



## STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE AS JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF-REALIZATION IN ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE: AN ANALYSIS

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### **An Abstract**

*This paper aims at taking up various problems pertaining to the identity of women and projecting Alice Walker as one of the leading voices among the black American women writers winning acclaim and recognition for her insightful and riveting portrait of black life and the experience of black women in a sexist and racist society and also brings out the fact that the very purpose of Walker's writing is to speak the female experience more powerfully and to depict the oppressed women and then to liberate them from the shackles of slavery to establish equality on par with men.*

It is generally held that African-American Literature is 'literature written by, about and sometimes specifically for African-Americans. The genre began during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries with such writers as poet Phillis Wheatley and Orator Frederick Douglass and reached an early high point with the 'Harlem Renaissance' or 'New Negro Movement' or 'Black Renaissance'. It continues today with such authors as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Walter Mosley being ranked among the top writers in the United States. Women of African origin in the United States have always been keenly aware of the impact of race, class gender and oppression upon their lives. Since, slavery, they have struggled individually and in groups, spontaneously and in formal organizations to eradicate the multiple injustices that they and their communities face.

Truly speaking the Harlem Renaissance marked a turning point for African-American literature. Claude McKay is regarded by most critics as the first significant writer of the Harlem Renaissance. **Songs of Jamaica** (1911) and **Harlem Shadow** (1922) are his notable works and he was followed by Jean Toomer, a talented black writer known for his work **cane** (1923) which is full of love and pride of race revealing the inner yearnings as well as the joys and sorrows of the black people. Following them, women also played an important role during the Renaissance. Women like Jessie Remond Fauset employed the medium of fiction rather successfully by writing such works as **There is Confusion** (1924) and **Plum Bun** (1929). Among the women writers of the times was Nella Larsen who sought to explore the innumerable social problems of young black women in their efforts to struggle upwards both in America and in Europe.

The Renaissance tradition was followed by the late twentieth century black women writers who appear to have a voice of their own being committed to the survival and wholeness of the entire people male and female, as well as valorization of women's work in all their varieties and multitude. Beginning in the 1970's African-American literature reached the mainstream as books by Black writers continually achieved best-selling and award-winning status. This was also the time when the work of African-American writers began to be accepted by academia a legitimate genre of American literature. A number of scholars and writers are generally credited with helping to promote African-American literature are the role of African-Americans within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism, slavery, freedom, struggle for existence and equality. Some of the notable writers are Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Jamaica Kincaid, Rita Dove etc. These writers have taken up the various problems pertaining to the identity of women, analysing them against different cultural and social milieus.

One significant writer of twentieth century is Alice Walker who is recognized as one of the leading voices among the black American women writers. She is said to have produced an acclaimed and varied body of work, including poetry, novels, short stories, essays and criticism. Her works are praised for their insightful and riveting portrait of black life in particular the experience of black women in a sexist and racist society. As Barbara Christian has put it, "Walker is concerned with 'heritage' which to Walker is not so much the ground sweep of history or artifacts created as it is the relations of people to each other; young to old, parent to child, man to woman" (Kane). In 1982, Walker won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for her novel **The Color Purple**. An epistolary novel (a book written in the form of letters) **The Color Purple** tells the story of Celie, a young woman who is sexually abused by her step-father and then forced to marry a man who physically abuses her. The novel was later made into a film by Steven Spielberg.

Alice Walker comes in adversity through the path of an American black woman 'experience'. She is able to speak the female experience more powerfully for being able to pursue it across boundaries of race and class. In short, her purpose of writing is to depict the oppressed women and then to liberate them from the shackles of slavery and to establish their superiority and equality on par with man. The story of a female slavery of black women and their evolution is in some ways like the story of a phoenix. They faced misery, redefining themselves. Slave women experienced sexual exploitation, child bearing, motherhood and sexism. They were exploited for their reproductive and productive capacities.



Alice Walker, an essayist, poet, novelist and activist, was born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia and grew up in an environment of violent racism, which, along with her family's poverty, left a permanent impression on her writing. Besides being a poet who published **In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women and Revolutionary Petunias and other Poems** (1973) and the editor of Feminist Publication **Ms. Magazine** she has to her credit publication of such five popular novella as 1. **Meridian** 2. **The Third life of Grange Copeland** 3. **The Temple of My Familiar** 4. **The Color purple** and 5. **Now is the Time to open your Heart**, of which **The Color Purple** is presented in an epistolary style. The novel narrates the life of Celie, a poor southern black woman who is victimized physically and psychologically by both her stepfather and husband. This novel goes beyond sexism, racism and homophobia.

The very title itself is nothing but a celebration of beauty, pleasures of living and how that celebration is at the centre of spiritual and mental growth. When Shug Avery meets her, she learns that she has been a coward throughout, and now she becomes bold and confident. Then she emerges a successful woman and gets reconciled with her abducted children. **The Color Purple** is a symbol of royalty and it represents the vast capabilities and potential in black people and when given a chance, they can become as independent and empowered individuals. Gloria Steinem too interprets **The color purple** as such symbolizing the 'miracle of human possibilities'. Some critics see 'purple' as a symbol of brushes on the beaten woman's face and this could be reference to andocentric society. Alice Walker's works have sprung up from her immersion in the lamentations and outcries of black women. Mel Walkan in **The New York Times Book Review** states that Alice Walker's choice and effective handling of the epistolary style has enabled her to tell a poignant tale of woman's struggle for existence and independence for which Walker chooses characters who are uneducated, inarticulate, deprived, abused by their family and usually trapped by circumstances which seem to be out of control. She picks up characters who seek the right opportunity to explore growth and change Celie is a representative of this type of character. Though she faces sexual and physical abuses at the hands of her stepfather Alphonso and her husband, she emerges out as independent and liberated being.

The novel **The Color Purple** deals with the suffering of Celie by her father. She suffers continuously and gives birth to two children who are being sold by him. Her step father arranges marriage with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ (as she calls) who again tortures her. Both the characters, Shug Avery and Sofia are really independent Sofia acts as a Catalyst in Celie's understanding of her own plight. Her awareness of the self is enhanced further by her strange relationship with Shug Avery. She is a mistress blue singer who leads a wayward life. Celie gives a gradual hold over her life through her association with Shug and Sofia. She becomes rebellious when she understands that her husband has hidden all the letters from Celie and she walks out of home. She with the help of Shug starts the Pant making business. She flourishes in her business through her hard work and determination. She understands that her Pa is not her real father. She gets back her land and she buys her father's drug store. Celie's realization of her 'self' makes her bold and daring. An equally important component of Celie's empowerment is her new found economic independence. Celie's clothing design is a form of creative self-expression, but it is also a form of entrepreneurship and a means to self-sufficiency. Celie has taken sewing, traditionally a domestic chore, and turned it into an instrument of independence. Walker implies that such economic independence is crucial for women to free themselves from oppressive situations. When she inherits her family's old property, Celie completes her independence, becoming a fully autonomous woman, with her own money, business, story and circle of friends.

The journey of the protagonist Celie, her self-realization, her struggle for existence and determination of the self are effectively narrated by Walker. Generally speaking, the subject of Black narrative literature has been the Whites' oppressing Blacks and the Blacks struggling and surviving to overcome that oppression. But Alice Walker's novels portray black men as oppressors and brutalizers of Black women. Spousal abuse is found to be very common because people believed in the patriarchal ideology that men are all powerful and women should be weak and submissive. Calvin G.Hernton in his **The Sexual Mountain and Black Women** While commenting on the oppression of women draws an analogy between the 'ethics of Jim crow' and the 'ethics of sexism' by saying:

"The ideological and behavioral inequalities fostered on Blacks by Whites were referred to by Richard Wright as 'The ethics of living Jim Crow'. Similarly the familiar axioms that woman's place is in the kitchen and the bedroom, that women should be kept barefoot, pregnant and premises, that they should be isolated, immobile and obedient, plus all the other ideals and beliefs under tuning the customs, converters and practices that mandate women as inferior subjects of men-all of these things may be collectively referred to as "the ethics of living sexism" (P11).

The male characters of Alice Walker are portrayed in this backdrop as oppressors of women in one form or the other. Celie is just fourteen when she is raped by her step father. "He never had a time word to say to me" (P1). Her step father in turn



says, “you better not never tell nobody but God, It’d kill your mammy” (1) Then he tries to silence his step daughter who is the victim of his sexual assault twice. He is a mean man who goes about having sexual relations with many a young woman. After raping Celie, he takes away her two children and gives them off. The moment Celie gets pregnant, he stops her education. She is frustrated when her children are taken away. “He took off. He took it while I was sleeping... He took my other little baby, a boy this time” (P5). After the death of his first wife, Pa marries another one. Bored with Celie, now her step father eyes upon Nettie, her little sister. Celie is very much worried about Nettie and tries to safeguard her. Celie’s step father arranges marriage with Mr. Albert, an old man. Unfortunately, the life of Celie at the hands of Mr. Albert is no better. He continuously beats her. He too assaults her physically and she is also ill treated by Albert’s children. Life with Albert is a painful journey. Noticing the way Celie bears all the brutalities, Calvin C. Hernton in his **The Sexual Mountain and Black Women** writes:

“In Slavery, the feelings of the slave do not matter to all the powerful master.... In particular, women are supposed to be so cold and brutalized by men’s awesome power that they view themselves as nothing and view men as gods” (P15)

**The Color Purple** fully explores not only the effects of sexism and racism but also the black women’s determination to overcome these barriers and emerge unscathed and whole ultimately. All the women characters of this novel do exhibit this determination and attain a state of autonomous selfhood defying and overcoming their dilapidated and opprobrious state in order to live a purposeful life and be content with themselves.

The novel is nothing but an account of abuses sexual, mental and physical which, Celie has to endure under her mother’s husband, Alphonso, as a child and her own husband as an adult. The horrying account of Celie’s sexual abuse presented on the first page of the novel is a sad commentary on the andocentric culture which condemns women to a subordinate state. Though Celie, Alice Walker has illustrated the predicament of a defenseless black woman. Celie is benumbed with sexual violence commuted by her step father and accepts her worthlessness as a statement of fact “Who you think you is?..... you black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman?” (P9). She cannot even muster up courage to share her torture with her mother. Even while her children are taken away from her mother, she watches in mute helplessness. She does not know what happened to her children and she remains unable even to resist her Pa. Life worsens for Celie in the clutches of Mr. Albert who relentlessly beats her.

Alice Walker Portrays her women characters as a mouth piece to reveal to her readers her feminist or womanist perspective. While analyzing Walker’s protagonists, Barbara Christian in her **Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers** observes:

“Walker’s protagonists share certain extend characteristics. All of them are female; all of them are southern black women and they are involved in some critical relationship to lover, mother, father, daughter, husband, woman tradition, god, nature that causes some discomfit” (33).

All the characters in the novel undergo suffering in a way or the other. Celie’s sister Nettie suffers a lot. Like Celie, she is also ill-treated by her step father. Netti, unlike her sister Celie, has a good appearance. She is eyed upon by her step father who wants to seduce her, when he is bored of Celie. Nettie is forced to leave Celie and goes half-hearted to Africa. There in Africa life is full of handships for Nettie who is totally upset to see the oppression of women undergoing spousal abuse. The intensity of suffering of Nettie is the same as Celie’s. Celie undergoes physical assault and her pain is equally felt by Nettie who is not able to bear her poor sister’s plight. Nettie struggles to empower herself and by overcoming the struggle tries to save Celie from the clutches of suffering. Shug Avery is a wayward night club singer. Shug is an example of the deserted children who are not taken care of by parents and never taught how to live. She does not live with one man, she flirts around and gets sick, and then she is thrown to the streets. Sofia is a ruddy character for her father always hates his children. This feeling of hatred has made bold Sofia arrogant one feels pathetic when she says:

“All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my brothers.  
I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl  
Child isn’t safe in a family of men” (P39)

She silently endures all sufferings and tortures in life. The ability to endure under worst circumstances. The ability to endure under worst circumstances is the specialty of the characters portrayed by Alice Walker. Sofia’s high spirits are injured and suppressed by racial discrimination. Her rude response to the Mayor’s wife to be a nanny to their children puts her in great



predicament. She is imprisoned and forced to work as a nanny. This incident marks a decline in her spirits. She is brutally injured in the jail. Life in jail put her under heavy hardships but one is surprised at her power of endurance. She is put to work in the prison laundry. She is given the worst of the calls and has to live with mice, lice and even snakes. The fighter woman is slowly stripped of her strength and she is forced to obey the white officials. She is forcefully silenced not by gender discrimination but by racial conflicts. She expresses her pathetic state to Celie,

“Every time they ask me to do something, Miss Celie,  
I act like I’m you. I jump right up and do  
just what they say” (83)

Sophia has a lot of affection for Celie and she expresses thus:

“To tell the truth, you remind me of my mama.  
She under my daddy thumb. Nae, under my  
daddy foot. Anything he says, goes she never  
say nothing back. She never stands up by herself.  
Try to make a little half stand sometime for the children  
but that always back fire. More she stands up for us the  
harder time he give her (PP 39-40)

It is this tolerance and endurance of the woman characters that make their struggle for existence a room for self-realization. Celie, at the end of the novel, acts as a voice not only for herself but also for all the characters of her age. In short, it has to be concluded that **The Color Purple** articulates nothing but the complexity of the struggle of black women in America making the struggle for existence leave an indelible mark in the minds of not only readers but also millions of black women.

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