

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: Exploring of the Idea of 'Women Empowering Women'

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Abstract

*The following paper is an effort to position the legroom occupied and shared by black women in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The novel is imbued with Walker's theory of Womanism which focuses on connectivity between women and how women use this connectivity amongst them in order to deal with the oppressive forces of the society that is both racist and sexist. The paper will attempt to outline the way in which women, by coming together, seek empowerment from each other in ways never seen before. Walker's venture through the novel is to advocate concepts of sisterhood and womanism. Her intention is not to expel men from the society but to overthrow the patriarchal norms imposed by them on black women. My paper will focus on outlining the ways in which the suppressed black women tread on a path towards liberty, autonomy and empowerment by associating with each other as friends, sisters and lovers.*

KEYWORDS:

Empowerment; black female self; fragmented identity; sisterhood; womanism

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, published in 1983, is believed to be one of the supreme literary fabrications of its time. Not only does it record the voyage of the vital character Celie from subjugation to autonomy but it also integrates the concept of a community of women providing their assistance and support to each other in order to redefine themselves and the world they inhabit. The very idea of redefining the self through female bonding is strongly connected with

Walker's theory of 'Womanism' which she coined in her compilation of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, published in 1983. Also, Walker's discontent with the western feminist movement because it excluded the concerns of black women, led her to create the theory of womanism. In this womanist prose Walker defines Womanism as a theory where "a woman loves woman, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist... Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender". Walker defines "womanist" by referring to the diverse forms of relationships that can crop up among women. Womanists love other women, especially for those things that make them female, like their precise female culture, their emotional life and their vigor. She seems to be articulating that women should not only love other women but they should also respect what is exclusively female about them. According to Amanda J. Davis, "Walker's definition of womanism draws her reader's attention to the importance of women's intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual wholeness, and she stresses the need to create a global community where all members of the society are encouraged to survive and survive as a whole. Walker's womanist mission hunts to put together the past and present, individual and



community, personal and political change, into a unified whole.”

According to Walker the term womanism allows for more enclosure and flexibility than the term feminism as it includes an extension beyond the boundaries of race and class and integrates the needs of women who have faced societal, racial, gender and sexual biases throughout. Womanism aims at empowering woman’s culture, community and spirituality and in this way becomes a means to clear away the obstacles that come in the way of women’s empowerment and emancipation. It is for this reason that in *The Color Purple* Walker creates a narrative about the passage that women take from the patriarchal oppressive world to a utopian world of women’s culture, autonomy and agency. In this process, the author aims to expose the abusive collaboration of racism and sexism towards women and mobilizes to reconstruct an order of existence in which males are not banished but are contained. The strong presence of the community of women is empowered in the world of *The Color Purple* without banishing men away from it.

The very availability of the feminine space for women enables them to cultivate and nourish themselves both individually and in connection with each other. In Walker’s novel the search for feminine space becomes an extremely important goal for the women considering the patriarchal world within which they live. The opening episode of the novel, through the letter written to God by Celie, showcases a world where women are treated no more than commodities and sexual objects. Celie, at the age fourteen, is raped and abused by the man she believes is her father when her mother becomes unable to accommodate to her husband’s sexual needs because of recent childbirth. “You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t” (*Color Purple*, 3), threatens Celie’s step-father. Abused sexually, physically and psychologically, Celie becomes the victim of the patriarchal setup where men assert their

power over women through the acts of rape and violence to make women feel powerless. These acts ultimately take the form of symbolic marks of oppression on the female body. It is this oppression that is both sexual and psychological that Celie has to fight against and break away from. In this journey towards freedom and empowerment the women of the novel become the source of her growth, progress and emancipation. Celie’s oppression and submission in the initial years of her teenage life symbolizes “the exploitation of black women by black men” and her story gradually takes the form of a story “of a black woman empowered to reject the role of a passive victim and become an active agent of her own life, with the help of her relationship with the other women, as a sister, relative, lover and a friend”. With so much emphasis on sisterhood, Walker valorizes and affirms the idea of woman-bonding. This woman-bonding becomes a guiding belief in shaping a new-fangled community in *The Color Purple* which enables women to discover a voice and power of their own in order to wrestle the patriarchal system which has besmirched and imprisoned them throughout. According to Barbara Christian, “Walker sees the possibility of empowerment for black women if they create a community of their own that can alter the present day definitions of woman and man”.

Written in the structure of a sequence of letters from Celie to God, Nettie to Celie, Celie to Nettie, and finally Celie to God, the stars, trees, sky, people, everything. Walker’s novel through the epistolary construction recreates the style used by the slaves to accuse their situation. It is also an approach used customarily by women to penetrate the literary ground and empower themselves. *The Color Purple* represents the act of letter writing as a means of self-expression through which the concealed voice of the protagonist, slowly but surely, gains power. The opening letter of the novel which is written by Celie to God describes the sexual abuse on her by her

supposed father and how she is given like an object to Mr. _____ (Albert), the man who will be her husband. Celie begins the letter with an announcement which seems both like a warning and a threat, she writes: “You better never tell anybody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (*The Color Purple*, 3). It is precisely this threat that forces Celie to accept silence and look for a new voice through the written language. Being raped, beaten and battered by her step-father and her husband, Celie starts writing down her disturbing experiences which finally add to her empowerment as she begins to frame herself in her letters. Wendy Wall in “Lettered Bodies and Corporeal Texts in *The Color Purple*” explains that writing down her experiences allows Celie to reintegrate her fragmented body through her discrete, yet unifying letters, which act as a second body through which she can speak. Wall emphasizes on the idea that Celie’s writing is “neither a pure channel of communication nor a duplicitous self-misrepresentation but a complex means of restructuring herself, it takes form of an active process within which she moves towards self-realization, self-definition and self-empowerment”. Celie’s letters first addressed to God, then to her sister Nettie and finally to nature contribute in linking her to her lost interior self and her inner voice because they preserve and frame the feelings that she could not articulate or share with anyone until she begins to associate herself with the women around her. The unified courage of the women owes very much to the stirring and empowerment of Celie in her expedition towards independence and agency.

Through the community of women that Walker so strongly advocates in her novel what she attempts to investigate are the women’s roles, both contained by and outside the patriarchal system, emphasizing on their aspiration for art, imagination, liberty, expression and spirituality. In *The Color Purple*, Walker makes it clear that art is a reservoir for generating “freedom, beauty,

power and most importantly a sense of community”. In the novel it is through art and creative activities that women come together and form a community through which they construct a place and space of their own which helps them to fight against the oppression which they were subject to. Walker reaffirms how art can work towards releasing women from the social restrictions that kept them under the supervision of the patriarchal authority. Women’s artistic drives are also considered as outlets for unrelenting immense oppression they have faced. Mae G Henderson asserts that, for Walker, “art is a source of liberation; it is an act of reconstruction and reclamation of the self, of the past, of women’s culture and therefore of community”. The knack of quilt-making in *The Color Purple* plays an extremely imperative function in bringing the women together and reconstructing their identities. As Wall argues, “it is difficult to talk about Alice Walker’s work without invoking the metaphor of quilt, since it is her primary means of describing her art, and her characters’ means of artistic expression”.

Celie’s process of redefining herself that was initiated by her act of writing letters, first to God and then to her sister Nettie, is followed by another act of creative assertion, that is, quilt-making. It not only connects her with her step daughter in law, Sofia, but also puts her on the path of economic independence and empowerment. Making of quilt pieces out of the messed up curtains, brings Celie and Sofia together into a bond of sisterhood and gives them an opportunity to exercise their creativity together, they ultimately give a very appropriate name to the quilt called ‘Sister’s Choice’. In a letter Celie writes, “Dear God, Me and Sofia work on the quilt. Got it frame up on the porch. Shug Avery donate her old yellow dress for scrap, and I work in a piece every chance I get. It a nice pattern call Sister’s Choice” (*The Color Purple*, 56). The name that these women confer to the pattern of quilt is

emblematic of the womanly bonding that restores women to a sense of entirety, sovereignty and connectivity. It not only becomes representative of expression of creativity but also functions as a symbol for women gathering up the scattered pieces of their lives and re-framing it. Sofia's suggestion to "make the quilt pieces out of the messed up curtains" (*The Color Purple*, 41) becomes representative of the black women's choice to re-erect themselves out of their shattered selves and triumph over the submissiveness and victimhood. Judy Elsley asserts that "a woman makes the world her own by moving away from the patriarchal ways in order to construct a space for herself. That space allows her to accept her own fragmentation and thus validate herself...as a result of which she makes a patch work quilt of her life". In *The Color Purple*, the act of quilt making becomes representative of the conversion that black women undertake from being male defined fragmented entities to becoming self defined women. For Walker, quilting is a form of a female written history where women write their own histories in their own language by piecing together the shapes and fabrics, taken from diverse women that they connect with. For instance, from Sofia Celie learns to fight back and stand up for what she believes in. In a letter, Celie confesses that she feels jealous of Sofia's courage to fight back her husband, Harpo, which Celie initially lacks. She writes,

"I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't.

What that? She say.

Fight. I say" (*The Color Purple*, 39).

For Celie, endurance was more vital than fighting against her oppressors, her step-father and her husband, as she felt that she could survive and continue to live only if she remained silent. But for Sofia fighting was the only means to survive, "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my

uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (*The Color Purple*, 39). It is only when Celie comes in contact with Sofia, and then with Shug Avery, she realizes that she needs to take a step that will allow her move forward from silence to speech and will also empower her to stand up for herself. From this very moment Celie is enabled to react, speak and take control of her life. This becomes evident in an outburst of Celie's as she replies back to Mr. _____'s humiliating statements, she writes, "You a lowdown 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" (*The Color Purple*). With this assertion Celie is able pave a way for herself towards finding a renewed free self after being empowered by Sofia's attitude and spirit towards life which plays a very critical role in Celie's awakening.

Walker's *The Color Purple* is prominently dedicated towards depicting black women characters who have empowered themselves to engage in a struggle to attain freedom, space, self-respect and dignity, a struggle that is achieved collectively through the bonding and sisterhood of women. Walker's womanism also has implications for building community and love among women by advocating sexual love between them. In the novel, the relationship between Celie and the blues singer Shug Avery reveals sensualities that played a pivotal role in awakening Celie and moving her towards a greater understanding of herself. As the representative of the blues culture, Shug blatantly rejects marriage and the concepts of domestic and sexual orthodoxy. She displays characteristics which portray her as a powerful, daring, kind and a generous woman who refuses to be categorized into any definition set by the black male world. Walker represents Shug both as an affectionate mother and a sexual mentor to Celie. She first becomes a friend to Celie, then a lover, but always has a subtly guiding "mothering" influence on Celie that enables her



to evolve into an independent, self-actualized woman, no longer accepting the conditions that have enslaved her. Shug also instills in Celie the confidence and the desire to get to know her own body. Having gone through violent acts like repeated beatings and rapes, Celie began to fear her own body as it became the most exploited target of the male aggression. She viewed her body as torn and fragmented and feared to “confront it as it represented for her the reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status”. It is this commodification that Celie has to liberate herself from and with the help of Shug she succeeds in “freeing herself, (de)objectifying herself from the system which treated her as a slave throughout”. The newly discovered space allows Celie to confront her body and exercise her sexual freedom. With Shug’s support, Celie views her sexual organ in a mirror for the first time and shouts, “It mine”. It is with this very confrontation and recognition of the self that Celie develops an interest in her body and enjoys its beauty. By discovering and then accepting her own body, which initially she considered as fragmented; Celie is able to instigate a desire for selfhood that is intact which ultimately leads her towards emancipation.

Walker also advocates freedom of expression for women. In her essay “In the Closet of the Soul”, she argues for sexual freedom and asserts, “Women loving women, and expressing it ‘publicly’, if they choose, is part and parcel of what freedom for women means, just as this is what means for anyone else”. This view is illustrated in *The Color Purple* through the bond between Shug and Celie as they form an undertone of female intimacy and sexuality as they habitually make use of Mr. _____’s (Albert’s) absence from home. On one such occasion Celie writes:

Mr. _____ and Grady gone off in the car together. Shug ast could she sleep with me. She cold in her and Grady bed all alone. Us talk about this and that.

Soon talk about making love . . . Grady and Mr. _____ come staggering in round daybreak. Me and Shug sound asleep. Her back to me, my arms around her waist . . . wake up sugar, I say. They back. And Shug roll over, hug me, and get out of bed. She stagger into the other room and fall on the bed with Grady. Mr. _____ fall into bed next to me, drunk, and snoring before he hit the quilts. (*The Color Purple*, 118).

In this passage it is evident that the feminine space that Celie and Shug inhabit is the one which is disrupted and disturbed by the presence of men. By allowing Celie to remove herself from Mr. _____ and moving to Memphis with Shug, Walker not only demonstrates the idea of creating a self-contained and self-determined world of women undisturbed by the brute behavior of men but also illustrates women’s potential for productivity and creativity when left to their own device. In Memphis, Celie and Shug continue to enjoy each other’s company and as this structure of feminine space progresses, the structure defining the patriarchal power deteriorates. The celebration of such a womanist order in the novel allows the protagonist to strengthen her sense of self and identity which ultimately awakens her to the realities of her world, the struggles that she has endured and has healed them through various modes of expression by seeking to share these experiences within the spaces created through strong female presence and bonding.

Along with setting Celie on the path to sexual freedom, Shug also drastically alters Celie’s notion of God, whom she had thought of as “some white man work at the bank . . . big and old and tall and grey bearded and white. He wear robes and go barefooted” (*The Color Purple*). In order to achieve spiritual independence, an important component of self-definition for Walker, it was important for Celie to get rid of the notion of the patriarchal God that she had set in her mind since her



childhood. Celie's perceptions of God gradually undergo a permanent change through Shug's interpretations of God as she explains to Celie, "God is inside everybody. God is everything . . . that is or ever was or ever will be. God love everything you love. It pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it". Shug's concept of "God" instills in Celie the desire to find God for herself and rejects the notion of God as a white old man commonly portrayed in the western society. She re-envisioned God as being within her and this very redefinition adds to her journey towards becoming a woman who is empowered and finally musters the courage to stand up for herself in every possible manner. She writes, "Now that my eyes opening, I feels like a fool . . . Still, It is like Shug say, you have to get man off your eyeball before you can see anything a' all".

Reiterating the role that women like Shug and Sophia play in Celie's empowerment, Walker valorizes the collaboration, networking and community building of women in *The Color Purple*. Both of these women characters are representations of unconventional women who exist outside the rules of patriarchy and societal restrictions. They are women who help other women to liberate themselves. The concept of 'women empowering women' that Walker so strongly advocates in this novel is deeply connected with the idea of self-identity and self-assurance of African American women. Celie's liberation from the black oppressive world becomes representative of all those African American women who have taken on the fight to redefine themselves after a long struggle against race, class and gender oppression. It won't be wrong to say that Celie's voice stands for a whole community of women, but at the same time it also claims her right to speak and assert herself as an individual. She also serves as an example of the ideal learning process and self-empowerment. "Poor and oppressed, she learns to shed the yoke of patriarchal oppression in its

many forms – in marriage, in love, in economics, in religion". As a result of this learning, the culture that is generated in *The Color Purple* is the one that is based on a woman centered model that seeks to transform the position of its women from being oppressed and silent towards becoming independent and assertive individuals. Through this novel Walker asserts that if black women wish to gain independence, power and security amongst themselves then it is important for them to come together and invest faith and confidence in each other. According to Walker, the act of black women coming together empowers them not only to stand up against the racist and sexist societies, both black and white, but also enables them to exercise their creative abilities which they were denied to utilize and exercise within the patriarchal set up. Creative activities like writing, quilting, sewing and singing become acts that resurrect women and nurture them in their journey from fragmentation to wholeness and redefinition. Walker illustrates art in her novels as a means available to women through which they rediscover their hidden voices and break through the age long silence imposed on them. According to Bernard Bell, when African American women come together through creativity to form a community, "they transmit knowledge, values and attitude from one person to another and from one generation to another, redefining social institutions and religious beliefs, and hence providing each other a psychological release from the restrictions of society." The values expressed in this kind of woman bonding such as mutuality, shared power, respect and unconditional love for each other become the guiding principles in formation of a new community which contributes immensely in empowering its members.

The sisterhood community that begins with fragmented selves ends up with creating whole and complete individuals. Healthy communication and a desire to share

with each other various experiences of their lives allow women to grow and progress both as individuals and in connection with each other. Women's community that Walker valorizes in *The Color Purple* thrives on transcending the socially constructed factors of race, class, gender and sexual orientation which ultimately results in creating an environment that can muddle through the negatives of the outside.

For Walker, empowerment of women, that is communal, sexual, spiritual and emotional, is attained through demonstration of women as artists and creators who through their artistic expression and community building begin to affirm themselves. Women like Celie discover to surpass every structure of subjugation with the aid of burly and accommodating women like Shug and Sophia and jointly they commemorate the ideas of womanhood, sisterhood, physical beauty and creativity. It is, thus, quite evident that In *The Color Purple* women empower women in every way possible. Be it sexual, spiritual or economic empowerment, women help Celie in her absolute revolution from being a broken and an abused black girl to becoming an empowered, self-governing and a self-confident black woman.

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