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Alice Walker's 'THE COLOR PURPLE' AS A NOVEL OF CHALLENGE TO MALE
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ABSTRACT

The domination of men over women is often characterized by physical and psychological victimization of women and enhancement of their misery. This male domination is not limited to any particular region or particular period but it is globalized problem of all the times. Many women writers enter the literary scene to motivate women and fight against male domination. Walker is one among these sort of writers. Alice walker in her novels portrays the world view of women and their worthy roles, as mother, sister, daughter, wife and beloved. She leaves the message that the valuable bond between men and women is possible only through the choice of freedom, desire and respect for each other's individuality. She also believes the dominance of male is not good for any society. The present paper shows this view of the Alice Walker with a focus on the novel 'The Color Purple.'

Key words: victimization, male domination, feminine roles, motivate, physical and psychological, globalized problem, individuality etc.

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INTRODUCTION

The Color Purple is a portrayal of African-American women's life in the twentieth century America. The present novel deals with the oppression of African-American women, not only by white people but also by black males. The women in this novel fight against all discriminations for their own survival and for the survival of their black community. The women characters of the novel like Celie,Nettie,Shug are found to break out their shackles and make their voice heard by all.

The description of the universal oppression of black women, crosses all the limitations of race, class, gender and the melancholy of their life reaches out women in general. The novel vigorously reflects consciousness of women's world. It is a novel which can be read crossing all the cultural boundaries, as bell hooks praises "it is truly popular work-a book of people-a work that has many different meanings for many different readers." (454) The color 'purple' teaches the world of women that they have endless potentiality not only to the black women but to all women who get ready to fight for their rights.

The Color Purple is an adventurous journey for Walker and her character Celie. Their paths are similar in their journey. It is a story of women's victory over male domination. It is a personification of African American women's struggle against racism, sexism and social discrimination. In this connection Walker's writings are described by Mary Helen Washington as:

from whatever vantage point one investigates the work of Alice Walker-poet, novelist, short story writer, critic, essayist, and apologist for black women-it is clear that special indentifying mark of her writing is her concern for the lives of black women."(133)

Walker's women especially Celie in the novel The Color Purple develops and matures in all the spheres. The protagonist is able to accomplish her own sense of 'self' and 'independence'.

The novel is the story of Celie, a fourteen year old black girl who lives with her sick mother and her sister, Nettie. Her stepfather, Fonso is portrayed as the desperado of the narrative, who robs women's strength both sexually and psychologically by demanding sex from both mother and daughter. At the outset of the novel Celie suffers mutely and writes her story in the form of letters addressed to God as she is strictly warned by her stepfather not to share with anyone. Her step-father also scares Celie not to speak to anyone except God: "*you better not tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.*" Rashmi Gaur explains Celie's sexual exploitation in the novel as:

The horrifying account of Celie's sexual abuse on the very first page of the novel is a sad commentary on the androcentric culture which condemns women to a subordinate state. Defenseless and threatened Celie cannot share her trauma with other members of her family. (168)

As the novel unfolds, Celie appears as an abused, brutally victimized young girl who doesn't know what is rebelling. She communicates only with God believing that at least God can listen to her and understand her sorrows and feelings. Writing to God gives her a sense of 'hope'. She hopes that her miseries can be identified and solved at least by God. Celie's problem in expressing her grief is described as:

Celie constantly struggle against the dominant language of patriarchy and racism and renovates her expressivity in terms of her mimetic expressions. So for a black women like Celie, mimetic voice of self-awareness symbolizes her dialogic expression and in this process Walker re-structures a specific feminist expressivity in terms of black women's resurrected consciousness. (Mukul Sen Gupta 194)

Celie is repeatedly beaten and raped by Fonso. It confirms the fact that she does not even have control over her body. After having two children by Fonso, Celie soon loses them. She doesn't know about their whereabouts. When her mother asks about them she just can say "God took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods." (4) But actually Fonso, like a slavetrader, sends them away to a childless family. Celie is then forced by Fonso to marry Albert, an old and brutal widower. She marries Albert with a hope that at least she can provide a secured life to her sister Nettie.

The marriage bargain between Fonso and Albert reflects how Celie (a black woman) is extremely commodified, just like an object and a slave. Krishna Mohan Mishra explains the exchange of Celie as:

A patriarchal society tends to deny subjectivity to females, whether it is sexual or economic activity. In both realms, they are commodified and exchanged between men, as, in the novel Celie exchanged between her step father and her husband. Such an exchange and compulsory heterosexuality operate to bind men together as well as helping uphold the system of patriarchy. (183)

Celie's tragedy doesn't end even after her marriage. Her husband Albert treats Celie as a child, and beats her the way he beats "the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie git the belt." (23) It shows that her body is meant for repeated sexual and physical assaults. Celie's grief is increased by her sister's departure who leaves in order to escape from Albert's sexual demands. As an act of revenge he even stops Celie's communication with her sister by hiding the letters of Nettie from Africa. Albert's hiding of Nettie's letters is an act of silencing. In this suffocated conditions, Celie doesn't ignore her profound sense of resistance. She escapes from Albert's physical and mental violence, by imagining herself into wood: "I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man." (23) Thus Celie gains

her personal relief either by imagination or by writing letters. Through the act of writing letters to God she acquires strength and inward inclination for resistance.

In the beginning Celie doesn't consider Albert's sister's advice to fight back. It is because she is aware of the fact that Albert's sister is just a visitor and lives away from her place and cannot extend her help all the time. In addition to this she is well aware of the fact that Albert's cruelty is intractable. So Celie turns to 'female bonding' as she strongly believes in the solace that is possible with female bonding. Liberation is indigenous to her, but still needs solace and support. The seeds of resistance she has inside cannot germinate on its own and provide her the complete freedom and the change she yearns for. The germination process starts after her relocation to Albert's house and her bonding with Harpo's wife Sofia, her step daughter-in-law.

Harpo and Sofia marry against their parents' will. Eventually Harpo realizes that Sofia is not submissive like Celie. Dominating her is not easy for Harpo as she is stronger than him. Whenever he tries to hit her, she retaliates him the lesson of obedience. In Sofia's company 'mute' Celie feels safe and secure. Moreover all her inward aspirations are secretly to God, who never responds. But now she has Sofia with whom she can share the miseries and her secrets of heart.

Along with the act of writing letters Celie's "quilting" with Sofia helps her to gain some more strength to be recognized as a human being. The cooperating atmosphere between Celie and Sofia, provides a strong base for an unrelenting alliance between the two women. Meanwhile Shug who is blues singer and beloved mistress of Albert enters Celie's life. She is brought to Albert's house and Celie is expected to nurse her, till getting her disease cured. In this process Shug gives psychological strength to Celie by saying "I am here to help you get on your feet." (191) So, Celie considers Shug as an archetype of female power and strength. Celie's desires and thirsts are exactly mirrored in the actions and character of Shug. This, in turn, develops the process of Celie's transformation with the guidance of Shug. Mae Henderson speaks of the difference between the two women as, "Unlike Celie, who derives her sense of self from the dominant white and male theology, Shug is a self-invented character whose sense of self is not male inscribed. Her theology allows a divine, self-authorized sense of self." (16)

Shug helps Celie to rediscover God and Nettie's letters hidden by Albert. At the discovery of Nettie's letters, the reaction of Celie resembles Sofia's enrage against Harpo. The seeds of disobedience that Sofia planted long ago into Celie's mind to shatter the head of Albert, start to germinate. Celie decides to take revenge immediately. She says "I watch him so close, I begin to feel a lightening in the head. Fore I She intends to kill him. Shug takes out the razor from her hand, but Celie remains livid: "All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble about the house crazy for Mr_____blood. In my mind, he falling dead every which a way." (110) Celie's adoption of Sofia's method surely shows the revolt against her cruel husband Albert.

Celie is instructed to 'fight back' not only by Sofia but also by two other women, Nettie and Albert's sister, even before Sofia did. But Celie is much influenced by Sofia rather than Nettie and Albert's sister. It is because Albert's sister and Nettie's teach Celie only to revolt where as Sofia demonstrates the way of revolting.

The vicious nature of Albert is disclosed empathetically with the discovery of Nettie's letters. Thereafter Celie stops writing to God and starts writing to Nettie. The discovery of Nettie's letters also recovers part of the authentic, but historically-erased, knowledge about Africa and the Africans. As it is learnt from one of Nettie's letters, "there are colored people in the world who want us to know! Want us to grow and see the light! They are not all mean like Pa and Albert, or beaten down like ma was." (119) Africans are mature enough to enlighten others. Altogether from the beginning to ending Shug's help, Sofia's courage, Celie's development and the recovery process they entail, portrays the ability of women to overcome the patriarchal barriers imposed on them.

Against Albert's will, Shug suggests Celie to wear pants instead of an embarrassing dress that she is forced to wear while working in the field. It represents the limits imposed on women. Celie uses a man's army pair of pants as a model to stitch a pair for herself. As Trudier Harris explains it "since men have been her cruel

oppressors, it is ironically appropriate that she take something traditionally assigned to them in shaking off the power they have over her." (14)

Shug inflames an upheaval in Albert's household. She decides to take Celie and Squeak, Harpo's submissive woman, with her to Memphis. Celie and Squeak are also set out to leave for Memphis. Empower by Shug's support and aggravated by Albert's evil deeds Celie bursts out in anger when Albert objects her decision of departure. Again, Celie resembles Sofia's attitude here: "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong . . . It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome at I need... all us together gon whup your ass." (180)

In Memphis, Celie shows her exceptional creativity by making different sorts of dresses. She designs the clothes for both men and women. By making pants for both men and women Celie tries to narrow the gap between the genders. Walker explicitly shows Celie's ability in dress designing as woman's indigenous power. Thus Walker is successful in depicting the patriarchy as an outdated term.

Shug traces Celie's talent in "sewing." So she suggests Celie to initiate her own business of making pants. The orders for Celie's product start to come in big numbers from all parts of the place, Celie, starts to recognize as a "whole" and gets command over her own life. Celie launches a female-made and female-run business, named "Folks pants, Unlimited." (191) So Celie turns into a complete potential being. As she puts it in writing to Nettie, "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." (194) Celie's ownership is even supplemented by Fonso's death. Consequently she inherits the house and other things including a store - the property of her biological father who was killed, out of business jealousy, by his white competitors.

She goes back to her hometown to claim her property and re-establish her business in the store she inherited. She owns the same place from which she was thrown out. She stands dignified and erect where she was abused due to male domination. Now she is free from 'male -domination. Albert is allowed just as a friend but not as her husband. Sofia is hired to work in the pants store that provides independence to her. Shug is always welcomed to visit and stay as she pleases. Walker's novel is not devoted solely to the development of Celie against male domination. Though the story revolves around Celie, the revolt of other women in Celie's circle, against male domination is equally significant. Walker's quilt is completed by including all the women as its parts as everyone have important role in the novel.

Conclusion

The women in the novel after undergoing a series of changes become independent and liberated women. The novel is portrayal of not only Celie but also the whole community of black women living under the long lasting oppressive conditions. Walker, through all the characters in the novel, celebrates communal harmony by bringing all of them together at the end of the novel. Though the beginning of the novel is pessimistic its ending is optimistic.

Not only the protagonist Celie but also all the women characters in the novel become independent psychologically, spiritually as well as economically. It is found that this liberation is brought due to the change in their attitude towards male-domination. The idea of rebelling against male domination and co-operation among these women during the crisis is chief obsession for their victory. Thus Walker's novel *The Color Purple* is an exact embodiment of women's revolt against their suppressed conditions.

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