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Alice Walker's "THE COLOR PURPLE": A SAGA OF EXPLOITATION AND
EMANCIPATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical study of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* that portrays the predicaments of the African American women who are subalternized and subjected to myriad forms of oppressive forces in a white and male-dominated society Southern United States. They are exposed not only to white people's racial assaults but also the domestic violence unleashed by their male counterparts. However, apart from highlighting torments and traumas, Walker shows some ways of emancipation. The central character, Celie goes through numerous obstacles in her life but in the end she reclaims her own voice and subjectivity through creative urge and love. There are also other female characters who show extraordinary determination and resilience amidst the antagonistic forces. Shug Avery and Sofia are not subservient and emerge as women of great strength and character as well. As a womanist text *The Color Purple* delineates the subjugation, oppression and exploitation of the black women and the necessary resistance that they must register to survive against the racial and sexist assaults.

Keywords: Subalternized; Racial; Subjectivity; Resistance; Sexist.

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Alice Walker called herself a 'womanist'. By this term she implied someone who is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" ("In Search ..." 5, xi). She also said: "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival of whole of my people. I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" (5,250) Walker invented the term 'womanist' from the urge to secure a place for women of color within a feminist culture that she finds overwhelmingly white and bourgeoisie. Walker's novel *The Color Purple* traces the journey of Celie, a black woman from an existence with no agency towards self-assertion. She deconstructs the identity imposed upon her by the hegemonic discourses of patriarchy and asserts her subjectivity. Walker's novel focuses on the exploitation and oppression of the women who suffer continually under the patriarchal domination in a colored segment of a society. If one is woman and that too black, then she is subjected to multiple forms of marginalization. She has to fight against white patriarchy, against sexism of black men and racial abuse of white men and women. As walker writes in her essay, "In search of Our Mother' Gardens", a black woman is the mule of the world, because (she has) been handed the burdens that everyone else- everyone else- refused to carry" (5, 237) The novel narrates in an epistolary manner the thirty years of a struggle in the life of Celie who is embodiment of

uncountable oppressed women inhabiting various uncivilized societies. She has been molested physically and emotionally both by her stepfather and her husband Mr. _____. While in her teens Celie is sexually assaulted by her stepfather. After molesting Ceile, her stepfather would threaten her: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (1). Being a nigger child her life is bereft of love, care or any kind of soft feelings. Her child by her stepfather has been taken away and her sister Nettie has been forced to leave. She becomes totally secluded. Eventually she is placed into a loveless marital life when she is married off to Mr.____, a widower who for the next thirty years put her to severe physical and emotional torments. Celie expresses her pent up feelings through her letters to God and to her sister Nettie who escapes similar fate by serving as a missionary in Africa. However, in Shug and Sofia, Celie finds some emotional solace and strength. Shug enables her to eventually gain her self-esteem. In renaming Celie a "virgin", Shug shows that Celie can script her own narrative. As the story develops she overcomes all obstacles through creativity and love. It is Shug for whom Celie is reunited with her children and her sister Nettie. In the end, they all come back home and celebrate their happy reunion. The novel depicts the transformation of Celie from utter helplessness to the state of self-recognition. *The Color Purple* portrays the racial tension that runs through all aspects of black life in South. All characters in Celie's family and the people around her are the poor exploited blacks. Most of them are denied the basic necessities of life. Nettie and Celie go to school but only when they are not doing any domestic works. As soon as Celie is married, her education stops. Most of the characters live in places segregated from the whites. They have separate cemetery; church, and school. Majority of the people are plunged into the darkness of poverty and ignorance. Even the poorest of the whites treat the blacks as beasts. Walker also focuses on the oppression unleashed by the black men upon the black women. Women are nothing but sexual objects: Celie is sexually molested by her "Pa". Sofia notes that '(a) girl child ain't safe in a family of men' (1, 38). Economic exploitation also works within the black families. "Pa" deprives his wife and her daughters of their inheritance. In "In search of Our Mothers' Gardens", Walker comments on the subjugation of the black women in their own communities:

The African male order, just like its American counterpart, denies the validity of female expression; girl children are not permitted to participate in the education provided by the missionaries, and they are considered the property of first their fathers and their husbands. As a sign of their entry into womanhood, they undergo a ritual of scarification, which literally makes their role in society (10, 62).

Unlike the other women in her society, Shug behaves independently. She advises Celie not be dependent on the males. Mr.____'s sister, Kate also advises Celie: "You got to fight them, Celie... You got to fight them for yourself". (Walker, 1985:21). After years of contact with Shug, Sofia, and Nettie Celie becomes brave and she "...frees herself from her husband's repressive control" (Gates, Jr. - Appiah, 1993: 16). Celie's individual story evolves into story of the black southern struggle for spiritual emancipation and for reconciliation to a homeland. Celie's move to Memphis symbolizes the black community's twentieth century migration to the North. Celie's final return to the South with her own house and business embodies Walker's argument for black reclamation of a Southern homeland. At the initial stage Celie is presented as one who has no identity; she is nobody, as Mr._____ puts it: "Who you think you is? You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (1, 204). Unable to describe herself Celie views herself, "as living in irreconcilable fragments" (9, 164). She starts her narrative by writing, 'I am' which she then crosses out, indicating her lack of subjectivity. Throughout her life she has made only sacrifices. She has been torn into pieces. She suffers from a sense of rootlessness. As Linda Tate asserts the key to Celie's self-transformation "lies in the ability to take control over defining oneself, naming oneself" (7,131). The moment Celie decides to leave Mr._____ to live with Shug in Memphis, she moves one step forward towards self-definition. She states, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook But I'm here (1,205). Later Celie expresses a positive vision of herself: "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" (1, 213). And now Celie starts signing her letters, defining her new identity through her relationships, her business, her love, her new place in the world. Celie earned financial freedom, by making comfortable ladies pants from any range of light to heavy work and ultimately becoming famous in the locality. She also feels happy, with winning over the soul of Mr. _____ and making him reassess his life. It was Shug who helped Celie

discover the long lost letters of Nettie, hidden in the chest of Mr. _____. The letters containing the information of Nettie served as healer of all her pangs and sufferings. Shug completely changes Celie's vision of life. Celie's notion of religion also changes due to Shug's influence. She has been viewing God as a white old man. All the angels are white, too and this God is useless to her. Like all other black people she has been subjected to the hegemony of religion that has instilled many false beliefs in her. Shug Avery's perception of God shows Celie a renewed image of God who is not white but much like the people of the black community. Shug rejects the false interpretations of the narrow church. She visualizes God in the natural world and its beauty, in all its richness and variety, including sexuality. Celie comments later in the novel that she and God can also make love just fine. By the end of the novel she has grown a liberal attitude to religion which was not offered by the narrow religion of the white church. Thus Celie goes through complete transformation in every aspect of life.

The women in Walker's novel are strong enough to endure the pains and sufferings of life. They overcome the hurdles and liberate themselves in their own ways. Walker concludes the novel with a happy ending. Nettie and her family return to their homeland. Celie is reunited with her children, her sister, with all her family and friends, steps into a new world of love, peace and happiness. Apart from the physical return to home, the novel also stresses the need of emotional homecoming. Linda Tate writes: "To heal itself and make peace with the South, the black community needs to work toward new definition of the relations between the races and sexes" (7,126). The novel is not only about the pangs and agonies of the black women but also about the quest for wholeness, for communication in a world of fragmentation and alienation.

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