

FEMINISTIC AND RACIAL CONCERNS IN ALICE WALKER'S "THE COLOR PURPLE"

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Abstract:

In the novel The Color Purple, Alice Walker has carried out a vivid portrait of her views regarding the hardships, bitterness subjugation and exploitation that African American women had to face in the early 1900's. Walker's story is fraught with very powerful and emotional experiences such as rape, the oppression of women, physical abuse, and prejudice. Her novel also explores the truth about men and women, blacks and whites. The novel is presented in an epistolary form and demonstrates the metamorphosis of a weak, black, mentally, physically and spiritually abused black girl into an independent strong woman.

Keywords: *Feminism, racism, dominate, suffering, superior, community.*

Introduction

Feminism is an oppression that fights for the rights of women. In the novel there is also a group of American-African women who struggle for the rights but they find that race and religion is not separated from this. Both American and African men and women faced the oppression of race, class and ethnicity. The difference between the two is determined by cultural fact such as language and culture while race is characteristics such as skin color, face and hair style etc. from the view of race and class it shows that in the American society the feminism is different with black women or white women. The elements of racism can be found in abundance in The Color Purple. In a letter to Celie by Nettie, the latter describes the fickle handedness of so called whites. While travelling to New York the blacks had to ride in the sit down sections of the train, there were beds on the trains and a restaurants! And toilets, but only white people can ride in the beds and use the restaurants! They had different toilets for the colored." (121)

Meaning and rise of feminism

Feminism is the belief that women should be treated same as the men. She must be *allowed* the same rights, powers and opportunities as men. The term 'feminism' was coined by Charles Fourier in 1837. Fourier was the supporter of women's rights, he believed that all important jobs should be opened to women on the basis of skill and aptitude rather than closed on account of gender. "No one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility." (Second Sex, www.goodreads.com)

Many people believe that feminism means to degrade and hate men and wanting women to rule everything. Feminism simply means believing that men and women are equal, neither is better than the other- everyone should be treated as equal. As everyone knows women face more inequalities than men. For many years, females have been seen as being weaker human beings both mentally and physically than men. Her "wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly." (The *Second Sex*, www.goodreads.com). From the earliest years of ancient times, women's status was defined by their relationship to men. They did not have identity of their own. A woman was always kept in second place to the man never

the first. Early Roman law described women as children, forever inferior to men. According to early Greeks woman's role was to be only a wife, cut out only for the sake of men, reducing them to a status of some possession.

The feminist movement has brought drastic changes in the society, including women's suffrage, greater access to education, more equitable pay with men, the right to initiate divorce proceedings, the right of women to make individual decisions regarding pregnancy.

Women have proved their mettle and have many a time been able to manage to display greater strength and courage as compared to men. We have so many examples of famous female personalities, who not only proved themselves as stronger but also more intellectual. For instance, Margaret Hilda Thatcher, the prime minister of the United Kingdom from 1979 to 1990, has been the longest serving British Prime Minister of the 20th century. A Soviet journalist dubbed her the "Iron Lady".

Black Feminism and Womanism in "The Color Purple"

In the novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker has carried out a vivid portrait of her views regarding the hardships, bitterness subjugation and exploitation that African American women had to face in the early 1900's. Walker's story is fraught with very powerful and emotional experiences such as rape, the oppression of women, physical abuse, and prejudice. Her novel also explores the truth about men and women, blacks and whites. The novel is presented in an epistolary form and demonstrates the metamorphosis of a weak, black, mentally, physically and spiritually abused black girl into an independent strong woman. Celie the protagonist, presents her story first being as a child of fourteen and then as a young married woman. Celie writes the first of the novel's 90 letters to God. In her first letter to God she reveals her age. Celie was impregnated by her own father at the age of 14. As a child she does not even know the literal meaning of the word pregnant. Her two children were sold by her father. Celie expresses her experience thus: "I'm big. I can't move fast enough. By the time I got back from the well, the water be warm. By the time I git the tray ready the food be cold." (4)

After the death of Celie's mother, she describes how her father's lust increased day by day. He got married with "another girl of my age, and Pa has now his eyes on Nettie." (5) A woman suffers a lot in this man constructed world. A female is just considered to be a thing, a toy with whom a man can have sex, play with and throw away. Celie gets married to a man double of her age having four children. Again as female she becomes the prey of male's lust in the form of her husband. She admits she could never enjoy physical love either with her husband or with 'Pa'. She just finds that it is her duty to satisfy the eros of her Pa and her husband. 'Mr.' never allows Celie to talk with her sister Nettie. The only light of hope that comes into Celie's life is the arrival of Shug Avery. The two women become involved in intimate relationship. They both share the same love with each other that they both were lacking.

Having found no satisfactory love from any male, Celie seeks to find all that love and emotions in Shug Avery. A person always needs someone to love with. Many years later, Celie comes in contact with her sister Nettie. She finds all the letters which were sent by Nettie to her. Now Celie escapes away from the brutal life with her husband. She also learns from Nettie that she and her children are coming from Africa to find her. Her whole life's suffocation comes to an end with the arrival of her sister Nettie and her own lost children.

Aspects of Racism

The term "Racism" implies the supposed superiority of one race over another that causes discrimination and prejudice. Racism has existed in all areas and at all times where different races or cultures of human have encountered each other. Nelson Mandela, the former President of South Africa, comments on racism: Racism is blight on the human conscience. The idea, that people can be inferior to others, to the point where those who consider themselves superior define and treat the rest as sub-human, denies the humanity even of those who elevate themselves to the status of gods.

Another predominant motif of *The Color Purple* is largely the concept of Racism in the black

women's struggle for independence. The novel deals not only with racism of whites towards the black, but also about the racism within the same country. Celie was always mistreated by her own black community because of her ugliness. She was the victim of racism in her own house. First, being the fatality of her father and then her husband. Celie's real father was killed because he was so successful in a world in which only whites were allowed to succeed. The novel takes place in two distinct settings- rural Georgia and a remote African village; both were having the problems of race and racism. Sofia was the prey of violence; she refused to be a maid to the whites. A black was not allowed to say no to the whites. The following conversation between Miss Millie and Sofia has a strong element of racism: Miss Millie to Sofia, would you like to work for me, be my maid?

Sofia say, Hell no.

She says, what you say?

Sofia say, Hell no. (81)

To say no to white community meant that black people's rest life would be a hell. After saying no, "Sofia was arrested, police cracked her skull, and they cracked her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swelled from head to foot." (82) Being so rebellious and equality lover person like Sofia, becomes a puppet in the hands of Whites. After being sent to prison Sofia yells to Celie in one of their meetings that every time the jail authority asked me to do something. "Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and just what they say." (83)

Racism has its deep roots in the psychology of white people. According to them, whites should have each and everything that the blacks have, although the people of white community are in a poor status. To be white means you should surpass each and every rich black person. This becomes the necessity for Mayor to have her wife a new car because she said if colored could have cars then whites must have their own. The biggest curse of Sofia's life was to say no to a white couple. She was not even allowed to see her children for five years. Sofia, suffered from racial prejudice a lot. At every step Sofia was made to realize the supposed inferiority of her race. Colored people could not share the same seat in whites' car. Once Sofia was asked by Millie "Have you ever seen a white person and a colored sitting side by side in a car"? (97)

The elements of racism can be found in abundance in *The Color Purple*. In a letter to Celie by Nettie, the latter describes the fickle handedness of so called whites. While travelling to New York the blacks had to ride in the sit down sections of the train, there were beds on the trains and a restaurants! And toilets, but only white people can ride in the beds and use the restaurants! They had different toilets for the colored." (121)

Sofia after fighting back against the genteel racism of the mayor and his wife ends up serving as maid to that family and as surrogate mother to Eleanor. In general, a very few paths were opened and available to the African Americans in the novel. For black men farming is the main occupation although Harpo manages to open a bar. For women, it seems to be possible to serve as a mother and to perform for a living while giving their hands in agriculture or to sing like squeak and Shug Avery do. Whatever Celie faced in her life in American South, all things mirrored in the life of her sister Nettie, in African culture. In both worlds, women are considered inferior and therefore are subservient to the males surrounding them. This custom was very much prevalent throughout the world at the time of *The Color Purple's* 1953. In both cultures, women were the primary caretakers of their children and their homes. The men or husbands were essentially the owners and dictators of their wives. The women would act as a sexual partner, mother and take of their children.

The one major difference occurred between the two worlds respectively Celie's world and Nettie's was that Olinkan women worked while the majority of American women at the time of the story didn't. *The Color Purple* differentiates between two cultures. The way Tashi's mother, Catherine is treated after the death of her husband is strange. She was treated as an "honorary man" because of the fact that she had so many male children. With this title, Catherine had no obligation to re-marry; she was exempted from the

obligation of remarriage with another man. This makes one culture different from another culture. In American culture the women were not exactly forced to remarry if their husbands would die. It may have been expected of them to resume the role of mother and wife with another man, but it was not obligatory.

Interrelations in both cultures

Apart from many differences there were similarities between the two cultures concerning gender roles. At the time of novel's setting, African American children were not allowed same rights to get education as Caucasian children were. In Olinka's tribe female children were not to be put through schools the way male children were. The thoughts and feelings of Olinka people are depicted in one of the letters of Nettie to Celie. Olinka's don't believe in imparting the education to their females. When Nettie asks Tashi's father about the education of girls, Tashi's father replies that there is no place for women to have important careers. While in Africa, when Nettie asks an Olinkan women why they don't choose their daughters for education, the women responds "only to her husband can (a woman) become something" and she goes on speaking that she can become "the mother of his children. These remarks are considered to be the literal thinking that Olinkan women are meant to be mothers and nothing else that they would enjoy. Nettie informs Tashi's father about his daughter's intelligence and the great career she could pursue, he immediately responds "there is no place for women to do those things". (142) This shows how the Olinkans minds are preoccupied with the idea that women should not have the same careers as men have. In Nettie's another letter to Celie, she writes about the similar thinking of men everywhere. Nettie writes "there is a way that the men speak to women that reminds me too much of 'pa'. They don't even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads towards the ground. The women also don't look in a man's face as they say. To look in a man's face is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? Again it is our own behaviour around pa." (146) so, the plight of women was all the same all over the world. They were treated more as commodities than as real human beings.

In Celie's childhood the common beating of her by her father and in her youth beating by Albert just in order to dominate her, both help to contribute to the Sexist settings of the book. In her early years Celie still reminds the day when her father catches her eying a boy and when she goes home, Celie writes in her letter to god that "she don't even look at men's", and then says she does look at women "cause (she's) not scared of them". (7) This demonstrates the fear of being a girl in a male dominated society, where a girl has no right even to look at the men. Through the examples of female sufferings inflicted by men, Walker throws light upon people of narrow mental horizon and the stereotypes cast upon people, and the attitudes of the Olinka's people, Walker talks about the predominantly sexist settings in *The Color Purple*.

Dominance of Male Characters

Throughout the novel the attitude of superiority is deeply rooted in the male characters that they are so blind in their own fantasy world of domination that they come to the point of being tormenters for women. For instance: "Harpo as his daddy why he beat me (Celie). Mr. Say, cause she my wife". (23)

Harpo gets married to his girlfriend, Sofia, and thinks of the same dominancy as his father does with Celie. Harpo mistakenly thinks of establishing the same dominance over Sofia as his father has over Celie. Harpo thinks that he can make his wife Sofia obey him by beating her and believes it is his right to do so. When Mary Agnes helps to get Sofia out of a prison, her white uncle thinks that he has an absolute right to extract payment from her in the form of sex. Walker tried to explore the basic male nature towards the females. Females for men are merely the subject of domination and physical pleasure, race does not matter, a black as well as a white both have the same mind-set. Nettie's narrative section mirrors the American patriarchal system. The men of Olinka tribe regard women as worthless assets. They endorse the ritual of female genital mutilation which literally marks girls as male's possession, prohibiting them of enjoying any sexual relationship when they are given in marriage to their father's choice of partners.

The novel *The Color Purple* also challenges the traditional male female roles with depiction of

gender role reversals. The relationship between Harpo and Sofia is the perfect e.g. of it. Sofia does all masculine works that are considered to be important only for males. She works so very hard in the fields. On the other hand Harpo does all the domestic activities like females do. Harpo works include looking after the children, cleaning, cooking etc. Celie's, business enterprise, making trousers for women, is a declaration of equality, although sewing is regarded as traditionally feminine in nature.

Woman's Courage and independence

The crux of the novel is Celie's liberation via her relationship with Shug Avery. Many of the women characters in the narrative are weak when isolated, but become bold and confident when they work together and fight for their rights. The first step towards the equality is to leave behind the intolerable situation, which Shug encourages Celie to do. Through this encouragement Celie proves to be an independent and happy woman at the end of the novel. Shug Avery is not typically a submissive woman, nor a victim, but an independent and capable person- she is, in fact, an embodiment of Walker's term "Womanism". Shug breaks off the traditional conventions about sexual love. She uses masculine phraseology and expresses sexual desires in a particular way, as a bisexual. She even teaches Celie, how to love your own body, self-love and self-care. Walker popularize the term and makes it a phrase that every woman, with the help of other women, can learn to love herself.

There are numerous female characters in *The Color Purple* who are known for their valour, courage and independent nature. Celie, Shug, Sofia and Mary Agens triumph through their own efforts. With the help of Shug and Sofia, Celie finally manages to find the courage to defend herself from the cruel treatment she suffered throughout her life, first in her pa's home and after in her husband's home. Celie leaves her marital home to begin a new life in Memphis. In Memphis, Celie's trousers making business, as well as her courage to wear garments that are traditionally meant for males only, symbolises the equality of men and women. While having male clothing on her body Celie celebrates her own masculinity and sewing trousers for everyone soon becomes the most important activity in her life. She writes in one of her letters to Nettie: "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, and I got friends and time. And you alive and be home soon, with our children." (194)

Celie attains financial independence; she no longer needs to be dependent on a male to provide for her. Ironically, the business of sewing, in fact, brings Celie and Albert into a better understanding of one another, with Albert acknowledging the skills and creativity of women which he used to deny in the beginning. Every female character of the novel succeeds in gaining own identity. Both Celie and Nettie move from a tag of slavery at the beginning to liberty at the end. Both find the power of self-expression: Nettie as a wife, and teacher and Celie as a successful businesswoman, who doesn't need a husband anymore to fulfil the desire of her life, Sofia is given the freedom to live the life according to her own.; Whilst Mary Agens develops her own career rather than being tied to domesticity and male requirements.

Walker concludes her novel with a smile on every character's face. Celie thanks everyone" Dear God. Dear Stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear people. Dear everything. Dear God. Thank you for bringing my sister Nettie and our children home" (259). The novel emphasises the Walker's idea that every African American women, with the help of other women, can become a 'womanist' and learn to love her. If this is possible then mutual understanding and reconciliation between males and females is also possible.

Through the in-depth analysis of the novel '*The Color Purple*' it is evidently clear that Alice Walker has been able to assert herself as a staunch champion of feminism. As she has portrayed massive transformation that central protagonist Celie undergoes. Beginning from her tormenting journey of mental and physical mutilation, Celie is able to generate love, mental and physical strength, and fights against the patriarchal setup and thus redeem herself. Racism is another key concern of the novel, portrayed in a highly touching manner by the author. Some hints of changes as per as interracial hatred is concerned is manifested. Finally, the author is able to deliver a message of universal harmony and peace not withstanding with color, class, race, sex and gender etc.

Conclusion

Alice Walker's novel *Color Purple* has a great role for black feminism and racism. While analyzing the black female sexuality, it is necessary to acknowledge how gender and race are linked. To examine the novel *Color Purple*, we find sexuality blind oppression of race class and gender together. Male character dominates the females in the novel. However there are strong character of woman in the novel and there is a change in the story. The *Color Purple* is a great example of feminism and racism for us. To conclude Walker's award winning novel it shows that woman dominated by man in every part whether by father or other. Apart from this Celie is a good example of braveness who works freely and declare her independent. Along with feminism, racism has also a great impact in the novel. If we talk about the main themes in the novel, these are like racism, womanism, religion and violence etc. But the main aim to this study is to know and explore the element of racism and feminism in the novel "*The Color Purple*".

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