



## THE DARKEST LIFE OF THE AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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### ABSTRACT

Afro-American women are doubly discriminated from their own community male as well as the white male and white women. They are considered to be the least living being in the world and the basic rights are regretted for them. Due to their marginalized nature, they are treated as slaves and labourers with low wages. They are not even allowed to merge with the white women society in US even though dwelling in the same land. Black women suffer a lot in the hands of both the men community and there is no one to uplift their hands. They undergo class, race, social and sexist oppression and can't raise their voice against the odds of the society. Walker has portrayed the trials and tribulations undergone by her community in a lively manner in her novel *The Color Purple* which has the theme of sexist oppression, race, class struggles. Her women characters struggle a lot to reveal their identity to the society. Celie shown as a submissive character and had the fear of men, revolted against the odds of her environment and gathered strength and courage to live independently. Shug, Sophia and Netti are the other characters who inspired her in one way or other and made her to realize herself. Through education and economic independence alone will make a woman to realize herself.

**KEYWORDS:** Afro-American status in US, patriarchal supremacist, suppressed – oppressed black women, Walker's Celie, to end sexist oppression.

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### INTRODUCTION

Afro-American- the term itself vibrates the separation of two communities revealing the fact to everyone as the marginalized community. The African people due to the lack of resources for living have drifted or taken as slaves to America. Because of their color discrimination and origin, there aroused a disparity for the black among the whites.

The Black community is treated by the White community as slaves and their basic rights are regretted. Black people are made to work in the Sharecrops and as a Domestic worker for low wages. Black children are not allowed to get education and they are insisted by the landlords to work in their fields at a young age. Though US is considered as a multicultural society/melting pot, the native people

are not ready to accept the settlers. The Afro-Americans showed interest in joining either the Baptist or Methodist church for they are the most anti-slave churches in America and their services were emotionally and spiritually. Black people are restricted to speak in their mother tongue, so the community had an alternative communication as acting and singing. Segregation among the colors was highly observed in all the geographical places of America. The black people are humiliated and degraded regularly due to their color of the skin. Even though the position of the Black community is pathetic without any hold in the adapted place, the condition of Black women is the worst of all.

#### STATUS OF BLACK WOMEN

The hierarchy of social power flows from the White male, White women, White children, Black male, Black male children, Black women and female children. The patriarchal society of white suppresses the black male which further reflects on the black female with high pitch pressures which is intolerable. The black women not only undergo suppression, oppression but also sexism. The race and class variation is mostly highlighted to the black women by her same gender of white which can't be averted. These community women are treated as a material and not as a soul with flesh and blood. They are doubly discriminated. Due to lack of education, they are unaware of their status and condition in the society and are submissive in nature. They took those pressures given by her supremacist and resistance power is absence in them for there is no one to support physically, mentally or economically. Due to their dependency nature, they accept all the dominating isms not having a vent to flee.

White women enjoy some freedom which is regretted to the black women and they are not bothered about the neglected women. They revolt only for the sake of their white community and not for the other black women who are also one among them in their place. The upper class and upper middle class women are given rights like education, reputed working environment and congenial homely environment but they felt boredom with their regular activities of doing the same work and want to make their leisure time a purposeful one. This

spirit made to arouse the feminist movement but it is also partial for this movement is enriched with those classes alone neglecting the poor white women, lower middle class women, non-white women and the black women. The black women for their degradable level in the society have also started a movement called "oppressed" but went unnoticed and didn't grab anyone's attention. The domination chain of the black women has cornered them and sustaining itself is a big crisis for them. They are treated as low wage labourers, domestic workers, child care, etc. This manmade domination has made them to undergo suppressions and oppressions. The unbearable suppression undergone by the black women community is sexual oppression; they are crushed and collapsed both in the hands of their own male community as well as the white male community.

#### WALKER'S CONTRIBUTION

Alice Walker, a feminist writer who also belongs to the same black community too has undergone this class, sexual and social racism and knows the pain of black women. Her writings too have reflected the marginalized discrimination which her community is facing. Her characters reveal the typical Afro-American society. Walker has written from her awareness of the pervasiveness of the violent racist system of the South and its impact on the black "Yet writing is more than an act of bringing ourselves into existence; it also determines the way we are shaped. Women's self-creation is influenced, impeded, constrained by language that has embedded in it the codes of patriarchal culture. For the black woman writer, the search for voice-the rescue of her subjectivity from the sometimes subtle, yet always pervasive, dictates of the dominant white male culture- is even more problematic" ( Tucker, Lindsey. *Alice Walker's The Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text*, Black American Literature Forum, Vol.22, No.1, Black Women Writers Issue (Spring, 1988), p-81-95, Published by St. Louis University, p-81, 1-4-11). Walker's award winning novel *The Color Purple* (1982) portrays the life of the Afro-Americans and their discrimination, suppression, oppression and the sexual harassment. "*The Color Purple* represents a more explicit turning toward the

question of the making of a text by a black woman. With this work, Walker has created a truly modernist text; that is, a text that manifests itself as an artistic production in which language is essential to the shaping of vision. She has created a text that shows language as power and has also demonstrated through this work what the nature of black women's discourse might be" ( Tucker, Lindsey. *Alice Walker's The Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text*, Black American Literature Forum, Vol.22, No.1, Black Women Writers Issue (Spring, 1988), p-81-95, Published by St. Louis University, p-82, l-14-20).

Walker's works have the themes of oppression, suppression, love healing, survival, and the consequences of choices and disparity of power in American society. "Like Dunbar, Walker was conscious of audience when she chose to compose in AAVE. Describing her mother's interaction with *The Color Purple*, Walker writes, 'She had not read *The Color Purple* before her stroke, beyond the first few pages, though it was deliberately written in a way that would not intimidate her, and other readers like her, with only a grade school education and a lifetime of reading the Bible, newspapers and magazine articles' (same 24). Written to be accessible to readers like her mother rather than white readers, *The Color Purple's* strategic fulfillment of the linguistic conventions of black literary realism nevertheless queers for both groups the normative portrait of African Americans traditionally found therein, as well as the more radical, nevertheless misogynistic, portrait of black self-love endorsed by the politics of black pride" (Lewis, Christopher S. *Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker's The Color Purple*, Rocky Mountain Review, Vol. 66. No.2 (Fall 2012), p-158-175, Published by Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, p-167, l- 9-19).

#### **SUPPRESSED WOMEN IN *THE COLOR PURPLE***

The novel deals with the struggle, both in America and Africa, of women to gain recognition as individuals who deserve fair and equal treatment which can be done by helping each other. The story of Celie and Nettie narrates their struggle to escape the countless acts of violence in their lives. Celie, a young black woman struggle not only against racist

white culture but patriarchal black culture as well. "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker, p-3, l-1). Presumably spoken by Celie's stepfather after he rapes her, this discursive prohibition against discourse intrudes in the place of Celie's beginning self-representation through writing. "Another key to Walker's technique can be found in an interview with Mary Helen Washington in which Walker describes three types of black woman: first, the suspended woman, characterized mostly by immobility; second, the assimilated woman, a woman 'still thwarted', ready to move, but without real space to move into; and third, the emergent woman, a woman 'making the first tentative steps into an uncharted region" (Tucker, Lindsey. *Alice Walker's The Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text*, Black American Literature Forum, Vol.22, No.1, Black Women Writers Issue (Spring, 1988), p-81-95, Published by St. Louis University, p-83, l-12-18). The novel begins with Celie writing a letter to God, what had happened to her. Celie's letters are not written in Standard English but Black folk language. "With Celie's first anguished letter to God, Walker enables the reader to enter into the private thoughts and emotional state of her traumatized, guilt- and shame-ridden, and depressed fourteen-year-old protagonist, who has been repeatedly raped and impregnated by the man (Alphonso) whom she believes to be her biological father: "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" (11), (Proudfit, Charles L. *Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's "The Color Purple"*, Contemporary Literature, Vol.32, No.1 (Spring, 1991), p-12-37, Published by University of Wisconsin Press p-17, l-6-13). The rape becomes not an instrument of silencing but the catalyst to Celie's search for voice.

Celie's sexual desire for the same sex, Shug, the singer is attracted and impressed towards her confident, courage and independent way of living. This liberty of Shug made Celie to fall in love with her but at the end of the novel she has realized what life is, and where it lays the contentment. "Black lesbian and lesbian allied writers of the 1970's and

1980's insisted on telling stories about black women who were excluded from black literary representation under the politics of black pride; they 'looked behind the veil and explored broken families, domestic violence, and sexual abuse' (Wall 797). The policies of hegemonic blackness considered these experiences and identities 'disempowering' because they have typically been affiliated with vulnerability and shame" (Lewis, Christopher S. *Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker's The Color Purple*, Rocky Mountain Review, Vol.66. No.2 (Fall 2012), p-158-175, Published by Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, p-159, l-11-17). "Wives is like children, you have to let 'em know who got the upper hand" (Walker, p-35, l-15-16). Mr- says to Harpo to beat Sofia for she speaks for her rights and that should not be transferred to Celie. Celie too said for she had jealous over her. Celie flatly advises him to beat her, resorting to a familiar hierarchal order system as justification. In spite of this external hostility towards other women, internally Celie is magnetized towards them, particularly towards Shug.

"All your children so clean, she say, would you like to work for me, be my maid?" (Walker, p-81, l-7-8). African women are treated as slaves by the White people and they won't wait for their approval or explanation. They have to abide to the words whatever it may be, to the American society. So, women are doubly colored and discriminated both in their society as well as in the adapted. "White folks is a miracle of affliction, say Sofia" (Walker, p-98, l-27). Sofia happened to be with the White American as a sort of imprisonment by doing service, and she felt that even the American women have not yet got their rights but they felt superior in one way that the African women are under them. "Only white people can ride in the beds and use the restaurant. And they have different toilets from colored" (Walker, p-121, l-3-6). "Niggers going to Africa, he said to his wife. Now I have seen everything" (Walker, p-121, l-10-11). White people hate to travel with the Black community and so in order to be differentiated from them they use everything separately and if they sees anyone in public they use to mock at them. The Africans can't

raise their voice for they are treated as slaves and slaves are not given a chance. Many Africans are selling their brothers and sisters to the white as slaves for they are lagging behind in economical and social status and above all they are black. "We all used the same cups and plates" (Walker, p-123, l-21-22). In England during their trip Nettie experienced with the white missionary people, they are generous, kind hearted and they are obliged to the service. The white missionary freely moved with others and has helping tendency. "Hard times is a phrase the English love to use, when speaking of Africa" (Walker, p-124, l-15-16). Nettie says that once Africa had got all the richness and the English people robbed and made them as slaves. The sophisticated civilization due to robbery has fallen down.

"All women good for-he don't finish" (Walker, p-23, l-2-3,). When Harpo asked his Dad why he beats Celie, he said that he has rights to do it, shows male domination. The black male characters may hope to confer upon themselves a position of masculine dominance by transferring the structure of slavocracy to the relationship between men and women within the black community; however, they have internalized this structure without questioning the implications of its cultural legacy. Their gendered inheritance is bankrupt by its formation through a racial system that has emasculated them. Nettie's letters add to the depth and variety of the novel and reveals to Celie that there is a world beyond her limitation. The letters take Celie out of the rural environment and help her to gain an awareness of African life, of a land where blackness carries multiple images and villagers suffer tragically from white exploitation, moreover women submit silently to male oppression. "You a low down dog is what's wrong. I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need" (Walker, p-180, l-24-26). Celie is waiting for a chance to blast Mr- for he has separated Nettie and Celie spiritually by hiding the letters. When Shug invites her to Tennessee, Celie accepts it for she need a change of environment and she no more wants to live with Mr-. Celie has gathered sass and self confident and she knew how to be an

independent woman. This shows how she has gained confidence on her and to feel the fresh air of liberty and freedom. "I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees' (213). This particular speech of Celie's affirms her existence and experience to Albert in a way her silent letters did not. "Everybody learn something in life, she say" (Walker, p-255, l-29-30). Sophia, even though have guts, and courage to face a problem was punished for her sensitiveness and she doesn't want to be a dependent woman or slave and that too particularly to work for a white woman. But after her imprisonment, she has learned a lot, and now she realizes how to react with the situation and sometimes she keep quite like Celie in a submissive manner. All the characters of Walker have learned something in their life and they have transformed according to their level of learning.

"What I need pants for? I say. I ain't women" (Walker, p-131, l-15). Shug insists Celie to wear pants for it will comfortable for her to work in the fields as she has to do all the work round the clock. Celie hesitates and afraid of Mr -. Bur Shug made up her mind to do so. The pant symbolizes the transformation gone in the mind of Celie and it has sown the seed to revolt against Mr – and to gain confidence and courage to raise her voice for freedom. "Celie's most remarkable creation with her needle is her pants. These are truly a product of the imagination, a product of both female consciousness and female economy, and they are fashioned for individuals so as to encompass both their physical and emotional needs. The first pair of pants that Celie makes, however, is at the suggestion of Shug, who is at a loss to see how Celie manages, 'plowing in a dress'. While functionality, 'everyday use', is maximized, and pants making becomes a profitable outlet for Celie's enormous but mostly unrecognized energies, pants also suggest mobility. Beyond the need for more sensible working clothes, pants have always represented a freer form of clothing, one usually forbidden to women" (Tucker, Lindsey. *Alice Walker's The Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text*, Black American Literature Forum, Vol.22, No.1, Black Women Writers Issue (Spring, 1988), p-81-95, Published by St. Louis University, p-

90, l-3-14). Celie slowly energized her self with the help of Shug and Nettie's memories and made herself as an economically independent woman.

#### CONCLUSION

Walker has presented her real, living characters and show how the dominant occurs and what are all the measures to be taken to erase the deviations in their community. The discrimination can be eradicated when the male community acclaims them and give equal rights for them. This can be done through education, updating worldly knowledge, knowing their position, identifying their self and economic independence. The white women have to approve them as one among them for all the systems implemented are manmade and in the past history one cannot trace out the domination isms. It is a clear fact known to everyone that the women are the secondary source, weaker sex than the male counterpart and evidence can be given by the male community from the Bible. It is an acceptable fact but we are not revolting to make matriarchal society but equality. Discrimination among the women community should not be cultivated rather exterminate. Class, race and sexist oppression are to be wiped off from the society making everyone as human.

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