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Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: Female Kinship

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Abstract

African American writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Buchi Emecheta and many more, through their truthful writings, expose the miserable and inhuman conditions of black women who in the finality recovers from their battered condition and succeeds in achieving their self-esteem. All these writers have used their writing to touch upon various issues engulfing and tormenting the black women within their own society as well as in the white community. Their writings examine the troubled experiences of black women, whose condition is no better than a slave. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel, which revolves around the lives of black women in America. It is a novel which amidst darkness and despair, narrates the journey of black women who at the end gain respect and dignity in their own eyes. It is a story of companionship and bonding among the black women and it is this support that helps them to transcend above their male counterparts at the end.

The paper is a humble attempt to study and present the female bonding at various levels among the marginalized black women who are victims of racism, sexism, and patriarchy in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

Key Words: Marginalization, Slavery, Compassion, Dignity, Patriarchy .

Introduction

Alice Walker is one of the most important contemporary figures in African American literature today. She is a novelist, essayist, poet, and an activist who has established herself as a pioneering literary figure in the world of literature. African American literature is produced by African

writers who stay in America and their works are vibrant with the saga of experiences and viewpoint faced by this community. Thus, it is a subcategory of American literature and their writings have enriched the American literature with their varied experiences.

African - American Literature

African American literature developed and flourished out of the tradition of spirituals and the act of telling stories. This literature grew mainly orally, through stories that they have heard from their ancestors, incidents that they have witnessed and the pain that they themselves have experienced. African American literature is an umbrella term, and it has engulfed diverse units such as Oral tradition, the literature of Slavery, Reconstruction of the New Negro Renaissance Movement, Harlem Renaissance, Realism, Naturalism and Modernism, Black arts, and the Contemporary period.

Slave Narrative

Slavery of any kind is an unacceptable and undisputable offense to an individual and today many laws have been raised to punish those who exercise slavery. Though the modern world no more justifies this gruesome practice, but slavery still exists in disguise in our society. Slavery is much more than a master servant relationship. Many a times slavery gets unnoticed or are taken for granted in a relationship. Women are the most vulnerable to this as they suffer at home, at work and at other levels of community. In 1861, the first slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs was published. It is the poignant life story of the writer herself who was an African American. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, though deals with the life and experiences of African American women, is not a slave narrative rather the novel demonstrates that the issues created by slavery is not yet over. The protagonist, Celie, and the other women in the novel are still entrapped in their own world deprived of respect and love because they are black. They seem to be free of the chains of slavery, but they are still affected by the stigma attached to slavery because of their gender and skin tone.

The African American community is portrayed to the world as a marginalized

community. They have always been pushed to the background and has been presented as slaves due to lack of resources for their living. Due to their skin colour they are known as 'black' and the very colour they bore, has deprived them from getting their basic needs and requirements. They live the life of humiliation and are stripped of their dignity quiet often by the white community they live in. Moreover, the condition of lower-class black women is the worst of all, who undergo suffering at numerous levels. They first suffer in their domestic space, then in the hands of the community as they are black in colour and many a times face suppression by the upper-class black women and women. Thus, we can postulate that the under privileged black women, for their survival, must fight on numerous levels- against white patriarchy, against patriarchy and against sexism of black men.

No doubt writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Buchi Emecheta and many more, through the power of the pen, illustrate the pathetic conditions of the black women in front of the world. But the final impression is the image of victory that these writers succeed in recovering both their forgotten history and the mental self which was earlier battered and crushed by their rivals. Thus, the black women writers accomplish in showing the black women's self-definition. The African American women transcends all boundaries and obstacles and emerge as more human capable of love and compassion, despite their own sufferings, in this cruel and harsh world.

Alice Walkers' *Color Purple*

Alice Walker's most acclaimed novel *The Color Purple* (1982) which gave her both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for Fiction, is the story of Celie who from a very young age endures mental and physical trauma but gradually gains dignity and respect in the end. The novel is about Celie, a black woman in the early twentieth century, who after much

struggle realizes her true self. Celie, as we witness in the beginning, is raped by her 'Pa' (her stepfather) from a tender age. The horridness of sexual abuse can be felt when 'Pa' says to Celie, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'll kill your mammy." (*The Color Purple*, p-3). Celie is baffled and frightened by her Pa's behaviour and she starts writing to God with the hope that one day God will come to her rescue;

"Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me." (*The Color Purple*, p-11)

Just like Celie, other women like Nettie, Sofia, Shug equally suffer in one way or the other, just because they are black. However, a deep insight into the story reveals that Alice Walker's intention is to portray that these women can overpower all the negative entities which try to suppress them in the name of sex, class, colour and ethnicity. Throughout the novel, Alice Walker writes as a 'dark women's activist' who is a representative of the "Black". She exposes the abuse brought on by the patriarchal administration and prepares the women characters to put an end to that society so as to remake the lives of the 'black' women. In this endeavour she realizes that only women can rescue women from this murky condition. *The Color Purple* beautifully portrays the relationship between women as multi-dimensional.

Sibling Bonding

The first strong bond that the reader gets to see in the novel is between Celie and Nettie. Nettie is Celie's younger sister and Celie has great love for her. Celie, who has suffered immensely since her childhood, dreams for a better future for Nettie. Though Celie is Nettie's sister, Celie protects her as a mother figure. Celie's affection for her sister is unconditional and their love for each other remains consistent even after they are being separated for almost

thirty years. Celie who has all through been mistreated by Pa (Alphonso), Mister (Albert) and Albert's children, does not want Nettie to go through the same experiences and hence advises Nettie to seek shelter at a decent family of her locality.

Nettie eventually goes to Africa with a missionary family and takes care of Celie's two children, whom Pa desired to kill, by adopting them. But Celie is unaware of this till the end and gets to know of it when she is finally united with her sister. From Africa Nettie keeps writing to Celie, which Celie never receives because of Albert's cunningness. Celie, who has no communication with her sister for a long period, never develops bitter feelings for her. Even Nettie has strong hope that one day she would see her sister, hence keeps writing to her. It is this invisible hope of reunion that keeps the life of these two women going amidst despair and pain.

Amity and Compassion

Of all the friendship and bonding that Celie develops in the novel, her relationship with Shug is very unconventional. Shug Avery is a glamorous and independent singer and was once Albert's mistress. When Shug gets introduced in the novel, the readers perceive her as an arrogant and selfish person. However, her closeness to Celie makes the readers realize that there lies an element of uncanniness in her. Their friendship not only helps Celie discover her real self and awakens her inert love and self-esteem, but also highlights the generous nature of Shug. Thus, a confident and new a Celie is born with the support of another female counterpart, Shug. It is through Shug's aid that Celie recovers the letters from Nettie, which Mister has been hiding from Celie for decades. Celie's bond with Shug ultimately makes her bold and strong and she honestly learns to love herself for the first time.

Shug's liberty and freedom attracts Celie towards her, and she falls in love with Shug. She accomplishes contentment and

satisfaction with Shug as this bond improves both their lives. Both, Pa and Albert, have crushed her talents and aspirations. With Shug she learns to express herself and starts sewing, which with time gained popularity among her family and friend. Shug tells Celie, "you make your living, Celie.....Girl, you on your own way". (p-193)

Sofia: A Radiant of Hope

Another striking relationship in the novel is the relationship between Celie and Sofia. Sofia marries Albert's son Harpo because he has impregnated her. After marriage Harpo starts abusing Sofia. Harpo's reason behind his ugly behaviour is that he thinks it is his right to mistreat his wife, as he has seen his father doing the same since his childhood. Pa, Albert, Harpo, and the other black men in the novel are all by product of the patriarchal society. These men, who themselves are victim in the hands of white racism, have imbibed it in order to gain access to manhood through a fierce patriarchy. It also helps them release their own frustration. However, Sofia is very much different from Celie and would not easily bow down in front of Harpo. Harpo tries hard to gain control over his wife, but she defies hard.

In stark contrast to Celie's silent obedience in Mr....'s home, Sofia demands to be treated as an equal by Harpo, while Harpo tries to imitate his father to rule in the private sphere. Harpo wants to know what to do to make Sofia mind. He sits out on the porch with Mr. he says, I tell her one thing, she does another. Never do what I say. Always back talk. (p- 37)

When Harpo fails to control his wife, he approaches Celie and seeks her advice, as he has known Celie as a submissive lady. Strangely, Celie instead of protecting Sofia, takes Harpo's side. Celie who herself has suffered wants Sofia to undergo the same pain and therefore advises Harpo to beat Sofia. Celie probably thought of finding relief from her anguish through Sofia's suffering. Finally, it is Sofia's determination, not to bow down to her husband's attacks, attracts

Celie towards her. She admits to Sofia that she was jealous of Sofia's defiant nature, and she feels guilty about the fact that she tried to help Harpo, when she should have been with Sofia.

A healthy friendship develops between them, and Celie starts admiring Sofia's assertive nature, honesty, and willingness to work on her emotions. Sofia is different from all other African American women of her time. In Sofia's courage to challenge and reject traditional ideas, Celie saw hope for the African American women. It is Sofia's strong and fierce nature that led her to reject the systematic oppression that engulfed the position of the black women. She first suffers in the hands of the mayor, who puts her in prison, then she works at the mayor's place where she is the meek black maid. Though Sofia suffers at the beginning, she herself decides to put an end to her ordeal herself. Looking at Sofia, Celie learns that if they have to emancipate then they themselves will have to push hard to recover from their dilapidated condition, they cannot rely on an external force to come and rescue them.

In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, another female relationship that grew and developed is between Sofia and Squeak. Squeak as the name suggest means "Little Miss Mouse". Squeak enters Harpo's life after Sofia is imprisoned and she takes care of Harpo and Sofia's children. Harpo asserts his love for Squeak, only after Sofia leaves him. In the novel Squeak is abused by many, but like Celie she too undergoes transformation in the end. Her real name is Mary Agnes, and she in the end demands to be called by her real name and not as Squeak. Alice Walker presents her at the beginning as a quiet, timid, and silent lady. However, just like Celie's her life is also of growth and evolution.

Squeak is the only character in the novel identified as mixed race, i.e., having both white and black ancestry. She thinks that the primary reason why Harpo is with her is her 'light' skin. She asks Harpo, "Do you really love me, or just

my color?" (p-97) Just like Celie gains strength and confidence from Sofia, Squeak too acquires confidence from Sofia and starts realizing her self-worth.

Conclusion

In *The Color Purple*, we experience bitter and harsh relationships among female characters in the male dominated black community. The writer exposes the deplorable, inhuman condition of black women and how they face marginalization in multiple level in their society. But in the end, it is women, in Alice Walker's world, who triumph in the novel. Mary Donnelly in her critical work, "Writers and Their Works Alice Walker: *The Color Purple* and Other Works" states in her introductory chapter, "Walker's heroines nevertheless articulate clear visions not just of the wrongs they face, but also of the hope and strength that cannot be quenched within them."

Celie is a protective sister to Nettie and their affection and support play a large role all through the novel. Celie is initially jealous of Sofia but later witnessing Sofia's assertive nature, falls in love with her. Celie gathers love and strength from Shug Avery and Shug helps Celie achieve her selfhood. It is in their anguish that these relationships tie them together in strong solidarity. They flourish as an alternative to rigid gender roles of the patriarchal society. Without the support and love and friendship among the females it would have been impossible for the 'black' woman to transcend above their male counterparts. Alice Walker appreciates the struggle of black women throughout history and her works not only narrates their struggle but also depicts the possibility of change and progression in their lives. The women in Alice Walker's works, though are crushed at multiple levels by the society, are able to gain respect and self-esteem at the end. In absence of the sense of togetherness and female bonding, these women would have remained in chains. Thus, Alice Walker teaches us to remain strong amidst

chaos in life and to keep fighting in adversities. She is a writer who gives hope to many and shows that patience, strong perseverance, and dedication always pay off in an optimistic manner.

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