

Black Feminism in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract. The concept of feminism seeks for the betterment of women in the prevailing patriarchal society. Alice Walker is an African-American writer well known for her feminist works. The term 'feminism' was coined specially for the downtrodden black females of the society. Walker wants to give her women identity, dignity and happiness they deserve. She wants them to free from the injustices inflicted upon them by the dominant patriarchal society. Feminism can be defined as class oppression, gender discrimination in the racist society. It worked on the enhancement of women's cultural and social identity. *The Color Purple* shows the oppression faced by the African-American women and how this oppression led to black feminist movement. Walker suggests that women can get an upper hand at some point by challenging the authority of their husbands and oppressors, and dare to overcome their odds. Black women's history is of self-empowerment, struggle against racism and sexism. African-American women have been able to build their own identity. The present study seeks to analyse Alice Walker as an author who shares her own vision of black feminism in her work *The Color Purple*.

Keywords : Patriarchal society; black females; self-empowerment; racism; sexism.

The Color Purple (1982) is a novel by Alice Walker which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for Fiction. The story takes place in rural Georgia and focuses on the life of African-American women. Celie, the central character is a poor, uneducated fourteen-year-old girl. She is abused and raped by her step-father. She finds herself very lonely in this world, unable to trust anyone and share her grief; she writes letter to God. Celie feels so insecure that even while writing letters to God she does not mention her name. Her step-father Alphonso says:

You better not never tell anybody but God.
It'd kill your mammy. (*The Color Purple*, 3)

Feminists from western countries were mostly dealing with the issues of contraception and abortion, while women from the minority group and economically undeveloped countries dealt with issues of racial discrimination, poverty and family and community violence. Black feminism became common in the 1960s and 1970s. It motivated the fight for equality between men and women. The black feminist movement was the abolitionist movement. The main aim of the movement was to end slavery in the country and ensure equality of all citizens regardless of their social status, race and gender. Black feminism promoted the economic and social

development of black women. The concept of black feminism is very clear in Walker's novel through her black women characters. In the novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker brings forth the adverse effects of the oppression of the black women on their development. These black women suffered from both discrimination and oppression in the hands of black men and white men and women.

Celie; the protagonist goes through several changes in her life. She was a small girl who was continuously abused into a mature woman. She gets married and is just a servant responsible for looking after her husband, Albert, and his four children. Albert always abuses Celie until she declares her identity as an independent woman. She frees herself from her husband's oppression and her conditions started improving. Her friendship with Shug Avery, Albert's mistress, and her fondness for her younger sister, Nettie, helped her in improving her condition. Celie starts her own business of designing clothes, and becomes a business woman and earns her own money. Simone de Beauvoir says:

One is not born a woman; rather one becomes a woman. (*The Second Sex*, 2)

Celie is the most suitable example to prove this thesis. In the initial stage of the novel Celie's life progresses and she is forced to marry an older man in the neighbourhood. Being a widower, one would expect that he needs a wife to be his companion and to look after his children. However, the widower rejects marrying Celie initially until he is offered cattle; that indicated the black women were worthless. Walker links black oppression against women to racism. The black men's cruelty was a result of their frustration in a white dominated society. The black women had to face double victimization in the society. They had no place in the white society. Walker describes how black women were treated as slaves, and their experiences in a gender-biased male dominated society.

In the novel Celie is a symbol of a good housewife. She tries to look after her husband and his children. Celie makes all efforts to do her best and provide a better life to her family. Her efforts are appreciated by two of Albert's sisters, Kate and Carrie who come to visit them. They say:

One thing is for sure. You keep a clean house...good housekeeper, good with children, good cook. Brother couldn't have done better if he tried.

(*The Color Purple*, 20-21)

The characters in the novel Celie, Shug Avery, Sofia and Nettie have womanist traits. These women have love for their people, culture and community. They love women and men sexually and non-sexually and are in search of their own self. They become audacious, outrageous and courageous in their behaviour. Walker focuses on the abuse of women by their husbands and lovers. Celie turns out to be a courageous woman who freely gets involved in a new life. She was victimized by

her step-father, Alphonso, who forces her to do what her mother would not. He forces her to marry Albert or Mr. _ who were the same as her step-father as she had to fulfil his sexual needs and take care of the house and children. She is a victim of sexism, accepts this as a part of her life and allows herself to be used. She felt hopeless and helpless until she came in contact with Shug Avery and Sofia. Celie develops a good relationship with Shug, shows her fearlessness with her that shows her courageous behaviour. She came out of her oppression with the help of Shug and takes the charge of her independent life.

Sofia and Shug Avery are also considered to be feminists. Sofia who married Harpo, Albert's son also faced challenges of gender roles, gets involved in physical disputes and finally leaves Harpo. Shug Avery changes the course of the novel as she comes to live with Albert but develops a good relationship with his wife, Celie. She as a blue singer paves the way for the upliftment of Celie. Carmen Gillespie writes about feminist view of Shug :

Shug's occupation as a blues singer foregrounds the ways in which she fulfils this role in Celie's life. She provides Celie with the means, vocabulary and methodology with which to find and sing her own song, her truth, her self-worth and her desires.

(Gillespie, 59)

Through Nettie, Alice Walker satirizes African men. The men in Olinka do not want their daughters to be educated, but their son. They argue and say there is no place for educated woman in Olinka as education is nothing good to woman. Nettie suggests to leave the place where education was a curse for women. But the men reject her idea and propose her to continue staying and only teach the boys. We can see the irony here where the male consents their son to be taught manly things that go with education, by a woman not by a man.

The Color Purple represents many seen and unseen wonders in the world. The letter form technique of the novel allows Walker her freedom of expression and speech where she writes in her free style without any constraints. The language in the novel goes from deep slang to average formal English. Celie's language is of the folk with slangs and also, she is uneducated. Nettie's language is formal and sound because she has an advantage of being educated.

Black feminism focused on the unique experiences, struggles and desires of all women of colour. Walker's concern of racial, sexist and gender issues have found place in this novel. The black women's struggle for wholeness and survival is seen in the novel. The women portrayed in the novel have shown their concern for the black families.

In the novel black feminism is unsuccessful at first because women were unaware of their problems. They suffered in silence as they felt their problems were

unique in their lives. Celie, for example was reluctant to report about her father, even though he abused her repeatedly. But the fear of losing her mother kept her quiet. Instead of complaining she preferred to suffer in silence and started writing letters to God. As time goes by, Celie gets used to this oppression and leads a miserable life. However, later in the novel her self-realization to end her oppression brings a change. She expresses her realization that there is a better life that indicates the success of black feminism. Black feminism made people recognize race as a social construction. It was a reaction to the oppression that black women face in the society. Black feminism arose, trying to make people aware of the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality and class.

Black women's exploitation and economic oppression can be seen in the novel when Sofia is forced to work for the mayor. The mayor's wife asks her to be her maid, but Sofia refuses. The mayor slaps her for this disrespectful behaviour towards his wife. Sofia reacts to this and hits him back. As a result, Sofia is punished to work as a maid for twelve years.

The novel also shows the stereotypical images of black women in consideration with their oppression. The characters were aware of the gender roles in the society and felt pressurized to behave according to the social construct. Sofia and Harpo behaved accordingly to the gender roles which was normal in society but they did not want it. Harpo liked to do women's work and to work in the household while Sofia liked more physical work. Yet, *The Color Purple* at certain points changes its course from oppression, because of the female characters in the novel do resist the oppression. Like, Sofia does not let herself beaten up by her husband as a submissive wife. Shug stands up for Celie when she comes to know that she is beaten by Albert. The feminist aspect can be identified from the fact that the characters do not passively endure the oppression. Collin mentions four ideas about black women's awareness in black feminism:

...the importance of self-definition, the significance of self-evaluation and respect, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and the centrality of a changed self to personal empowerment.

(Collins, 119)

The Color Purple, especially indicates the oppression on the black females. It stimulates a conversation between black men, black women and white men and women. In conclusion, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has a significant role in black feminism. It deals with the oppression of black women in context with sexuality, race, gender and class. Black women dealt with these issues in silence and privacy. In the course of time, if one is courageous enough to make a better life for herself, then it can be made possible. Celie, the central character is the best example who came out of the oppression, started a new life for herself and made her own identity as an independent and self-confident woman. Walker attempted to portray her

own particular vision of black feminism in this work. Feminism is a philosophy to remove the state of oppression implemented on the black women by the society. Women emancipation and upliftment is an important part of the society. Alice Walker through her novel portrayed a good vision towards women emancipation.

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