will over dehumanising oppressive forces that seemed omnipotent and irresistible. The oppressor here is not a white master but black male over female.

KEYWORDS- black, folk, men, oppression, violence, womanism

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I. INTRODUCTION

Though William Wells Brown and Harriet E. Wilson were the first ones to introduce novel form that focussed on theme of black oppression a great deal of credit goes to Walker for vigorously highlighting the oppression of blacks by blacks. The identifying feature of Walker's writing is her compassion for the lives of black women since she believes that black women are deplorably the most marginalised and oppressed of all the people in the world. Her novels thus exhibit a full complexity of her vision incorporating folklore, gothic, romance, civil rights movement reverberating with revolutionary ethos of 1960's, and black lesbianism, chaffing much against the confinements of doctrinally accepted themes.

Having learned the valuable lessons of self sufficiency and independence quite early in her life Walker tries to understand not only the external realities but also the internal world of black women grasping their predicament of triple oppression. She explores the problem faced by black community within itself where the white oppressor is replaced by black male and the oppressed black male is replaced by black female so that there is role reversal of the oppressor and the oppressed. Women have to endure similar encoding and sublimation to come to terms with male oppression that Black's undergo to cope with racial oppression. This results in leaving black women at double remove from power and makes them participants in a double encoding system. If black history that forms a repressed, encoded, ruptured alternative to published American history, then maternal history – the chain between generations bound by maternal experience, genetic biases, and empathetic subjugation - is an encoded subtext within the black male cultural history.(Nadel 157)

Walker feels there are three types of characters who do not find their place in the literatures of the United States. Physically and emotionally exploited women leading narrow and confining lives eventually driven to insanity, psychologically abused women victims of cultural alienation and surviving women who achieve wholeness out of harrowing oppression uplifting the others oppressed like them. *The Color Purple* is a novel about the third category of surviving women who are subject to cruelties of spousal abuse, incest, lesbianism, depravation, subjugation and dehumanisation. It's a heart rending narrative of a protagonist who is one of the downiest and outest of women characters in her fiction. The novel charts Celie's growth from a dependant, defeated personality to an independent liberated individual with a purpose and drive. Though Walker does not neglect to deal with external realities of poverty, exploitation, and discrimination, her stories, novels, and poems most often focus on the intimate reaches of the inner lives of her characters, the landscape of her stories is the spiritual realm where the soul yearns for what it does not have.(Fowler 60)

The story is set somewhere between 1916 and 1942, the period of post-reconstruction settlement of blacks in the Deep South. Walker has largely drawn upon her personal experiences to tell us the kind of life black women live. It's very close to the accounts shared by her maternal and grand maternal folks, her own memory and observation and reminiscences of the life of downtrodden rural Southern black. Celie the 14 year

old begins her story by writing to God as she feels he is the only one who can hear her and she can relate to. She opens her heart out to him apprising him of her mundane existence, brutality she's suffering and exploitation she's subject to at the hands of her step father. Alphonso is demonic, molesting and beating Celie because her mother becomes bedridden, and is mentally and physically invalid after her first husband is lynched by envious white southerners for possessing streak of an ambitious small businessman. She is threatened and told that the knowledge of the act, information should be for no one but God, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy". (Walker 3) Celie's ordeal does not end even after her step father's remarriage and her mother's death. Through her letters addressed to God she wades through her painful ordeal and carries on with life. Alphonso even fathers two children, a girl named Olivia and a boy named Adam, both are however stolen and deemed to be killed by him.

Celie can connect only to God, since she is poor, semiliterate, ugly, and black. The Color Purple fits into the category of a self-reflexive novel, where the protagonist's communication with God reveals an attempt at self introspection and self discovery. An epistolary novel, it received new treatment in the hands of Alice Walker. Celie is a writer sans audience or listeners. Deborah.E.Mcdowell rightly observes:

Celie's growth is chartable through her letters to God, which are essentially letters of self-exploration enabling her to become connected to her thoughts and feelings. The connection eventually liberates her from a belief in a God outside herself, whom she had always imagined as "Big and old and tall and graybearded and white", and acquaints her with God inside herself. (73)

Challenging the dominance of the traditional Eurocentric literary standard Walker deftly articulates the literary image, representation and female narrative voice of earlier silenced poor African American women who are confidants engaged in intimate communication. Making use of 'folk' language as dominant female narrative voice, she embraces and reclaims not only poor African American women but also their language.

Like Zora Neale Hurston in *Mules and Men*, Walker in *The Color Purple* accords priority to African American culture, folklore and folk expression, treating the language of 'folk' as praxis, an art form or a skill selecting words from black vernacular English or Ebonics that efficaciously convey the experience of African Americans. She employs language of oral culture and applies words to paper, liberating 'folk' language from the tight fetters of western standard form. Walker is thus instrumental in deconstructing the western standard and reconstructing the oral standard resulting in acceptance of the foremother's language, their history, music, religion and community. Epistolary form of writing convincingly narrates the poignant tale of Celie's struggle for independence and equality. With Pithy, direct, black folk idiom the novel captures the lives of black women who are extraordinary in their struggle, culture, humour and courage to carve a place out of it.

Celie's painful ordeal and gruesome existence is further escalated when she is married off to a widower farmer named Albert who's keener on marrying her younger sister Nettie, since Celie is categorised as a "spoiled" (9) good but, "She can work like a man" (10). Nettie has all the attributes of being pretty, young and virgin rendering her valuable but Celie, "She ugly. Don't even look like she kin to Nettie". Albert marries Celie for the dowry she gets in the form of a cow. Negotiated into, marriage like the cow that accompanies her she is not accepted as a subject. Linda Abbandonato feels:

Her sexuality and reproductive organs are controlled by men, her submission is enforced through violence. In her terrified acquiescence to such blatant male brutality, Celie symbolically mirrors Everywoman. (302)

Celie is mother to Albert's four uncontrollable children who are equally ruthless towards her like their father. Her job is only to cook, exert at farm and be a passive lover in her loveless marriage. She continues in her hell, even her sister Nettie cannot provide any kind of help in alleviating her pain. She has no identity and existence outside of her suffocating domestic sphere. Albert soon tries to tempt Nettie with his amorous advances. As a result she runs away from his home and is assumed to be dead by Celie.

Celie is completely alone and alienated after her sister leaves. A typical victim of abusive and assertive patriarchal power she is submissive, internalising all her suffering believing that beatings from husband are normal and a part of the power men wield over women. Violence among the men in the play is all pervasive and gender violence as a legacy is passed on from father to son. Walker shows the generational implications of such rage. Men like Alphonso, Albert's father, Albert, Harpo try to control their women by trampling over their physical and mental freedom. This makes Celie accept everything with surrendered silence, her muteness results into putting her energy into writing. She gives vent to her emotional outburst by confessing her ordeal in front of God and silenced into invisibility for years to come.

Celie even encourages Harpo to beat Sophia to bring her under control since her cocooned mind cannot understand how a woman can question her man. She's completely taken aback when Sophia confronts her for recommending Harpo to beat her. Celie is confused and shocked to see a woman physically challenge a man since she has been conditioned to believe that women are supposed to endure and endorse everything that's thrust upon them. However Sophia does not even spare Celie, verbally abusing her too. Celie, the abused at all

fronts from a tender age does not know rebellion. It's only after Nettie escapes the lascivious advances of Albert, that she helps Celie get some voice through her letters.

The novel realistically deals with the estrangement and violence that's regular feature between black men and women clearly portraying the role of male domination in the frustration of black women's struggle for independence. Walker talks of the estrangement of her men and women through a triangular love affair.

Albert is involved in an amorous relationship with sultry, Bessie-Smith type blues diva named Shug Avery who often visits the local jook joint. She is a great temptress and loved by all. Bold, independent, sharp tongued, having a quick wit she displays qualities attributed to men. Albert is totally smitten by her. When Albert gets Shug home due to an illness Celie instead of feeling jealous and depressed, nurses her back to health. This particular development is a significant in initiating Celie's gradual transformation. Shug is really moved to see Celie's deplorable condition at the hands of Albert. She's appalled to see how Celie endures slave like treatment. Shug tries to instill some sense into Albert to stop brutalizing his wife, "Albert, you been mistreating somebody I love. So as far as you concern, I'm gone. I couldn't believe it, he say. All along in there we was as hot for each other as two pistols. Excuse me, he say. But we was. I tried to laugh it off. But she meant what she said." (245) It's Shug with whom Celie has a satisfying and reciprocal sexual loving association. Celie tries to locate herself while being caught in the racial, classical, and sexual and gender ideologies. Shug helps Celie to see her inner beauty as well as her external beauty to discover her strength and lost self –esteem but more significantly her voice and her independence. She takes her to Memphis to give her a new lease of life, "I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet." (191)

Celie is a touching character who creates a space for herself in Shug's heart. It's due to her compassion and love that Shug stays on in Celie's house few more days even after recuperating from illness. They forge a close bond that consummates sexually. With Shug's help Celie is able to come to consciousness, retrieve Nettie's letters that guide her towards emancipation. She overcomes her hesitation and fear to get a voice of her own and transform. After she finds Albert has been hiding Nettie's letters from her for over 30 years, her belief in God also shatters. As she recovers from shock, she announces to Shug that she no more is writing to God, because she now knows "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'. (173) When Shug tells her to be careful, lest God hears her, Celie responds angrily, "Let 'im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you." (173) Walker uses authentic folk voice to convey her predicament. She is honest to the cadence and spirit of black English perfectly tapping the poetic resources of the idiom. Because of its "folk" voice novel is convincingly authentic.

Celie's love for Shug energises her to build a new identity. Shug is compassionate and empathetic and observes "Us each others people now". (165) She embodies and embraces Celie. Their lesbian bond reflects her increased sense of self and her capacity to relegate to background the patriarchal injunctions. Gloria Steinem sounds convincing when she says for Walker:

Morality is not an external dictate. It does not matter if you love wrong people, or have children with more than one of them, or whether you have money, go to church or obey the laws. What matters is cruelty, violence, keeping the truth from others who need it, suppressing someone's will or talent, taking more than you need from people or nature, and failing to choose for yourself. It's the internal morality of dignity, autonomy, and balance. What also matters is the knowledge that everybody, no matter how poor or passive on the outside, has these possibilities inside. (51).

As Celie goes through her struggle she becomes smarter, her experience grows, her observations are sharper and she becomes more informed. Her growth is traced in her letters that initially have knothole vision and interpretations of the world reflecting a naive, illiterate adolescent perspective. Eventually her letters exhibit authority and dialect flowing into a lyrical cadence of its own kind whereas Nettie's letters seem uncharacterised reporting of events. The letters addressed to God were anonymous, but those addressed to Nettie are signed as, "Your sister, Celie and 'Amen'." Celie is now ratifying, asserting, and validating her own words, her own worth, and the authority of her own experience (Mcdowell 145). Celie's voice is convincingly distinctive as she is a womanist reclaiming the matrilineal creative talent of writing and stitching. It's an escape from violent masculinity.

Celie shares a strong relationship with her mother, tender sisterly bond with Nettie that holds them together irrespective of the distance between them, familial relationship with Sophia who helps Celie in asserting herself. Shug and Celie's bond is multileveled –sisters, friends, guest, host, caretaker, patient and lover's. Celie's associations with all these women gives her strength to initially bear Albert's brutality and later challenge him. Celie is helpless but it's these women who make her realise her slave like existence and challenge patriarchy.

Subverting the traditional classical Eurocentric feminist criticism Walker employs theory of Womanism that involves practice, theory and criticism all at once. Adopting universality to separatism womanist theory of Walker is inclusive of the culture without skin colour distinction. Not confined to race,

ethnicity, womanist's critics belongs to an interpretive community whose ancestral matrix can be traced to Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheatley, Anna Julia Cooper and Zora Neale Hurston.

Walker defines womanist as someone who is outrageous, audacious, and courageous or has a wilful behaviour. The term has been derived from black folk expression of mothers for their daughters i.e. like a woman, womanist catches the essence exhibited by women who are unrestrained, bold, refusing any kind of compartmentalization by dictates of society. An adventurous, daring, ready to fight and take risk to chase her dreams, a free spirit having a mental capacity and moral nerve to confront any kind of oppression, endure deprivation and resist apprehension of any nature a womanist is an exhibitor of tenacity of spirit, determined resolve, directional intention, free from debilitating patriarchal hold, striving for self actualisation, possessing bravery and tenaciousness of purpose.

Celie is a survivor who loves Shug exhibiting womanist trait of appreciating and uplifting other women. Shug's pride, boldness, independence and yearning, for living act as a catalyst for Celie and other hapless women. It's the rebellious and gutsy Sophia who not only challenges the social fabric of racist community but also deserts her husband. She makes Celie question men in her life instead of being at the receiving end always.

Walker's characters grow and change. Men and women both lead miserably deplorable lives, but where as men become attuned to it and accept it passively women rage and then accept it. In one of the scenes towards the end Mr.- and Celie are sitting together on the front porch, old now and calm together, talking about the lessons life has taught them. Albert conveys to her that he has learned to wonder about the things that happened in the past.

Celie is generous and forgiving towards two men who mistreat her and made her life miserable. She is resilient enough to bear everything with stoic overcoming insurmountable ordeal to come out of the mundane existence. Overburdened by suffering and pain Celie is still able to find peace of mind towards end. Walker's description is true to life, the characters in the novel evolve and learn to accept whatever life throws at them. Celie's thoughts get amalgamated with her feelings, her gestures, her words and most importantly her work. Her letters exhibit force and authority. When Albert reprimands her saying "who you think you is? he say. You can't curse nobody. look at you, you black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman".(187) Celie's answer reflects how she has evolved from a life of brutality and exploitation to the one of liberation and successful capitalist entrepreneur. "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook....But I'm here."(187) Celie realises, "Now that my eyes opening, I feels like a fool....You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a' tall." (177)

New women like Celie endeavour to conquer seemingly insurmountable odds to change their lives. Harshness is replaced by hope to begin a meaningful life. Celie's pants making business is a great success and she is loved and respected by all. Celie redeems only after going through grinding suffering, conflict between experience and inexperience, youth and age, power and powerlessness, braving adversity with passivity and patience, building bonds realising self worth by nourishing healthy friendships as Celie tells Nettie, "And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think the youngest us ever felt."(261) Walker has a strong individual voice and a unique vision. Dinitia Smith rightly maintains:

The Color Purple is about the struggle between redemption and revenge. And the chief agency of redemption, Walker is saying, is the strength of the relationships between women their friendships, their love, their shared oppression. (57)

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