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FEMINIST TRANSITIONS IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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ABSTRACT

A theory by the woman, of the woman and for the woman is how we can define feminism. The concern of the feminist writers and critics is to replace the position of woman from being an object to a subject. In our patriarchal societies, we have certain set standards and rules meant only for women and they are supposed to adhere to them. Gilbert and Gubar in *The Mad Woman in the Attic* writes, "A woman writer is engaged at another level with assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male literature, especially the paradigmatic polarities of angels and monsters." The aim of feminists is to transform these societies and systems. Women must write for themselves as, the men will not. Feminists believe that decolonization must be done by each and every woman and they must move out from the sphere of being a victim. The paper proposes to analyse Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as a feminist text. The novel conveys that women must retaliate against the unfair and unjust treatment they receive from men and that they must do this by helping one another. The transitions in the life of the protagonist of the novel, Celie and other female characters would be looked at in a detailed manner. Alice Walker's concept of womanism would also be elaborated upon viz-a-viz the novel.

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Woman- woman is the biological other of man. A creation of God responsible for the creation of human race. In no respect a woman is inferior to her other half i.e. the man. She is equally endowed with intelligence, power and individual personality. A woman plays multiple roles during her lifetime starting from a sweet little daughter to a sister, to a mother to a working woman, so on and so forth. They play a strong role not only by supporting their families but also by determining the destiny of their community as well as their nation. But, from times immemorial, man has kept her as his own personal property and thus not allowed to develop her own individuality. Our patriarchal societies have a particular mindset that the male is superior to the females, physically as well as mentally, so they must submit themselves to the male authority. In such societies there are set standards and rules meant only for women and they are supposed to adhere to them.

Therefore in order to rescue the females from the bondage of the patriarchy, feminism came into play. The main motto of feminists is to transform these patriarchal societies and systems. For the feminists, women must write for themselves as the men would not. Feminists have a firm belief that decolonization must be done by each and every woman and they must strive hard in order to move out from the sphere of being victims. They want to replace the position of women from being passive objects to very active subjects.

Feminism began as a movement in about 1960's and gained momentum during 70's and 80's. Feminists look at a work of art from a female oriented point of view. Their work is to set right the distorted, oppresses and invisible image of women. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as a feminist text and the transition in the life of central character Celie would be brought out. As this paper is dealing with Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the focus thus shifts on Black feminism and more specifically on the concept of 'Womanism' as proposed by Alice Walker herself.

Women and that too black, connotes someone who is doubly oppressed and marginalized. The black women were disliked not only by the whites but also by their coloured male counterparts. Alice Walker deliberately moved away from the term 'Black Feminism' as this term was not defining her concept of feminism and thus she replaced the term with 'womanism'. In the introduction of her celebrated book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* Alice Walker defines the term 'Womanism' and also a 'womanist' as:

1. From womanish (opposite of "girlish", i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A black feminist or feminist of color . . . responsible, in charge, serious.
2. Also: a woman who loves other women sexually and/ or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility . . . and women's strength. Committed to the survival of wholeness of entire people, male and female . . .
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless.
4. womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (xi-xii)

'Womanism' does not divide black society from within on the lines of gender but, stands for integration and has faith in the wholeness of the society. Throughout her literary career Alice Walker delved deep into the oppression and victimization of African American women and this also forms the basic structure of the novel *The Color Purple* which has 'womanism' as its basic theme. To quote Krishna Mohan Mishra the novel;

. . . depicts the antagonism between black men and black women, and the physical and emotional relationship between black women. It concerns Black women victimized by black men physically, sexually and economically, their lesbian bonding against the tyrannical forces of patriarchy and their ultimately gaining triumph over them. (Sinha 178)

The women in the novel with special reference to the protagonist, moves from being victims to self conscious beings and not only women but men also undergo a sea change. The concept of 'Lesbianism' which is also a corollary of 'womanism' has also been incorporated in the novel through the physical bonding that emerges between Celie and Shug Avery in the due course of the novel.

The Color Purple is written in an epistolary form. There are as many as ninety-one letters out of which first fifty-one letters have been addressed to the God and the latter letters are either from Celie to Nettie (her sister) or from Nettie to Celie. Sunitha Diwakar in "The Sense of the Self" elaborates upon Celie's act of writing to God as, "Celie's communication with God through her letters confirms her very existence. Through her letters she asserts that she is still alive. She writes just to survive" (Sinha 123).

The novel opens with Celie's tragic letter to God wherein she reveals about her rape by her own father whom Celie used to call Pa. Celie's father told her not to tell anything to anyone or else he would kill her ailing mother. Celie had two children with her father but both of them were abandoned by Celie's father. It was after the death of Celie's mother that she started nurturing her family. Her first and foremost concern was to protect Nettie from the advances of their father. Like a typical womanist she was desperately trying to take

Nettie into her custody. One of the most touching example of Celie's womanism is when she offers herself to her father in order to save Nettie from his advances. "I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick" (*The Color Purple* 8).

Celie's decision to marry Albert was also for the sake of Nettie. Albert wanted to marry Nettie but Pa-, because of his intensions to molest her, didn't allow Albert to marry her and thus Celie was married to him, a man with four children and a girlfriend. Celie wanted to have a secure future for her sister so she called her up to come and live with her in Albert's home. But here also the problem was not solved as Albert started making advances towards Nettie therefore Celie thought it best to send Nettie along with Mr. and Mrs. Samuels and their two adopted children Olivia and Adam, who actually were Celie's children abandoned by Pa.

Celie was harshly treated earlier by her father and later by her husband, Albert. Celie used to call Albert as Mr-. She expresses his behaviour towards her as very callous. "he look at me. It like he looking at the earth" (*The Color Purple* 21). Albert, a typical patriarchal male believes, "Wives is like children. You have to let'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (*The Color Purple* 37). Thus, the novel unfolds the story of Celie who is lonely, sad and full of despair, who is treated like an animal both by her father and her husband. She is just like an object for them to play with and leave. Celie's treatment at the hands of men lets her reveal that, "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them" (*The Color Purple* 6). She feels comfortable with other women around instead of men. Celie has abandoned her emotions and whenever she used to get a sound beating from Albert she does not "cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree" (*The Color Purple* 23).

Bhaskar A. Shukla in his book *Feminism and Female Writers* writes in relation to Alice Walker's portrayal of women in her fictional world that, "Walker's women characters display strength, endurance and resourcefulness on confronting – and overcoming – oppression in their lives, yet Walker is frank in depicting the often devastating circumstances of the 'twin afflictions' of racism and sexism" (153).

Celie wanted to live for herself but the constant domination as well as control by men never allow that to happen and as a consequence to it Celie developed a dual personality. On the outer level, that is perceived by the patriarchal male society, she is black, ugly and dull but internally she is sensitive and a caring individual who sacrifices her life first for the sake of her mother and then for her sister. Her sisters-in-law were also impressed by the way she used to manage her household chores. They suggest her to be strong and fight for herself but to this Celie replies, "But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (*The Color Purple* 17). So, there is this protagonist who is weak physically, mentally and economically and is in a constant struggle with her male dominated society in order to survive.

It is around letter number seventeen that we come across a bold female character who is self asserting and is not allowing her husband to dominate her. She is Sofia Butler, wife of Albert's elder son Harpo. When Sofia refuses to be treated like a servant Harpo complains of the matter to his parents who direct him to give her a sound beating and what surprises in the incident is that Celie also guides Harpo to beta Sofia. Actually, Celie became jealous of Sofia as she was unlike her. Strong, bold and willing to fight for herself, Sofia was a total contrast to Celie. But the rift in their relationship was solved as soon as Celie told her the reason for her (Celie's) doing so and thus Celie and Sofia came closer into companionship. Thus a womanist bond gets established. Both of them then involve themselves into the process of quilt making out of rugs and torn curtains. This quilt making stands symbolic of transformation from rugs into a cozy quilt i.e. from worn out emotions to emotional bonding between women for themselves.

Shug Avery, a blues singer and Albert's girlfriend also brings about transformation in the life of Celie. Celie was very much impressed by her persona and the way she used to handle men. Celie started feeling comfortable in her company and an emotional bond started evolving between them. "For the first time in my life, I feel just right." (*The Color Purple* 60) Hereon, Celie starts growing, evaluating and analyzing things.

Womanist concern for the society on the whole is visible when Shug and Celie together tries to help Harpo to establish his jukejoint. In order to attract more and more customers Shug used to sing songs there. Shug's dedication of one of her songs to Celie made her feel important as she was never ever looked upon as

an individual. It was Shug who guided Celie to explore herself not only mentally but physically as well. To Celie also Shug was more manly, unlike her, meeting and hugging people around. " Shug talks and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl, you look like a good time. Women always talk about hair and health."(*The Color Purple* 85) Celie's sexual behaviour was also different towards Shug. To quote NanditaSinha:

As Celie learns, she moves out of her state of passive dependency into a sense of her own worth. Unlike the monstrous inequality between husband and wife, theirs is a reciprocal relationship – Celie giving herself to heal the sick and exhausted Shug and Shug giving of herself, patiently and lovingly teaching Celie to know her own potentialities . . . it is through her awareness of her right to the passion, creativity and fulfillment that life offers that she empowers herself. (51-52)

With the arrival of Shug Avery, there comes a u turn in the life of Celie. Shug started guiding Celie to explore her sexuality and also stood as a protective shield against her. It was Shug who reveals Nettie's being alive to Celie and that Nettie's letters were deliberately hidden by Albert to take revenge on Celie for not allowing him to come closer to Nettie. It was Shug only who channelized Celie's directionless energy and advised her to start her own business of making pants. Celie's decision finally of making pants and wearing them too works as a transitional phase in her life i.e. from being a stereotypical female, with set rules and dress codes to follow, into a self- asserting one. 'Pants' which stand as a symbol of masculinity and dominance are now being stitched and worn by the females.

Celie's further transformation is brought about by discovering Nettie's letters. Nettie's letters made her aware of the outer world. The stern mentality of Olinka people towards women as depicted by Nettie in her letters made Celie identify herself with other black women belonging to Africa. New thinking horizons were being opened up for Celie through her sister's letters. These letters became a source of education for her. Celie's doubts on God being white are also cleared by Nettie who says, "the Bible says that Jesus Christ had hair like lamb's wool. Lamb's wool is not straight, Celie."(*The Color Purple* 141) which indicate that Jesus is also coloured. However, Celie also comes to know that Olinka men make beautiful quilts. This is a typical womanist aspect where there is no restriction on the kind of work both sexes do.

It is also through Nettie's letters that Celie comes to know that that their biological father was a great businessman and was lynched by the whites and that Pa- was their step-father who married their mother for the property she inherited after the death of their real father. Hereafter, Celie's journey on the path of complete transformation actually begins. She is now liberated of the sin of having children by her father, who actually was her step-father. Celie gathers courage to leave Albert and move to Memphis with Shug. It is Albert who is worried now instead of Celie as he is bothering about the society. Shug takes Celie to her big home and when Celie tries to look after Shug, Shug tells her, "You not my maid. I didn't bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet."(*The Color Purple* 218) Once again we are confronted with the womanist concerns where a woman is ready to support another. Celie's confidence in herself gets a boost and and she begins her enterprise of making pants. She owns her little factory and is swamped with orders from everywhere. Celie is now an independent and transformed woman who is earning for her own living and has tried to challenge the patriarchal society.

A womanist text not only looks forward to empower women but also care about the men and the society. The novel therefore also is not concerned with female's evolution and bonding alone but also with the transformation of male thinking. That is why we see a change in Albert and Harpo who now "reassess and re-evaluate their lives and develop a better relationship with their women" (Diwakar, 137). Albert during his conversation with Celie after she has returned back tells her, "I'm satisfied, this is the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feels like a new experience"(*The Color Purple* 267). He also admits that it "Took me long enough to notice you such good company, he say"(*The Color Purple* 283). Harpo has also evolved from a man who wanted to subdue his wife into a man who is now more liberal and assisting his wife in her household works.

To conclude this paper I would like to quote TrudierHarris who in his article "From Victimization to Free Enterprise:Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." says:

From a used and abused woman Celie emerges as an independent, creative businesswoman. She moves from being ugly duckling to a figuratively beautiful swan . . . She moves from the back room of the house in which her step – father has violated her to sharing a huge house in Memphis with her lover to returning to a house, property; and a store she has inherited. She moves from being Albert's footstool to demanding his respect and teaching him how to sew. (14)

Thus, towards the end we come across a confident and self – sustaining Celie, who is sewing pants and "Anybody can wear them" (*The Color Purple* 218). So, the pants Celie made were not only for males but also for females. She made an attempt to break the distinction between the two sexes. Towards the end of the novel we definitely come across a Celie who is now intelligent enough to take up the decision of her life by herself, who is now in a position to say 'no' to Albert when he proposes her to remarry, a Celie who has now replaced the idea of a white/black male god with nature and learnt that she must also take part in the act of creation out of sheer love and care like nature does.

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