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Oppression and Humiliation in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract:

Alice Walker is the first major writer to make a full-fledged attack on patriarchal domination within the black community itself and her revolutionary writing emerges as unique decolonization of traditional love. Walker has worked for civil rights in Liberty County, Georgia and a number of civil rights projects in Mississippi. Walker, with her writing of *The Color Purple*, gets placed among the most influential contemporary American Writers and is almost universally recognized as a spokeswoman for black people. Alice Walker is awarded with the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for her epistolary novel *The Color Purple* (1982) which advocates women-bonding and their association leads to the self reliance to survive the manifold oppression and humiliation suffered by the Afro-American women. This paper projects the plethora of oppression suffered by the potaganist, Celie in the novel. It also explores the effects of male domination upon Celie's spirit.

Keywords: oppression, sexual oppression, rape, incest, humiliation.

Alice Walker was born to sharecropper parents in Eatonton, Georgia, in 1944. She grew up to become a highly acclaimed novelist, essayist and poet. She is best known for her novel *The Color Purple*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for Fiction in 1983. Walker is also known for her work as an activist. She is credited with coining the term

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‘womanism’. Alice Walker's career as a writer took flight with the publication of her third novel, *The Color Purple*, in 1982. The novel is set in the early 1900s, and explores the struggles in the life of the protagonist, Celie who passes through oppression at the hands of her father, and later, her husband.

Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* is written in an epistolary form. The entire novel is written in series of the letters by Celie, the protagonist of the novel and her sister Nettie. Celie's letters reflect her internal conflict, her silent suffering, and the impact of oppression and humiliation on her spirit. *The Color Purple* is a novel that begins with Celie, is a poor, uneducated and very plain looking fourteen-year-old girl's cry for help. Celie has suffered repeated rapes and brutal beatings by the man she believes to be her father, Alphonso, who tells her, in the novel's opening line, “You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.” (p.1) It is a warning or rather a threat from the stepfather of Celie which silences her, thereby depriving her right to even speak of herself with anybody. She is not even allowed to share her feelings of joy or sorrow with anyone except God. Celie writes about the misery of childhood incest, physical abuse, and loneliness in her letters to God.

Celie's letters are written in non-standard English dialect, what Walker has called black folk language. In fact, Celie writes as many as 50 letters to God in a simple broken language which symbolizes the broken heart of Celie. Her communication with God through her letters confirms her very existence and asserts that she is still alive. “The actual language of the letters, which are written in Celie's folk speech without any attempt at editorializing on Walker's part, is similarly reaffirming; something essential to her personality.”(Trudier Harris p.16)

Celie has been raped twice and impregnated by her stepfather whom she thought was her real father. She suffers from an overpowering sense of incest. She feels scared and ashamed to tell her mother what has happened to her, and she thinks she deserves it. Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* remarks, “But fear and hatred of our

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bodies often crippled our brains, some of the most brilliant women of our time are still trying to think from somewhere outside their female bodies hence they are still merely reproducing old form of intellection”(p.284).

Oppression has become the order of the day in the life of Celie. Having lost faith in man for her rescue, she addresses her letters to God who alone understands her miserable plight and predicament. After being repeatedly raped by her stepfather, Celie is forced to marry a widowed farmer, Mr. __ (later called Albert), with three children. Celie’s marriage with him is another kind of oppression in her life .Celie is convinced that the patriarchal society, particularly the African American society, gives the right to a husband that he can use his wife as he wants and he can abuse and oppress her in any way he wishes. This is seen in her husband’s answer to his son Harpo’s question why he beats Celie. She realizes the futility of her existence with Albert and his children. Celie submits to his ill-treatment and accepts everything he does. The ceaseless psychic oppression and humiliation on a regular basis results in Celie’s sense of loss of identify and individuality.

Celie is constantly humiliated by making mention of her physical ugliness which makes her feel inferior in her own eyes and she ignores her own body which has been put to repeated sexual and physical assaults. Celie is forced to accept that she is ugly in the society standards because her step father stresses on this. “She ugly, don’t even look like she kin to Nettie” (*The Color Purple* P.8). Time and again Celie is called ugly and worthless by both her Pa and her husband, and eventually she comes to accept their judgment. She simply endures the humiliation and drastically curtails her emotional life.

Celie becomes a sexual servant to Albert and a step mother to his children: ‘an occasional sexual convenience’ she could escape from Alphonso who has forced Nettie to come for living with Celie. She believes that marriage as an avenue of escape and takes mainly to look after his unruly, children and to keep house neat and tidy, as well as to satisfy himself sexually. Celie is

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convinced that a woman has to serve and obey men in all respects and aspects and she is made a victim of patriarchy.

Celie physical body has exposed to untold series of rape and brutality by her victimizers. As Gabriele Griffin observes we can see that “the body constitutes the site of oppression and become the source of permanent anxiety. The body dominates the novel. The central character has no control over her body and her physical environment. Victimized from an early age she is the object of perpetual abuse”(p.21). A similar comment is voiced by Deborah Mc Dowell in her essay “Regarding Family Matters” in which she cautions the ways in which black women’s bodies are reduced to the terrain upon which white and black men enact a struggle for power and control over literary landscape.

Celie’s life continues to be miserable. She is beaten, abused, oppressed, and humiliated by her husband, Mr. _ . To be wife means to be obedient, submissive, and Celie describes how her husband treats her. He beats me like he beats the children. He says, Celie, get the belt. The children are outside the room peeping through the cracks. “All I can do is not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man” (*The Color Purple* P.22). Celie's attitude of resisting the oppression of all kinds’ is worth quoting. — To pretend that she is wood, a tree bending but not breaking. In times of extreme physical pain Celie transforms herself into a tree is a telling example of “a black woman’s proximity to the passive suffering and agony of nature”. (Badode p.38).

A black woman, by name, Sofia has also experienced the experience of oppression and humiliation for a petty act of hitting a white man. The white Mayor and police beat Sofia black and blue in order to reassert their patriarchal dominance and Sofia is put in prison and she is sent to work as a maid in the mayor’s house for twenty years. She is not even allowed to see her

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children for twelve years which make her bury her sentiments deep. Sofia protests against the racial and sexual exploitation.

Sofia is able to escape oppression and humiliation by leaving her house and her husband, but she is unable to fight against the oppression and humiliation which is an evil force. Sofia struggles for a meaningful existence and shows her strong power to transcend the racist and sexist society. She struggles for redemption and deliverance from the clutches of manmade dungeon of oppression and humiliation in the patriarchal society.

The thought of leaving her helpless sister at the mercy of Mr. ___ troubles her deeply. But Celie sends her to the only person she thinks would be able to help Nettie, the minister's wife, whom she had met once in town and seen her, accompanied by a little girl, whom Celie instinctively knows to be her own child, Olivia. Thus, Celie is separated from her sister Nettie, who is taken in by Samuel, the minister, and his wife, Corinne to look after their adopted children Olivia and Adam who are in fact Celie's children by her stepfather.

Celie's only confirmation of existence to herself is the letters initially written to God both in hope and hopelessness. And the little ray of hope left in her is lost when she discovers that Mr. ___ has been intercepting Nettie's letters addressed to her. Then she makes her strongest religious statement addressing God, "You must be sleep" (*The Color Purple* p.183). When Celie discovers the letters from Nettie the life of Celie undergoes a transformation and finds the truth about Pa that he is not her real father. In reality, her real father is killed by the white merchants.

The liberation of Celie comes through Shug Avery, the blues singer the mistress of Mr. ___ Celie's transformation is brought about by her journey along with Shug to the big city, Memphis, where a new life of independence and happiness with the establishment of her own business. Celie practices the ideologies of Marxist feminism and radical feminism to break the male supremacy. Celie tries to replace heterosexual love by lesbian association with Shug Avery in

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which she advocates the radical feminists' ideology that a woman's primary relationships are with other women.

Celie leaves Mr._ and lives with Shug and establishes a female centered household where there is beauty, love and laughter. She moves to the path of self-sufficiency not by the means of wage labour but by means of a trade that is both artistic and necessary. She attains her liberation when she is able to break the male dictated stereotype. Shug is the only reason of physical and psychological development of Celie. *The Color Purple* is a novel which highlights the oppression of women and it is also a saga of the black woman's fight with oppression and humiliation to gain her identity. Celie is a representative of all women in general and African American in particular who suffers from the oppression and become a victim to social tyrannies.

The title of the novel is an important symbol and has its own relevance. In the western standards, Purple symbolizes elegance, authority and dignity. At the outset, Celie does not wear purple clothes, which suggests that she has not got self reliance and self- identity. With Shug's help, Celie begins to make a living by herself, gets self reliance in terms of economy. Towards the end of the novel, Albert, the husband of Celie, has carved a purple frog to her as a gift which denotes the recognition for Celie.

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