

## **THE POWER OF WOMENS SOLIDARITY: A STUDY OF ALICE WALKER THE COLOR PURPLE**

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Alice Walker is one of the most famous and cherished writers, and this is largely due to the novel 'The Color Purple'. The novel won her considerable praise and criticism for its controversial themes. Alice Walker was a precious child, but after being blinded in one eye at age eight in an accident with a BB gun by one of her brothers. By the time they reached a doctor a week later, she had become permanently blind in that eye. When a layer of scar tissue formed over her wounded eye, Alice became self-conscious and painfully shy. Stared at and sometimes taunted, she felt like an outcast and turned for solace to reading and to writing poetry. But later she realized that her traumatic injury had some value: It allowed her to begin "really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out". Walker has always given credit to her mother for encouraging her to make something of herself, her father and brothers failed to give her a positive male role model.

Walker was fascinated by female writers such as Flannery O'Connor but eventually became frustrated by the lack of black women writers in the curriculum of colleges. Eventually Walker "discovered" the works of Zora Neale Hurston, a writer in the mid - twentieth century which became the biggest influence on her literary career and life. Walker also edited a collection of Hurston works and is largely responsible for her posthumous popularity.

One hundred and fifty years ago the first African American novel as a genre came into existence. This new genre was able to stand for the broadest human concerns, it could assimilate diverse forms of cultures, and it could captivate readers beyond boundaries and racial lines. African American writers

are not only widely acclaimed and cherished, but they are also bestowed with the world's highest literary prizes and awards.

A new genre was produced in the eighteenth century known as the slave narrative. The genre borrows from the autobiography, travelogue and captivity narratives that were already common forms of writing among the early settlers. While most puritans and pilgrims expressed faith in god and hope in their journey to a new land, the African American narratives convey extremes of alienation and suffering.

"The White man's happiness cannot be purchased  
by the black man's misery." - Frederick Douglass

At the turn of the 20th Century, non-fiction works by authors such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington debated whether to confront racist attitudes in the United States. During the American Civil Rights Movement, authors such as Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about issues of racial segregation and black nationalism. Today, African American literature has become accepted as an integral part of American Literature, with books such as *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley. *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, which won the Pulitzer Prize; and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison achieving both best selling and award winning status.

Black feminism argues that sexism; class oppression and racism are inextricably bound together. The way these relate to each other is called intersectionality.

One of the theories that evolved out of the Black feminist movement was Alice Walker and other womanists who pointed out that the black women experienced a different and more intense kind of oppression from that of white women. Patricia Hill Collins defined Black feminism, in *Black Feminist Thought* (1991), as including "Women who theorize the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary black women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community and society".

Alice Walker's first novels, **The Third Life of Grange Copeland** and **Meridian**, both dealt with violence towards black women by black men. **The Color Purple** also shared many of these themes. Possessing the Secret of Joy was a 1992 novel that dealt with female circumcision, which is used in some African rituals. Critics of Walker have stated that she has portrayed black men as cruel in her works, which has sustained stereotypes of black male violence.

**The Color Purple** was Walker's third novel, written in 1982. This novel received the Pulitzer Prize for Literature and an American Book Award. When the novel was made into a film in 1985 by Steven Spielberg, Walker became even more successful and controversial. While she was criticized for negative portrayal of her male characters, Walker was admired for her powerful portraits of black women. Reviewers praised her for her use of the epistolary form, in which written correspondence between characters comprises the content of the book and her ability to use black folk English.

Reflecting her early political interests as a civil rights worker during the 1960s, many of her social views are expressed in the novel. In 'The Color Purple', as in her other writings, Walker focuses on the theme of double repression of black women in the American experience. Walker contends that black women suffer from discrimination by the white community and from a second repression from black males, who impose the double standard of white society on women. 'The Color Purple', reflects Walker's desire to project a positive outcome in life, even under the hardest conditions. Her Central character triumphs over adversity and forgives those who oppressed her. This central theme of the triumph of good over evil is no doubt the source of the book's great success.

The opening letters of this novel introduce us to Celie, a young girl who endures what seems to be nothing but abuse and betrayal. Her reasons for writing to god are clear. "You better not never tell nobody but god. It'll kill your many," is what Celie's father says to her before he rapes her. Living in a hopeless situation, she looks to god for guidance and assistance. We see that Celie is left to survive without support or love from her parents. What is even more

repugnant is the rape of Celie by her father, a heinous crime to begin with, the rape here is also symbolic. Just as the crime violates the women and takes away her security and trust, Celie loses not only her trust of society but also her trust of her own family. Walker uses these opening pages to illustrate the inequitable treatment of men and women in society.

To Celie's father, and to the other men of this town, women are disposable and forgettable units, only useful for providing themselves with pleasure. Celie's father uses his daughter to replace her mother, who is too hurt from childbirth. When Celie becomes older, her father replaces her deceased mother with another young girl, and then starts to pursue Nettie when his new wife becomes sick. To this man, the women of 'The Color Purple' are interchangeable, used for sex and then for work.

There are two primary elements of the novel that are unfamiliar. The first is its epistolary form, that is, it is written as if it were a series of letters. The protagonist writes first to God, then to her sister Nettie and finally to the world she has grown to love. Through her letter writing the protagonist comes to understand herself and realizes her own voice. The second unfamiliar element in the novel is the Southern black dialect of Celie and other African - American characters in the book. She uses black English in the novel, as it is the language that her characters would actually speak without which she would not have captured the real Celie.

The novel tells the story of Celie, a poor southern black woman who is victimized physically and emotionally by her step father, who rapes her repeatedly. The letters are written to God and Celie's sister Nettie, who became a missionary in Africa. Celie overcomes her oppression with the intervention of her husband's mistress, Shug Avery. By the end of the novel, Celie is reunited with her children and her sister. Celie writes letters to God in which she tells about her life and in the course of her story, she meets a series of other characters who shape her life.

The Colour Purple tells the story of a fourteen year old daughter's rape by her 'Pa'. Later, her Pa further discredits her by handing over Celie to Mr\_\_\_\_, a

widower in need of a wife-housekeeper - caretaker of his children. Isolated and confused, Celie follows her Pa's prohibition silencing her speech, but wrote letters to god:

Dear god,

I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.

As a child victim of rape and incest, she often blames herself for her trauma. In order to save her mother and then Nettie from the cruelty of Alphonso, she quietly takes her own abuse. She marries Albeit, so that Nettie will not be forced to marry him. Victimized and tortured by her husband on all fronts Celie slowly becomes acclimatized to this state of affairs. Nettie, her sister tells her to fight back but Celie can't, celie's notion of woman's place is as old as the history of black women in America. Celie submits to his beating stating:

...I don't fight, I stay where I'm told.  
But I'm alive... 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 as tree. That's how come I know trees fear man.

The fact that Celie in moments of extreme physical pain transforms herself into a tree, is an example of a black woman's proximity to the passive and suffering agony of nature.

Celie learns the power of women's solidarity through her bond with Sofia. Her quest starts with the original hatred for Sofia. She envies her and tells Harpo to beat her. But Celie maintains a platonic love for Sofia. She visits her often during the years of her confinement, encouraging her and giving her strength.

But Celie's actual transformation takes place with Shug Avery's arrival. Even before she meets her, she loves Shug believing her to be the perfect picture of glamour and independence. When Shug loves her back, she finds it difficult to believe. It is Shug who awakens the brutalized and silenced Celie to her own strength and sexuality. Shug is Walker's womanist catalyst who teaches and

shows Celie that all beauty and all ugliness come from within. Shug allows Celie's own femininity to blossom in full plentitude and through her Celie comes to love herself. Walker shows the relationship to be one of restoration and emphasizes the importance of female friendship in the black community.

Through Shug Celie discovers that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has been intercepting Nettie's letters for several years. From the letters which Shug helps her obtain she learns that her children are brought up by Nettie and that the man who raped her wasn't her real father. Celie's first response when she finds the letters is a murderous fury to kill Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and the scales fall from her eyes with respect to god to whom she has been writing.

Dear god, my daddy tynch. My mama crazy.

All my little half- brothers and sisters no kind to me

My children not my sister and brother. Pa not Pa.

You must be sleep.

With Shug's help, Celie is able to translate her murderous rage into powerful speech and to meet Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ on the battlefield of language. Celie's self assertion is met with scorn by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ he says:

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.

But Celie's voice gain's strength as she comes into possession of her history and starts resisting Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. When she declares independence she feels almost possessed by a mysterious power. Through her speech she breaks Albert's hold on her. She declares to him:

It's time to leave you and enter into

The creation. And your dead body just

the welcome mat I need.

Celie leaves Albert's place. In Memphis, while trying to think what she wants to do for a living, she sits making pants and soon finds her vocation.

The three dominant attributes of Celie's personality are strength and endurance, the ability to love unconditionally, and the constant search for truth. The ability to endure under the worst of circumstances is Celie's key to survival.

Shug is another woman in the novel who knows the value of women's solidarity. She is portrayed as the archetypal blue woman, and is unconventional, she reveals to Celie that her mother never really loved her and her father made sexual advances. As a result, she learns independence at a very early age. Shug's world is a world of blues, with its earthy wisdom and singer lifestyle. She is a glamorous and beautiful woman that Celie always adores even before meeting her. She writes a song for Celie, in appreciation of her nursing her back to health and sings it before a crowd at Harpo's juke joint naming it miss Celie's song. In due course Shug becomes a life giver to Celie.

Shug is always full of wisdom and correct responses, she acts as a catalyst to free Celie and other women. When she finds how Albert has treated Celie over the years, she loses her desire for him and erases him from her life. She then helps Celie and Mary Agnes escape their lives of domestic abuse and labour. In the process, she gives Celie a sense of her own unique beauty and spirit. Shug tells Celie that she believes god gets angry if a person does not take time to admire the color purple in a field. She teaches Celie how to gratify herself-shug makes it clear that:

God is inside you and inside everybody else.

You come into the world with god. But only  
them that search for it inside find it.

Shug tells Celie that she is leaving with Germaine, she promises that it will only be one last fling for six months, then she promises to live with Celie forever. In spite of her wisdom and will, shug craves for love and affection of her people saying:

They had a lot to give. But I needed love

plus understanding. They run little short of that.

Shug loves without any boundaries of age or gender. After she returns to Georgia with her new husband Grady she begins an affair with Celie that lasts till the end.

Sofia is another strong female character, she struggles greatly for her independent spirit and impudence. As husband and wife, she and Harpo do battle for years. Harpo wants her to be submissive like his stepmother Celie but she refuses and does not follow the expectations of the patriarchal lifestyle. When Harpo tries to criticize or punish her independent ways, she regularly gives him a beating, since she is larger and stronger than he is. Finally she leaves him tired of his abuse.

Unlike Celie, Sofia does not succumb to female submissiveness. She remains her own person, refusing to be dictated by the traditional roles of the woman, both physically and emotionally. Sofia helps Celie to redefine herself and to retaliate against sexual subjugation. In fact, Celie survives only by learning from Sofia the lesson to fight back against the gender system based on male dominance and female submission that breeds violence against women and wives.

The racial dimension of this novel can be seen when the strong Sofia confronts the mayor's wife, Miz Millie and refuses to work as a maid in their house, Mayor slaps Sofia and in turn Mayor is banged by her as a result she is sent to jail.

Sofia is abused by the white power and sentenced to work as a maid in the white mayor's house. During her years of confinement, both in prison and in the home of the mayor, Sofia survives on hatred, even thinking of murder. Her helplessness is revealed when she says to Celie that:-

Every time they art me to do something, miss Celie, I act  
Like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say.

Early in the novel, Mary Agnes, Harpos girl-friend, treats Sofia poorly and wants Harpo to banish her. However, when Sofia is beaten severely by the

police in town she helps Sofia to get out of the jail. As Bubber Hudes, jail warden is related to Mary Agnes, she approaches the warden to rescue Sofia but as a result she is raped. As the warden knows he does not have to worry about being charged with raping a black girl.

In spite of her anger, Sofia is good to Mis. Millie's children. Eleanor Jane develops a devotion to her. When she brings her baby boy for Sofia to bless, Sofia tells she cannot bless him, for he will probably grow up to be her oppressor, like most white men. Then when Eleanor gane helps to care for the black Henrietta, the white community is outraged that she would lower herself to be employed by an African - American. Towards the end Sofia is able to love Eleanor gane in turn for her devotion.

After Sofia is freed from the mayor's home, she quickly returns to her old self, to prove that the white power cannot break the black spirit within her. In many ways Sofia is a reflection of Celie, showing unbelievable endurance during hardships. It is not surprising that the two women Sofia and Celie form a strong bond of friendship that lasts till the end.

Nettie is Celie's sister, unlike Celie, Nettie is allowed to school as Pa always wants her to become a school teacher while Celie stays home and works. When Celie puts up with incest in order to protect her sister Nettie becomes forever grateful to her. Even though she escapes oppression and is allowed to explore the world, Nettie never forgets who facilitated her escape.

When Nettie leaves Albert's house, he tries to seduce her but she manages to fight and wound him. At that point he promises never to lit her be in contact with Celie again. Nettie reaches the town and finds the Reverend to whom Celie had directed her before. She is immediately accepted into the family which consists of the Reverend Samuel, his wife Conine and Celie's two children, Olivia and Adam. Nettie realizes that the children look like Celie and are in fact Celie's children who have been adopted.

Nettie writes letters that Samuel and Conine are missionaries who plan to leave for Africa. She starts learning about Africa and is awed by the splendid history of the continent. From Africa, Nettie faithfully writes to Celie, telling her

about Olivia and Adam and about her experiences in the native land. Even though she never hears from Celie, she is not disappointed and thinks she may hear from her sister if she continues to write to her.

Nettie's character is important as her letters give the news about Olivia and Adam which results in renewal of Celie's strength after knowing that her children are alive. Even when Celie was told by the State Department that Nettie has drowned in a shipwreck, Celie refuses to believe and she longs to see Nettie in person and she longs to see Nettie in person and declares that she will wait for her until she is ninety years old, if necessary.

Nettie and the family are led by a guide into the jungle where the Olinka tribe lived. Since the tribe allows polygamy, they immediately think that Nettie was Samuel's second wife. Nettie worked as a school teacher. Unfortunately, the Olinka did not believe that girls should be educated. According to them, "A girl is nothing to herself. Only to her husband can she become something". This shows the plight of woman who are deprived of education due to patriarchy.

Olivia and Adam develop friendship with a young girl named Tashi and every night Olivia brought Tashi to her hut to teach her what she learned. As a part of their ritual Tashi undergoes both the facial scarification ceremony and the rite of female initiation.

Conine becomes jealous of Nettie and decides that Nettie and Samuel should call each other brother and sister to avoid having the natives think that Nettie is one of Samuel's wife wives. Corrine falls ill with fever which forces Nettie to assume most of her choses. At the same time she becomes extremely suspicious of Nettie and children. She convinces herself that Nettie was infact the mother of the children and that Samuel was their illegitimate father. Nettie finally takes Samuel aside and finds out how he got the children. He tells her that they were brought by the man whom Celie Pa. Samuel says he thought Nettie was the mother of the children and that was the reason he wanted her to accompany them to Africa.

Nettie tells Corrine the truth about Olivia and Adam, but Corrine refuses to believe her. It is only after Nettie finds a quilt with some cloth that Corrine

had bought when she first met Celie that Corrine recalls meeting Celie. Conine breaks down, starts crying and that same night she passes away.

Nettie writes about how the Olinka were eventually forced off the village site and given poor land several miles away. She indicates that in the meantime she and Samuel have got married and returned to England to plead on behalf of the Olinka people but their efforts fail as the church Bishop in London is not convinced. Nettie and Samuel make plans for the entire family to return to United States. Nettie's return at the end allows for a totally happy ending.

Ultimately, Walker constructs an ideal world of true love and commitment in her novel. It is possible to identify Celie with the color purple by realizing that she has gone unnoticed and is finally being noticed as she asserts her existence. Her new relationship with life is manifest in the way she interacts with people and in the way she now writes her letters not to god but to Nettie, which is an act of self-affirmation.

Celie declares assertively towards the end of Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'.

"I'm Pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and  
Can't Cook ... But I'm here."

Such words were not always characteristic of the protagonist's speech. In the early chapters of the novel, Celie clearly demonstrates a submissive temperament. Towards the end of the novel, however, Celie achieves a sense of self-respect.

Although Walker focuses on Celie in 'The Color Purple' most of the women in the novel are examples of women who are physically and psychologically abused and torn by instincts. Sofia, Celie's daughter in law, is imprisoned for knocking the mayor's wife, Shug was disliked because she does not fit the conventional mode of behaviour for a woman of her time. Nevertheless these characters, affirm Walker's conviction that the public and private world can be transformed. In this cruel and violent story of redemption, what matters to most of the women in Celie's world is giving the truth to those

who need it, being freed from the suppression of one's will or talent, taking just what you need from people and choosing for yourself the life you wish to lead.

Forgiveness and compassion enable individuals who were estranged and alienated to nurture one another's growth. The message conveyed in the novel is that relationships no matter how seriously impaired can be restored. The values expressed in woman bonding-mutuality, respect, shared power and unconditioned love becomes guiding principles shaping the new community in 'The Color Purple' which includes everyone, women and men, family and kin.

Amid the lavish praise for *The Color Purple* have been some stringent critics, who are offended by the portraits of many of the characters. Contending that racism is strengthened by the unsavory qualities in the book's black male characters and that Celie is a thin and unbelievable character, some critics believe the book harms, rather than helps African Americans.

Other critics, though, have praised the novel's effective use of setting and scenery. Walker sees into the life of African Americans living in the Deep South as she picks up on the rhythms of life she came to know in her own youth. In spite of the possible unrealistic aspects of the novel, *The Color Purple* has become a classic, read and studied by many as an examination of a black woman fighting traditions that could only keep her oppressed, subservient and enslaved.

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