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EXIBITION OF EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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Abstract

Portrayal of women's suffering in literature has become common. But the fact is, all the portrayals of women are not similar. In this way, the struggle of women in the American writer Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* stands as significant work in the genre of feminism. The author picturizes the struggle of black women to create lives in the face racism, sexism and the inevitable self-doubt which accompanies generation of patriarchal oppression. It is clear that the author reveals through the character 'Celie', that from patriarchal oppression, woman can find her own voice and thoughts. This paper focuses on women's struggle against patriarchal oppression and endeavors to overcome it, to move towards spiritual growth, self-empowerment and freedom.

Key Words: Struggle, Patriarchal oppression, Self-empowerment.

1.Introduction

The present paper deeply explores the suffering of women under the patriarchal oppression. *The Color Purple* is a significant work with the themes of sexism and racism. Alice Walker won the

Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for “The Color Purple”. Though she has got the Pulitzer Prize, she faced many problems in her childhood. Her brothers unintentionally shot on her eye. For this reason she has become alone, that time she used to write for a time pass. Celie, as the main protagonist and narrator, shows some form of internalized oppression. The epistolary, or letter-writing, form of *The Color Purple* resembles a diary, since Celie tells her story through private letters that she writes to God. Therefore, Celie narrates her life story with complete candor and honesty. As a poor African-American woman in rural Georgia in the 1930s and a victim of domestic abuse, Celie is almost completely voiceless and disenfranchised in everyday society. However, Celie’s letters enable her to break privately the silence that is normally imposed upon her.

Celie’s confessional narrative is reminiscent of African-American slave narratives from the nineteenth century. These early slave narratives, which took the form of song, dance, storytelling, and other arts, ruptured the silence imposed on the black community. Yet, unlike Celie’s letters, these slave narratives employed codes, symbols, humor, and other methods to hide their true intent. Slaves took these measures to prevent slave owners from discovering the slaves’ ability to communicate, articulate, and reflect on their unhappiness, but Celie takes no such protective measures.

The story is set in rural Georgia, beginning two generations ago and covering thirty years in the lives of the characters. It is told from the viewpoint of poor, ragged, semi-literate Celie, who speaks in black folk dialect. The plot advances on the briefest lines of dialogue in an epistolary style which has Celie, out of loneliness and despair, write letters first to God, then to her sister Nettie in Africa. From the first line of the book, You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your Mammy. The reader instantly identifies with fourteen-year-old Celie, who is caught in the horror of incest and abuse. She bears one child who later turns up missing. When her mother asks where it is, Celie replies: I say God took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this Not until much later in the book does Celie find that her children's father is really her stepfather and that her own father had been lynched-information that has been cruelly withheld from her. Alice Walker attacks head-on the taboos that most black writers shy away from, with the notable exceptions of James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison. Like the author Zora Neale Hurston, whom she admires, Walker says she writes about taboos because she is not embarrassed by anything black people do.

Celie’s Struggle Against Patriarchal Oppression

As a young girl, Celie is constantly subjected to abuse and told she is ugly. She decides therefore that she can best ensure her survival by making herself silent and invisible. Celie’s letters to God are her only outlet and means of self-expression. To Celie, God is a distant figure, who she doubts cares about her concerns.

Celie’s father abused her but she does little to fight back against her stepfather, Alphonso. Later in life, when her husband, Mister, abuses her, she reacts in a similarly passive manner. On that time Celie does not have courage to fight with her father and husband. However, Celie latches on to Shug Avery, a beautiful and seemingly empowered woman, as a role model. After Shug moves into

Celie and Mister's home, Celie has the opportunity to befriend the woman whom she loves and to learn, at last, how to fight back.

Shug's maternal prodding helps spur Celie's development. Gradually, Celie recovers her own history, sexuality, spirituality, and voice. When Shug says Celie is "still a virgin" because she has never had a satisfying sex life, Shug demonstrates to Celie the renewing and empowering capacity of storytelling. Shug also opens Celie's eyes to new ideas about religion, empowering Celie to believe in a nontraditional, non-patriarchal version of God.

Nettie's long-lost letters, which Celie discovers with Shug's help hidden in Mister's trunk, fortify Celie's sense of self by informing her of her personal history and of the fate of her children. As her letters show, Celie gradually gains the ability to synthesize her thoughts and feelings into a voice that is fully her own. Celie's process of finding her own voice culminates with her enraged explosion at Mister, in which she curses him for his years of abuse and abasement. Mister responds in his characteristic insulting manner, but his put-downs have no power once Celie possesses the sense of self-worth she previously lacked.

The self-actualization Celie achieves transforms her into a happy, successful, independent woman. Celie takes the act of sewing, which is traditionally thought of as a mere chore for women who are confined to a domestic role, and turns it into an outlet for creative self-expression and a profitable business. After being voiceless for so many years, she is finally content, fulfilled, and self-sufficient. When Nettie, Olivia, and Adam return to Georgia from Africa, Celie's circle of friends and family is finally reunited. Though Celie has endured many years of hardship, she says, "Don't think us feel old at all. . . . Matter of fact, I think this youngest us ever felt."

Sexism and Racism in *The Color Purple*

Themes of sexism and racism are prevalent in the entire novel, probably as a reflection of the social contexts surrounding the novel's setting. Celie, as the main protagonist and narrator, shows some form of internalized oppression when she advised her Harpo to beat Sofie as this was how she was treated by Mister. Shortly after, however, it is revealed that Celie merely advised Harpo in doing that as she was jealous of Sofie's strong-mindedness and assertiveness. Later on in the novel, Celie also begins to find strength within her to reject the violent advances of Mister. Racism as an issue is seen in how Sofie was imprisoned and violently beaten for rejecting the white mayor's wife's offer to be her maid (where the offer in itself was a reflection of racist thinking). Nettie, in her letters, also indicates her reflecting the racial stereotypes held by American Blacks against their African counterparts.

Celie is married off to Albert, a widower, who fancies Nettie rather than Celie but needs a servant to care for two of his children (their mother has been shot by her lover). Beaten and abused, Celie is miserable until the day when Albert brings home a former common-law wife named "Shug" (short for "sugar") Avery, with whom Albert had borne three children before his previous marriage. Shug has been living an independent life as a blues singer, leaving their illegitimate children to be raised by her parents. But now Shug is ill, and when Albert asks Celie to nurse her to health, there

results a ménage à trois with a twist: Celie falls for Shug, forming a lesbian relationship, while both are living with Albert. Walker's treatment of this taboo is characterized by tenderness and humor. While bathing Shug, Celie says: First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man. Walker's female characters come brilliantly alive under the skillful hand of their creator.

Sexual abuse of Celie by Alphonso

Walker's novel *The Color Purple* begins with the scene of rape. When the protagonist of the novel, Celie is stepfather, whom she believes (because nobody talks about the lynched) is her father, begins to rape her..." She cannot tell this trauma anybody. At first, her stepfather starts to do this when her mother is not at home.

Celie, the protagonist and narrator of *The Color Purple*, is a poor, uneducated, fourteen-year-old black girl living in rural Georgia. Celie starts writing letters to God because her father, Alphonso, beats and rapes her. Alphonso has already impregnated Celie once. Celie gave birth to a girl, whom her father stole and presumably killed in the woods. Celie has a second child, a boy, whom her father also steals. Celie's mother becomes seriously ill and dies. Alphonso brings home a new wife but continues to abuse Celie.

Male domination in *The Color Purple*

The female characters, or more appropriately, the colored women in Alice's *The Color Purple* show their destiny in relation to men, society, white people, financial freedom, sexual freedom, and identity. They are symbolic representation of the world of women in pain under the patriarchal subjugation and repression in a colored segment of society which bears the stamp of male domination and patriarchy. It is about being a woman and that too black, living in the frame of male civilization, racist and sexist by definition, being subject to all possible forms of oppression.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is a story about finding and being reconciled with God. Because Celie does not really turn away from God. Rather, she turns to the only place where she has seen God's presence—her relationship with her sister Nettie. And it is this relationship that carries her through the journey of healing as she finds her way back to God. She ends up with a more spiritual and personal relationship with God as a result of her time in Africa, and like her sister comes to realize that the narrowness of conventional belief and practice closes rather than opens the way to a personal contact with the Almighty. Both the sisters complete a personal journey towards a deeper knowledge of God as the novel ends. One of the major aspects of the novel is that Walker employs a narrative technique of epistolary novel for the story. First, it allows an uneducated, black southern woman to speak for herself. Writing her letters becomes for Celie a means of structuring her identity, her sense of self and others. Celie's letters, her growing ability to express her thoughts and feelings show her spiritual development, mark the way she goes to her independence.

Alice Walker gives a sad portrait of a dying lifestyle and a primitive civilization left unrecognized. There is a strong sense of outrage that people are driven out of their rightful homes for foreign (white) economic gain, forced to pay for the privilege of living in corrugated huts and becoming prey to disease because their yam crops are destroyed. Ultimately Samuel and Nettie are forced to leave and return to America. The link between the people in Georgia and the Africans is that both are victims of white oppression, but tragically, despite their common heritage, they can be of no help to one another.

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