Voicing the Voiceless: A Study of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*

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Abstract

Throughout her writings Alice Walker highlights the issues pertaining to the lives of the black women and the strong bond of sisterhood which empower these once weak women by regaining their identity, inner strength and individuality. This paper attempts to explain how the female protagonist Celie in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* gradually liberates herself from fear, misery and oppression, along with a special emphasis on the black women’s life.

**Key Words:** Oppression, patriarchy, discrimination, subjugation

Women writers whether post colonial or not, have always been marginalized and excluded from literary canon. In a male dominated value system, their work has been undervalued. Alice Walker, best known as the author of *The Color Purple* vividly depicts sexism, racism, oppression and poverty rampant in life. Her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple* deals with the struggle, both in America and in Africa, of women to gain recognition as individuals who have a self and identity of their own, there by defying the exploitative and oppressive chains of a society dominated and constructed by male. All the women characters in the novel exhibits the determination of overcoming all kinds of oppression leveled upon them in order to live a meaningful life.

Alice walker portrays Celie’s experience of oppression in a male dominated society, her sexual abuse by her father and husband and how she successfully comes up from submission and oppression to a self realization and thereby attaining total freedom. *The Color Purple* articulates the struggles of black women in America. In her novels Alice Walker has projected her women as victims of violence, she projects a successful change from a victim to a successful women. Celie’s words “I‘m pore, I‘m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook…But I’m here.” is suggestive of the above words. The major concern of walker is black women. In an interview with John O’Brien: “I am preoccupied with spiritual survival, the survival of whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women.”

Black women are ruthlessly exploited and considered as mere objects intended only for male sexual gratification. Celie’s world was one of fear, despair, insecurity and loneliness, unspoken and unspeakable suffering, colorless dark and with no ray of hope or sunshine. From the very first chapter onwards Walker portrays a world of oppression and abuse of black girls and women. Walker tells story in the form of letters. Celie’s attitude about herself and about god is clearly visible through the letters which she writes to God to help her to survive the spiritual emotional and physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her step father. The experiences of the
black female protagonist, Celie are presented through her letters to God. Through her letters to God Celie the fourteen year old girl narrates her first experience of sexism, her father sexually abusing her.

Male dominance is always considered as a norm in such a society where Celie is abused. She is made to suffer by the man who she had for long believed to be her father. Her father’s words, “She ain’t fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice…” (9), shocks the readers. The horrifying account of the sexual abuse portrayed on the first page of the novel shows an androcentric culture which sees women as mere objects for sexual gratification. Her stepfather denies her the right for education, rapes her repeatedly and shatters her confidence. She is considered as ugly, dump and good for nothing. To save Nettie from an unpleasant relation she even becomes the wife of Mr. Albert. She wants to protect her sister from her father’s clutches and wants her to study and escape from the world of abuse and oppression. The female characters in the novel represent the collective consciousness of black women, the fear, pain and misery, their experiences, fortitude and hopes. Women in general are conditioned to a timid diffidence in their behavior and being black intensifies it.

As a close parallel to the victimized black women the land too is cultivated to the extreme in order to take maximum resources out of it. The felling of trees, like ancient giant mahogany trees and the destruction of the forest reveal how the land, “was forced to lie flat …and bare as the palm of his hand”. (The Color Purple 153). Man values nature or land only so far he can benefit out of it. So is the case with woman. Celie is defenseless and threatened and not in a position to share her feelings and trauma to another one other than God.

Her novels deal with the life of African Americans with a special emphasis on the black women’s life. The black women’s life is a journey from powerlessness to the state of empowerment and self realization and self recognition. Though Celie is considered as ugly and dull outwardly, she has an inner strength which allows her to protect her sister from evils that she has experienced. She finds no other way out rather than recording her experiences as letters addressed to God. “but I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive”. (17) Walker stresses the entrapment of black women, the interior colonization.

Though ill-treated by her step father and husband she always wished to be cared and loved. Her words, “I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and may be she like it. I put my arm around him” (13). She is beaten, cursed, beaten and humiliated simply because she is a woman. She silently suffers ever, Patriarchal society marginalizes women anything for he sake of being alive. Celie lives in a cocoon, surrendering to the male supremacy. Still she wants to analyse the reason for her suffering. Her first letter records this attempt.”May be you(God) can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (1). Her husband says “Cause she my wife. Plus she stubborn. (23).

Walker emphasizes the predicament of the black women through the portrayal of Celie. Even when her children were taken from her, she had to remain silent. “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” (3). Celie’s husband, a widower with four children considers her as a whore and as a slave. Her husband is presented as Mr – in Celie’s letters. Her continued exploitation increases her inner strength. Celie’s relationship with Sofia, Harpo’s wife brings about a huge change in her. Sofia is a constant reminder to Celie of the strength that she lacked. Sofia is able to escape gender discrimination by leaving her husband and her protest against sexual and racial exploitation is clearly portrayed in the novel. Sofia acts as a Catalyst in Celie’s understanding of herself.
Celie’s relationship with Shug Avery, a confident, glamourous, bold and beautiful women and the lover of her husband enhances her awareness of self, which enriched her and enabled her to have better faith in herself, and a courage to face the atrocities and to express her feelings. A bond develops between them. Celie’s lesbian relationship with her helped them to be comfortable with their body and feel loved. Women gaining strength through women is clearly depicted in The Color Purple. Shug and Sofia are considered as the strongest women who are ready to fight for their rights. Even Albert says,”You know Shug wil fight… Just like Sofia. She bound to live her life and be herself no matter what” (276).

Nettie has a strong desire within her to raise herself to a higher level so “All day she read, she study, she practice her handwriting and try to git us to think” (17).She goes to Africa with the team of a black missionary. She suffers racial and gender discrimination. But still works for the betterment of her people and dedicates herself fully to the work. Women in The Color Purple are oppressed, degraded to the level of mere objects by men. But still they with the help of other women are able to overcome the oppression leveled upon them.

The metaphor of collective effort and sisterhood is clearly portrayed. Celie draws strength from it and helps other women to gain inner strength. With the help of other women she starts stitching clothes and thus learns to manage her own life. The symbolism of color is very well used in the novel. Albert always insists Celie to wear brown or navy blue colored dresses which suggest oppression and never allowed her to wear red or purple, those colors which stands for happiness. Later on Celie reasserts her own individuality and likes and decorates her room with purple.

Shug and Celie believe that God has been made in the shape of white man who asserts his supremacy over the so called oppressed black people. Celie’s initial letters were addressed like “You should not better tell anyone but God” (10), which shows her dependence upon an external strength as she failed to believe her hidden strength and capacities. She regains her identity and later addresses her letters to her sister Nettie, feeling that God to whom she has been writing is a man who “acts just like all the other men I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown”. (199).Her spiritual journey is completed when she addresses, “Dear God, Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God” (92).

Oppression has been an issue that has affected human life for a very long time. A society based on cooperation and balance rather than dominance and hierarchy is necessary for survival on this planet and seeks to end all forms of oppression. Walker suggests the metaphor of sisterhood and collective effort and says that the efforts made by man to subjugate women can be stopped by the united efforts of women themselves. Celie gradually discovers the power and joy of her own spirit, freeing her from her past, reuniting her with those she loves by voicing against patriarchal order and thereby attains an autonomous state. Despite everything women are able to raise their voice against injustices and regain their inner strength and self hood. Alice Walker in the novel is thus preoccupied with the survival whole of her people and in exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women.
Works Cited: