



PROJECTION OF DAUNTLESS AND ASSERTIVE COLORED WOMEN IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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ABSTRACT

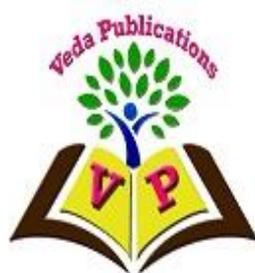
Since time immemorial, women have been treated as frail, timid and enervated in patricentric society. Women were always discriminated against by the patriarchal society. They are regarded as 'Other' and second sex in the male predominated society and they have been forced to live a subdued life. They have been silenced by the patriarchal voice. In her path breaking novel by the name of *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker endeavors her best to give voice to the voicelessness. All the female characters in the novel are bold enough in their speech and action. Initially the heroine of the novel is a timid and submissive character. But as the story progresses, she appears as a bold personality with a voice of her own. The heroine gets empowered with the help of the other women projected in the novel. The novel is almost like a female bildungsroman. Because there is an endeavor to project the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist in the passage from childhood through varied experiences. The novel is in fact a minute account of the youthful development of the heroine, Celie. It depicts the various processes by which maturity of Celie is acquired through the manifold ups and downs in her life.

Keywords: *Immemorial, Frail, Timid, Enervated, Patriarchal, Discriminated, Voice, Bold, Empowered, Growth, Maturity.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Color Purple which was published in 1982 is a classic in the realm of American literature by Alice Walker. The novel can be categorized under the category of bildungsroman because it has all the necessary characteristics of a bildungsroman. It is a female bildungsroman featuring female protagonists. The novel is in the style of epistolary form and it won both 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for Fiction. It portrays the dilapidated circumstances of Afro-American women in rural Georgia. It is in fact a heart wrenching saga of transformation of a girl with such a low esteem who didn't have her own personality to that of a self-assured and empowered woman. It is also the story of the African- American women who have resurrected from the inhuman bondage of domestic slavery and empowered after so much of exploitation and oppression. Women are seen self-empowering by fighting external factors that strive to silence them. What Walker is trying to expose here is the assertiveness and the voice of the oppressed and suppressed woman. Here Walker is seen undertaking enormous painstaking effort to project the female characters. She celebrates women like Shug Avery, Nettie, and Sofia who are not only valorous but also helpful. They helped in finding value in women's lives such as Celie, Squeak. In this case female bonding occupies a significant position in the novel.

CELIE

The central story of the novel revolves around Celie and her sister Nettie. Celie was writing letters to God because she had no one else where she put her feelings. She is an uneducated girl with no self esteem. She is broken, frustrated, dejected girl.

Albert, her stepfather keeps beating her for no reason. She is repeatedly raped by her stepfather, whom she first believes to be her father. Besides raping her and impregnating her, her stepfather also beats her and forces her into a marriage with a widower named Albert, in the novel often referred to as Mr. _____, who brutally beats and rapes her. While introducing Celie to Albert, Alphonso says,

"She ought to marry first. She ain't fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled, twice. But you don't need a fresh woman no how." (Walker, 13)

Her life was like a hell. She is deprived of schooling. Neither her mother is interested in sending her to school nor her father Alphonso. Celie had to do all the household work. Celie married Mr. Albert. And she calls him as Mr. Albert. Albert has an affair with Shug. Shug calls him by his first name Albert. This is sometimes very shocking for Celie. Women are not supposed to call their husband by their first name. As the novel progresses, we come to know that Celie had been subdued in her entire life from childhood. She is at first a girl of total lack of individuality. She never thinks about herself and she never imagined that she can speak for herself. She doesn't have a voice of her own. Initially this was her way of surviving. When her father beats her she endures it. Even he sexually abuses her. She usually accepted it as her fate. She struggles her entire life against many kinds of odds from poverty to racism, sexism, etc.

Her stepfather married her to Albert with the sole intention of looking after four children of Mr. Albert from his first marriage. In Albert's households she has to do the whole monotonous, menial and exhausting work. Celie reveals in one of her letters to



God that she can only survive the way she is. When Albert beats her, she assumes herself as a wood.

"I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man." (Walker, 22)

Celie is a victim of patriarchy, racism, sexism, but she accepts this as her fate. Celie is of the view that this is how she has to survive. She with such a low esteem and lack of individuality of her own is completely dependent on others and her only means of survival is to submit or to surrender before her fate. The thoughts of emancipation are like a dream for her. She can't even imagine her emancipation. Because of years of exploitation, she regarded herself as a person of low esteem, a person without a voice and a person without confidence. Celie transformation from a girl with such a low esteem who didn't a personality of her own to that of a confident woman is the core of the novel. Towards the end of the novel, she had her own enterprise. She breaks her past bondage. She even threatened Albert to murder him.

Celie had her own enterprise. She teaches facts. She searches for her own source of income. She was searching for her empowerment. At the end of the novel, she has a business of her own to run. She has a house of her own. Avery helps her in her empowerment. Virginia Woolf in her groundbreaking essay *A Room of One's Own* opines that a woman must have money and a room of her own if she has to write fiction. Woolf quotes-

"A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." (Woolf, 1)

Women like Nettie, Sofia and Shug provide Celie mental, spiritual, material and financial support. Through Shug, she learns to fight for herself and gets the skill of inner voice. Shug Avery is a role model for Celie. Shug helps her to find her own self esteem. She learns from Nettie that for survival, resistance and struggle are important. She writes,

"...I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive". (Walker,19).

Albert has kept the letters secretly which Nettie had sent. When Celie gets the letters, she stops writing letters to God and addresses her letters to Nettie. It becomes a means of forming her identity. She decides to create a new identity by leaving her husband, which is considered as a further step to wholeness. Celie goes ahead and leaves the house, to Memphis, where she starts a pants-making business and earns a living without any assistance, and not depending on any man. It is due to Shug Avery's tremendous impact that Celie leaves Mr. ____, her husband, and becomes empowered woman.

"I am happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends, and time. And you alive and be home soon," (Walker, 104).

In this case towards the long run of the novel ; it could be interpreted exclusively within the purview of feminist ideology in which, Celie is seen fighting boldly back against her husband by saying, "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman..." (Walker, 101)

SOPHIA

As far as both female assertiveness and female voice is concerned, the first person that comes to our mind is that of Sophia, wife of Harpo. She had a great



influence on Celie's transformation from timid to bold personality. There is a particular incident in the text where Celie is seen encouraging Harpo to beat his wife, Sophia. Because Celie is jealous of Sophia. The reason behind her jealousy of Sophia is that she can do anything which Celie never can imagine doing. She doesn't listen to Harpo. She doesn't stop talking. She doesn't jump everywhere she is ordered to do something. She is uncontrollable. So Celie asks Harpo to beat Sofia in order to control her. What is important to note here is that it is a traditional practice of African men to assert their supremacy over women. These are mostly conservative men who believe that women are sub-human and thus occupy a lower position in terms of human worth. Albert's notion of women is seen in the following passage:

"Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr. _____ say,

Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—he don't finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa." (Walker, 22)

Celie's transformation took place with Sophia. Sophia has a mind of her own. Sophia is independent by nature. But she makes some judgmental errors. There lies the tragedy of her. One day when she goes to the market, there is Mayer's wife, Miss Millie with her husband. They see Sophia and are astonished to see her so healthy and strong woman and her children so clean. She tells Sophia whether she had worked in their home as a maid. Sophia being a strong woman in character replied, "Hell no". Then the Mayor's wife gets angry. The Mayor feels how dare she reply to her like that. He then physically assaults Sophia. Sophie hits the Mayor back. She was

then being arrested for beating the Mayor. She was sentenced for twelve years. She is seen throughout the course of the novel as she fought against her father, against her brother, against her husband Harpo. She said:

"all my life I had to fight. I had to fight with my daddy. I had to fight with my brothers. I had to fight with my cousins and uncles." (Walker, 39)

She is depicted by the novelist as the kind of woman who is unable to bear beating. She hits back. She is assertive, aggressive and would never allow anyone, not even her husband to step on her toe. This kind of bold, confident, willful, courageous and brave woman is being celebrated by Alice Walker.

Walker creates Sofia's sisters "all big strong healthy girls, [and who] look like amazons" (Walker,71). She creates this deliberately to make us apprehend that physical might is also essential in women contrary to stereotypes floated by patriarchy that affirms that women should be delicate.

NETTIE

Another strong female character worthy of notice is Celie's sister Nettie. She boldly rejected Albert's sexual advantage and runs away from Celie's home to the house of a black missionary. It was Nettie who taught Celie learning. Nettie in a sense is the most educated girl in the novel. She educates herself. Nettie is the first person who instills a degree of confidence in Celie.

SHUG AVERY

Shug Avery is another one of the boldest characters we will come across in the novel. She is very assertive. She has experienced rejection. She has been a blues singer. She has been rejected by her



family. She has been rejected by her own children who called her immoral. Because she has a relationship with multiple men. She is very open in her sexual preference. Shug changes the entire direction of the novel when she comes to live with Albert and develops an intimate relationship with Celie. Carmen Gillespie writes about the womanist view of Shug as: "Shug's occupation as a blues singer foregrounds the ways in which she fulfills this role in Celie's life. She provides Celie with the means, the vocabulary and the methodology with which to find and sing her own song, her truth, her self-worth and her desires (Gillespie, G., 2011). She teaches Celie to explore her own body and mind. In this case some nuances of lesbianism are found in the novel. It was Celie who nursed her back during her severe illness. Celie also sees in Shug a maternal figure. Shug opens a new world to Celie. Eminent critic Marcellus Blount in her essay "A Woman Speaks" is of the opinion that Shug Avery is a kind of "the color purple in the field" for Celie, who helps her to become courageous, free and proud of herself. She is independent because she earns lots of money through her singing and she goes too far to places like Tennessee where Celie could never dream of going. Shug is a kind of woman who travels by car. On the other hand, Sophie is a kind of woman who goes anywhere she wants through the train. She could go alone. They are the kind of independent women. Celie since she lacks that courage and confidence, she doesn't think it possible she could travel so far. She plays the role of lover, friend, sister, teacher, preacher and when she dedicates a song to Celie she makes her love herself. Celie writes that for the first time somebody made something and named it after her.

Squeak

Squeak, Harpo's second wife, is also a strong and bold character. She told Harpo that she is not Squeak. She is Mary Agnes. Squeak also in a way finds her voice. Her name is her identity and she asserts that by refusing to use the name Squeak. She is the one who helps Sophia in the time of her distress by raising her child.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion it is to be admitted that the novel is all about the women who have come out and empowered after so much of exploitation. Giving voice is one of the important aspects of the novel. Each of the female characters in the novel in a way is seen challenging the existing system. They are seen challenging patriarchy, challenging dehumanization, challenging sexual assaults, challenging even the existing system of the white authority as Sophia had done. Women come out towards the long run of the novel with a voice of their own, with an enterprise of their own. Through years of exploitation of racism, sexism, physical abuse, they come up as a strong woman. Celie with the help of Shug and Nettie finds her own individuality at the end. At the end, Celie leaves Herbert and goes. She breaks all her past bondage. Celie is able to fulfill her needs as an independent woman. She is breaking the traditional spaces of women. Finding a voice is equal to making a space for her. This kind of assertive character is particularly absent in American literary tradition, basically in that of African American writings. What Walker did here is that she is breaking the canon, breaking the traditional spaces of woman, delimiters the space of woman. At the end, all the characters live a very



insular life, get rid of problems and achieve both personal and communal wholeness. To sum up, the journey of Walker women in search of the principle of "Color Purple" is to restate the role of the Black woman as a creator and also to define her relationship with the change in American society. This is, perhaps, best stated by Walker in her poems:

"Because women are expected to keep silent about their close escapes I will not keep silent...

No. I am finished with living
for what my brother and father defend
for what my lover elevates
for what my sister, blushing, denies or rushes
to embrace.

Besides:

My struggle was always against
an inner darkness : I carry within myself
the only known keys
to my death....."

- (Walker, lines 1-26)

".....the healing
of all our wounds
is forgiveness
that permits a promise
of our return
at the end."

- (Walker, lines 10-15)

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