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Sisterhood in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Sisterhood in *The Color Purple* is one of the motivating forces in this novel. It is this solidarity of each woman for the other that gives strength to each character involved. The black women's voice did not exist when Walker wrote this novel. She gave voice to the struggle of black woman and her message was that despite the difficulties of life, black women can triumph over all obstacles. The women in *The Color Purple* are strong characters that use their bond of friendship to overcome the harsh realities of racism, sexism and maltreatment. Celie, Sophia, Squeak, Shug & Nettie all overcome the obstacles put forth to them by using their friendship to comfort each other. *The Color Purple* affirms the survival and freedom of black women through strength and wisdom of others. It is through this bond of sisterhood that they experience love, acceptance, spiritual guidance, and support against a very cruel and oppressive life. Celie nearly struggled for everything her whole life. When she was only a little girl, her stepfather sexually abused her. He then sold her to a man named Mr. ____ who had no intention of loving her. If Celie refused, she was punished severely. Through all these traumatizing events, Celie lost respect for herself and forgot how to love. However, Celie met a woman named Shug who gave her the courage to fight for what she believed in. Shug taught her how to laugh and play and showed Celie a whole new perspective of life. Shug constantly reminded Celie to speak out if something was bothering her and to not do anything that she did not feel like doing.

The depiction of various women characters reveals what Walker means by womanism in *The Color Purple*. Three women in *The Color Purple* - Nettie, Sofia, and Shug particularly go beyond strict southern definitions of Black womanhood. Nettie's education allows her to escape into the larger world, to become a missionary. "Stout and bouncy"(Walker 1982: 84) Sofia demonstrates "feisty refusal to be controlled by anyone-by whites, regardless of sex, or by men, regardless of race"(Gloria 1990: 317). In her relationships with Harpo, her husband, she boldly transcends gender boundaries, working in the field while Harpo takes care of the domestic chores. They are quite happy until Harpo's socially determined desire to dominate Sofia causes them to fight "like two mens" (Walker 1982: 39), and then leads to their long separation. But in the end, Harpo and Sofia make their peace, fully accepting each other, regardless of gender conventions.

Notably, the women characters in the novel - Celie, Nettie, Shug, Sofia, Mary Agnes – are bound together by a close sisterhood. In fact, Celie's development into a strong and independent person becomes possible because of this sisterhood. Walker portrays this network of women as being the core of African American racial survival. "Sister's choice" is the pattern of the quilt Celie and Sofia choose; and this quilt is a symbol of the "female bonding that restores the women (even brutalized Celie) to a sense of completeness and independence" (Gloria 1990: 320). Women's quilting functions as a way of creating female community in a world that represses female expression. Significantly, quilts being a most

representative form of African American folk art, “embody the ideal of unity in diversity... The pieces of a quilt, like individuals in a pluralistic society, retain their original identities while functioning as parts of something else...” (Dieke 1999: 141). So, the process of quilting acquires a symbolic meaning. Celie overcomes passive victimization, as a consequence of her personal development, to build a pattern of her own choice out of the shattered fragments of her life. It is also significant that quilting techniques reflect a textile aesthetic which has been passed down for generations among women who are the descendents of Africans. Quilts, as Priscilla Leder has noted, “embody the ideal of unity in diversity which permeates Walker’s writings” (Leder 1999: 141). The irregular repetition of form, off-beat placement of pieces, inconsistent color schemes, and controlled sense of rhythmic movement in Afro-American quilts show an emphasis on improvisation. Thus, quilting in *The Color Purple* is a symbol of women’s bonding, creativity, and at the same time, a manifestation of African American folk culture, the elements of which are so masterfully incorporated into the novel’s structure and style.

The first signs of sisterhood can be seen in Celie and Nettie. The first and probably the most influential woman in Celie’s life is her sister Nettie. The two sisters live within a family where affection is totally absent. With a violent rapist father and a sick mother, Nettie provides Celie with moral comfort. When Nettie notices that Celie is frequently beaten by her husband, she urges her to fight him. She also urges her to fight Mr. ___’s children by teaching them a good lesson and letting them know who has the upper hand. Forced to be separated by Celie’s oppressive husband, Nettie before leaving encourages her to be active: “You got to fight. You got to fight”(Walker 1982: 18). Celie and Nettie promise each other to keep in contact through letters but Mr. - hides all the letters from Nettie and Celie’s only addressee (and hope) is God, so she writes to Him. However, her relationship with God doesn’t give her courage to adopt an active attitude and it’s 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” (Walker 1982: 22). To Celie, Nettie has always been like a teacher. She helps her sister with reading, spelling and everything she thinks Celie needs to know. No matter what kind of situation, Nettie never gives up any opportunity to inform Celie about what is going on in the world. In the short period of staying in Albert’s house with Celie, Nettie witnesses his brutality and knows clearly that Celie doesn’t have any hope if she continues with her submissiveness. So she tries hard to teach and enlighten Celie in every possible manner. This ability to read and write taught by Nettie enables Celie to pour out her bitterness to the absent God. It also enables Celie to read Nettie’s letters from Africa, which broadens her mind. However, to Celie, the most important and exciting news from Nettie is about her two children. From Nettie’s letter, Celie gets to know, for the first time, that her two children, whom she has lost when they were born, now stay with Nettie in Africa, leading a happy life and receiving good education. The good news of the two children provides Celie, a poor mother, with strong spiritual strength and enables her to survive in the especially hard time. Moreover, Nettie symbolizes hope in Celie’s life. Celie regards Nettie as the perfect model of a girl. She describes her to Shug:

Smart as anything. Read the newspapers when she was little more than talking. Did figures like they was nothing. Talked real well too. And sweet. There never was a sweeter girl. Eyes just brimming over with it. (Walker 1982: 123)

Nettie becomes a source of comfort for Celie in her harsh world. Although Celie has not heard from Nettie for years, she cherishes the hope that Nettie is still alive and they can meet

again someday. Celie, in turn, is of great help and support to Nettie. In absence of parental affection, she not only plays the role of a sister but also that of a substitute mother. She offers herself to her stepfather thus, protecting Nettie from being abused. Later, when the two sisters are separated from each other, this affectionate bond of sisterhood continues to tie them both providing them hope and strength.

Sofia Butler, Celie's step-son's wife, is another woman who becomes a model for Celie. "I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't. . . What that? She says. . . Fight. I say" (Walker 1982: 42). She is a fat woman with big legs. She grows up in a family of men and learns that only by fighting can she survive, "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers; I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (Walker 1982: 42). Unlike Sofia, Celie does not fight and keeps silent when she suffers from family violence. She even takes it for granted that men are superior to women. However, Sofia refuses to accept this unfair social rule and with her determination, refuses to be humbled by anyone in her life, whether black or white. She does not hesitate to say "hell no" to the mayor's wife's offer that she go to work as her maid, and knocks the mayor down after he slaps her. Sofia, with her rebellious spirit, acts as a significant influence and contributes to Celie's awakening. Celie's first meeting with Sofia happens when Sofia comes to ask Albert's permission for her marriage to Harpo. At first sight, Celie is surprised by Sofia's strong and confident appearance "She not quite as tall as Harpo but much bigger, and strong and ruddy looking, like her mama brought her up on pork" (Walker 1982: 32). When Albert rejects their request and even insults Sofia about her pregnancy, to Celie's astonishment, Sofia does not submit to him. She says to Harpo, "Naw, Harpo stay here. When you free, me and the baby be waiting"(Walker 1982: 33). Sofia's bravery moves Celie deeply for she is completely different from the image of woman Celie is familiar with. She gets married to Harpo regardless of their parents' objection. When Sofia learns that Celie always keeps silent except to tell God about her suffering, she gives her a suggestion, "to bash Mr. ___ head open, Think about heaven later" (Walker 1982: 44). Celie and Sofia become friends who rely on and help each other through the rest of the novel. Sofia makes Celie realise that women can be independent, strong and courageous, which ultimately paves the way for her new, free self.

But the great stimulus for Celie to adopt an active attitude is provided by Shug Avery, her husband's lover. Their relationship is a very special one since Shug gives Celie support to build her own independent self. Shug represents a "total flaunting of the society's prescribed roles for women" (Linda 1994: 127). In Celie's eyes, Shug Avery is the most beautiful woman she has ever seen. Celie first sees Shug's photograph:

She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like something tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motocar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some. (Walker 1982: 7)

Shug is not only beautiful, but worldly, strong, sensuous, and fiercely independent. The female bonding that ties Celie and Shug is totally different from the ones between Nettie or Sofia. She is first a friend to Celie, eventually a lover, but has always a subtly guiding "mothering" influence that, like the mothers of Walker's "generations", enables Celie to evolve into an independent woman, no longer ready to accept the conditions that have enslaved her. "Shug is friend, sister, teacher, preacher, comforter, and guardian angel...who teaches (Celie) a new song of herself" (Gloria 1990: 318). She helps remove the "terrible nothing" from Celie's life and teaches her how to laugh, how to speak her mind, how to see

herself as a woman deserving of love, how to love herself. Relevant to remember one of Walker's definitions of a "womanist" is that "(she) loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love...Loves struggle. Loves the folk. *Loves herself. Regardless*" (Walker 1983: xii). When Shug dedicates a song to Celie, Celie writes, "She says this song I'm about to sing is called Miss Celie's song (...) First time somebody made something and name it after me" (Walker 1982: 77). When Shug comes to know that Mr. _____ beats Celie when she is not at home, Shug says, "I won't leave...until I know Albert won't even think about beating you" (Walker 1982: 79).

When Shug helps Squeak sing, she remarks that her voice makes "folks git to thinking bout a good screw"(Walker 1982: 120). According to Shug, God loves when people are happy; and what can give a greater happiness than love? Physical love between Shug and Celie which generated so much criticism among critics can be, nevertheless, considered not as sexual liberation, but rather as "the total liberation of women"(Gloria 1990: 318). It is "simply an expression of love between two human beings who happen to be women"(Gloria 1990: 318). Indeed, love can only be a fulfilling experience when the "essentials of love are in place - trust, compassion, understanding, gentleness, and friendship" (Gloria 1990: 318-319). By listening to Celie's problems and stories, Shug enabled Celie to open up emotionally and release the pressure and pain that had muted her throughout her childhood and adulthood. As she writes in one of her letters, "My life stop when I left home, I think. But then I think again. It stop with Mr. _____ maybe, but start up again with Shug" (Walker 1982: 85). Her friendship with Shug becomes a lifetime union and comforts Celie throughout her struggles with both Mr. _____ as well as with the remembrances of her childhood hardships. Shug also helps her to find Nettie's letters and "wear the pants" literally and metaphorically and it is because of her and Nettie's letters that Celie is able to react and speak. She says, "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong.... It's time to leave you and enter into the creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need" (Walker 1982: 207). From this moment on, Celie is in control of her life and is able to abandon her husband and work - precisely sewing pants. Mr. _____ will try to intimidate her but now he won't be able to humiliate her. Mr. _____ replies, "Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly. You a woman. Goddam.... you nothing at all" (Walker 1982: 213). Celie answers back, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (Walker 1982: 214). Shug causes this psychological change by becoming the surrogate parent and child simultaneously. In a moment of passionate commitment, Shug fulfills the roles of all those who had failed to love Celie. Her love-making is a little like sleeping with mama. This newfound freedom makes them heal each other through their quilting. Walker talks about the interdependence of quilting and writing in her essay, "Writing *The Color Purple*." Quilting, an African-American tradition, leads to female bonding as women sit together and make quilts. The joint quilting which Celie does with Sofia, marks another phase of Celie's journey towards selfhood. Their quilt-making is a process of healing. When Celie is angry with Mr. _____, she wants to slit his throat with a razor; instead, she takes the needle and begins creating. She also tells him, "We all have to start us somewhere if we want to do better and our own self is what we have to find" (Walker 1982: 278).

Shug's spirituality, and her spiritual bonding with Celie, is of greater significance in Celie's life than the women's moments of physical pleasure. Shug is a "feeling, caring person connected to the universe" (Gloria 1990: 319). Shug's most important gift to Celie is a liberating definition of God and through this, a new concept of the world. This is especially relevant for Celie's metamorphosis. Celie learns to share Shug's conception of God as neither male nor female, black or white. Celie saw God in the beginning as white and male; this is

how she had conceived of him, “He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wears white robes and (has) ...bluish-gray eyes. White lashes” (Walker 1982: 201). Not only is he white (racist and sexist) in appearance, but in his attitudes, too:

...he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't see again. ... (He) is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown. (Walker 1982: 199)

Shug totally changes Celie's ideas about God. For her, God is present in all creation, “God is everything... Everything that is or ever was or ever will be” (Walker 1982: 202-03). God is not in the Church, Shug explains, “God is inside you and inside everybody God...beyond nature. The world is God. Man is God. So is a leaf or a snake...” (Walker 1983: 265), God is “in the color purple in a field somewhere” (Walker 1982: 203). Thus, Walker emphasizes the “unity and interconnectedness of all life - human, vegetable, animal” (Dieke 1999: 5) - which can be recognized as a holistic view of life. Significantly, in the end, Celie is able to address a letter of thanksgiving to this new God, “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God” (Walker 1982: 292).

Throughout *The Color Purple*, Walker portrays female friendships as a means for women to muster the courage to tell stories which, in turn, allow women to resist oppression and dominance. Relationships among women form a refuge, providing mutual love in a world filled with male brutality.

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