



Exploitation of Black Women in The Fiction of Alice Walker

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KEYWORDS :

The acclaimed writer of the Pulitzer prizewinning novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), Alice Walker has asserted that for her writing is a way to correct wrong that she observes in the world, and that she has dedicated herself to delineating the unique dual oppression from which black women suffer: racism and sexism. Her work is an exploration of the individual identity of the black woman; in it she examines how embracing her identity and bonding with other women affect the health of her community at large. Walker describes this kinship among women as "womanism," as opposed to feminism.

In Walker's novel, the black women's struggle to claim their selves, in order to change their lives and secure a rightful place within the social network of relationships they themselves constitute usually absorbs the psychic pain involved in such a struggle and shatters the iron base of gender which limit self empowerment.

Alice Walker has emerged as one of the major contemporary Afro-American novelist on the literary scene of American woman to win a Pulitzer prize. Her writings portray the struggle of black people throughout history and are praised for their insightful and riveting portraits of black life, in particular the experiences of black women in a sexist and racist society. Alice Malsenior Walker was born in Eatonton, Georgia, on February 9, 1944, the eighth and last child of Willie Bee and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker. The *Color Purple* was nominated for a national book critics circle award when it was published in 1982 and, the following year, received both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award. Walker was named distinguished writer in Afro-American studies at the University of California. Alice Walker examines in her fiction the black women's search for selfhood through an analysis of the individual's relationship to the community. In Walker's novels, the black women's struggle to claim their selves, in order to change their lives and secure a rightful place within the social network of relationship they themselves constitute, usually absorbs the psychic pain involved in such a struggle and shatters the iron bars of gender which limit self-empowerment.

The Color Purple is an acclaimed 1982 epistolary novel by American author Alice Walker. It received the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the national book award. It was later adapted into film and musical of the same name. One salient characteristic of *The Color Purple* is its treatment of the issues of gender within a framework that is women-centered. In other words, the protagonist is a woman and the variety of problems that are exposed are all related to areas and themes concerning women. The victimization of black women constitutes moreover a complication matter in the novel. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker is the story of a poor black woman living in the south between world war I and world war II. This was a time when although slavery had ended, many women were still virtually in bondage and had to put up with many conditions that were reminiscent of the days of slavery. The problem was that they had to endure being treated like an inferior being by their own families sometimes, as well as from the white people that lived there. It was a life that was filled with misery for many black women and they felt helpless to do anything about their situation.

In this novel Alice Walker introduces southern black female character that not only faced slavery, but sexism, racism and oppression. Throughout the novel, Walker not only describes the injustices against African-American women, but forces us to become a member of an oppressed race as we struggle to hear the rhythm and sway of Celie's mind. *The Color Purple* is an extraordinary account of a black woman's plight as she strives towards acceptance, freedom and independence. Much of the narrative Alice Walker's novel is derived from her own personal experience, growing up in the rural south as an uneducated and

abused child.

Harriet Jacobs, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* represents the fate suffered by black women, when she states:

"Black in a white society, slave in a free society, woman in a society ruled by men. American white women were expected to be passive because they were female. But black women had to be submissive because they were black and slaves."

It is no wonder that the novel has been a tremendous commercial success as well as the subject matter of ample scholarly effort. Relating events taking place in rural Georgia in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, it touched a nerve: it spoke up on subjects that had not been considered dramatic material so far, being outside of the mainstream experience on the one hand, and seen as better remaining within the black community without being divulged, as something everyone knew but never spoke about, on the other hand. In doing so, it also touched a different kind of nerve: while whites are portrayed as abominably cruel, the blacks themselves through the black male characters, are portrayed incredibly negative. As soon as the novel came out, such portrayal was seen as a kind of betrayal, as adding fuel to the white's fire. *The Color Purple* is a great book that describes the life of black women who were forced to do things against their own will. Discrimination was a big problem during the time this book takes place. Women had no rights and black people were treated like slaves. There are many black women whose sufferings are shown in this novel: Celie (protagonist), Nettie, Sofia, Shug, Mary Agnes and Olinka women.

The book is written as a series of narrations to God and focuses mainly on a woman named Celie, who has lived a hard life already when, at the age of 14 she begins writing letters to God to have someone to confide in, and tell her thoughts and secrets too.

In her first letter, she says that she is a good girl and already has been. She wants a sign from God letting her know what will happen to her in the future. Already at that age she has been taking care of her sister and brothers and has been working very hard and trying to get something out of an education. On top of this she has been raped by her father.

The two babies she gives birth to as a result of the "relationship" are taken away from her.

She thinks at first her father might have killed one of them, but later finds out that he sold them to a couple in town. Celie can not even muster up courage to share her trauma with her mother. Even when her children are taken away from her, she watches in mute helplessness instead of taking her mother into confidence. As she writes to God,

"She ast me bout the first one whose it is? I say God's... Finally she ast where it is? I say god took it"

Celie's father one day he beats her especially hard when he thinks she winked at a boy.

Certainly never even looks at men because she is scared of them. Celie does not do anything about her situation because she's used to being treated like that. She's scared and she fears for her sister Nettie too, when her pa starts looking at her the same way.

When a man referred to as Mr. _____ asks for Nettie's hand, Aiponso as the presumed father refuses under the pretext that "she too young" and he wants to "make a school teacher out of her". He suggests instead the no more, "fresh" Celie as he puts it whom he wants her to get rid of. Her father even tells Mr. _____ that "she ugly but she ain't no stanger to hard work."

and she clean" her father, pa pulls her out of school early, claiming she is dumb and has no need for education. Although *Nettie* supports *Celie* by telling him that she is smart, pa ignores her beneficial comments about *Celie* and plans to prepare her for marriage. *Mr._* takes the entire spring season to decide whether or not he wants to marry *Celie*, but goes ahead because he needs someone to watch over kids.

On *Celie's* wedding day, she is taunted and even beaten by *Mr._'s* four children from his previous marriage, she writes," he pick up a rock and laid my head open" He marries *Celie*, because he just wants someone to take care of things for him so he doesn't have to do much. she is being abused by *Mr._* she has to work in the fields, raise his children and she is abused as a slave and whore.

The first women, besides Nettie, to show Celieany compassion is her sister-in-law Kate

Who criticizes her own brother for his behaviour towards his wife. she objects to *Celie's* Being "the one bring (ing) all the water" and asks *Albert* son, the by now young man *Harpo*, to do the job instead. For this *Kate* gets reprimanded by her brother and leaves In tears. *Mr._* is so mean that he brings his mistress *Shug Avery* at his home when she falls sick with a terrible illness. He tells *Celie* to prepare a room for *Shug* will stay with them until she is healthy. She seems to be pure evil. She is rude, mean and demanding of everyone around her namely *Mr._*. As she is very mean, like you was a servant: and all because *Albert* married you" *Celie* continues to care for *Shug Avery*, washing and combing her short, knotty hair, swooning over her thin long limbs and dark black skin. She plays with *Shug Avery* as if she were a doll or her baby *Olivia*.

Celie's nursing gradually wins her over from death and a bond is gradually forged between them. The relationship between *Celie* and *Shug* does have lesbian strains. In *The Color Purple* lesbianism is not a taboo- it is simply an expression of mutual want which helps women to be comfortable with their body and feel loved. Walker has approached the subject of "incest and black lesbianism as something natural and liberating."

All the life *Celie* suffered a lot first because of her Pa and then her husband whose attitude is mean or worst for his wife. He does not take care of anything. He does not do anything and the climax of the story comes when *Celie* discover that her husband has been stealing and hiding the letters that *Nettie* had been writing to her throughout the year. She is so infuriated that she takes a razor blade and is poised to kill him from behind, but *Shug* intervenes. She persuades *Celie* could not believe he was capable of taking away the only person that she loved and loved her back other than *Shug*.

In this way, all her life Celie suffered a lot in this male dominated society.

Gender and particularly social discrimination is also faced by *Celie's* sister, *Nettie*. When *Alphonso* (Pa) appears to be fed up with *Celie*, he starts eyeing her younger sister *Nettie*:

"He act like he can't stand me no more say I'm evil an always up to no good...I see him looking at my little sister. She scared but I say I'll take care of you with God help"

Tashi another character her duty is only to stay at home her mother and learn womanly duties. *Nettie* goes to Africa with the team of a black missionary and has an opportunity to understand the Africa culture and her own people at close quarters. Her experiences with the *Olinka* people reveal that universally women are treated as secondary people. "The *Olinka* do not believe girls should be educated."

In Olinka every female has to face the rite of female initiation and facial scarification.

Sofia is another black woman character who is strong physically and psychologically and is a perpetual reminder to *Celie* of what she has always lacked in her life. When *Sofia* Comes to meet *Celie* and *Mr._* one day, some seven to eight months pregnant and not too light skinned. *Mr._* does not approve of the marriage because a pretty girl like *Sofia* can control *Harpo*. He thinks negatively of her because of her unwed pregnancy, thinking Her an immoral, loose woman with poor sexual morals. He thinks women can use their Sexuality as a weapon. *Sofia* tells everything to *Harpo*. He marries *Sofia* in a small ceremony. After this *Harpo* to beat *Sofia*, then *Sofia* finally leaves *Harpo* because of the

way she is treated.

Shug Avery is another main character. she is blue singer and also the woman that *Mr._* whom she calls *Albert* longs for. she is his beloved. she is a woman that knows What she and gets it. *Alberst* describes her as manly. Although *Shug Avery* is independent and free spirited, she is not escaped from sufferings just like other black women.

Mary Agnes, who has a minor role in *The Color Purple*, also suffer a lot because of her gender. She is *Harpo's* new girlfriend and nick named *Squeak*, a woman like *Celie* who obeys her man's every command. She lives with *Harpo* and is moulded into the stereotyped role of a house wife. Deprived of her identity, she works and suffers mutely. when *Sofia* is caught by police, *Squeak* realizes that she is related to warden ;they are cousin. So she goes to jail to make *Sofia* free and she returns home beaten up, disheveled and raped by *Hodges*, the warden. As soon as he recognizes who she is, he forces her to undress and fornicate. He believes that as her cousin, he is justified in his vicious action.

Due to gender and color, *Mary Agnes* also suffers a lot till *Shug* and *Celie* discover her talents for singing. Her attempts to live a happy family life are not successful, but she ultimately understands the value of possessing selfhood. When *Harpo* is reluctant to let her go to *Memphis* she assertively identifies her need and wants it to be fulfilled.

In this way all the black women suffer due to their gender as well as color. The subject of the book is that of abusive men and oppressed women. This is pertaining to the overall theme, which is the self destruction of the black community in the times when they should have been united against the common evil of the discriminative white man. The author uses characterization to illustrate this theme. All of the major characters are oppressed black women. They suffer oppression from the men in their families and furthermore their husbands. The white men in society oppress the black men; in turn, Instead of coming home and rejoicing in the wonders of family life the black men depicted in the story come home and physically, mentally, verbally and spiritually abuse their women. This is the vicious cycle, which goes on throughout most of the story.

The solution *Walker* proposes in *The Color Purple* is for women of the black community to bond; and if this entails a relationship that is of a lesbian nature, the reader must be sufficiently perspicacious to see beyond the surface. The characters in *The Color Purple*, especially *Shug* and *Celie*, succeed in creating a bond among themselves which engenders individual expression while providing mutual support. Such a relationship provides protection from male violence and cruelty, while also allowing women to apprise the world through a perspective beyond that imposed upon them by men. It also liberates women from the isolation that is enforced upon them in heterosexual relationship. The lesbian relationship and homosexual affective bond between women that perforce eliminates the presence of men, is an act of rebellion against the patriarchal cultural order, and also the sole means, for women scarred by men, to find someone who will love and cherish them and whom they will love and cherish.

It is only with *Shug* that *Celie* first consummates a satisfying and reciprocally loving relationship. It is only when *Celie* meets *Shug* and escapes from *Albert*, she learns that women can be equal to men in power, in knowledge, and in matters of love and finance. It is her love for *Shug* that enable *Celie* to bury her sad double narrative of paternal origins and construct a new identity within a feminine domain. When *Celie* returns to live in *Georgia* near the end of the novel, she is no longer weak and submissive, instead, she has become a competent, self-assured female who knows she can be contented without depending on anyone but herself.

Alice walker has made the purpose of her writing quite clear, "I am pre-occupied with the spiritual survival, the survival Wholw of my people. But beyond that I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women."

The Color Purple fully exhibits this concern, as it explores not only the effect of sexism and racism ,but also the black women's determination to overcome these barriers and emerge unscathed and whole ultimately. All the women characters of the novel exhibits this determination and attain a state of autonomous selfhood defying and overcoming

their dilapidated and opprobrious state in order to live a purposeful life. That's why the protagonist of the novel *Celie* is able to assertively state her identity,

"I'm pore, I'm black. I may e ugly and can't cook... But I'm here. " Alice walker, herself stated about her novel, " Let's hope people can hear *Celie's* voice. There are so many people like *Celie* who make it, who come out of nothing. People who triumph."

Through different stages of *Celie's* life Walker has underlined the fact that despite their odious circumstances the black women are able to raise their collective voice against the casuist patriarchal order and attain an autonomous state. This idea is supported by the other women character of the novel too. *Shug* and *Sofia* defiantly oppose all oppressive designs of gender and racial discrimination, *Nettie* conquers the advers circumstances of her life through courageous action and self-reliant *Mary Agnes*. All these women gradually redefine themselves with their own effort and with help of other women. Through these characters Walker has epitomized the realities of the lives of the black women and registered a vociferous protest against the debilitating sexism of the patriarchal society.

The Color purple placed Walker among the most important contemporary American writers and made her a literary celebrity. Presented in an epistolary style, the novel traces thirty years in the life of *Celie*, a poor southern black women who is victimized physically and emotionally by both her stepfather, who sells the two children she bears him. *Celie* is eventually placed into a loveless marriage with *Albert*, a widower whom she addresses as "Mister", and who for the next three decades subjects her to beating and psychological torment. *Celie* writes letters describing her ordeal to God and to her sister *Nettie*, who escapes a similar fate by serving as a missionary in Africa, *Celie* eventually finds solace through her friendship and love for *Albert's* Mistress, *Shug Avery*, a charismatic blues singer who helps to gain self esteem and the courage to leave her marriage.

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker was bitter and defiant about the injustices visited on her race and her sex: that tone made her book effective, and made it possible for readers who suffered injustice to identify with it, whatever their sex and race.

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