

## Resistance and Resilience in Alice Walker's The Color Purple

Dr.Kavya.B

Lecturer in English  
Maharani's PU College

*"I can be changed  
by what happens  
to me. But I refuse  
to be reduced by it"*

-Maya Angelou

**Abstract**

The present paper titled "Resistance and Resilience in Alice Walker's The Color Purple" is a study on Walker's Womanism. Alice Walker introduced this term in her short story 'Coming Apart'. She is a recipient of prestigious Pulitzer Prize for her novel 'The Color Purple'. She is the first black American writer to win this prominent prize. There are seventeen novels, short story collections, twelve non-fiction works and collections of essays and poetry to her credit. Womanism is having its genesis in black feminism. The Black feminism emphasis on gender, race, nation and class whereas womanism focuses on black women, their culture, oppression and determination. Black Feminism emerged as they were excluded from the feminism. The racist attitude was so predominant that the black women were neglected by the white women. It was Sojourner Truth an American abolitionist and activist for African American civil rights delivered a historic speech at Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio (1851) asked "Ain't I a woman?". In Nell Irvin Painter words "It was the time when most Americans thought of slaves as male and women as white, Truth embodied a fact that still bears repeating: Among the blacks are women; among the women, there are blacks." Anna Julia Cooper is considered as "the Mother of Black Feminism" for her contribution, "A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South". Ida Bell Wells was an American investigative journalist, who exposed lynching of African-Americans in the US. She was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancements of colored people (NAACP). She was also a teacher, newspaper editor and civil rights and women rights activist. In 2020 Ida B. Wells was honored with a Pulitzer Prize special citation as recognition for her courageous reporting on the violence against African Americans during the era of lynching. The inclusion of intersectionality in feminism displayed concern for black women. It focuses on multiple forms oppression at once and how it affects a person's life.

**Keywords:** feminism, black feminism, womanism, gender, self-identity

The core value of womanism is the unity among females, to celebrate sisterhood. The novel 'The Color Purple' serves as a testament to feminism. It makes an attempt to define freedom, individuality and empowerment. It throws light on sexual exploitation, relationships, racial and gender discrimination also. The sexual violence displayed on the women crushes them inside and they resist in silence. Finally their resilience is remarkable. The black women exhibit immense strength in accepting their situation and to face their challenges in an optimistic attitude. They don't indulge in self-pity or blaming their males. They are thinking genders and strive hard towards their rewarding resolution. It is noteworthy that black women were in dire need of womanism as they were neglected and excluded by the white feminists in the first and second wave feminism. In the third wave feminism they are included with the theory of intersectionality and womanism. Womanism is much more than

feminism. It can be termed humanism as it concentrates on the upliftment of both male and female. Though females are oppressed directly by men, womanism creates scope for men to become a human first rather than confirming himself as a man physically. Womanism gives freedom to define one's sexuality. Alice Walker rightly quotes "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender". Womanism is not for black women or white women it is pertinent for all the women in the world. Womanism urges need for the unity among women to uplift one another rather than accusing or fighting against the male oppressor. This paper is indeed a reminder in the present scenario of competitive corporate world where women are fighting against each other to inculcate sisterhood and honor womanhood.

The present paper titled "Resistance and Resilience in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" is a study on Walker's Womanism. Alice Walker introduced this term in her short story 'Coming Apart'. She is a recipient of prestigious Pulitzer Prize for her novel 'The Color Purple'. She is the first black American writer to win this prominent prize. There are seventeen novels, short story collections, twelve non-fiction works and collections of essays and poetry to her credit. Womanism is having its genesis in black feminism. The Black feminism emphasis on gender, race, nation and class whereas womanism focuses on black women, their culture, oppression and determination. Black Feminism emerged as they were excluded from the feminism. The racist attitude was so predominant that the black women were neglected by the white women. It was Sojourner Truth an American abolitionist and activist for African American civil rights delivered a historic speech at Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio (1851) asked "Ain't I a woman?". In Nell Irvin Painter words "It was the time when most Americans thought of slaves as male and women as white, Truth embodied a fact that still bears repeating: Among the blacks are women; among the women, there are blacks." Anna Julia Cooper is considered as "the Mother of Black Feminism" for her contribution, "A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South". Ida Bell Wells was an American investigative journalist, who exposed lynching of African-Americans in the US. She was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancements of colored people (NAACP). She was also a teacher, newspaper editor and civil rights and women rights activist. In 2020 Ida B. Wells was honored with a Pulitzer Prize special citation as recognition for her courageous reporting on the violence against African Americans during the era of lynching. The inclusion of intersectionality in feminism displayed concern for black women. It focuses on multiple forms of oppression at once and how it affects a person's life.

According to Alice Walker the Black women were referred as outrageous, audacious, courageous, serious, willful behavior, curious, responsible, and grown up doings. She defines "Womanist is one who loves other women or men sexually and/or non sexually. They are committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.(xi) Loves music, Loves dance, loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.(xii) The epistolary novel 'The Color Purple' revolves round the women characters who are sisters by blood like Celie and Nettie and sisters without any blood relation like Corrine, Sofia, Shug, Olivia and Tashi. Celie writes to God and she finds solace in unburdening herself. Nettie writes to Celie honestly and reveals the truth in different layers. Helene Cixous opines, "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons by the same law with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history – by her own movement." (347)

In the opening lines of the novel it is learnt that Celie is raped by her father and her mother is always pregnant and sick. Her father uses her as an alternate to her mother who is gone to the hospital for delivery. Celie is just fourteen years old and is impregnated by her father. When the child is born it is taken away and the second time also when it was a boy. She is sure it was sold. After her mother's death Celie is sick of pregnancy and the responsibilities of her siblings. But when her father looks at her little sister she is scared and wants to take care of her. Her father married a girl of his daughter's age. Her sister gets a boyfriend of her father's age and Celie wants her to marry him soon so that she could not suffer in the hands of her father. Celie is married to Mr dash as he wanted someone who could take care of his children and Nettie is was too young and inexperienced. After wedding she learns that her husband has four children not three. She is unwelcomed by her husband's son who picks up a rock and opens her head. But Celie proves herself as a good care taker of her husband's children. When her sisters in law Kate and Carrie visit them they are happy the way she had kept her home clean and tidy. Nettie who goes to school wants her sister to fight. "But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive." (18) Celie is buried with her husband's children that's what her sister calls her but she thinks it was better if she was buried then she wouldn't work. Celie is not only a responsible but also a courageous person. She is a victim of domestic violence but decides to suffer in silence. She is thrashed by her husband and his son. He asks her to bring the belt and beat her. "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man." (23) In contrast to Celie there is Sofia who is independent, daring and fearless of men. She wanted to marry her step son Harpo when she was eight months pregnant. But when Harpo's father speaks badly about her character she never begs Harpo to marry but she says she and her baby would be waiting for him when he becomes free from his father. She is saved by her sister and her brother-in-law. Harpo brings his wife Sofia home after marrying her in her sister's house. His father is forced to give him wages. Sofia is a strong lady and not obliging like Celia. Celia is dependent on her husband and takes him as a savior of her life though she is tortured and humiliated by him. But she confesses to Sofia that she is a fool and jealous of her. She wants to fight the way Sofia does. Sofia had fought all her life with her daddy, brothers, cousins and uncles. "A girl child ain't safe in a family of men." (39) Sofia is well determined to kill her husband before he beats her. Celia remembers Sofia's mother. "She under my daddy thumb, now she under my daddy foot. Anything he say goes. She never say nothing back stand up for herself". (39)

Male characters name are revealed in the later part of the novel as they are insignificant. Celie doesn't know her husband's or father's name. She comes to know her husband's name when he is called Albert by his girlfriend. Celie takes care of her in her sickness and they become good friends. Shug Avery is called Queen Honey bee and Celie is wonder struck by her beauty. Harpo wants to tame his wife Sofia. It hurts him that he is unable to make her mind him. She is very dominating and willful. Harpo says Celie "I want her to do what I say, like you do for Pa. when Pa tell you to do something, you do it, he say. When he say not to, you don't. You don't do what he say, he beat you" (60). Sofia says Celie about her changed relationship with her husband. She loved him but his attitude hurts her. She says "I'm getting tired of Harpo. All he thinks about since us married is how to make me mind. He don't want a wife, he want a dog." (62) Sofia is a free woman but she suffers due to her color. Once she is caught by the Mayor's wife who wants to take her as her maid. When she denied to Miss Millie her Mayor husband slapped but Sofia fought him back. The result of it "They cruel her skull, they crack her ribs. They tare her nose loose on one side. They blind

her in one eye. She was swollen from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of an egg plant." (82) She is put to work in the prison laundry, for the whole day from five to eight. Dirty convict uniforms, nasty sheets and blankets piled way over her head. She is tamed well and she becomes Celie as she is sentenced for 12 years. If she says anything she is afraid that they strip her, make her sleep on a cement floor without a light, rolling with Roaches, mice, flies, lice and even snakes. When Harpo's girlfriend tries to help Sofia in the jail she is raped after telling the truth of her resemblance with the white jailor. Finally Sofia is taken out of the jail and is made to work as maid. When Mayor denies the opportunity of driving to his wife it is Sofia who teaches her how to drive. But when they go together to leave her home she says, "Have you even seen a white person and a colored sitting side by side in a car, when one of 'em wasn't showing the other one how to drive it or clean it?" (97)

Shug married, Grady as she thinks it was love at first sight. Her presence and absence in the life of Celie had made a difference. It's Albert's changed nature which altered Shug's decision. She had loved Albert when he used to dance and laugh. But she hated him for beating Celie and hiding her sister Nettie's letters. He had hidden all the letters of Nettie in his trunk. It is Shug who gets it to Celie and also arranges it in order. Celie is extremely happy to read the letters of her sister. There are surprising facts in that to know. The owners of Nettie, Samuel and Corrine have two children named Olivia and Adam. Nettie reveals to Celie that they are her children as Olivia resembles her mother. They are part of a group of people called Missionaries of the American and African Missionary society. Nettie spends time in studying about the Africans and their status till date. She wants to contribute her might to it. Nettie misses her sister so much that she writes her letter to her even knowing it won't reach her. She knew her brother in law and his animal like behavior. Who had asked his sister to throw her away from his house and later followed her and had tried to seduce her. Nettie was lucky enough to escape from him and got shelter. Though she is a maid she never feels like that as she is treated well as a part of their family. She is allowed to read and she reads how Africans were sold them because they loved money more than their own sisters and brothers. How they were brought to America in ships and how they were made to work. When Samuel asked Nettie if she would like to join them to build a school in the middle of Africa she readily accepts and gets educated by them. Nettie becomes engrossed in reading and thinks about the position of the Blacks. How "Millions and millions of Africans were captured and sold into slavery – you and me Celie! And whole cities were destroyed by slave catching wars." (124) Today the people of Africa – having murdered or sold into slavery their strongest folks – are riddled by disease and sunk in spiritual and physical confusion. They believe in the devil and worship, the dead. Nor can they read or write. Nettie's heart bleeds for her ancestors when she first visited African coast. Olinka is the village where they plan to open a school and educate the villagers. It was not easy for them to acquaint. They had expected white missionaries but never black that too with women volunteers.

The Olinka never wanted their girls to be educated. There is gender discrimination in their community. "A girl is nothing to herself. Only to her husband can she become something." (140) They prepared girls to become mothers of his children. They had considered Nettie as the missionary's drudge. Everything was going well in the family but she observed some change in Corrine. She distanced herself from Nettie but still she was good natured "But sometimes I sense her spirit is being tested and that something in her is not at rest (142). The women have totally surrendered themselves to men and never try to assert themselves. Nettie is pitied for not having husband and children. She is an outcast for them. Nettie is brought



up in the same subjugation and is unwilling to accept their views. She is reminded of her pa. "Men listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don't even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads toward the ground. The women also do not 'look in a man's face as they say. To look in a man's face' is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees." (147) It was Nettie's and Celie's behavior to their father who never displayed any affection. Unity among women and sisterhood in them is commendable. Samuel is shocked by the friendship among the women who share their husbands. They giggle and gossip and nurse each other's children. Many of the women rarely spend time with their husbands. "Their lives always center around work and their children and other women." (151) The men had life and death power over their wives. She could even be killed if he accuses of witchcraft or infidelity of his wife. The territory of Olinka was disturbed by the construction of the roads. Even they were told that their home is not theirs but it belonged to a rubber manufacturer in England. The worst part was they were asked to pay the rent to use the water. Corrine is very upset as she thought the children's resemblance with Nettie may be due to Samuel being their father. She had just avoided Nettie but she was very late to convince her with the truth even when Corrine had checked the stretch marks on her tummy. Samuel had thought the children were of Nettie and she had followed them to take care. He was convinced that those children were of Nettie's sister. When he told the story of how he got the children Nettie was all in tears to know the truth how her father's store was burnt and how he was killed. Their present father was a stepfather. Corrine believes Nettie after she shows her the cloth she had bought from her sister but unfortunately it was only just before her death.

The novel speaks about the religious factors and religion. Speaking about Jesus hair like lamb's wool. The whites have pictured him like them Shug says "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking or don't know what you looking for." (176) Sofia when returns home after eleven and a half years with six months off for a good behavior, her elder children are married off and the younger ones wondering who she was. When Shug comes married to Grady she wants Celie to join her to Memphis. When Albert tries to slap her and saying what will people say running off to Memphis like she doesn't have a house to look after. Shug says "why any woman gives a shit what people think is a mystery to me." (181) Her husband had never thought Celie would leave him and when she curses him he utters "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a women. You nothing at all." (187) The love and affection between Celie and Shug, their comradeship and sisterly caring is noteworthy. Their relationship has brought rejuvenation in the life of Celie. She is able to stitch pants for women. Pants become the symbol of her freedom and assertion, equality and empowerment. Celie comes to Shug along with Harpo's sweet heart Suzie Q who wants to sing. She makes her own choice. Nettie is happily married to Samuel. After coming back home Adam starts missing Tashi. He goes back in search of her but she hides from him as she had scars on her face. The villagers force their younger generation to have this identification as a mark of their race. "But the children think of scarification as backward, something from their grandparent's generation and often resist" (219). They reject their blind practices and traditions.

Celie's step father Alphonso had not told anything about the property but after his death his wife tells Celie "Your real daddy owned the land and the house and the store. He left it to your mama. When your mama died it passed on to you and your sister Nettie." (220) Celie is happy that she owns a house for them and their children. Celie is disturbed when

Shug finds a new boyfriend. Still she can't stop loving her. For her surprise her husband who once called her ugly is behind her and falls for her new look. But Celie finds men as frog. She is disinterested in men but he loves to spend time with her and helps in stitching too. The only letter he gives his wife is the telegram which states her sister along with her family is drowned. Celie doesn't want to believe it. Still she is hopeful and writes letter in her name. Its noteworthy that white girl Miss Eleanor Jane comes in search of Sofia who had taken care of her as a mother. She even holds her baby boy and says. 'I'm his mama and I won't let him be mean to colored' (241). There is a ray of hope from the younger generation. Adam had gone in search of Tashi and returned with her after two and a half months. When Adam proposed marriage to Tashi she refused directly saying "I fear Adam will be distracted by one of those naked looking women and desert me. Then I would have no country, no people, no mother and no husband and brother. But Adam got himself identical scars of Tashi's on his cheeks and they got married. Celie learns to live alone without Shug and her Mr. She denied his wish to marry her again this time in the spirit as well as in the flesh. She is ready to be his friend but not as his wife. Nettie returns to her sister Celie along with her family after thirty years. Shug also returns. Celie had renovated her home and painted her room purple and red except the floor that painted bright yellow. In the Bible, the color purple is associated with the rich, royalty and authority. It also signifies liberation and spirituality. There was a family reunion on July 4<sup>th</sup> where white people celebrate their independence from England and black folks don't have to work so they also celebrate each other. There is slow change and growth in Celie. At the end she becomes independent. Thus by asserting herself she gets justice to herself. According to Womanist scholar Layli Maparyan (Phillips) womanist theory seeks to "restore the balance between people and the environment/ nature and reconcile [e] human life with the spiritual dimension."

The core value of womanism is the unity among females, to celebrate sisterhood. The novel 'The Color Purple' serves as a testament to feminism. It makes an attempt to define freedom, individuality and empowerment. It throws light on sexual exploitation, relationships, racial and gender discrimination also. The sexual violence displayed on the women crushes them inside and they resist in silence. Finally their resilience is remarkable. The black women exhibit immense strength in accepting their situation and to face their challenges in an optimistic attitude. They don't indulge in self-pity or blaming their males. They are thinking genders and strive hard towards their rewarding resolution. It is noteworthy that black women were in dire need of womanism as they were neglected and excluded by the white feminists in the first and second wave feminism. In the third wave feminism they are included with the theory of intersectionality and womanism. "Womanism supports the idea that the culture of the woman which in the case is the focal point of intersection as opposed to class or some other characteristic is not an element of her identity but rather is the lens through, which her identity exists. As such, a woman's Blackness is not a component of her feminism. Instead her Blackness is the lens through which she understands her feminist/womanist identity."

Womanism is much more than feminism. It can be termed humanism as it concentrates on the upliftment of both male and female. Though females are oppressed directly by men, womanism creates scope for men to become a human first rather than confirming himself as a man physically. Womanism gives freedom to define one's sexuality. Alice Walker rightly quotes "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender". Womanism is not for black women or white women it is pertinent for all the women in the world. Womanism urges need for the unity among women to uplift one another rather than accusing or fighting against the male

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