

The Color Purple: A Representative Upshot of Alice Walkers ‘Womanism.’**Yasmin Khan**

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the concept of womanism, brought in by Alice Walker. Black women bore the brunt of both mental and physical torture and suffering. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is the outpour of emotions encompassing various life aspects like friendships, respect, love, trust and the bond among sisters. She stresses the need for a world of love, strength, bonding and understanding among women to overcome all male resistance that comes in the way of self-liberation, self-respect and being self-sufficient. Womanism arrived as a merciful angel to guide and secure Celie, the protagonist, a position which siphons away the suppression, oppression and abuse, both mental and physical. The novel delineates her journey of struggle for emancipation and finally awakens the sense of self-respect and self-consciousness, eventually leading to be self-liberated.

Keywords: Womanism, The Color Purple, female bonding, Womanist, racism, domination and exploitation

Alice Walker is credited as being one of the many Black American writers along with Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Gloria Steinman, Toni Morrison, Zora Neal Hurdson, Maya Angelou, as enriching Afro-American literature with their practical approaches to issues of racism, sexism, struggle of women for emancipation, domination, discrimination and the like. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is the outpour of emotions encompassing various life aspects like friendships, respect, love, trust and the bond among sisters. *The Colour Purple* portrays the struggles of black people in the white-ruled society. The novel gives due recognition to the fight against racism, violence against women and imperialism. It exhorts that women must voice against the unfair and unjust treatment they receive and that they need to reciprocate with one another in overcoming such hurdles. A life both physically and economically secure and independent paves the way for Women's' liberation and emancipation. What Walker voices in her novel is nothing new, such issues have been there since the Enlightenment period. The Civil rights Movement and the Feminist Movement were born out of these circumstances. Prior to the Civil War in America the Black African people have borne the brunt of inhuman behaviour; tortured, abused and neglected on racial and sexual grounds. In the process, they have lost their genuine "self", and have developed a "double consciousness".

Walker visualises a society in which women are foregrounded and not relegated as the 'other'. Afro-American or black women must have their share of human right and equality in society. *The Color Purple* promotes black feminist awakening and breaking the shackles of patriarchy. They want their basic rights: social, political and economic, save their dignity, their feminine entity, self-esteem, self-realization and their sexual awareness. Alice Walker not only gives voice to black women but also seeks to provide their freedom, as in the case of the protagonist Celie, in *The Colour Purple*. It is an epistolary novel consisting of 90 letters, of which the protagonist Celie addressed 61 to God, 14 to her sister Nettie and 15, Nettie to Celie. It imitates the slave narratives that had a great impact on the African American writings. Published in 1982, it won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for Fiction.

Alice Walker brought in a new concept — *Womanism*, which reveals both racial and sexual discrimination. Both Feminism and Womanism are tantamount to women's liberation. Whereas Feminism is more concerned with suppression and oppression by patriarchy, Womanism sees the female's status as the focal point of empowerment and includes racism on its chart as a destabilising factor. It gives due cognizance to both the sexes, instead of securing rights for women alone. Womanism does not abide by class and creed and it believes that people need to stand beside each other and do away with the whites' hegemony. The racist, class-based and sexist structure of the American society fragmentises people on the virtue of their colour and sex. Black women are categorised to a separate class on the basis of their sex. Walker in *The Colour Purple* defends her concept and propagates for the voice of the black women, thereby seeking a harmonious coexistence of man and women, which summarises her "Womanism". This concept of Walker's has crossed boundaries, beyond United States to Africa, being handled as a tool for critique and analysis. Unlike other writers, Walker uses the term *woman* when it comes to her gender. Her notion is that universally, woman has greater connotations than the word *female*. To Walker, a Womanist is a person who considers being responsible for herself and for those who depend on her, especially other Black women and capable of taking her own decisions and dealing or tackling with the outcome of the same. However, such a stance taken was not appreciated by the Black patriarchy. Walker upholds that being a Womanist, involves the appreciation and love for all women and women's culture. A Womanist is one who would love women non-sexually and sexually as well. By this suggestion she brings acceptance for Black lesbianism whose existence was never taken into account by others.

The Color Purple narrates the ordeal of young fourteen year old poor black girl named Celie as the protagonist. As History bears testimony to the fact, Celie and the other woman characters find themselves entrapped in the quagmire of racial and sexual oppression. They are physically abused and battered; they live in the most vulnerable circumstances of violence, quandry and exploitation. They receive inhuman treatment on the basis of their colour and sex. They are puppets and objects of sex gratification. There was none she could rely, only tell God about her woebegone life. To ease her heavy burdened heart, Celie writes

letters to God. Nettie, Celie's sister, Shug Avery-the blue singer, Sofia – the strong willed daughter –in-law, Tashi an Olinka tribe girl and Squeak are all women who face sorrows and sufferings caused by the male dominated society. More than the others, Celie is the only subject of repeated rapes and beating. She is raped and tortured by her stepfather physically, mentally and emotionally. She is forced by him to a loveless marriage with a widower of four children. Celie's mother too had no say when her former husband was killed by a white. Neither did she protest to the callousness of her second husband, accepting all torture inflicted on her as a part of life like countless other black women. Celie's sister Nettie loves her unconditionally; their mutual love has strong sisterly bonding. She tries to give Celie knowledge but again has to flee for her own safety, as she finds it vulnerable, due to the presence of Pa. She realises the importance of education and later leads the life of a missionary. Celie realises that Nettie is unsafe in her own home, a target of her father's evil design, so helps her to flee from his clutches. Nettie tries to evade and escape Alphonso's sexual approaches. Celie is separated from her sister the only person she has in the world.

Later, after a long period of separation when she unites with Nettie she is spiritually awakened. The unity between the sisters is symbolic of reclaiming of her 'self'. Celie's life continued to be violent in the absence of Nettie, she was left with no choice, chance or strength to question, rebel or break free from the shackles of bondage. She continued being lost and helpless, wrecked psychologically, remorse of her incestuous part, till; her erotic relationship with Shrug, her husband's mistress emboldens her self-image, ultimately leading to her self-sufficiency and economic independence. Womanism thus, arrived as a merciful angel to guide and secure Celie a position which siphons away the suppression, oppression and abuse, both mental and physical. Walker repudiates the bourgeois mentality, contradicting existing norms of marriage and heterosexuality within a constructed framework of love in lesbian-feminism. Celie concedes to her stepfather's sexual approaches, only to save Nettie who would be raped and abused like her. This sisterly bonding serves to be one of the most poignant and touching sacrifice of Walker's Womanism. The novel's style, form and content too bear testimony to the fact that Womanism was a dominant factor. It is suggestive of lesbian-sexuality in the sense that the letters written by Celie are an extension of the female body, while the relationship of care, concern and sympathy among women is a matter of lesbianism.

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker's true intention is to project women to be free from patriarchal domination and learn how to be independent with their efforts to fight against the prejudice and the patriarchal domination. Her objective in writing this novel is to give voice to black women. She stresses the need for a world of love, strength, bonding and understanding among women to overcome all male resistance that comes in the way of self-liberation, self-respect and self-sufficient. Her message for all is that when women come together, mutually decide to support and stand for each other, they will sustain their truly acquired rights. Walker suggests that the idea of freedom should develop or the change must

start from the family itself. The single family transforms to a community when women realise their potentiality to assert in the familial roles for women's freedom.

Celie's self-awareness and self-consciousness develops in gradual stages. As a young girl she is unaware, initially, when she suffers her lot, she only resorts to God for her plight. The second stage is when she decides to change and revolt, decides to leave her home to make a living. Finally, Celie's female consciousness comes full circle when she criticized the false of the God, "What God has done for me? If he ever heard the crying of the black women, the world would change into another appearance!" At this moment, the consciousness of Celie has improved to a higher level. She can speak; her voice became bold and confident. She proposed such questions: "the Gods belong to the white or black?" or "the God belongs to the male or female?". Celie is threatened by her stepfather to not open her mouth about being abused by him, or else her mother would be killed, "you better not never tell nobody but God. I'd like kill your mammy". Probably, this awakens in Celie a sense of ethical pride and self-awareness and helps both Celie and Nettie to grow mature. By the end of the novel, Celie writes letters to everyone: "Dear God, dear the star, dear the trees, dear the people, dear all things in the world!

Her sense of her own strength and self-consciousness is to a large extent the enlightening influence of Shug. She admires and is also fascinated with Shug's ability to control the vicious power. It is through her that Celie's female consciousness becomes active. Her sense of loneliness and degradation found solace in her bonding with Shug Avery, it aroused a sense of confidence to revolt against her perpetrators. The *womanish* bonding, be it her sister, Shug, people in her surroundings enabled Celie to come out of her oppressive and suppressive shell and voice aloud her pent up feelings. Womanism is the sense of being able to empathize women's condition by women themselves and striving to improve women's emancipation, thinking, caring and supporting each other. Relationships among women form a canvass of refuge and shelter for all black women's struggle for liberation and striving for equality. Women's self-respect and self-love have great consequences in ultimately being self-liberated. Also, in the outlook of men changes are effected in their attitude and respect for women. Celie's relationship with Shug is a solitary case of the sexual dimension of womanism in the novel. She is attracted to Shug in an overtly sexual relationship. The relationships of all other women are in a sense of mutual help, sympathy, emotional understanding, caring and the like: and also heterosexual. Alice Walker employs Lesbianism, the relationship of women adoring other women sexually, the relationship that comes from the exaggerated love between women. However, her interpretation for "womanist" does not deny the heterosexual relationships. Despite the debates and controversies of Walker's Womanism, it has developed, gained momentum and found acceptance for it seeks to give a voice against oppression and suppression of black women, thereby seeking to unite the Black. Her experiences are that of her characters and she makes them 'to speak through her'.

Acclaimed as one of the major womanist black woman writers, Alice Walker appeared on the literary scene in the 1970s. She has depicted the contemporary harsh realities of her own experiences, sufferings and emotions. Her experiences shape her characters. Walker's dream in *The Color Purple* is to create a balanced and harmonious society in which men and women, the White and Black live in harmony with each other. The Black history and culture has been one of destruction, domination and exploitation. The novel was a medium or a platform through which she could narrate and depict a realistic picture of Black people in general and their predicament in particular. *The Color Purple* demonstrates that when there is a violation of women's integrity; will power of women can be channelized to cope up with those in distress and agony. Womanism can be considered a tool for the Black women to fight back and assert their rights, to do away with social and cultural repressive practices in society which view them as the 'other' and places them at the lowest rung of the social ladder.

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