

Concept of Patriarchy and Motherhood in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract

*African American literature emerged as a significant part of American Literature after 1970s. Most of the African-American writers of 20th century especially dealt with experiences of African Americans. Black writers of contemporary American fiction have focused on struggles of African Americans in the United States. As they were black writers, they emphasized that to be a black woman was more different from being than a woman. Their novels have presented how Black women could survive in hard conditions. These writers have clearly demonstrated the African-American women's lives, characters and sufferings. African American women are aware of such economic circumstances of their families which forces them to silently bear their oppression and exploitation by the racist and patriarchal masters. Apart from their exploitation in the outside world, they are also subjected to patriarchal oppression within their own families which is perpetuated by their own men because African American women somehow manage to get some petty jobs on the basis of their domestic skills while African American men largely remain unemployed. This lack of employment for African American men causes serious mental set back to them and often they become hostile to their women and perpetuate patriarchal oppression, thinking that they are the reason of their unemployment. In Alice Walker epistolary novel, *The Color Purple*, the author vividly depicts the sufferings of African American women from patriarchy, sexism and racism. The writer has provided her readers a masterpiece not only to read but also to live through her fantastic narration. In fact, Alice Walker's core intention behind writing this novel is not only to give voice to black women but also a hope for emancipation. Walker shows us the evolution of her major character, Celie, from being a sexually abused child to a passive wife and finally to an emancipated woman.*

This paper makes an attempt to explore Black motherhood in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Black motherhood in the novel transcends the biological motherhood and stresses upon the

aesthetic or spiritual motherhood which proposes the theory of the existence of female bonding which is based on the shared patriarchal oppressions. In addition, Black motherhood has also been subjected to socio-economic conditions which not only define but also control the black mother in African American families. However, the adverse socio-economic conditions and racial and patriarchal oppressions have never been able to affect the love and care of black mothers for their children. The novel also explicates the fact that the oppression of Black mother in the family by the patriarch is the result of their passive acceptance of the oppression. Once the black mother takes a stand, she overcomes the oppression.

Walker does not limit herself in describing the sufferings of African-American women and suggests all women a path leading towards the freedom from the clutches of patriarchy and sexism. Celie, the protagonist, succeeds in changing her status of a sexually abused slave woman and thus free herself economically, physically and spiritually. Education is one of the key elements in the journey of her emancipation process that starts with writing letters to her sister Nettie. Another element is the close female bonding with her sister Nettie, her stepdaughter Sofia and close friend Shug Avery. Celie's relationship with these women as well as the skills of writing helps her to assert her female body and achieve spiritual and economic freedom.

In *The Color Purple*, the sense of hope even in despair is one of the most noticeable characteristics that impress the reader. Although Celie, the main character, suffers deeply from the effects of sexism and racism, she never gives up claiming victory. Celie a black, poor and uneducated woman is able to free herself from the evils of patriarchy that was next to impossible. The study would lead towards and examine the path that Celie follows in order to achieve her ultimate desire of getting freedom at any cost. Celie, throughout her life gets ample chances to meet and interact with different women around her and thus a female bonding develops among them that lead the way to her freedom. Moreover, Celie used to write her thoughts and ideas and expresses her emotions through letters. This writing habit of Celie perhaps represents the suppressed aspirations into her demanding an outlet. Thus with female bonding and writing, she becomes a totally independent woman at the end of the novel. *The Color Purple* may be a fiction but it would be a very powerful and wonderful way to teach moral development as we see the main character Celie.

The Color Purple is a woman centred novel although as many men appear in it as do women but is overshadowed by female bonding in terms of both its theme and narrative strategies. The novel

also entails the struggle between redemption and revenge and the chief agency of redemption is the strength of the relationship between women: their friendship, their love and their shared oppression. Along with the protagonist of the story, other sympathetic characters also include women. Women love, women support, women wrangle and women heal each other. They become womanish and the story womanish one. This female bonding may be denoted sometimes as lesbianism, sometimes as sisterhood and none the less as motherhood that is the fusion of both. This chapter has taken the broader term amongst the three to be discussed and elaborated i.e. 'Motherhood.' Motherhood and mothering are the integral features along with the development of the novel. It gave the novel a new and emancipated dimension to its leading character Celie who attained the biological, psychological and spiritual mothering in the form of the damn hypnotic, scintillating and charismatic blues singer Shug Avery. It was Shug with whom Celie first accomplished a satisfying and reciprocally loving relationship that lasts forever in her heart and is imprinted on her mind and soul. Shug taught Celie each and every lesson a mother used to teach her child and tried her level best to convert a silent, suppressed and more than enough promising and obliging Celie to an outspoken, confident, energetic, satisfied and somewhat vindictive Celie. To be precise *The Color Purple* may be denoted as the novel of the heroism of black women.

The novel endeavours to assume that Celie, the protagonist, is able to free herself through writing letters and with the help of women around her. Pouring her sufferings down into a paper is a therapy that enables her to survive and even to liberate herself. Her oppression and liberation can be discussed under some theories in order to have better understanding of them. Radical feminism is a 'current' within feminism that focuses on the theory of patriarchy as a system of power that organizes society into a complex of relationships based on an assumption of 'male supremacy' used to oppress women. Radical feminism aims to challenge and overthrow patriarchy by opposing standard gender roles. They observe this as male oppression of women, and calls for a radical reordering of society. Socialist feminism is a branch of feminism that focuses upon both the public and private spheres of a woman's life and argues that liberation can only be achieved by working to end both the economic and cultural sources of women's oppression. Socialist feminism, sisterhood, motherhood and writing are key elements in Celie's emancipation process.

Presented in an epistolary style, *The Color Purple* traces thirty years in the life of Celie, a poor southern black woman being tortured on both emotional and physical grounds. The life of Celie, a fourteen year old girl is set up in rural Georgia, who with her younger sister Nettie and some other siblings, leads an abusive life with a sick and worn out with child bearing mother who soon dies. She was leading a life of slavery, cooking, cleaning and looking after the other siblings. She was being denied a schooling as her 'Pa' thought her "too dumb to keep going to school." The suffering and victimization of Celie's sexual abuse started on the very first page of the novel and in the early phase of her life as well. This echoes silently the andocentric culture which condemns women to a subordinate state. She is repeatedly being raped, beaten and humiliated by Alphonso, her so called father who later proved to be her step father. It resulted in her pregnancy and that too, twice but the babies are taken away from her. This brutality renders her the sterile and she is deprived of mothering her children which is considered to be a curse to a woman. Though she was being deprived of her mother's love and mothering her own children, but being a woman, could not forget the basic nature of a woman, of mothering and mother love that was there in her heart and she was dying to outpour it upon her children. But the poor Celie found mother love only in the form of her letters written to God and that too was far more remote, silent and one way communication. It also represents the dominance of male psyche on the society that women consider themselves responsible for each and every crime or fault, irrespective of the fact that whosoever has done it. Though she herself was the victim but felt as if she was a corrupt one. She was so scared of this male figure that she found herself quite helpless even in complaining about this disastrous act to her mother.

The inner strength of Celie can be noticed when she tried her level best to save her loving sister Nettie from their step father. Here her love for Nettie was showered in the form of a mother who could do anything for her children and Celie proved herself to be the best sister cum mother in this respect. This was the only reason why she enters into the forceful institution of marriage to Mr. Albert, a widower, just to look after his children and satisfy his sexual needs at times. She used to take his name as Mr. because of the estrangement of the married life of the two and because of the emotional gap between them. In the novel, we have many examples of sisterhood that link women with each other. The very first signs of sisterhood can be seen in Celie and Nettie. The two sisters live within a family where affection is totally absent. With a violent rapist father and a sick mother, Nettie is able to provide Celie with moral comfort. When

Nettie notices that Celie is frequently beaten by her husband, she urges her to fight him. She also urges her to fight against Mr.____'s children by showing them a good lesson and letting them know "who is the upper hand" (25).

Since Nettie has accepted formal education, she is deeply influenced by her teacher, Miss Beasley, who has her own independent ideas and rebellious consciousness, which helps Nettie to shape her own consciousness and ideas. To Celie, Nettie has always been like a teacher. She helps her sister with reading, spelling and everything she thinks Celie needs to know. No matter in what kind of situation, Nettie never gives up any opportunity to inform Celie what is going on in the world. In the short period of stay in Albert's house with Celie, Nettie witnesses his brutality and knows clearly that Celie is hopeless if she keeps her submissiveness. So she tries hard to exert every possible way to teach and enlighten Celie. For example, she writes words on some cards and sticks the cards to the corresponding places in order to keep Celie from being an illiterate. This ability to read and write taught by Nettie enables Celie to pour out her bitterness to the absent God. Through writing, Celie feels a little consolation in Nettie's absence. That also enables Celie to read Nettie's letters from Africa, which broadens Celie's mind: as Nettie tells her sister that The Bible says God is not white, but a black, because Jesus Christ's hair is as curled as their black's. The first human in the world is not white, but a black. The Africans had, at one time, a more advanced civilization than the Europeans. Such knowledge gives a great shock to Celie's previous concept and forces her to be out of the moral value by the white people she has been learning since her childhood. Thus she awakes her ethical pride and self-consciousness. However, to Celie, the most important and exciting news from Nettie is about her two children. From Nettie's letter, Celie gets to know for the first time that her two children, who she has lost when they were just born, now stay with Nettie in Africa, and that they are living a happy life with Nettie and are receiving good education. The good news of the two children provides Celie, a poor mother, with a strong spiritual strength and sustains her to survive in this hard time.

Moreover, Nettie is always the hope in Celie's life. Celie regards Nettie as the perfect model of a girl. She describes her to Shug: "Smart as anything. Read the newspapers when she was little more than talking. Did figures like they was nothing. Talked real well too. And sweet. There never was a sweeter girl. Eyes just brimming over with it" (101). With this excellent sister in heart, Celie achieves a little comfort in this harsh world. Therefore, although Celie has not heard

from Nettie for years, she cherishes with the hope that Nettie is still alive and they can meet again someday. Celie, in her turn, is of great help and support to Nettie. In absence of parental affection, Celie plays not only the role of a sister but also the role of a substitute mother. Celie offers herself to her stepfather preventing thus Nettie from being abused. When the two sisters are later separated from each other, this affectionate sisterhood continues to link both sisters providing them a hope of survival during the harshest living moments of their existence.

Another woman who helps Celie in becoming free is the blues singer Shug Avery. However, the female bonding that ties these two women is totally different from the one with Nettie or Sofia. In fact, if Nettie is considered as the hope that sustains Celie alive and Sofia the rebellious spirit that encourages Celie to fight, Shug is seen as the affectionate mother and sexual mentor for Celie. Shug Avery is at first a friend to Celie, eventually a lover, but has always a subtly guiding “mothering” influence that, like the mothers of Walker’s “generations” enables Celie to evolve into an independent, self-actualized woman, no longer accepting the conditions that have enslaved her.

Celie has always been deprived of maternal affection and Shug, like a mother, protects Celie from the beatings of her husband Albert. She stays at Albert’s house and does not leave until she becomes sure that he will not even think about beating Celie again. Shug becomes the angel by Celie’s side that helps her pave the first steps towards independence: “I won’t leave, she says, until I know Albert won’t even think about beating you” (79). Celie first learns of Shug, the woman her husband truly loves, from a photograph. In her mind, Shug is the most beautiful woman she has ever seen. She even says that Shug is prettier than “my mama”(8). After years of hearing about, thinking about and dreaming about the fantastic Shug, Celie first sees her when Albert takes her home. Actually, at that time, Shug is nearly sick to death. Then Celie has devoted her attention to nursing Shug until she recovers. Shug is touched by her tenderness and care, hence creating a “Miss Celie’s song” to express her gratitude to Celie. For the first time, Celie is aware of being respectable, “first time somebody made something and name it after me” (65). This song also becomes a catalyst for the development of their lesbian relationship. In fact, the two women share a long embrace and end in a kiss, bonding their relationship.

It is thus quite evident that sisterhood is of great importance for Celie’s emancipation. With the support of Nettie , Sofia and Shug, Celie is able to accept her body, free her self spiritually and

economically and therefore gets her independence. However, Celie during this emancipation tells her experiences through writing letters which has certainly a role to play in her emancipation.

Celie a black poor and uneducated African American girl is able to change her situation. She is a symbol of hope that impresses the readers by her strength, faith and courage. From exploring her process, it seems that female bonding is one of the main elements that women need in order to emancipate. Nettie, Sofia and Shug help Celie a lot in her emancipation. Celie's emancipation could not be possible without sisterhood and writing as well and both seem to complete each other. In fact, if Shug and Nettie help Celie to free herself spiritually and change her vision of God, writing had long before made her ask questions about this God who never answered her letters.

The women in the novel, even those who have interests in the same men, nevertheless band together to support and sustain one another throughout the novel. People who used to suffer in their struggling ultimately succeed and win their happiness they deserve. Thus *The Color Purple* does not only exhort black women but all other oppressed women in the world that they are able to live an independent life both physically and economically. In order to be free from patriarchal domination and establish harmonious relationship with men at last, women should learn how to be independent with their efforts and keep on fighting against the prejudice and the patriarchal domination from men as it is commonly said: any revolution starts in mind. So if a woman wants to change her life she has to fight as Celie did.

The women characters in *The Color Purple*: Celie, Nettie, Shug Avery, Sofia and Mary Agnes, all are knit into an intimate bonding of sisterhood. Celie's development and liberation into an independent individual became possible with this sisterly attachment. As Clenora Hudson Weems comments: "Given that we know all too well how comforting sisterhood is, we must welcome it and its rewards for others as well as for ourselves. Thus, for the moment, let us reflect on how much more beautiful our world would be if all sisters simply loved each another. Our children would be more secure, for there would have not just one female guardian, but many to attend to their needs." (73)

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