

Significance of *The Color Purple*

Dr. Ulka S. Wadekar

Kesharbai Lahoti Mahavidyalaya, Amravati, (M.S.) India

A. Y. Ali

M.S.P Arts, Sci & K.P.T. Comm College Manora, (M.S.) India

Abstract

Alice Walker is a late 20th century African American author. Many of her novels are concerned about the pathetic condition of blacks. *The Color Purple*, published in 1982 unfolds the panorama of black female reality of the neo-slavery period that takes shape in the smithy of black male brutality towards black females, racial oppression and misogynist assumptions. The novel won the Pulitzer prize for fiction in 1983 focuses on the process of the self-discovery of an unlettered black southern woman. Walker applied an epistolary technique in the novel. The major themes are race, gender, discrimination, and triple exploitation of black women.

Key Words: Race, gender, identity, and patriarchal oppression

The Color Purple placed Walker among the most important contemporary American writers. The novel traces thirty years in the life of Celie, a poor Southern black woman who is victimized physically and emotionally by both her step father and her husband. Celie writes letters describing her ordeal to God and to her youngest sister Nettie. *The Color Purple* is a tale of violence. The story starts at Georgia in the 1900s and goes on for thirty year. A 14 year Celie is repeatedly raped by her stepfather. Celie is forced to marry a widowed farmer with three children. Soon her mother dies and Celie is left to live with this cruel man, Pa and her younger sister Nettie. Celie becomes pregnant. Celie's child, a girl, is taken away from her and Pa tells her that the baby has been killed.

Women are treated like slave. They do not hold any position in the society. They are only objects of sex in the eyes of men.

Men exploit them sexually till they die and bring home another teenager to gratify their sexual desire. They are so mean that they don't spare even their daughters.

Celie, the protagonist, a black woman in the south, writes letters to God in which she narrates her sad story, her role as daughter, wife, sister and mother. In the

course of her story Celie meets number of other black women who shape her life like Nettie, Celie's sister, Shug Avery the Blues singer and Sofia, the determined daughter in law. Celie is placed at center of this community of women, the one who knows how to struggle for existence. Celie is helpless woman. She fails to cope up with the situation. Her self esteem is very low and seeing this Pa takes undue advantage of Celie. Pa exploits Celie physically because she doesn't have enough courage to oppose. As a result, Celie has to suffer. In the house nobody respects her though she does all the

domestic chores. According to Maroski: in her fiction, Alice Walker has called together a meeting of Black Women. The place is the South. They are plain women. They grow petunias. They struggle endlessly and are homeless because they know no wrong. Mostly just ordinary Churchgoing women who sometimes, in their confused state, amalgamate Voodoo and Christianity. Sense of powerlessness against the structure of the dominant society as well as the fact that they have little understanding of that structure. Therefore, in a day-to-day existence, they carry out a plot constructed by white society (male and female) and choreographed by black men. Walker's characters mirror allegation about Black Women relationship to their pain and suffering. (Gale Research 427-428)

The Color Purple (1982) has generated the most public attention as a book and as a major motion picture, directed by Steven Spielberg in 1985 narrated through the voice of Celie. *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel a work structured through the series of letters. Celie is forced to marry a widowed farmer with three children. Celie's life turn around when she meets her husband's mistress Shug who opens up her mind and teaches her how to question and think of herself. From there Celie continues to meet more women who question their husbands and society's view of them. Slowly, finally receiving letters from her long lost sister and continuing to be true to herself. Celie learns how to be independent, how to live a happy life. The novel discusses all kinds of family dynamics and how women, especially women of color were treated.

Nettie not only is alive, but she helped raise Celie's two children. She learns to

fight for herself. Eventually she gets the maturity about how to live in a modern twentieth century. Shug, a woman who is able to kindle feelings of sexual love and self love within Celie-for the first time. They respect each other. Because of Shug and because of Sofia, Celie is able to triumph over the Sexual and racial oppression that spoiled many of her female ancestors.

Albert asks Pa for Nettie's hand in marriage, but Pa refuses. Instead, he offers Celie, who is older, but Celie is merely a slave destined to care for his children and home and serve as an outlet for his sexual urges, unfortunately not "fresh".

Following her mother's death, Celie is forced to take care of the other children, including her younger sister, Nettie. Pa who cannot live without 'a woman' remarries and brings home a girl of Celie's age. However, Pa still rapes Celie. Celie finds that Pa sometimes looks at Nettie, and Nettie is scared. Pa wants to make Nettie his next sexual victim.

Racism in the United States has been widespread since the colonial era. Social and legal rights were given to white Americans but denied to Native Americans and Asian Americans. White Americans (particularly the well to do white Anglo-Saxon protestant) were granted exclusive privileges in matters of education, immigration, voting rights, citizenship, land acquisition and criminal procedure over periods of time extending from the 17th century to the 1960s.

Sofia functions in the novel as a representative of the black woman. Sofia is sentenced to work in prison laundry for twelve years. During this time Celie and

Albert visit twice a month and learn Sofia's suffering.

The arrival of Shug Avery on their doorstep marks the beginning of another phase of Celie's growth. Shug functions not only Celie's protector but also as the catalyst for the exploration of her sexuality.

Celie's inner transformation is visible to all when she announces to family that she is leaving for Memphis with Shug. Though Albert tries to dissuade her by ridiculing her and proclaiming her. Celie discovers that not only her sister is alive, but that Nettie has been raising her children Adam and Olivia. Shortly after Nettie is employed by Samual and Corrine, they all take journey to Africa as members of the American missionary society.

The Olinka do not at first permit their girls to be educated. Missionaries work among the Olinka, the Olinka eventually allow their girls to attend school with Olivia and Tashi, an Olinka girl who befriends Olivia and captured the interest of Adam. After Corrine's death Samual remarries with Nettie. Celie forgives Shug because she loves Shug.

Walker uses the letters of Nettie to describe the situation of women, their culture, tradition and oppression. Walker tells the reader through her novel that it is not matter what you are or how you look or what you have or have not accomplished. It's enough that you are 'here'. , "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (CP 1) Celie's terror is so profound that she begins to write letters to God, the only person she can tell at this time. Nettie has to flee for her life and winds up in Africa with a family of black missionaries who

have unknowingly adopted Celie's children by Alphonso.

The metaphor "tree" speaks a lot about Celie's condition. But during the course of the novel which begins in the early 1900s and ends in the mid 1940s. Celie eventually leaves Albert and moves to Memphis where she starts a business of designing and making clothes with the help of emotional support of Shug Avery and Sofia, Celie undergoes personal evolution.

Alfonso does not care how she is and wants to gratify his sexual desire. The poor woman has to plead, "Fonso, I ain't well.... Can't you see I am already half dead, an all of these children."(CP 11) "You gonna do what your mammy would'nt." He threatens her to get shut up and get used to it. "You better shut up and get used to it."(CP 1)

He soon gets her pregnant and forced her to quit school. Celie is pregnant with second child by the time her mother dies. After each birth 'Pa' takes the children away from Celie and does not tell her, where they end up. Following her mother's death, Celie is forced to take care of other children including her younger sister Nettie. Pa who can't live without women, remarries and brings home a girl of Celie's age. However, 'Pa' still rapes Celie. Celie is completely helpless. She believes in God and talks to him through letters.

Albert treats Celie very mercilessly. On her wedding day the eldest son of Albert hits Celie's head with a stone, blood flows down but Mr. Albert only says 'don't do that.' He has four children and Celie has to take care of the 'rotten children'. They are so dirty that Celie has to comb their hairs. She has to do all the household chores and even then Albert beats her. She has to

work in a farm and Albert sits on the porch, does nothing, only gives orders.

When Nettie migrates to South Africa with missionaries and sets her goal to educate Olinka people, she writes letters and sends to Celie, Nettie is a primary source of information that gives Celie pride in her African heritage and knowledge of the world outside of the American South. Shug Avery enters the house

of Albert as his lover. Celie is now asked to take care of Shug. During Shug's illness Celie wins her heart by nursing her. Shug is a singer. Shug recovers and becomes able to sing again. Shug returns to Albert's house with a brand new car and a husband named Grady. Through Shug's mentoring and love Celie becomes able to grow into an independent self thinking individual. From the letters she learns that Nettie is returning to America and Celie's two children are living with her.

When Celie comes to know about her children being alive and living with her younger sister her happiness knows no bounds. From here onwards she appears to be an empowered woman. Having read Nettie's letters Celie also gets upset knowing the oppression of the Olinka tribe and other Africans. Because Nettie through her letters let Celie know about her life in the village.

She works as a school teacher for children. It is through Nettie's letter that Alice Walker tries to revive the history of Afro-Americans as to how they were enslaved and suppressed. Walker presents Olinka tribe as a typical example of condition of women in Black culture. working for common goal: the uplift of Black people everywhere".(CP 113).

Men marry many women and have several children from them. They are forced to work and follow their orders. 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. Celie's new awareness of life is that life is something to be looked at positively. Along with Shug, Celie manages to start up her pants business and gets existence. She earns money, power and recognition. Albert is now a changed man. Celie forgives Albert for treating her so badly and helps him. Celie now runs her own business. They are free from oppression and suppression and able to enjoy equal status.

The Color Purple though chiefly is a tale of miserable condition of Celie, the Protagonist, the other women characters are invariably part and parcel of the same. They also become victims of racial and sexual discrimination. She is forced to leave her dear sister Celie and live an isolated life in Africa as a missionary. The estrangement from her sister pains her lot but she suffers and sustains till the estrangement is over and she comes back to the canopy of love created by Celie. Nettie describes her life in the village and the treatment she receives from Corrine. She lives in a small hut far from the hut of Samual and Corrine.

It is significant that the status of women in the Olinka tribe is no better than in the American South. the children's mother by Samual. She becomes paranoid that Nettie is her husband's ex-lover. Nettie's life is wretched and lonely. She writes Celie about her loneliness, "Oh Celie! My life here is nothing but work, work, work and worry.

The incident in the town with Sofia and Mayor is significant in terms of racial

discrimination of blacks. This incident indicates Whiteman's might to exploit Blacks. Sofia who cannot tolerate abusing and humiliation, knocks the man down and the police come. They drag her to the ground. They beat her mercilessly. She is called crazy for her opposition to men's oppression.

"They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one ride. Once in the prison, Sofia, is put to work in a prison laundry. The whole day from five to eight she is washing clothes. Her face becomes yellow. Her fingers look like fatty sausage. The cell where she sleeps is nasty. Food is also bad. There are roaches, mice, flies, as a black American women reared in the South in the 1930s, Sofia rejects completely the systematic oppression that engulfed the position of the black woman. Blacks worked for Whites, who paid them very little.

Her adamant refusal to be white woman's maid is eventually crushed, and she is forced to work first without pay in the prison, doing laundry and then with pay as the white mayor's family maid.

The warden sends Sofia to the Mayor's house as Miss Millie's maid. Sofia's duty is to look after Miss Millie's children and to do all the household chores. Once, while playing, Sofia does not throw the ball as a

result the boy comes and kicks Sofia. After death of Miss Millie she has to grow her daughter Jane whose health is not good.

She has great hatred for White people because she suffers more at the hands of them. She would have died, had she been Celie but Annie Julia is the first wife of Albert. Albert wanted to marry Shug Avery as he was in love with her. she was strong and hence survived. Her husband does not love her, but looks upon her as an object of sex. He has four children from her. In the end her boyfriend shoots her and Julia meets with tragic end.

Conclusion:

Through the character of Celie Alice Walker wants to focus on the life of African American women in the Southern United States in the decades of 1930s and 40s and their socio-economic conditions of black community, struggle to establish their identity.

Walker wanted to show how African Americans are neglected though they are equal. In the novel the term 'Purple' represents meanings of wealth creativity, wisdom, dignity, peace, pride and independence. The Color Purple is a rare color in nature and it's therefore having sacred meaning , creating feelings of spirituality.

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