

Struggle and Liberation Towards Selfhood: Reading Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*

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It goes without saying that through centuries women have always been relegated to a subordinate status as a result of the oppressive patriarchy that governs all societies across the world. Legal, economic and social restrictions on the basic rights of women have existed throughout history and in all civilizations. Women have been debarred from their basic rights on the basis of gender. Oppression against women is to be found for example, in the legal system, such as unequal labour, marriage, and divorce laws. More pervasive are the widespread attitudes about women's proper and natural duties and the proper or natural relations between the sexes. From childhood onwards, social beliefs and attitudes reinforce women's inferior status. Some of these are stereotyping in text books, unequal pay for equal work and the traditional division of labour within the family. The social institutions supported by cultural values and normative expectations force women into an unreasonably narrow role. Consciously or unconsciously almost everyone cooperates in this oppressive socializing or 'conditioning'. Parents, teachers, toy manufacturers and writers of children's books encourage girls to be 'feminine'. Such pernicious effect of socialization make women suppresses the greater part of their potential. As a result her individual self has very little recognition and self effacement is the only course left to her.

Feminism, as a philosophy of life, seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep rooted causes of women's oppression. As a philosophy of reform it envisages profound changes in traditional social structures such as the family, in economic role and power of women, and finally in fundamental attitudes and personal relationships, leading to a just social order. Feminism may be described as a movement that seeks the reorganization of the world based upon a basis of equality in human relations. It has been termed as a movement that looks to reject all differences between individuals upon the ground of sex that would abolish all sex privileges and sex burdens. Feminism strives to dismantle all systems of domination thereby setting up the recognition of the common humanity of woman and man.

Feminist literary criticism developed as a component of the women's movement of the 1960s

bringing into close focus the issues of the 'otherness' and 'marginality'. Feminists brought to literature a suspicion of established ideas which made their approach truly revolutionary. They were interested in literature as a powerful means of creating and perpetuating belief systems.

Feminist writers today examine the experiences of women from all races and classes and cultures. Their writings are marked by a strong sense of attempting to expose patriarchal premises and the resulting prejudices. There is no doubt that many a time in the stock woman characters emerging from male writings the essence of a real woman is being presented in a marginalized way and their innermost qualities are relegated to the background. It is in the writings of women alone; that the deep personal inner thoughts of a woman seem to be unfurled. The focus of this present paper is to present one such American writer Alice Walker and her representation of the conflicts and tribulations of a black American woman. The paper will attempt a reading of Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* and in the process analyze the process of liberation of the main protagonist- Celie as she struggles to find freedom from oppression and brutality. The novel conceptualizes Celie's suffering in terms of the entire history of the Afro - Americans. She is in fact doubly marginalized- on the basis of her race and gender. Celie's suffering is a consequence not of her behavior but of her subject position unequivocally stated by Mr. 'You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam he say, you nothing at all' (Walker 187). These categories of race, class and gender condemn Celie to a life of depravation and exclusion. However amidst all the conflict and subjugation that she experiences Celie survives both in body and spirit. The present paper will attempt to chronicle that journey of liberation and of self fulfillment as Celie discovers the power and joy of her own spirit and self. The paper will be analytical in nature and secondary sources like text books, references, and internet sources will be consulted.

Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* published in 1982 and winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 is an epistolary novel and the entire work is in the first person form of letters. The novel chronicles the journey of a young illiterate black girl Celie in the years between the wars. Celie's childhood is replete with violence, poverty and brutalisation. She starts writing letters to God which begin with her self-erasure, crossing out the words 'I am' (Walker 3) as she recounts how she was raped by her father at the age of fourteen. She addresses God and confides about all that is happening in her traumatic life. In the second part her letters are addressed to her beloved sister Nettie. This epistolary technique as used by the author does more than revealing the plot, it is a deliberate ploy used to reflect the growth and emancipation of the main protagonist. It is significant that in the beginning Celie's letters are addressed to God as she is too traumatised with fear to write to any living person. Her father has forbidden her to confide to anyone consequently the only person she can write to is God. Moreover in the initial stages she doesn't even sign her name, another indication of her low self esteem.

The novel begins with Celie's first letter to God stating that she is just fourteen and yet already burdened with cooking, cleaning and caring for a multitude of brothers and sisters because of her mother's failing health. In addition she is pregnant the second time as a result of her father's sexual advances. She abhors her father's cruel ways but she knows that by submitting to

him she is going to spare her sick mother from his torture. She tells God about her mother that 'she happy' (Walker 3) as sickness is preferable to her husband's brutality. Her subsequent letters reveal that after her mother's death she is left all alone to face her father. She finds that her father has started making advances towards her younger and prettier sister Nettie. Towards the end only the truth is revealed that the man whom she and Nettie considered as their biological father is in fact their step father. She tries her best to protect her sister from her father's advances. She is later forced into a loveless marriage arranged by her stepfather with a widower with four children and is regularly beaten and raped by her husband. Mr _ her husband (Albert) gives an explanation as to why he beats his wife

'... cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All woman good for - he don't finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa'(Walker, 23)

In this stage of the novel Celie simply endures all the violence against her. In one of her letters she says that she pretends that she is like wood, a tree bending but not breaking. This psychology works in her aid and she writes, '...Celie, you a tree. Thats how come I know trees fear man' (Walker 23) . She survives for a long time in this manner but fortunately her encounters with three exceptional women convince her that it is not enough to simply endure but to break free and live life on her terms. In the process she learns to fight and confront all who torture her. In fact one of the most significant aspects of the novel is the portrayal of the intricate mosaic of women joined by their love for each other.

One of the important figures who support Celie and give her mental strength is Sofia, an independent young woman married to Harpo, the oldest of Celie's stepson. Interestingly because she herself is a product of a male-dominated culture with no mother or protector, Celie exhibits a forced hopelessness and a misogynistic attitude toward women. In fact, she has been abused so much by her father, and husband that she tells Harpo to beat Sofia. Sofia learns about this and comes to confront Celie. When Sofia asks Celie why she advised Harpo to beat her she says,

I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't.

What that ? she say.

Fight. I say

She stand there a long time, like what I said took the wind out her jaws. She mad before, sad now. (Walker 39)

This scene of confrontation between the two women ironically leads to an enduring friendship and sisterhood that helps Celie in healing her wounds, The two woman create a quilt together symbolic of strong bonding that lasts a lifetime. Just as scraps of cloth are sewn together to form a quilt so can women from different backgrounds and stations come together in a similar way to form new friendships. Much later in life when Sofia punches the white town mayor and lands up in prison it is Celie who helps her along with Shug and Squeak. It is from Sofia that Celie learns that it is possible to fight against the gender discrimination that relegates women to a subordinate position.

The second significant character responsible for Celie's liberated spirit is the glamorous blues singer Shug Avery. Totally besotted by her Celie cannot imagine that someone as beautiful as Shug Avery exist in the bleak and unhappy world that she lives in. As a young girl when she first sets her eyes on a photograph of Avery, Celie is mesmerised by her appearance. Fate brings her closer to Avery as her husband brings home Avery who is very sick on the verge of death. . She has no qualms about the fact that she is her husband's mistress and instead of bearing any grudge she lovingly nurses her back to health. On her part Avery is grateful for the love and nursing and a bond of sisterhood develops between the two women.

Shug Avery's presence in Celie's house instil a sense of self confidence in her. Avery is a spirited, fiery tempered woman with a fighting spirit who refuses to be beaten into submission in any situation. She fights with Albert when he refuses permission to let Celie accompany them to hear Avery sing, she composes a song in Celia's name and sings it in public and most significantly Celie becomes aware that Avery flaunts all the gender roles that a woman is supposed to adhere to.

That when I notice how Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl you look like a good time. Woman always talk bout hair and health. How many babies living or dead, or got teef. Not bout how some woman they hugging on look like a good time. (Walker 77)

The love that Celie has for her sister Nettie is another important force that helps Celie in her struggles. Nettie is another inspiring figure for Celie throughout the novel. Since the day Nettie forced by circumstances flees from home Celie has struggled with an unbearable loss and pain. However the deep, fierce unflinching love for Nettie makes her believe that Nettie is still alive somewhere. Later with the help of Shug Avery Celie discovers that Albert has hidden all of Nettie's letters from her to make her believe that she was either dead or never wrote to her. This realization of Albert's cruelty towards her makes her erupt and revolt. She finds the strength to leave him and goes away to Memphis to start a new commercial enterprise with Shug the woman she loves.

Celie's liberation has not come in an easy manner. In this journey the presence of the three women, Sofia, Shug and Nettie play a vital role in building her self confidence and self esteem. Celie starts realizing her own worth and refuses to give in to the oppression associated with her sexual identity as well as racial identity This strength comes through the acts of creative discovery and self affirmation that Celie discovers within herself. When Celie is recounting the story of her first rape by her father to Avery she mentions that it took place while she was cutting hair and she also tells Shug that cutting hair was an activity that gave her immense pleasure. This creative impulse finds a different outlet following her association with Sofia as both women start quilting . It is a new creative experience which binds the two women together socially in response to the violence of men. This eventually leads to sewing 'Folkpants' the redemptive imaginative and financially successful venture in Memphis that transforms Celie to a successful business woman.

There is no doubt that the role model for Celie in her creative endeavour has been Shug Avery whose independence and power derives from her creative singing talent. Her singing gives her the authority and self esteem that Celie lack in the initial stages of the novel. In the novel however it is not just Celie who finds liberation. Harpo's mistress called Squeak also rises above the limitations of race and gender and reclaims an identity of her own like Shug through her singing. The author makes it clear that it is the creative acts and impulses which help the women in the novel realise their Self.

Creativity is undoubtedly affirmative and assertive that give women the strength to not only bear but fight back. Closely associated with creativity lies also the power of realizing sexual fulfilment. Shug teaches Celie self confidence partly by example but primarily by instructing her about sexual fulfilment. Celie's discovery of her sexuality is crucial in understanding her own value as a person and her sexual relationship with Shug Avery is a liberating and empowering one. Creativity and sexuality are intimately connected as they are both deeply personal and self affirmative. No wonder when Celie starts making Folkpants she writes, 'every stitch I sew will be a kiss' (Walker 193).

One may consider Celie's liberation as complete when she finds her own voice and curses Albert, 'until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble' (Walker 187). Through her voice of protest Celie has asserted her Self. In the end, reunited with her sister and her two children (whom she thought were dead) she finds in herself the strength to forgive Albert who significantly participates in Celie's sewing and contributes to Folkspants thereby illustrating his own redemption and overcoming the strict gender roles of his upbringing where sewing is discouraged as woman's work. Celie has not only overcome all the conflicts of gender, race and class but more significantly claimed a sense of joy that she never realized was possible. Her transformation is clearly visible in the orientation of her letters- Her initial letters without her signature addressed to God, then to Nettie with the confidence of asserting her name to the final letter which is addressed to God, the stars, the trees, the sky, 'peoples' and 'everything' is a significant marker of Celie's spiritual joy.- her world is now so big that she can accommodate the whole world. She delights in the world and is a part of it, overcoming all kinds of conflict she has found her true self.

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