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**Quest for identity and History: A Black Feminist Analysis of Alice Walker's
*The Color Purple***

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ABSTRACT

The Color Purple unfolds the panorama of black female reality of neo-slavery period that takes shape in the smithy of black female brutality towards black females, racial/patriarchal oppression and misogynist assumptions. The novel focuses on the process of the self-discovery of an unlettered black southern woman. It traces the gradual growth of her radicalisation empowerment through female bonding, education and self-employment. The black feminist analysis deals how black female radicalism, embracing of womanism, exploration of black heritage and resultant self-determination bring to fruition Celie's quest for Identity and History.

Celie's succeeds in her quest for Identity and History by developing an understanding of her roots and heritage and acquiring the awareness that she has a right to happiness, passion, creativity and emotional fulfilment. To exercise her rights as an individual, Celie learns to resist the advances of black men who hinder her self-fulfillment. In this novel, Walker establishes a "feminist culture" by focusing attention on the under-privileged and inconspicuous southern black woman who suffers not only at the hands of the white society but also due to black male oppression.

The black feminist approach focuses on the slow and painful growth of Celie's self-consciousness and self-discovery and how her rejuvenation and rebirth are occasioned by her freedom from the expectations and demands of the patriarch, sexism and racism. It takes into consideration the gradual process of her empowerment, brought about by the kindling of her dormant libido by Shug, the enlightening of her mind by Nettie and the attaining of economic security, provided by her owning the house after Alfonso's death and her work as a seamstress. It contextualizes Celie's arduous journey from self-pity to self-love, from sense of worthlessness to sense of pride, from degrading deprivation to uplifting fulfilment and from being a non-person to an authentic person.

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Celie succeeds in her quest for identity and history by developing an understanding of her roots and heritage and acquiring the awareness that she has a right to happiness, passion, creativity and emotional fulfilment. To exercise her rights as an individual, Celie learns to resist the advances of black men who hinder her self-fulfilment. Alice Walker has been vehemently criticized within the African-American community for her portrayal of black men as abusers and rapists. Like her literary predecessor, Zora Neale Hurston, who was criticized during the Harlem Renaissance for her feminist writing, Alice Walker has withstood the criticism. She has held on her convictions and continued to be a spokesman for the cause of the oppressed black woman. In her oeuvre, she explores, "the issue of the spiritual survival of black people" (Smith 450) in particular, black women. She states: "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival of whole of my people..." I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" (Walker, *In Search of 250*.) Besides dealing with a rural southern, black woman's search for an identity, *The Color Purple* is about "reclaiming one's history,...inheritance, language,...and voice...(Folks 183)

In approaching the peculiar dilemma of the African-American woman as a trapped victim of both gender and race, Alice Walker feels there is need for a more radical criticism. She feels that white feminists like Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer and Kate Millet fail to address the black woman. Like Barbara Smith and Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker thinks that the aims and objectives of the white feminism are not relevant to the cause of the black woman. In this context, she observes:

You see, one of the problems with white feminism is that it is not a tradition that teaches white women that they are capable. Whereas my tradition assumes I am capable. I have a tradition of people not letting me get the skills, but I have cleared fields, I have lifted whatever, I have done it. It isn't not a

tradition of wondering whether or not I could do it because I am a woman (Bradley34.)

In an attempt to address the dual dilemma of the black woman, Alice Walker shows:

...a way of putting aside the limited confines of white Feminist criticism...(as) feminist criticism of white women cannot define or lead Black feminism. In the writing of Walker, a dialogue begins which can help feminist criticism reconsider its emphasis on psychoanalysis and literary history and move into the expanded notion of feminist culture (Humm 114.)

In *The Color Purple*, Walker establishes a "feminist culture" by focusing attention on the under-privileged and inconspicuous southern black woman, who suffers not only at the hands of the white society but also due to black male oppression. The adverse criticism of the theme of black male brutality in *The Color Purple* seeks legitimacy from the belief that the patriarchal practice of sexist politics symbolizes black opposition to racial oppression. Thus the black male aggression against black woman is camouflaged as a reaction to social victimization. Bell Hooks regards this perspective on the black male brutality as an expression of the pedagogy of patriarchy and rhetoric of Black Nationalism which collaborate in oppressing the black woman. She argues:

At the peak of contemporary feminist movement black males were one upping white males by representing themselves as the group of males who had not capitulated to feminist demands that they rethink sexism. That repudiation of feminist thinking was highlighted when black females like Alice Walker by once again flaunting their sexism and accusing her and other black women of being traitors to the race.(93).

Albert, Celie's malevolent husband, embodies the black male chauvinism and the patriarchal assumptions and tendencies, analyzed by Bell Hooks. In the absence of another benevolent black male character, he seems to represent the majority of black American manhood. Alice Walker has refuted the allegation that she has presented Albert in order to tarnish the image of black men in general

and create a schism between black men and women. Nevertheless she is outraged by black America's denial of the existence of any form of spousal or child abuse. She is appalled by her detractors' total lack of empathy for women. She thinks that it amounts to condemning black women as a whole. She contends that the portrait of Albert is suggestive of the black feminist denigration of male sexism and phallogentrism, inherent in sexual/racial politics that justifies domination of females, misogynist thinking and negative anti-woman mythology. The black feminist criticism disentangles the skein of race, gender and class with a view to confirming that black male sexist brutality against black women is triggered off by the racist exploitation and oppression of Blackman by the Whiteman.

Besides establishing the interlink ages of race and gender in *The Color Purple* Alice Walker reinforces her position as a "womanish" writer. As the term "feminist" does not reflect Walker's preoccupation with the plight of the Southern Black woman, she adopts the term "womanism," which is propounded in the preface to *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanish Prose* (1983). It is derived from the word "womanish" which black southern people use to describe a girl who questions norms and traditions and has a voice of her own. Womanish is the opposite of "girlish." Regarding her choice of the word, "womanism," Alice Walker remarks: "I just like to have words that describe things correctly...I need a world that is organic....that really comes out of the culture." (Bradly33). The subtitle of *The Color Purple* "Womanish is to feminist as purple to lavender" (Walker, *In Search of* Xii) reiterates Alice Walker's womanish position.

The Color Purple records the voice of Celie, an illiterate southern black woman, who is raped by her step-father and then married off to Mr. Johnson, who could make use of a good worker on his farm. Threatened by her step-father that she had better tell no one but God about her rape at his hands, Celie starts writing letters to God, The entire novel comprises of Celie's letters to God, then to her sister Nettie, and of Nettie's letters to Celie. After her children are separated from Celie and her sister Nettie escapes the advances of Mr. Johnson and

leaves for Africa with missionaries, Celie sinks into isolation. With the passage of time, she develops affinity with an extended family which includes Shug, her husband's mistress who is a juke joint singer and the strong and rebellious Sofia. With the help of the black sisterhood, Celie overcomes oppression and acquires an identity and a sense of her history. In the end, Nettie and Celie's children are reunited with Celie. Mr. Johnson mellows down and develops respect for Celie and her new found independence.

As *The Color Purple* deals with Celie's early life, growth and development, it falls in the category of a Bildungsroman. As a Bildungsroman, *The Color Purple* charts out Celie's gradual evolution and transformation. In the beginning, Celie lacks strength and courage to fight male brutality. Instead she teaches herself to merely survive: "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree"(39). She is the archetypal meek, subservient southern black wife: "She never say nothing back. She never stand up for herself" (17). Unlike Sofia, Celie unassertive and bears her suffering without questioning. She contends: "I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is to stay alive" (Tate 131).

As a result of her silence in the face of oppression, "Celie has been fragmented into pieces which are given away to others" (*Ikenna Dieke* 164). Her life is a series of sacrifices to her father's ruthless desires, to her sister's safety, and to Mr. Johnson's cruelty. She leads a devastated, hopeless life after being abused by her father and her husband and her separation from her children and her sister. She lacks a sense of belonging and self.

As the novel evolves, Celie gradually moves towards self-acceptance and later self-assertion. She asserts herself for the first time when she takes the decision, on her own behalf, of leaving for Memphis with Shug. She boldly announces her existence on earth, "I 'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook.....But I'm here"(205). In Memphis, Celie, for the first time, gives expression to her dormant potentialities and creativity. In a letter, written to Nettie, from Memphis, Celie communicates a new and positive vision of herself: "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money,

friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our Children." Furthermore, Celie, for the first time at the close of this letter, signs emphatically, there by revealing her new sense of self that she has acquired through her relationships and her business:

"Your sister, Celie
Folkpants, Unlimited
Sugar Avery Drive,
Memphis, Tennessee" (212).

Celie comes close to acquiring a sense of identity in Memphis, which opens up new vistas for her and brings her in contact with the world at large. From newspapers, Celie learns about global happenings. On the war torn scene of the contemporary world, she honestly comments that people are "fussing and fighting and pointing fingers at other people, and never even looking for no peace" (208).

Even though Memphis is the beginning of Celie's journey of making a place in the world, she is still away from realizing full potential. In Memphis, Celie acquires a presence that is acknowledged. Her employee, Darlene attempts to "improve" Celie's dialect to make her "refined". As a result, Celie returns to Georgia with a personality and style of her own. On her return to Georgia, she announces to Sofia and Harpo: "I feel different. Look different.." (215) Significantly, Mr. Johnson does not recognize the new Celie: "I pass Mr. house and him sitting on the porch and he didn't even know who I was" (215). It is in Georgia that Celie's final discovery of a sense of self occurs. On returning to Georgia, she reclaims her family home, the farm and the store after her step-father's death. Her ownership of property marks the beginning of new life for Celie. It is significant that she returns to Georgia "round Easter" (215). The synchronization of her return with Easter symbolizes the rebirth and redemption of Celie.

Celie's evolution from a self-effacing woman to a woman whose consciousness allows her to gain control over her life is inspiring. Celie however would not have been able to attain a sense of self entirely by herself. Nettie, Shug and Sofia who form a close sisterhood aid her in her quest for identity. In this context, *The Color Purple* focuses on southern black female survival and transcendence. At this

point it is significant to focus yet again on the Walker's powerful notion of womanish. Understanding among women is not a threat to anyone who intends to treat women fairly. The black feminist analysis of Celie's growth and self-discovery demonstrates how the assimilation of black values of neighborly kindness and sustaining love, embracing of African- American religious traditions, assertion of cultural identity and allegiance to ethnicity empower her to resist racial, sexual and patriarchal pressures. Her realization highlights the inadequacy of the white Christian God, efficacy of black sisterhood and relevance of womanism.

Besides dealing with Celie's self-discovery, *The Color Purple* also focuses on Celie's quest for history. In this sense, it is also a historical novel that chronicles Celie's coming to terms with the legacy of her race and her roots. It affirms and makes black history. It traces the history of the blacks from Africa to the suburbs of the USA. The novel captures Celie's developing a sense of her racial roots and history. The historical perspective of *The Color Purple* highlights the significance of Nettie. She becomes the vehicle by which Celie understands the meaning of the epic journey of her relentless race. Nettie educates Celie and becomes crucial to Celie's coming face to face with the oppression, experienced by her race. Nettie has always been an educating force in Celie's life since childhood. Nettie's education enables her to enter the outside world and become a missionary. In the process, she discovers Africa and her roots and passes on the knowledge of the tumultuous history of the Blacks to Celie. Consequently, Celie learns to treasure and value her race and its heritage.

Nettie reveals to Celie the harrowing story of how the Colonizers have oppressed the blacks and robbed them of their heritage and culture. When Celie gazes at the envelope that brings Nettie's letter from Africa, the stamps showing the "little fat queen of England" (102) catch her attention. Through the stamps, Alice Walker brings Queen Victoria and the universe of imperialism and colonialism into focus. Nettie informs Celie how the English road builders displace the Olinka villages in Africa. She also reveals that the black missionaries

are made to participate in the process of colonization in Africa under the garb of educating the colonized. Nettie tells Celie that missionary work is another form of promoting imperialism. She makes an acute comment on the colonizer's plundering of the art objects of the of the colonized:

...the English have been sending missionaries to Africa and India and China and God knows where all, for over a hundred years. And the things they have brought back.

We spent a morning in one of their museums and it was packed with jewels, furniture, fir, carpets, swords, clothing, even tombs from all the countries they have been. From Africa they have thousands of vases, jars, masks, bowls, baskets, statues and they are all so beautiful it is hard to imagine that the people who made them don't still exist. And yet the English assure us they do not (116-117).

Evidently, the personal/private discourse of a young wonder-struck girl is dexterously embedded in a wider context of race and class. The discourse also underscores how, in a subtle fashion, the white society, for its own gains, has been using the blacks against their own race. Nettie realizes the dormant strength of her race and the fact that valuing their heritage and their history alone could save the blacks from alienation and extinction. She passes on this realization to Celie. It sustains her and enables her to emerge successful in her quest for self-discovery. Through Nettie's travel to Africa, Nettie and Celie not only discover themselves but also their overwhelming past. This represents the convergence of the quest for identity and history, both reinforcing and reiterating each other.

Nettie's encounter with white colonizers urges her to explore black history. She shares with Celie the three insights that she gleans in the process of exploring black history:

1. Africans and not white men were the first to sell blacks into slavery.
2. Jesus had lamb's wool like hair. i.e kinky.
3. Africans had a more advanced civilization than the Europeans had at a comparable period of time in history.

The first insight reveals to Celie that Africans has exploited fellow Africans for mercenary motives. In response to the call of Mammon, they have chosen to dehumanize their brothers and had reduced them to a saleable commodity. The second insight focuses on the lineage of kinky hair, which are generally associated with the blacks. By imparting a halo to the kinky hair, Nettie makes an effort to boost the self-esteem of her race. The third insight historicizes what is primarily a play of mythical imagination, aiming at gaining collective self-esteem.

Nettie's exploration of the black heritage instills in her and Celie a sense of pride in their heritage and history. It fills their minds with a new admiration for their black skin. They come to look upon themselves as an inseparable part of the vast African continent and its rich and diverse civilization. Consequently they are overwhelmed by a strong feeling of Black Nationalism and *pan-Africanism*. As a result, the urge to uplift the black people seizes them. In the wake of this psycho-cultural transformation and rejuvenation, Celie partakes of the collective consciousness of black people. Nettie also passes on to Celie the ideology of Marcus Garvey, a prominent black figure of the time. The racial/cultural/social consciousness, generated by Garveyism gives a boost to Celie's quest for history and heritage. Resultantly it culminates in her acquiring a distinct identity.

Celie's distinct identity is defined by her transformation from a meek subservient woman into an angry and assertive woman. She wants to kill Mr. Johnson for concealing Nettie's letters from her and thus blocking her channel of communication with her sister. Nettie dissuades her from taking recourse to violence and persuades her to be tolerant. Moreover she imparts the liberating knowledge of their racial legacy to Celie and entuses her to emerge successful in her quest for history.

The black feminist analysis of the text demonstrates that Celie's quest for identity and history contextualizes racial conflict, oppression of black women and production of female subjectivities within the African-American community. It highlights the role played by the

dismissal of men from her private world, realization of the inadequacy of the white Christian God, integration with black heritage and racial roots and the assimilation of the power and wisdom of her female ancestors.

Celie's self-realization is made possible through affirmation of herself and others. Her spiritual transformation from a "tree", a piece of wood, to a happy and fulfilled person occurs through knowledge, creativity and love. With regards to the role of creativity in the transformation of Celie, Alice Walker refers to the dormant artistic potentialities of the black female ancestors: "These grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the spirits of creativity in them for which there was no release" (233). Unlike Walker's female ancestors, Celie and the other brave female characters in *The Color Purple* find the "release" of their creative potentialities. The black women in *The Color Purple* realize their individualities in their quilts, songs, and gardens. Shug and Mary Agnes discover themselves in music; Sofia and Celie in their quilts; Nettie in her teaching; and Celie in her wonderful "flok pants". At the end of the book, Celie finally discovers a world of "the color purple". "The little purple frog...on my mantelpiece" (285) symbolizing her triumph in life. Purple is the color of fulfilment, glory and regal power. By associating this color with Celie's quest, Walker renders heroism to her life and fills the matrix of her life with happiness.

The black feminist approach focuses on the slow and painful growth of Celie's self-consciousness and self-discovery and how her rejuvenation and rebirth are occasioned by her freedom from the expectations and demands of the patriarch, sexism and racism. It takes into consideration the gradual process of her empowerment, brought about by the kindling of her dormant libido by Shug, the enlightening of her mind by Nettie and the attaining of economic security, provided by her owning the house after Alfonso's death and her work as a seamstress. It contextualizes Celie's arduous journey from self-pity to self-love, from sense of worthlessness to sense of pride, from degrading

deprivation to uplifting fulfilment and from being a non-person to an authentic person.

The black feminist study of the text throws spotlight on the less-travelled path that the chief female protagonist traverses in the course of her quest for history and identity. Her quest crystallizes as a universal expression of the oppressed and the dispossessed humanity's struggle for emancipation and fulfilment.

The tour de force of the black feminist study of *The Color Purple* lies in denouncing the white patriarchal set-up and the black male oppression. The black feminist approach reveals that the collective degradation of black people is linked with the issues of race, gender and class. The close focus study of the sub-text, constituted by Nettie's letters, reinforces the point that Alice Walker offers an authentic critique of race relations and class positions. The specific thrust of the study lies in underscoring the hegemony of race and class in the private and personal discourses of Celie. She resists racism and sexism and emerges successful in her quest for identity and history. The dexterous treatment of the theme of identity and history makes *The Color Purple* "an American novel of permanent importance" (Robinson 540). The feminist analysis shows how, *The Color Purple* has become a vehicle of radical black self-determination and a document of black feminist theory and praxis.

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