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THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHALLENGE OF BEING A BLACK WOMAN: A STUDY OF
ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOUR PURPLE*

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Abstract:

The first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, Alice Walker creates Celie, in her novel The Colour Purple, to be the mouthpiece of the plight of black women. Celie grows up in a patriarchal social and is the victim of sexism owing to her gender, as well as of racism, owing to her colour. She narrates the stories of misery of the black women in her life. The coloured are subjected to untold hardships and undergo the process of identity disintegration. Celie walks the silent path of desolation, picking up the pieces of her fragmented self. Through a spiritual transformation and the solidarity she forges with women of similar fate, she builds herself up and liberates herself from the dominance of men. With respect to the realist view of society, this current project has been undertaken with an effort to highlight the plight of the African American women.

Keywords: Abuse, African-American, Black, Feminism, Patriarchy, Racism, Solidarity, Sexism, Womanism, etc.

Literature is a mirror of its society. Its diverse genres have praised and criticized its contemporary society throughout history. Since the emergence of novels in the early part of 18th century, the ever-changing nature of the society has gained a larger stage and audience. Oxford defines novel as “a fictitious prose narrative of book length, typically representing character and action with some degree of realism.” Alice Malsenior Tallulah-Kate Walker is an American novelist, short story writer, poet, theorist and social activist. Her life was strenuous. An eight year old Walker became permanently blind in her right eye after an accident. She attended the only school available to black students in Eatonton, Georgia. Walker remained constantly engaged with the history and hardships of the black community during her working life. In 1982, Walker composed her third novel, *The Colour Purple*, which became her best-known work. She was awarded with the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and National Book Award for Fiction in 1983. The novel was later adapted into a film and musical.

Adriana Claudia Martins explains, “Socially structured mechanisms legitimize oppression, generate and control it so that violence is maintained, in different guises; a fact that the history of humanity has recorded with colonization, racial segregation, and the degradation of people” (Martins, 50). In her work, *The Literary Connection between ‘The Colour Purple’, by Alice Walker and ‘Push’, by Sapphire: African American Literature*, Martins emphasizes on the inferiority complex that develops within the victimized classes of women, a result of the depreciation they face when their family and society silence and exclude them (Martins, 50).

Zhao Qing in *Interpretation of Celie’s Trauma in ‘The Colour Purple’ from the Perspective of Trauma Theory*, identifies trauma as a major theme of the novel. Qing says, “The heroine Celie suffered various traumas during her whole life, namely domestic violence trauma, isolation trauma and gender trauma, etc” (Qing, 1567). Celie was trampled by her stepfather and husband, physically and mentally. She remained isolated after her separation from her sister, Nettie. The long oppression she faced since her childhood at the hands of men, led to a severe gender trauma within her (Qing, 1568-1569).



R.P. Monika and T. Senthamarai employed resilience theory as the reason attributed to Celie's success in their article *Oppression to Revolution: A Transformation of Celie in 'The Colour Purple'*. Resilience theory is defined by Emmy Werner as "the capacity to cope effectively with the internal stresses of their vulnerabilities and external stress" (Monika, 3518). The entirety of Celie's childhood and youth was marked with abuse, dependency and defeat ((Monika, 3519). The solidarity of the female community and Celie's resilient attitude also shaped up her strong and independent character ((Monika, 3520).

Ahmed Kadi Abla and Serir Mortad Ilhem talks about the effect of Celie's lack of formal education manifesting in her letters and speech in *Literary Use of Dialect: Case of Walker's 'The Colour Purple'*. Celie uses the vernacular black dialect for communication. Instead of being an undermining factor, it is the most prominent attribute that Walker could employ to "individualize her characters in that different characters' linguistic behavior is closely linked to their educational level and the social echelons to which they belong" (Abla, 36).

Jaswinder Kaur and Zameerpal Kaur in *Ecofeminist Concerns in 'The Colour Purple' by Alice Walker* interconnect ecological and feminist consciousness. Celie's letters to God represent the oppression of women in the society, and Nettie's letters to Celie show the destruction of nature in Olinka (Kaur, 39). The first connection is men being responsible for the turmoil brought upon women and nature. Secondly, the letters never reach their address. Ecofeminism is a social movement "to demonstrate the oppression of women and annihilation of nature that are bound up with the notions of class, race, casts and colonialism" (Kaur, 29).

Judy Elsley in *Nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent: Fragmentation in the Quilt and 'The Colour Purple'*, identifies the act of sewing as an important symbol in the novel. Women, much like fabric, endure transformation from fragmentation. "Celie, working with pieces of fabric, begins to actively create herself out of the fragments of her life" (Elsley).

The methodology used for the project is both descriptive and analytical. Its data is qualitative in nature. The novel *The Colour Purple* is the primary source of data. The project also relies on the secondary sources of information gathered from published thesis, dissertations, essays, journals and articles. The project is based entirely on subjectivity and observation. A parallel between the fiction and reality is drawn through this project. It is aimed to understand the evils towards women that exist in the society, caused by the forces of individual and collective misogyny.

The project makes use of the Feminist Theory and Womanism. Feminism is defined as "the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes", by Oxford. According to Alice Walker, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender." Walker's Womanist is "one who values the soul and the well-being of the black community."

The world in its 21st century has achieved the unachievable. Progress in the fields of science, commerce, literature, law, communication, etc, has left no page unturned. Human consciousness has seen remarkable growth, but humanity still lags behind. Various humanitarian issues, like war, class conflicts, homicides, abuse, terrorism, and social malpractices are either unresolved or swept under the rugs of politics.

As such, literature across the world has shouldered the duty to debate upon these issues, among which the challenges dealt to women account for a significant portion. The novel embodied in this project is Alice Walker's renowned 'The Color Purple', published in 1982, when the second wave of Feminism was at its peak. Walker identifies herself as a feminist and coined the term 'Womanism'. The protagonist, Celie, is designated to be the mouthpiece of the society she was born into. Her life resonates with the horrors of the class she represents. Walker pours her own spiritual rebirth in this novel, through Celie, to encounter "That Which is Beyond Understanding But Not Beyond Loving" (Walker, *TCP*, 09).

A woman's birth marks the dawn of her misfortune. The fourteen year old Celie is a victim of sexism. She is beaten and raped by her Pa, who she thinks is her father. Celie undergoes almost a daily



routine of abuse as a daughter first and then as the wife of Mr. __. When Harpo asks his father why he beats Celie, Mr. __ conveniently replies, “cause she my wife” (Walker, *TCP*, 30).

Exploitation does not remain confined to the heroine of the novel. Almost all the women suffer from toxic masculinity. Men like Mr. __ and Pa feel entitled to discipline women. Harpo assaults Sofia hoping she will submit to his authority. Celie and Sofia are the incarnation of women, stripped off from their identity by a continuous process of degradation.

Women are viewed as the lower sex and are assumed to inherit a submissive role. Men treat women like cattle that need domestication “to let ‘em[the women] know who got the upper hand” (Walker, *TCP*, 42). Her worth is equaled to that of an animal, an object or simply as her husband’s property. Pa gives Celie away in marriage to Mr. __, and a cow as the dowry. In an effort to ease the humiliation, Celie tries to make her body hard like a tree when assaulted, but soon realizes why “trees fear man” (Walker, *TCP*, 30). Unable to thwart Harpo’s attempts at dominance, Sofia says, “He doesn’t want a wife, he want a dog” (Walker, *TCP*, 67). From Africa, Nettie relates the interaction of men and women. Men look everywhere but at the woman they are talking to.

Women are expected to hand over the control on her body and life to men. Celie is impregnated twice by Pa and is snatched away from her chance at motherhood when both of her children are taken away against her will. She became menopausal before turning twenty. The Olinka women were made to brave the facial scarification ritual in order to be recognized as a part of the community. Young girls endured the rites of genital mutilation in the name of female initiation ceremony. Men held power over the life and death of a woman in the novel.

The use of the American Black Vernacular language shows the informal state of Celie’s education. She was forced to quit school during her first pregnancy. Education for girls was strictly discouraged in Olinka. Tashi was heartbroken at her father’s death, whom “she has tried to please...never quite realizing that, as a girl, she never could” (Walker, *TCP*, 153). Women’s desire for independence is curbed by men. Mr. __ forbade Celie to go to Memphis and Harpo did not approve of Mary Agnes’ wish to sing in public.

Women’s reputation precedes her value. The scandal involving the first wife of Mr. __, who was shot dead by her boyfriend, hindered Mr. __ and Harpo courting Nettie and Sofia respectively. Celie is labeled as “spoiled” by Pa and Sofia is condemned by Mr. __ over their pregnancy. Men’s definition of women is neatly hashed out in the following lines:

Wives don’t go to places like
that (Walker, *TCP*, 74).
A woman need to be at home
(Walker, *TCP*, 82).
Women weaker...women sponse
to take it easy...cry if you want
to. Not try to take over (Walker, *TCP*, 195).
A girl is nothing to herself; only
to her husband can she
become something (Walker, *TCP*, 144).
You black, you pore, you ugly,
you a woman...you nothing at
all (Walker, *TCP*, 187).

The novel is ridden with the plague named racism. Misogyny has its claws deeply engrained in the society, branching from racism. The white men enjoy the supreme position, second only to God, in the social stratum, followed by the white women. Black women belong to the lowest strata of the hierarchy.



The whites look down upon the blacks as inferior beings and expect to be served by them.

The English forged destitution among the Africans and later pitied them. The rich white Englishmen stole Olinka land and made the people labour in their own homeland. Celie's biological father was lynched by the whites for his success. Sofia's refusal to serve a white American, Miss Millie, the Mayor's wife, was met with a thrashing that nearly killed her.

She was reduced to the position of a slave in the Mayor's household. Miss Millie vehemently denied sitting next to Sofia in the car. Mary Agnes is subjected to racism within her own community. She is called "yellow" for her black and white ancestry. The whites snickered behind the black missionaries traveling to Africa. Pa says,

The trouble with our people is
as soon as they got out of
slavery they didn't want to give
the white man nothing else.
But the fact is, you got to give
'em something. Either your
money, your land, your
woman... (Walker, *TCP*, 167).

Celie explains that the first man, Adam, was the first white man who was not killed by the coloured for being different. The first men were the coloured who abandoned the whites as slaves. The serpent in the Bible is the black people whom the whites swore to crush out of rage for being casted out. The whites will become the next serpent for their hatred towards the coloured. Every million year people will evolve to look differently and be picked at by the ones who do not look different. The cycle of being the serpent will continue.

The serpent caused the black men to resent the whites. Malice made them sadists at their homes. They raised sons who were unable to love or be loved. Mr. ___ inherited his father's abusive nature and passed it on to Harpo who sought to beat his fearless wife, Sofia. The vicious nature of this serpent can also be seen in Celie, who out of jealousy, kindled Harpo's yearning to discipline Sofia.

The years of abuse crumbles and disintegrates women's identity. Celie spent her youth as a submissive character. She is silenced by the scars of abuse, unable to sport even her mother's empathy. Celie's first letter is addressed to God, the only entity she can confide in. Celie's stepfather, Pa, warns her to never disclose her situation as "it'd kill your mammy" (Walker, *TCP*, 11), after sexually assaulting her. Sofia was initially a bold and strong individual, who retaliated when assaulted. Later, she is demeaned to a mute character. When questioned about how she handled prison, Sofia answers,

I act like you [Celie]. I jump
right up and do just what they
say (Walker, *TCP*, 88).

With Mr. ___ severing the ties between the sisters, Celie enters a state of utter loneliness. She feels connected to Nettie through the means of letters. When Nettie writes, "Only the sky above us do we hold in common" (Walker, *TCP*, 173), we can comprehend the magnitude of agony caused by their separation. Celie is reminded to fight for herself on numerous occasions but she is scared to act upon it. The toxic nature of men made them repulsive to Celie as a result of which, her sexuality was left in a state of confusion.

Shug Avery's introduction not only set Celie's personal development into motion, but also



revealed much about Mr. ___'s character. He was hopelessly in love with Shug to begin with. Mr. ___ was abusive towards his first wife, Annie Julia, and after her death, with Celie "For being me [Celie] and not you [Shug]" (Walker, *TCP*, 77). Mr. ___, Celie and Shug entered into a ménage à trios. Both Celie and Mr. ___ were enamored with Shug. But Celie was unable to love herself. As she bonded with Shug, physically and emotionally, Celie started realizing her worth. Shug never shied away from anything feminine and encouraged Celie to celebrate her body and sexuality.

From the confines of Mr. ___'s house, Celie visits Africa, "the land for which our mothers and fathers cried- and lived and died" (Walker, *TCP*, 133), through Nettie's letters. The letters serve the purpose of educating the readers about the suffrage of a similar kind set in a different continent. The Olinka traditions of women subjugation are criticized by Nettie. The colonization of Africa and its aftermath are made known the letters. Celie's life turns upside down when she learns the truth of her biological father. She says in a daze,

My daddy lynch. My mama
crazy. All my little half-
brothers and sisters no kin to
me. My children not my sister
and brother. Pa not pa" (Walker, *TCP*, 163).

Anguish makes Celie question her faith on God, who like all men is "trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (Walker, *TCP*, 175). Shug tries restoring the trust preaching, "God is inside you and inside everybody else...God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (Walker, *TCP*, 177). Shug advises Celie to stop picturing God as a man because,

Man corrupt everything... He
try to make you think he
everywhere... you think he
God... Conjure up flowers,
wind, water, a big rock (Walker, *TCP*, 179). Meanwhile, Nettie explains,
Most people think that He
has to look like something or
someone... Not being tied to
what he looks like, frees us"
(Walker, *TCP*, 227).

Thereafter, Celie pictures God in the nature around her. This spiritual healing becomes one of the stepping stones to her liberation.

Social evils and taboos are mostly women-centric. Superstitions are aligned around women. Harpo scornfully refutes Mary Agnes when she laughs at men which he considers to be a bad luck. Women are also victims of incest. Analyzing Pa's character unravels a disturbing truth, coherent with the contemporary and modern society. Pa indulges in pedophilia. He rapes the fourteen year old Celie and develops an interest in her younger sister, Nettie. Celie protects Nettie by bravely throwing herself in the way of Pa's advances. He remarries young May Ellen and discards her as she grows older. A fifteen year old, Daisy, becomes the third wife of an old Pa.

We come across all kinds of relationships during the course of the novel. Some of them are the failed remarriages of Pa and Mr. ___, Shug and Mr. ___'s affair, complicated biological and harmonized



adopted families. Celie builds herself a family out of broken relationships. Her camaraderie of Shug, Sofia, Nettie, Mary Agnes and so on, became the pillars of her growth.

Through forgiveness, the downtrodden characters make peace with themselves and those that wronged them. Celie reconciles with Mr. __ and now dares to dream. She owns a home and a pants making business. Celie metamorphoses from being a girl who could be pushed around into doing anything to an independent woman who could do anything. To Nettie, she writes, “I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time” (Walker, *TCP*, 193). She also learns to stop relying on Shug for happiness, “if she come, I be happy. If she don’t, I be content” (Walker, *TCP*, 247). A lifelong dejection culminates to one neat end when the sisters fall to their knees in gratitude and embrace each other, as they reunite after nearly thirty years. It is “the youngest us [Celie and Nettie] ever felt” (Walker, *TCP*, 251).

The Colour Purple received heavy criticism for dealing with sensitive subjects like slavery, incest, homosexuality, and other taboos. Illicit as they may appear, the contents are pertinent to the world even today. Hence, the novel continues to receive worldwide appreciation. The simplicity of language and style allows the readers to empathize with the characters.

There is a diverse range of themes in the novel, some of which are mistreatment, oppression, submission, patriarchy, violence and abuse. The novel also shed a ton of light on social evils like racism, gender stereotyping, discrimination, sexism, female genital mutilation, scarification, etc, with contrasting positive themes, like solidarity, love, family, faith and the ability to change and forgive.

Feminism is often misinterpreted as a battle between the sexes. History has testified and narrated stories of women combating against bigotry and sexism. It is a cross-cultural phenomenon, relevant still today. Feminism is often criticized to be ‘man-hating’ and to promote misandry. The truth is far from it. Feminism is a medium to overthrow gender-based inequality. A woman needs to be treated as an intellectual being, equal to man. The relationships women establish with each other, based on similar shared experiences, are quintessential for their chance at rebuilding themselves. It is the soul of Walker’s ‘Womanism’.

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