

“I’m Pore, I’m Black, I may be Ugly.... But I’m Here” Alice Walker’s The Color Purple: A Study in Womanism

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Abstract:

The novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker expresses the resilience of the African American after having battled years of trauma. The novel is dexterously drafted in an aura of endurance with an underlying and voracious substance of wonder, hope and resilience. Though Celie faces the dreadful triple oppression of poverty, racism, and sexism, she upholds a sense of her own decorum. When endowed with the right prospect, she opens her heart fully to love. *The Color Purple* represents a substantially melodramatic childhood. The novel clearly entails to the black women that only sisterhood, mutual bonding and cooperation can connect them together and help them appreciate their own worth and get true liberation and enlightenment. Compared with the works of the former black women, this novel does not aim on complaining or attacking the patriarchal forces but helps women become conscious of their strength and resilience. The novel sagaciously reproduces the socio-economic and political stage where black women endeavour to walk out of darkness, get rid of the oppression and progress toward a new dawn.

Keywords: oppression, African – American, subjugation, patriarchy, liberation

Introduction:

Alice Walker is undoubtedly one of the most prolific black women writers of American literature. Her works predominantly concentrate on the predicaments of American black women. Walker won the Pulitzer Prize for her acclaimed novel *The Color Purple* in the year 1983 and she is also the first black women writer to have won the laurel. The triumph of the novel not only lies in the theme of racism and sexism, but also in feminism and in womanism to a great extent. *The Color Purple* brings to light the significant causes of black women’s oppression over the ages. It points out clearly that patriarchy has wrecked an

irreparable damage on them. The novel clearly entails to the black women that only sisterhood, mutual bonding and cooperation can connect them together and help them appreciate their own worth and get true liberation and enlightenment. Compared with the works of the former black women, this novel does not aim on complaining or attacking the patriarchal forces but helps women become conscious of their strength and resilience. The novel sagaciously reproduces the socio-economic and political stage where black women endeavour to walk out of darkness, get rid of the oppression and progress toward a new dawn. In order to differentiate from other feminism, Walker creates her own term “womanism”. The white women writers idea of feminism is refuted by Alice Walker and she chooses the term womanism, to denote the resilience, essence of womanhood, bonding and shared communal and womanist beliefs.

Differing from the other feminists’ ideas, the novel, while portraying the new birth of the protagonist, also describes the modification in the black man’s attitude towards the black women. At the end of the novel, black women and black men cultivate a congruous connection with each other. Walker’s “womanism” exceeds sexual and racial discrimination and views the completeness of humanity. This peculiarity is a strategic point of Alice Walker’s “womanism”, and it is a befitting reply to the conventional modes of feminism. In today’s American society, racism and sexism operates craftily against the black women. Walker’s submission (reflected in the novel) of unraveling such social predicaments paves way for a holistic, universal and a positive solution. In the same way, her idea of “womanism” is also an enormous contribution to traditional feminism, remarkably to black feminism.

Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* with its African American ethos examines the quandary of gender politics as cultural stereotypes which consequently force women to become physical, social and emotional victims of men. Celie’s marriage to Albert forces her in a situation wherein she finds herself out of the frying pan into the fire. Being a mother to her unkempt, unkind, and violent step-children, she is constantly face to face with their relentless insults abuse. She writes to God about this:

“I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve. His mama died in his arms and he don’t want to hear nothing bout the new one. He pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breasts

(The Color Purple, 13)

Albert's father and brother can’t digest the fact that Albert houses both his whore and his wife in the same home. The squalor and immorality in the African American community is brought to the fore in the novel. However, when Sofia lands in jail, the entire family pulls

their chords together to bail her out immediately. They even connect and come up with ideas to alleviate her aggressive trait and prevent her from contemplating vicious tendencies. They realize that jail kills her physically and spiritually and endeavour to get her out of trouble. Regardless of blood ties, they all constitute one common family.

The pivotal theme of the novel is the harm wreaked on the black community, both by their own sequence of violence and the racially provoked revulsion of Negroes in the South. Plagued by the white racist violence and its unremitting menace, the rural black Southerners develop a tight-knit community; nonetheless, they annihilate themselves from within by neglecting and exploiting their women - mentally, physically and sexually. Black women, such as Celie and Sofia, are beyond doubt doubly oppressed. They are bizarrely discriminated against by racism, which eventually makes them second-class citizens in the larger society, and they are oppressed by their fathers and husbands and brothers, which makes them second-class citizens in the home. In neither place can the black woman have the benefit of the basic human rights of freewill, liberation from violence, or even exercise ownership of their own bodies.

Another paramount theme of *The Color Purple* is the prospective fortitude and delight women can attain in harmony with one another. Defenseless in the patriarchal family that segregates them from one another, women become influential associates to one another when they stick together. A fraction of their tyranny as women is their internalized sexism, which confirms to them that they are definitely worthy of the underprivileged treatment they get from men. When they come together to communicate their anguish and joys, women apprehend that they deserve enhanced prospects and can toil hard in unity together to upgrade their plight.

The novel is dexterously drafted in an aura of endurance with an underlying and voracious substance of wonder, hope and resilience. Though Celie faces the dreadful triple oppression of poverty, racism, and sexism, she upholds a sense of her own decorum. When endowed with the right prospect, she opens her heart fully to love. *The Color Purple* represents a substantially melodramatic childhood. Raped by her father, Celie gives birth to two children from this incestuous relation and her coming of age, however, is the plodding insight which she gains with the help of other protagonists like Sofia, Shug Avery, and her sister Nettie. Now she veritably can claim her own beauty, her own self-esteem and a sense of freedom. She eventually wins back her husband's love and starts her own business.

Jasbir Jain has remarked about the patriarchal hegemony that has wrecked the lives of women over the years.

“Patriarchy, at the outset, stands for power and authority. The word has a number of affiliations and goes on to symbolize possession, control and belonging. Patriarchy can stretch its meaning to relate to the nation. Moreover, women are not the only ones to be oppressed by it: all marginalized categories whether men or women get caught in its web of authority. And its arms extend to almost every field- philosophy, law, governance, society itself, and the more modestly constructed family.”

(Jain, 2005, 13)

The novel *The Color Purple* unleashes a biting criticism on racism and sexism. The patriarchal set-up has made a mess of many aspects associated with the social and family life. The Whites control economy and the larger units and they also subjugate the blacks. Eventually the Black people are isolated have to fend for themselves. The black men who are oppressed by the whites, in turn overpower their women and vent their anger and frustration on their women.

At the very beginning of the novel, Celie is circumscribed by the paternal command, “you better not tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy.” (1) It clearly demonstrates man’s power and the powerlessness of woman. Celie is bullied to marry Albert, a typical male gesture to emphasize woman’s subordination. If her condition as a daughter is unbearable, her life as a wife is no better. She is married off to a middle-aged widower. This is how her step-father recommends her to Albert,

“She ugly. He say. But she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God alone fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it.”

(The Color Purple, 9)

When Albert agrees to marry Celie, she is inspected like an animal before the deal is finally through. As a mule of the family, she is belted, humiliated and in the fields is made to work like an animal. Albert’s logic for ill-treating Celie is simple:

“Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn.”

(The Color Purple, 23)

It is Nettie who continues to remind Celie,

“Don’t let them run over you... You got to fight.... You got to fight....”

(The Color Purple, 18)

Astonishingly, the other woman who facilitates Celie to reclaim her dignity and identity is Shug Avery, her husband’s mistress. In the African American literature, what is laudable is that the community of black women comes to salvage the suffering females and marshal them magnificently to help them piece together a meaningful and constructive life

in the midst of chaos and dilemma – both on the personal and the universal levels. Celie’s role as a woman is to cook, breed and work like an animal and also be emotionally and sexually available to her husband. Her existence is nullified and all her prospects of obtaining a decent identity in her own family are inadvertently muted. She is resilient under all trying circumstances. She neither has the freedom to act nor to think. As far as the institution of marriage is concerned, Simone De Beauvoir has this to say:

“The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure women the promised happiness- there is no such thing as assurance in regard to happiness- but that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine.”

(De Beauvoir, 1993, 502)

Alice Walker is widely acclaimed because of her theory of ‘womanism’. It is slightly different from feminism. This concept is much suitable to the kinds of novels she writes. In the preface to *“In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”*, she declares about ‘womanism’.

“Womanist I. From womanish. (Opp. of “girlish”, i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown”. Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.”

“Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/ or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and / or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health.”

(King, 2004, 235)

Walker redefines the standards of female behavioural patterns. She also poignantly asserts that the ordinary duties of women like stitching (which Celie does in the novel) if refined minutely can be utilized to her gain for economic self-sufficiency, financial self-reliance, physical and emotional wholeness. The governing gender has always maneuvered horribly to keep woman down through financial subjugation and economic manipulation. It is the combined result of racism, gender and poverty that has horrendously culminated in the subjection of women on all fronts. Alice Walker has strongly accentuated the inner resources of women which consequently boost her to accomplish her dreams and attain her goals.

Women are self-supporting by struggling solely. This can be seen in Shug Avery’s achievements as she goes up North eventually making a great deal of improvement. She sets

up a pant-making business which ultimately becomes a rag to riches story. Celie's full-grown commitment and enthusiastic perseverance adds reputation to the enterprise. Her life undergoes a U-turn; the change being both inward and outward. It is outward in the impression that Celie transforms her way of life. She is aware of men and manners. Not only that, she becomes self-dependent as financial stability comes her way. In the novel, Sofia emerges a very strong and a brave character. She challenges all forms of male domination and in her domestic life; it is she who wears pants. Celie also learns to wear and stitch pants and at one point, she announces fearlessly, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here."

(The Color Purple, 214)

With this statement, she moves beyond the issue of gender politics. She asserts her independent identity and defies many gender norms. Walker suggests that all forms of gender repressions and inequality can be fought with self-awareness, education and an indomitable spirit.

In black women's fiction, the troubled protagonist like Celie may search for complex relationships with her own gender for fulfillment and self-awareness but in other cultures, it may still be considered a taboo. In *The Color Purple*, we find how Celie and Shug Avery bond so well. They openly discuss their sexuality and various other issues. Shug helps Celie regain her self-esteem.

Alice Walker in her book *Living by the Word* recollects a visit to the Hardwick Prison where a lot of women had been imprisoned. She later discovered that almost seventy percent of them who were imprisoned were Black. These women were usually imprisoned for petty, even pathetic crimes: for stealing food or clothing or school supplies for their children or for cashing continually bouncing checks which they use to buy groceries. One woman was imprisoned for stealing Vienna sausage. What we conclude from this description is that women were driven to frustration and desperation and hence they resorted to such petty crimes. We find just about a similar reference in the novel *The Color Purple* where Sofia is arrested on the charges of assaulting the Mayor's wife. The surroundings in the prison where she was put were filthy and full of squalor and stench. Walker states,

"Because it is obvious that Black women do not have the right to self-defense against racist and sexist attacks by white men I realize I am in prison as well."

(Walker, 1998, 23)

Women are edged out of the larger framework of the community but the men need to realize that women have a sharper mettle and emerge victorious in any state. Walker talks

about the inabilities of the black men in understanding the problems of their women-folk. The culturally defined sex-roles of women impose a great deal of hardship upon their personalities. Celie and the like are caught in the brutal web of culture. Culture and history have victimized them in a bizarre way. The racial history and the predominance of the white culture have wrecked an irretrievable damage in their lives.

The Color Purple deals with the struggle, both in America and in Africa, of women to gain recognition as individuals who deserve fair and equal treatment. Male dominance is the norm in both countries. As Albert says "Men s'pose to wear the pants". It takes various forms, not least of which is sexual aggression. In the very first letter, Celie tells of the abuse she suffers at the hands of the man she believes for a long time is her father. Mary Agnes is raped by the white uncle whom she approaches for help to get Sofia out of prison and Albert also tries to force Nettie to submit to him before she leaves the house after fighting him off. Celie's sexual encounters with her husband, are sordid and unloving. Physical violence also seems to be a common occurrence, even in relationships which are quite loving, like that between Harpo and his wife Sofia. He beats her because "the woman s'pose to mind." It is a respectable thing for a man to do to his wife, in his view.

Women are exploited very seriously, especially Celie, who is married off to Albert to look after his children and is expected to work on the farm and submit without objection to all of Albert's demands and those of the children. She is also meant to accept Albert's affair with Shug Avery, which extends even to him sleeping with her under the same roof. In fact fidelity is not seen as an important quality by men, although the same behaviour in females is cause for comment. The preacher in the church attacks Shug by implication because of her loose lifestyle but men are allowed to behave as they wish.

The novel's message is that women must stand up against the unfair treatment they receive at the hands of men and that they must do this by helping one another. The women in the novel, even those who have interests in the same men, nevertheless band together to support and sustain one another throughout the novel. The bond of sisterhood is important, both literally in the persons of Nettie and Celie, Sofia and Odessa and metaphorically in the persons of Mary Agnes and Sofia, Albert's sister and Celie, Tashi and Olivia and of course Shug Avery and Celie, who embody the twin roles of sisters and lovers in their relationship. Some of the women in the novel have learned to fight for themselves. Sofia is powerful and physically strong. She is not subservient and has great strength of character as well. She can and does fight for what she wants, but of course her aggression results in her dreadful experience at the hands of the police after she dares to "talk back" to the white mayor, and her subsequent sentence to drudgery as the mayor's servant lasts for many years. The bond

between her and Mary Agnes is stronger than their mutual claim on Harpo's affections. Mary Agnes endures rape for Sofia's sake in order to get her released from prison, and when Mary Agnes goes off to be a singer it is Sofia who looks after her child.

The North, thus, is viewed as a “promised land” for the residents of South but the insights of North vary to a great extent for both the sexes. Celie has extracted the optimum out of North and has replenished her own self; thereby heralding a spectacular transformation; whereas the male has ended up being under-performing and frustrated even there. Celie’s metamorphosis has affected the entire sisterhood but such has not been the case for the male. The achievements of the male have impacted only his sphere of activity without any concern for his family or community; a striking contrast to the achievements of a woman. Masculine and feminine temperaments are also addressed in the novel. Shug is described by Albert as being more manly than most men, but as Celie rightly points out to him, those qualities of independence, honesty and integrity are equally valid as womanly qualities. What the novel asserts is that people are weak and strong, and gender should not dictate perceptions of qualities which are essentially human.

It is hardly surprising that most of the male characters in this novel are presented in an unsympathetic light. They are all, even Samuel; inferior in some way to the women they associate with. They behave deplorably; acting in an aggressive, often brutal way; they show little understanding of women, treating them as slaves, menial workers or sex objects. They seem also to have no solidarity, unlike the females, who band together to support and console one another. The men in this novel seem to be incapable of bonding with one another and show little evidence of communicating on anything other than a very basic, crude level.

Perhaps the least attractive of the men is the stepfather, Alfonso. He violates Celie at the age of fourteen, makes her pregnant twice and then sets out to do the same to Nettie, prevented only by Celie's determination to offer herself as a sacrifice to Albert instead of her sister. After removing her two children, he negotiates with Albert for Celie, offering a free cow as part of the deal, then takes two other wives, both in their teens before he eventually dies. Ironically he has a gravestone which describes him as an upright husband and father. In addition to his cynical sexual depravity he also defrauds the two girls of their heritage, living in a large house and using the considerable income from the real estate collected by the girls' real father before his death. After Alfonso dies the house and land is restored to Celie and it is to their rightful home that the two women finally come to end their lives with their extended family around them.

Albert is known for much of the novel as "Mr.____" by Celie. She is not even friendly enough with him to use his given name and he makes little effort to get to know her at all until their mutual attraction to Shug Avery forces them together enough to acknowledge their tolerance for one another. In the early days of the marriage, "Mr.____" is callous and exploitative; carrying on his affair with Shug under the same roof and making no attempt to treat Celie as anything other than a household chattel.

The only mitigating feature about Albert is his devotion to Shug Avery. He has a lifelong passion for her and remains devoted to her even when their physical relationship stops. Apart from that he is thoroughly vindictive, keeping all Nettie's letters from Celie as a deliberate act of meanness because Nettie refuses to sleep with him. Shug is the only woman who has any effect on him. She is able to stop him from beating Celie; she gets Nettie's letters back and eventually she is able to effect a slight reconciliation, after Celie leaves him to go away with Shug. It is their mutual love for Shug which enables Celie and Albert to reach a vantage point which is a proper submissive attitude on his part.

In the course of the novel, Celie musters a great deal of courage and strength in order to fight against all the odds that surround her. A remarkable makeover happens and Celie makes her voice heard and her presence felt. Instead of being submissive in front of her callous husband, she now confronts him audaciously when the former attacks her self-respect and integrity.

"He laugh. Who you think you is? He say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all.

Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem it come to me from the trees.

Whoever heard of such a thing, say Mr. _____. I probably didn't whup your ass enough.

Every lick that you hit me you will suffer twice I say. Then I say, You better stop talking because all I'm telling you ain't coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words.

Shit, he say, I should have lock you up. Just let you out to work.

The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say."

(The Color Purple, 213)

This sea-change in Celie's character reflects that she is not going to allow herself to be victimized anymore. Rather, she will break out of her shell and protect her integrity. Shug's encouragement acts as the catalyst in this regard. It is difficult to see why a vital character like Shug Avery decides to take up with such a weak character, but she conveniently acts as a way of accommodating Mary Agnes when she goes off to be a singer.

Germaine, also is a strange companion for a woman as strong as Shug, being much younger than she is (nineteen) and very effeminate. The affair is short lived, though, and perhaps serves to illustrate the "masculinity" of Shug and the point that role reversal is possible.

Celie's success has many things to prove. It shows that she has become self-reliant and paves way for other women of her community to do so. Celie's development from innocence to awareness is the most significant aspect of the novel. Her struggle to find herself can be seen as representative of the struggle of women to define their own experience through the development of self-knowledge and understanding. Celie depicts a woman who has been placed in the background of a male-dominated world. Not only that she is successful, but she also manages to bring together all broken threads and triumphantly attempts a unification of the family. Celie's newly gained identity can be seen when she ends a letter sent to Nettie: "Amen,

Your Sister, Celie
Folkspants, Unlimited.
Sugar Avery Drive,
Memphis, Tennessee"

(The Color Purple, 221)

The few characters in the story who manage to change their fortunes only serve to emphasize the plight of the rest. Shug Avery is a successful blues singer with a life of comparative luxury, able to travel and earn money. Some of this affluence comes also to Mary Agnes, and eventually to Celie when she begins her dressmaking business. Nettie is lucky to be fostered by Samuel and Corrine and with their help achieves a career and education, but the majority of the people have to struggle to survive from day to day, trapped by poverty and ignorance.

Even the poorest of the whites consider themselves superior to any black, no matter how successful. The story of Sofia is the main episode in the novel which illustrates the hazards of being black in Georgia in the thirties. Sofia is spirited and strong, assertive and independent and yet she is reduced to total helplessness when she dares to answer back to the mayor's wife - a spineless creature who is herself as weak as Sofia is strong. Sofia refuses to be patronized. She makes the mistake of "looking like somebody" - driving in a car, an unusual thing in those days for anyone, let alone a black woman and replying to the mayor's wife's offer of menial work with a "Hell, no" The beating she receives is out of all proportion to the offence she committed but the white ruling class shows no mercy to an "uppity nigger". Slavery in fact was abolished after the Civil war but it lived on in all but name for almost a century. Black people have to find a voice of their own. The quest for identity remains an

important issue for the Afro-American community. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has this to say in this context,

“For just over two hundred years, the concern to depict the quest of the black speaking subject to find his or her voice has been a repeated topos of the black tradition, and perhaps has been its most central trope. As theme, as revised trope, a double-voiced narrative strategy, the representation of characters and texts finding a voice has functioned as a sign both of the formal unity of the Afro-American literary tradition and of the integrity of the black subjects depicted in this literature.”

(Gates, 1988, 239)

Alice Walker has used Shug Avery to help highlight the relationship of the performer to the community, or portray social attitudes of one class toward another based on their response to the music. Music and songs play a very significant role for the black women to bear their burden. It is a means for them to let their sorrows out and relieve their pains in the wake of repeated atrocities inflicted by the men. They sing spiritual numbers and bury their grief. Shug Avery has emerged as a great singer. Her performances have been attracting a huge audience.

The women are connected to each other as many of them are regular church-goers. That gives them a lot of security to confide with each other. Celie goes to the church regularly and empty her burdens by finding some comfort and solace. Toni Morrison says in this context,

“The daily or weekly sessions in church were not only to give each other strength. It was the one place where you could cry, among other people who were also crying and whom you trusted to help you. With everybody else there, you were not afraid or ashamed to do it. You knew that afterwards you still had to get up and face it, but now somehow you could.”

(Ruas, 1986, 241)

The Afro-American dialect has been made use of in the novel. Blacks do not speak the English which the Americans do. On the contrary, they use a dialect of their own which represents the tenor of their discourse in the best possible manner. This dialect allows them to share, communicate, express and integrate. Having been written in the Afro-American dialect, the novel attempts to lay bare the norms of the community.

“Us got to do something, say Mr. and be right quick about it.

What can us do? ast Squeak. She looked a little haggard with all Sofia and Harpo children sprung on her at once, but she carry on. Hair a little stringy, slip show, but she carry on” (The Color Purple, 95)

A first reading of the novel would hold the readers in bewilderment at such a dexterous application of vocabulary; but subsequent readings would bring to our notice the novelist's purpose at this fruitful exercise. Walker's use of the epistolary style throughout the novel reflects upon certain poignant issues mirrored in the novel. The novel is a series of letters Celie writes to God. In the later part of the novel she addresses letters to her sister Nettie, Nettie writes to Celie and then again Celie writes to God. Celie confides all her worries, anxieties, burdens, concerns, disappointments and even joys and contentment with God. Apart from focusing on the epistolary aspect, the usage of the address 'Dear God' also seems like a spiritual rendering. It launches an intimate association with the readers as well. "Dear God,

Now I know Nettie alive I begin to strut a little bit. Think when she come home us leave here. Her and me and our two children."

(The Color Purple, 154)

Alice Walker's adept use of this style fulfills her objective in conveying her message to the readers. In the last letter, Celie mentions

"Dear God, Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God"

(The Color Purple, 292)

This rendering seems to unify and assemble unto Celie all that was lost. Celie, a representative of all the women in bondage and suffering, undergoes a metamorphosis by carving a niche for herself. Thus, the last letter the theme and reconciles all the characters with one another. When the scenery changes from dreary to spring, it represents Celie's new beginning and emphasizes her step to becoming independent. When Celie is with Shug, after leaving Mr. Albert, "it was a bright Spring day" (178).

The novel, thus, encapsulates myriad of themes in its framework- that of race and gender being the prominent ones. The novel breaks many stereotypes and highlights the predicaments of the Afro-American women and also underscores a ray of light in a web of despair by providing a deeper insight in the lives of the Afro-American women. Alice Walker's womanist theory about black feminist identity and practice creates a whole new perspective in the issue of gender politics. Drawing on her notion of an essential black feminist consciousness, her novel *The Color Purple* is an in-depth study to examine issues of identity and difference within feminism.

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