



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND RACISM IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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ABSTRACT

The Color Purple is hailed as a classic book in exploring the pathos of black women in social context. Its strength derives from the regeneration of the multitude of characters with the protagonist Celie in the forefront. Walker focuses on racial, political and sexual issues while they highlight women's struggle for survival. *The Color Purple* more particularly, provides an insight into predicament of women on the domestic front. It depicts the oppression and exploitation of the black women caused by repetitive violence, suppression, physical and sexual exploitation and patriarchal taboos. This paper focuses on the multifaceted violence suffered by the protagonist Celie and other women characters and how they gradually liberates themselves from fear, misery and oppression.

Keywords: Patriarchy, sexual oppression, racism, rape.

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Alice Walker's true intention from writing this novel is to give voice to black women and to provide them with a path to follow in order to emancipate and get their freedom. Walker shows us the evolution of her major character, Celie, a poor, barely literate southern black woman from being a sexually abused child to a passive wife and finally to an emancipated woman. Walker in *The Color Purple*, focuses on Celie, who is trapped by racist and sexist oppression and the way she seeks to define herself is through the use of language. *The Color Purple* reveals the plethora of violence in the form of harsh economic, social and emotional crisis facing the blacks. Celie's relationship with her step-father and husband is characterized by sexual oppression in the patriarchal society in America. Celie endures a barrage of rape and harshness that causes her to experience her body as fragmented and as being possessed by her victimizers. As Gabriele Griffin observes we can see that "*the body constitutes the site of oppression and become the source of permanent anxiety*". Celie has no control over her body and her physical environment. Victimized from an early age she is the object of perpetual abuse.

Celie is an invisible woman, "a character traditionally silenced and effaced in fiction; and by centering on her, Walker replots the heroine's text". She gives voice to Celie and permits her to express all the miseries she has undergone.

Alice walker depicts Celie's experience of subjugation in a male dominated society, her sexual abuse by her father and husband and how she successfully comes up from submission and subjugation to a self-

realization and thereby attaining emancipation. The journey of self-discovery that Walker's protagonist, Celie, undergoes is accentuated by an internal understanding of God that is woven into the structure of the novel. In *The Color Purple* Alice Walker has projected her women characters as victims of violence, violence especially in domestic space, curbs women's resistance and fractures her subjectivity as it poses threat to both her wholeness and the establishment of a whole black nation. *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel a work structured through a series of letters. Celie writes about the misery of childhood incest, physical abuse, and loneliness in her letters to God.

The Color Purple is a novel that begins with a fourteen-year-old girl's cry for help. Celie has suffered repeated rapes and brutal beatings by the man she believes to be her father, Alphonso, it begins with a patrimonial injunction of silence: *"You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy"*. Celie's story is told within this threat: the narrative is about breaking silences, and, appropriately, its formal structure creates the illusion that it is filled with unmediated "voices." According to Carole J. Sheffield, *"the right of men to control female body is a cornerstone of patriarchy. Violence and the threat of violence against females represent the need of patriarchy to deny the woman's body of her own property"*. Throughout the story, Celie is told to keep quiet about what has taken place between her and her father Alphonso. *"He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don't never git used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook"*. Soon after, Celie's mother dies and Alphonso rapes Celie more and more often. Her father impregnates her twice and takes away the children after they are born. Celie is convinced that he has taken the children into the woods and killed them, but in reality, he has sold them. Alphonso eventually remarries, and to get rid of Celie, he marries her to a man described as Mr. _____. Celie's marriage to Mr. _____ is the end of violence on the part of her father but it is a new beginning of violence on the part of her husband whom she denotes as Mr. _____. The patriarchal society gives the right to a husband that he can use his wife as he wants and he can abuse her in anyway he wishes. This is seen in Mr. _____'s *"answe, cause she my wife"* to his son Harpo's question why he beats Celie.

Celie is of the view that: *"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."*

The first and, probably, most influential woman in Celie's life is her sister Nettie. They were forced to be separated by her oppressive husband but, before leaving, Nettie encourages her to be active:

*"You got to fight. You got to fight.
But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is to stay alive."*

Celie and Nettie promise each other to keep in contact by letter but Mr._____ hides all the letters from Nettie and Celie's only addressee and hope is God, so she wrote to him. However, her relationship with God doesn't give her courage to adopt an active attitude and it was only useful to her since it helps her to bear her oppression:

"I don't say nothing. I think bout Nettie, dead. She fights, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight; I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive."

At this stage of her life another woman influences on her life; it's Sofia, the wife of Mr. _____'s son Harpo. Celie observes that Sofia is not a victim of circumstance, but a controller of circumstance, as when her sisters come to stand with her at her wedding and hold her baby, and when she doesn't have shelter when things go wrong with her marriage. But soon, physical abuse seems to be common occurrence, even in the relationship which are loving like of Harpo and Sofia. Harpo beats Sofia manytimes. Mr._____ advises him,

*"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."*

Interestingly Sofia never acquiesces to her husband's patriarchal authority though he continually attempts to dominate her. Celie considers her as a model because she fights for her rights but Celie is not able to behave the same way:

"I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't.

What that? She says

Fight. I say."

Sofia acts as a catalyst in Celie's understanding of her pain and her plight. She is strong, assertive and independent. In many incidents Sofia proved herself a firm lady. Her fight with Mayor is an example of it. She dared to answer back to the Mayor's wife. She will never surrender to Harpo:

"I love Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But

I'll kill him dead before I'll let him beat me."

Walker describes Sofia as a, *"big strong girl. Arms got muscle. Legs, too. She swings that baby about like it nothing. She ... give you the feeling she all there. Solid.*

Like if she sit down on something it be mash."

In *The Color Purple*, Sofia represents the plight of the female in rebellion and she stands in contrast to Celie in her effort to dominate the male world. She tells Celie, *"Every time they sat me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say."*

The liberation of Celie comes through another women in the story, Shug Avery, the blues singer and she is Mr. ___'s mistress. Though her initial behaviour towards Celie is rude and mean, Celie cares for her with devotion. Celie serves her with love and admiration: *"I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short."* But later she starts liking Celie and takes the place of Nettie by bringing out the true self of Celie and restoring her dignity and self-respect. Shug helps Celie not only to understand and accept

Shug tells her, *"God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come Into the world with God.....It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything."*

Shug sees God's love in the beauty around her. She believes that God places beauty in the world to make human happy

It was through Shug that Celie came to know that Albert had been taking mail with strange postage stamps on it and was hiding in his pocket. Shug tells Celie about the letters and finally managed to smuggle a letter out of Albert's pocket one day. The letters brought happy tidings from Nettie that she was returning to America and Celie's two children alive and is with her. Nettie's letters open a wide vista of predicament and oppression of the Olinka tribe and other Africans and also their traditions.

Shug also helps her to find Nettie's letters and "wear the pants" and thanks to her, and to Nettie's letters, Celie is able to react and speak:

To Mr. ___ *"You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need."*

Men in Celie's life constantly prevent her from speaking and the act of writing down her feelings is a way of *"shouting her rights in silence"*. Writing, to Celie, was a tool to stay alive and, therefore, it was as important to her as breathing:

"Long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along"

It was due to Shug Avery's influence that Celie leaves Mr. ___, her husband, and becomes an economically and socially empowered woman. *"I am happy, I got love, I got work, I got money, friends, and time. And you alive and be home soon,"*

By the end of the novel, Celie can strongly fight back against her husband by saying, *"You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman...,"*

when she decides to go to Memphis. In this very moment Celie's consciousness starts growing, she remarks *"I'm pore. I'm black; I may be ugly and can't cook. But I am here."*

Celie finds her identity as a woman that she has to step up on her own feet. Celie's pants making is an important symbol of her freedom. From an abused woman, Celie emerges as an independent, creative business woman. She gradually discovers the power and joy of her own spirit, freeing her from her past,

reuniting her with those she loves by voicing against patriarchal order and thereby attained an autonomous state. Her spiritual journey is completed when she addresses, "Dear God, Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God."

Thus Celie goes through complete transformation in every aspect of life. To sum up, Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* represents the African American woman as a symbol of hope and resurrection for humanity. Walker insists the significance of bonds between women as a means to contend with racism and sexism. Its a novel that portrays the gradual forming of a new black woman, Celie, who evolves from patriarchal oppression to awakening and independence. Walker emphasis that women would learn to make 'room' for themselves. The women characters of the novel prove Walker's idea by facing the challenges boldly. Walker does not eliminate men, as it considers their transformation too. The transformation of men and the improvement in womens' situations in the novel envision a better future for black people. Women perceive that through friendship they can realize their dreams, follow them in society and achieve them. The ray of hope even in despair is the important aspect of the novel. Thus, *The Color Purple* examines the quest for wholeness, for communication in a world of fragmentation and alienation.

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