

## BREAKING THE SILENCE FROM VOICELESS TO VOICED IN ALICE WALKER'S 'THE COLOR PURPLE'- A BUILDUNGSROMAN

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**Abstract:** Alice Walker's, "The Color Purple", portrays victimization and sexual oppression within the black race in a traditional patriarchal system. Her Novel not only depicts the negative machinations of female oppression, it also dramatizes the positive process of female character growth and liberation of Soul. Walker's "The Color Purple" is the epitome of Black female character's process of evolution. The novel illustrates the odyssey of a black woman who is sexually abused, verbally dominated and physically beaten for almost three decades. Despite of physical and mental exploitation the protagonist of the novel transcends her plight through self-awareness and attempts to scale the subtle and warm dimensions of womanist consciousness. Alice Walker enables the reader to travel into the private thoughts and emotional state of a tormented, traumatized and depressed fourteen year old protagonist, "Celie". Celie's struggle to explore her through language, finding her voice to break free from the shackles of class, race and sexual ideologies that she is subjected to, is rendered in a moving and innovative way. The Color Purple is a narrative of sexual confession and includes patriarchy, sisterhood, lesbianism and the individual's quest for self-realization. It is the story of incest, intraracial violence and abuse which drew a plethora of emotional responses from black communities as well as from black academics for its depiction of Afro-American social life. Written in epistolary form, the novel recounts the initially tragic life and ultimate triumph of Celie, who rises from an incest victim to lesbian love and entrepreneurship Celie's tale, charts the triumph of sheer will over oppressive forces, forces that would seem initially to be omnipotent and irresistible. Walker shows her heroine trapped in the whole range of possible oppressions. Male over female, black male over black female, dominates the structure of "The Color Purple" instead of White racism. Celie's story is an epistolary, first written to God and later to her sister Nettie. The novel is about the protagonist journey from self-abnegation to self-recognition.

**Keywords:** Oppression, Shackles, Class, Race, Sex, Voiceless, Voiced, Self-realization.

**Introduction:** Alice Walker is a prolific black American woman writer in the post 1950 era. She is a novelist, essayist, short fiction writer, biographer, lecturer and educator. Her focus on feminist issues within the black community as well as upon intraracial violence and oppression, places her in a category of writers willing to confront the difficult problems of communities in transition, their male/female and parent-child relationships, and to cajole their members to renew their faith in each other for the sake of community survival. Alice Walker's works are quilts -- bits and pieces of used material rescued from oblivion for everyday use. She takes seemingly ragged edges and arranges them into works of functional though terrifying beauty as Barbara Christian observes.

Black writing is an evolutionary process. Alice Walker was one of the first contemporary black women writers to insist that sexism existed in the black community as well as in the white community. She was one of the first black women writers to explore the problems of sexism, when most other blacks were declaring that racism was the cause of all the ills of African-American people. She has also

dramatized in her works, the nature of racism and the relationship between sexism and racism as modes of oppression that restricted the lives of all men and women Walker is the significant black woman novelist of our generation to concentrate on the sensibility of the South as a way of perceiving the perennial conflict between the human spirit and societal patterns. She has long insisted that until the solids and prints of the South are sorted out and stitched into clarity, the relationship in the country between men and women, blacks and whites will continue in disarray.

As a craftsman, Walker sorts out the throwaways, the seemingly insignificant and hidden pieces of the lives of Southerners, particularly black families and stitches them into the tapestry of society. Much of Walker's literary talent is devoted to expressing the "inner vision". Her novels continually 'stitch a fabric' of the everyday violence that is committed against her characters and that they commit upon one another in their search for regeneration, and regeneration is what they as black people desire. As a

black woman novelist, Alice Walker is after the whole truth of African-American life. However, her major concern is the black women themselves. She has made it very much clear in an interview with John O'Brien:

I am preoccupied with the 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 (1970: 192).

Alice Walker became the first black woman novelist to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *The Color Purple* which also won the American Book Award. Unlike most of the novels by any writer, it is read across race, class, gender and cultural boundaries. Her writings reflect her concern for the lives of black women. Her substantial body of writing, says Barbara Christian, is characterized by specific recurrent motifs. Most obvious is Walker's attention to the black woman as creator, and to how her attempt to be whole relates to the health of the community (1984: 457). Her tales are marvelous in themselves, intriguing the imagination with wondrous touches juxtaposed to the mundane. Her novels describe the everyday violence that is committed against her characters and that they commit upon one another in their search for regeneration, and regeneration is what they as black people desire. Mary Helen Washington, Alice Walker critic describes Walker's ambition to be an "apologist and chronicler" of Black women's lives (quoted in Gates 1993: xii). She uses "apologist" in the sense that Walker speaks or writes in defense of a cause or a position. Alice Walker's unsparing; vision of Black women's victimization in sexual love – their isolation, degradation or grotesque defeat by despairing or aspiring black men – has been a major element in her growing body of work.

Starting with Celie's first anguished letter to God, *The novel* starts in Georgia in the 1900s and goes on for about thirty years. The novel begins with a threat by her father. "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (1). Thus, she writes letters addressing God because she has no one else to write. She is trapped in a gridlock of racist and sexist oppressions and fights for self-recognition. Celie symbolizes every black woman. The very first letter Celie writes to God indicates the miserable way she falls a victim to sexual advances and atrocities of her father. Through her letter, her father is described as a virile, tough and strong man. He is like a walking

phallus. When he finds out that Celie's mother cannot allow him to have sex, he tries to find a substitute. Consequently he makes brutal sexual attacks on Celie. He tells her, "You better shut up and git used to it" (1). No doubt her mother is relieved from her father's continuous sexual attacks. However, Celie is subjected to enforced rape. Celie's rape leaves her with a guilt that blocks her words. She writes to God: Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me. (1).

As the child victim of rape and incest, she often blames herself for her trauma and believes that this bad thing has happened to her because she is bad and therefore deserves it. However, she becomes pregnant because of her father's sexual attacks. The moment she becomes pregnant she writes: I'm big. I can't move fast enough. By time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By time, I git the tray ready the food be cold. By time, I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time (3).

Celie is berated and shamed for wickedness by her dying mother, who is unaware of her husband Alphonso's guilt: "My Mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me" (3). Motherhood may be a pleasure to some women but for Celie, it is a burden. Celie is not allowed to love her own kids as they were taken away by her father. Celie's position is pathetic. She is forced to grieve silently as Alphonso, her stepfather disposes off her two babies, either killing or selling them as Celie supposes. Alphonso, marries another black woman and treats Celie as an unpaid servant. Celie is sold as a property by her father to Albert, who needed a mother-cum-maid for his children from his previous marriage. Celie accepts Albert thinking she would get an opportunity to save her younger sister Nettie from the sexual advances of her stepfather Alphonso. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ beats her, makes her work both in the house and in the field, and insists on sexual accommodation, treating her as a beast of burden. Victimized and tortured by her husband, Celie is slowly used to this state. Celie submits herself entirely to her husband's beatings. Albert evicts Nettie, Celie's younger sister and the only person who Celie loves and vice-versa. Deprived of everything Celie becomes dumb. Though Celie does not know how to fight, she knows how to work. Celie suffers not only at the hands of her stepchildren but also at the hands of Albert. To be a wife means to be submissive, to be subordinate, to be obedient and to be a punch bag for the man. Albert beats Celie as and when he likes. Celie describes the treatment meted

out to her as follows: He beat me like he beat the children. .... It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man (23). The fact that Celie, in moment of extreme physical pain transforms herself into a tree is a telling example of a black woman's proximity to the passive and suffering agony of nature. Celie is always optimistic and chooses life-in-death. She tolerates Mr.-- beatings because she anticipates a better life and imagines things will be better afterwards.

Parallel to the main story, Walker introduces the reader to the gender conflict between Mr. \_\_son Harpo, and his wife Sofia. She is a woman who dramatizes the plight of the female in rebellion. Harpo feels that Sophia does not behave with him like Celie with Mr. \_\_. He complains that she never does what he tells. When he consults Mr. \_\_ about Sofia's disobedience, he preaches his Gospel: "Wives is like children. You have to let'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (37). But she remains her own person, refuses to be dictated by the traditional roles of a woman, both physically and emotionally

Sofia is a black woman fighter. Her aggression is her means to prevent others from subjugating her. Sofia's defiance in the face of brutal treatment provides Celie a model of resistance against sexual and racial oppression. Sofia appears to be the antithesis of female vulnerability. She is a free-spirited young woman who is incredulous at the absence of self-will in Celie. Walker depicts her as a woman who creates a scene whenever and wherever she believes her right to freedom is being jeopardized. Sofia tells Celie: 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. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say, God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. (42) Sofia's struggle against Harpo's will is the turning point which makes Celie aware of the existence of an alternative rapport between male and female. The racial dimension of this novel can be seen when the strong Sofia confronts the Mayor's wife.

Sofia is not one of those black women who would like to become a white man's house maid. For every white man every black woman is a girl and his woman is a lady. Here again, the classic paradigm of racism emerges as it becomes apparent that Miss Mille condescends to Sofia solely because she is African. When the Mayor listens to the way Sofia

replies, he slaps her. As Sofia is a spirited lady she promptly retaliates. The Mayor, however, takes revenge by ordering the police to use third degree methods to torture and mutilate Sofia. Walker shows how both racism and classism are enforced by the leaders and the law-makers. No doubt, Sofia is defeated by the Mayor and his men, but she represents the black woman who wants to fight for her own dignity. Her struggle is for dignity as an individual who is both black and female.

Though her struggle is not always successful, it provides an opportunity to her to display her fortitude and agility to transcend her racist and sexist circumstances. Her varying responses to her environment illustrate the need for the development of the black society which allows for an individual to define one's meaningful existence within the larger American society. Naturally, the very presence and activities of Sofia make tremendous impact on Celie's thinking. Thus, Sofia unknowingly convinces Celie that the black women suffer not because of any inbuilt disabilities and faults in them but because of their sex and race and the lack of will to fight.

Celie's actual transformation takes place with the arrival of Shug Avery. Shug Avery, a brilliant Blues singer and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ long time lover enters Celie's life when Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ brings her home for nursing. When Shug arrives, sick and weak, Celie nurses her back to health, prepares her meals and bathes her; they both become friends. Shug is the most amazing female, Celie has ever seen. She teaches and shows Celie that all beauty and all ugliness come from within. Shug gives many lessons of life to Celie. She helps Celie to discover her true self whereas Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ thinks only about power, control through the oppression of others. Shug represents the female beauty that Celie is starved of. But more than that, she is also the first person besides Nettie to be grateful for Celie's hard work, to praise Celie for the many skills that Celie does indeed have despite her husband's insults, and the first since Nettie to love Celie as a person.

The relationship that develops between them is sexual and physical. Celie tries to explain the type of love between them. That love resembles the love Celie felt for her Mama, Nettie and her lost babies. In their Lesbian embrace Celie finds a refuge. Shug allows Celie's own femininity to blossom in its full plentitude. She develops Celie as a subject. Shug's love for Celie is deep-rooted and results in an on-going physical relationship as well as a powerful

emotional affiliation. As a result, Shug inspires Celie to celebrate her existence. Celie also loves Shug in a way that radiates all elements of God's world that she has given to Celie. Once Shug implants the idea on Celie that she is somebody, she undergoes a transformation which encompasses her sexual awakening. Daniel W. Ross (1998: 70) has described this point very effectively by stating that one of the primary objects of feminism is to restore women's bodies, appropriated long ago by a patriarchal culture to them. Because the female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to fear or even to hate their bodies. Celie has no desire to get to know her body because it is the source of her exploitation. However, Shug's presence generates an erotic stirring and creates a spiritual bond between them. "I wash her body it feels like I'm praying" (53). Shug becomes not only a model for Celie but also a mother that Celie never had (Barbara Christian, 1985: 194). In Shug's company, Celie learns to love her black sisters and herself. Just as Sofia and Shug serve as female models for Celie, she too reaches out to help her fellow sister, Mary Agnes, alias 'Squeak' who becomes Harpo's second wife.

Walker's novel goes beyond restoring Celie's voice to break down the patriarchal marriage that sanctions violence against women. This dismantling begins with another wound when Shug and Celie find the letters from Nettie that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has spitefully hidden since Nettie's separation. Shug helps to retrieve her lost sister Nettie and her letters from the custody of Albert. The very first letter of Nettie opens with a message: "You've got to fight and get away from Albert. He ain't no good" (131). She provides information about different things. Nettie has gone to Africa with Corraine, Samuel and their children, Adam and Olivia. Samuel and Corraine work for the missionaries of the American and African missionary society. As Africa is a far off place, Nettie feels good when she writes to Celie.

She informs Celie that New York is a beautiful city where a section of it called Harlem is owned by blacks. There are colored people who own fancy motor cars and live in houses which are finer than the white people's houses. These people live in much beauty and dignity. However, these people love Africa. Time and again, Nettie writes about the black people of Africa and their social customs, religion and culture. Celie also comes to know that in Africa, African daughters like their American counterparts must combat male violence against women and so depend on idealized but ineffectual female support networks among mothers and daughters. The letters

explore gender oppression on the African continent. This is graphically illustrated in Nettie's narration of an incident in which she questions the Olinka group about the status of girls in their village.

The Olinka do not believe girls should be educated when Nettie asked a mother why she thought this, she said; A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something. In one of the letters, she reveals that Jesus Christ was not white but black. Nettie also informs Celie that Olivia and Adam are her own children who were taken away by Alfonso from Celie and handed over to Samuel and Corraine who adopted them. In addition to this, she writes that their father Alfonso, is not their true father. Their real father had been lynched along with his two brothers. They were killed by jealous white merchants who show the racist attitudes towards blacks. The white merchants complained that his store was taking all the black business away from them, and his blacksmith shop that he set up behind the store, was taking some of the white. So, his store was burned down, his Smithy destroyed. One day in the middle of the night he was dragged out of their home along with his two brothers and was hanged.

With the stigma of incest removed, Celie finally stands up to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. With Shug's help, Celie is able to translate her rage into powerful speech and to meet Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ on the battle field of language. Patriarchal metaphysics break down simultaneously as Shug and Celie leave Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ house for Shug's Memphis estate. Celie's self-assertion is met with scorn by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Shug got talent, he say. She can sing. She got spunk, he say. She can talk to anybody. Shug got looks he say. She can stand up and be notice. But what you got? You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people (212). Celie then breaks down gender hierarchy. She liberates herself from patriarchal dictatorship. Celie's metamorphosis changes from a wretched woman into a free being. Through speech Celie establishes her freedom, breaking her husband's hold on her. When Shug Avery wants to take Celie to Memphis, Albert says: "Over my dead body" (206).

In the beginning Celie is a submissive girl who knows nothing. At first, she was even ashamed of revealing the truth and writes letters to God instead of speaking to him directly. It is a journey towards self-identity of Celie: "You a low down dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need" (207). While in the past, she would have absorbed such invectives, a transformed Celie now retorts, "I am pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (214). "I'm here", asserts the supremacy of speech over the physical, material despotism characteristic of patriarchy. Celie joins her black

sisters, becomes confident in her abilities and makes her own living by becoming a designer and manufacturer of pants. When Shug leaves with a new lover, a nineteen year old boy, Celie returns to Georgia to live in the house she inherited from her real father and contents herself with her designing among people she calls family. In her home, she creates for herself, quite appropriately, a purple room.

Celie gets not only her maternal property after her step-father's death but also her sister Nettie, son Adam, daughter Olivia as well as her real black woman self. She succeeds in liberating herself from

all the shackles created by the white men, black men and white women. She becomes an enterprising black woman and abandons her submissiveness, passivity and dumbness. Thus, Celie a black girl who suffers from self scorn learns to love herself and also other black men and women and becomes aware of the womanist tradition of self-reliance and self-esteem.

**Acknowledgement:** I am indebted to my Guide Prof. Dr.K.Ratna Sheila Mani for her scholarly guidance and consistent support in every walk of my intellectual journey. I am extremely thankful to my family for their unconditional love and support

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