

**THEME OF RESISTANCE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ALICE WALKER'S
NOVEL *THE COLOR PURPLE***

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Abstract

The present paper entitled Theme of Resistance: A Critical Analysis of Alice Walker's novel The Color Purple aims at understanding the theme of resistance as depicted in the novel The Color Purple by Alice Walker. A pioneering writer of Afro-American literature in America, Walker has been instrumental in uncovering the soul of blacks in general and women in particular. The themes of rise of African American women above oppression on account of gender and race, and quest for independence and a respectable place in society are some of the most pertinent and often recurring themes in her novels. The Afro-American literature or black writing in America as it is known and read widely now gives expression to the experiences that are specifically African American that did not feature in any mainstream American literary work and hence remained hitherto unknown to the world. Thus, the racial and cultural response that is part of the Afro-American history is one that no other race or group shares. Like other writers belonging to the black race Walker has given vent to the experience that purely represents the ethos of her race and its people at the same time acknowledging the fact that writing could serve as a tool to correct the wrongs and in her novels especially the one selected for study in this paper, she has constructed a female centric world wherein she rewrites stories of females from a distinctive perspective in order to challenge the conventional patriarchal writing practice. This paper is an attempt at undertaking a critical analysis primarily focusing on the theme of resistance as depicted in the novel The Color Purple by Alice Walker.

Keywords: Resistance, Black woman, Abuse, Self discovery, Individualism

Introduction

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, an epistolary novel published in 1982 narrated through the letters of the protagonist of the novel Celie. The female world that Walker created in this novel is an exploration of Celie's identity as an individual as well as a black woman. In this process of self discovery the novelist has also insisted on the fact that how by embracing her individual identity and the bonding that she develops with other fellow women in her journey affects the well being and health of her community at large. Thus, through Celie's story Walker endeavored to fight for the cause of black womanhood by an exploration of an ideal way to resist and fight against the twin evils of racial and sexual discrimination, and thereby establishing their own identity. *The Color Purple* exposes the black man's violent side in terms of violence, sexual abuse, and prejudice against black woman. It is Walker's the most strikingly powerful and artistically mature work that has transcended the limitations of female gender to achieve universally embracing human concerns like individualism, and self reliance.

In all her novels and here in *The Color Purple* in particular, Walker's main contention has always been the fact that black women suffer from double oppression in America and she maintains that Afro-American women firstly have to suffer discrimination and torture in various forms inflicted by the white community and secondly they are victims of abuse and violence from Afro-American men who impose the double standards of white society on their women. In her approach towards the narrative that Walker developed in her novel, Walker's voice has been stern, bitter and defiant about the injustice and oppression inflicted upon her race and sex. Her staunch tone in her attitudes towards things surrounding her race and community made the novel an effective one and the impact it left on the minds and souls of the readers who had undergone similar experiences was an instantly moving one that crossed sex and race.

The novel, *The Color Purple* embodies Walker's vision of black feminism at its best that was close to her scheme of things as far as her artistic purpose was concerned. In her artistic endeavor to bring about a transformation in the minds and attitudes of people of her race in order to come out of the shackles of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, Walker was looking for a base to envisage a kind of living that allows and promotes individuals to grow amidst all the suffering that befalls in front of them at various levels. This, Walker believed, was possible when there is a collective consciousness to live harmoniously and uplift each other whether it is in terms of female bonding as well as man-woman relationships within the community. The novel focuses on the growth and

development of Celie from a helpless and invisible young female to a self sufficient and empowered woman at the end.

The Color Purple set in the rural Georgia, the place wherein Walker was born, begins with the striking out but not the erasure of “I am”, as the protagonist Celie’s crisis of subjectivity has textual as well as historical implications and in the very beginning of the text her status as a subject is clarified and chalked out through her enforced privacy in God. Celie’s voyage begins with confining in and writing a prayer letter to God sometime in her fourteenth year when she has no idea what is happening to her and around her. She was considered ugly and subjected to abuse. Though, she has her doubts if God, the distant figure who she confides in, actually cares about her concerns, still she writes in her letter:

Dear God, I am fourteen years old, ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me. (Walker, *The Color Purple*, 3)

In this novel Walker is on a mission to explore the estrangement between her (Afro-American) men and women. Celie, the protagonist and the major female character of the novel is leading a life that has no significance to herself but to others especially men, like her father Alphonso (whose identity later revealed as her step father) who rapes her repeatedly and steals the children begotten, later she was forcefully married off to an older man Mr. _____. She is made to marry the man who initially wanted her sister Nettie by her stepfather not for love but to work and take care of his four children from previous wife. Celie’s husband’s name is referred to as only “Mr. _____”, without a first name or surname, which further reflects the fact that he was the master of Celie, and that they were not equal. Due to her helpless status she does little to thwart the abuse and advances of her stepfather and later she undergoes a similar situation when her husband Mr. _____ abuses her by reacting in a same passive manner.

As she writes letters to her sister Nettie and throughout mentions him as “Mr. _____”, the lack of a surname or a proper name given to him could suggests lack of respect she has had for him due to how he treated her. From the very beginning of her life when she realizes that she has no say and control over her own life and its matters, she learns to be quite and submissive. She is nobody just like any other black woman living a shackled life with no background and education to support and sustain. She is a poor, black and uneducated girl of fourteen living in rural Georgia, a place inhabited predominantly by the Afro-American people. She starts writing letters to God because her father beats and rapes her. He continues to do so even after he brings a new wife to home:

He act like he can't stand me no more. Say I'm evil an always up to no good. He took my other little baby, a boy this time. But I don't think he kilt it. I think he sold it to a man an his wife over Monticello. I got breasts full of milk running down myself. He say Why don't you look decent? Put on something. But what I'm sposed to put on? I don't have nothing. I keep hoping he fine somebody to marry. I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I'll take care of you. With God help. (Walker, *The Color Purple*, 5)

Walker's main contention is that in order to develop a sense of 'self', it becomes very crucial to first of all develop the ability to express one's thoughts and emotions. Initially, being a young girl with unspeakable truths and life circumstances, initially Celie is altogether unable to resist advances of those who misuse her and abuse her physically and mentally. She remembers her step father Alphonso's warning that she "better not tell nobody but God" about her physical violation by him, and thus, she feels that to remain silent and invisible is the only way to preserve herself. She is considered merely an object, a mute subject who has no power to speak up for herself either through action or words.

Through her letters that she writes to God wherein she begins to pour out her feelings and emotions serve as a source to confide in and thus lay bare her life story as she lived, endured and resisted it. The story is being narrated primarily by Celie and her sister Nettie at times. Celie's narrative voice is in first person that she narrates through a series of ninety personal letters to God and later to Nettie. In the beginning of the story her letters chiefly focus on what she does, hears, sees, observes and feels. Over the course of time, her letters bring out more complex trajectory of themes and insights that become instrumental in the events of the novel. As the story progresses, the narrative voice shifts between letters written by Celie and letters written by Nettie. Though, the letters from Nettie are also read through the eyes of Celie herself.

When Shug Avery, a singer, beautiful and seemingly empowered woman falls sick and Mr. ___ brings her home, initially Celie detested the idea of having her around but as the time progresses the two begin to develop a strong bond and admiration for each other, and Celie looks up to Shug as her role model. And it's only after Shug's coming into Mr. ___ and Celie's home that Celie gets to learn at last how to fight back. Shug's love and support helps Celie's development and self discovery. It was only after Celie and Shug discover the letters written by Nettie that Celie gets the much needed knowledge about her existence and other things that were hidden from/to her, and thereby starts forming a powerful narrative of her own. Celie becomes disillusioned with God's existence and role as there is no response to her letters nor does her predicament change for any better, she writes to Nettie as an evolved soul after coming in contact with Shug and adopts a more practical approach towards things around:

Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown. (Walker, *The Color Purple*, 173)

It is with Shug's entrance into her life that Celie discovers her own (family) history, spirituality, consciousness, sexuality and most importantly her assertiveness. The self-actualization that Shug brings in her transforms Celie into a happy, successful and independent woman. Celie is able to stand up and become a fighter because of the love she receives along the way especially from Shug who makes Celie understand the beauty of love, relationships, kindness and above all being a female that plays a major role and contributes towards Celie's independence from suffering and oppression. Celie takes up sewing and harnesses her creative side. She becomes a successful seamstress and her new venture turns out to be a profitable one. After having spent a life of being destitute, voiceless, invisible, and full of abuse, at last Celie emerges as a self-reliant, successful and contented person. She even forgives those who wronged her and after thirty years gets to reunite with her sister Nettie and her own children. At the end, there is a sense of contentment, triumph and gratitude in Celie towards everything and everyone:

Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God. Thank you for bringing my sister Nettie and our children. (Walker, *The Color Purple*, 259)

Alice Walker believed in the twin concepts of 'survival' and 'wholeness' which she has successfully rendered in the novel *The Color Purple* through the journey of Celie, from an invisible and voiceless girl to an evolved and awakened soul. *The Color Purple* can be considered as a sort of bildungsroman novel which is a coming of age novel that traces the protagonist's spiritual, moral, emotional, psychological and social/personal growth and development from childhood to maturity. However, here the protagonist's journey starts from adolescence, at the age of fourteen wherein she is searching for answers concerning her dismal existence and that will probably help her understand her unjust life as she has no clue what is happening to her. Her quest to find answers and solutions to her existential crisis continues until she reaches middle age whereby she gets to realize the happiness and a sense of wholeness in her existence with her family and friends, as well as in the world. Celie's journey has been an arduous one and throughout she had to wrestle with and resist various challenges in terms of oppression, male chauvinism, sexism, and racism. At the same time she was also struggling with her personal beliefs and spirituality. The novel suggests that the will to survive, the indomitable spirit to resist and finding affinity with the community one belongs to, an individual can transform and emerge as a whole independent human being.

Conclusion

Alice Walker emerged as a vocal spokesperson for black feminism and since the publication of *The Color Purple*, she has earned both critical and popular acclaim as a major writer and intellectual. She is recognized as a beacon of light and hope to the millions of marginalized black people, especially the women, and through her writings she has been able to bring them at the centre and express their pain and agony in her heartrending stories which most importantly deal with the issues of racism and sexism, and various other tortures inflicted upon the Afro-Americans, again women in particular. The black women were not only subjected to racial and sexual abuse of the white population but at the same time they were also subjected to the violence, most often sexual, and abuse of the black men as well. In this novel Walker's stance of being a 'womanist' finds its full culmination as she is deeply concerned with her idea of a unified whole wherein she seeks to connect the past and present, individual and community, personal and political change. Her primary concerns include the importance of Afro-American woman's emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual wholeness. At the same time Walker also focuses on the growth and development of all members of the community and their survival. Walker in her womanist prose anthology *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* says "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" and her definition of a womanist is someone who is outrageous, audacious, courageous or possesses willful behavior. Walker further adds that a womanist is someone who is committed towards survival and wholeness of all human beings, irrespective of race, class and gender. Walker's artistic vision is represented beautifully in the novel *The Color Purple*.

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