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BLACK FEMINISM ON ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOUR PURPLE

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Abstract

The word 'Feminism' is one of the movements, initiated in 1880. There is a clash between white and black people. So, 'Feminism' movement renamed as a 'Black Feminism'. The white people rule over blacks. Blacks are not having rights in anything even to write in literature. Later, 'Black Feminism' becomes a school of thought, which argues that sexism, class oppression, gender identity and racism, inextricably bound together. One of the black feminist's writers is Alice Walker. She is an award-winning author of novels, stories, essays, and poetry. She is the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. She won in 1983 for her novel *The Color Purple*, also a National Book Award winner. Her own feelings and emotions expressed in her third novel, *The Color Purple*. This novel deals with the classic tale of Celie, a young black girl born into poverty and segregation. She has been raped repeatedly by the man. However, she calls him as a father. She has two children taken away from her, is separated from her beloved sister Nettie and is trapped into an ugly marriage. Then she meets the glamorous Shug. Shug is assigned and magic making a woman who has taken charge of her own destiny.

Keywords: Black feminism, racism and sexism

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Black feminism is a school of thought, which argues that sexism, class oppression, gender identity and racism are inextricably bound together. Alice Malsenior Walker (born February 9, 1944) is an American novelist, short story writer, poet, and activist. Alice Walker is one of the famous black women writers whose works mostly deals with the sufferings of the black women in the society. She is a well-known black feminist writer. Her major themes in her works like racism, sexism, suppression, oppression, male chauvinism and gender identity. Her novels like *The Color Purple* and *Meridian* is about a victimized black woman and deals with their bitterness and painful experiences of life.

The most popular novel of Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1982. In this novel, the writer portrays Celie, a young, an uneducated, ugly black woman who suffers by racism, sexism, and torture of her husband. Therefore, this novel tells the story of poor Celie who was sexually abused by her step-father and then she forced to marry a man who physically abuses her.

The structure of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel that is made up of ninety letters. This novel consists of series of letters in which the novelist expresses the thirst of identity and the emotions of Celie. Celie's painful heart addresses the Lord as 'Dear God' throughout this novel as a prayer and ends the novel with 'Amen'. She openly tells her horror life, first to God, then to her sister Nettie, and finally to the world she has grown to love. Therefore, she narrates her life story with complete candor and honesty.

Alice Walker begins this book in a pathetic manner. The first letter of Celie to God explains the poor state of Celie (fourteen years old) who was sexually abused by her step-father Alfonso. The repeated rapes and brutal beatings of her step-father takes her to the life of hell. The brutality of her step-father hurts her and she cries as,

He was pulling on her arm. She say it too soon, Fonso, I ain't well. Finally he leaves her alone. A week go by, he pulling on her arm again. First, he puts his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. (1)

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From the above lines, we can see the misery of childhood incest, physical abuse, powerlessness and loneliness of the protagonist, Celie. So, she has been affected physically and psychologically.

A fourteen year-old Celie, who was caught in the horror of incest and abuse. She bears one child who later turns up missing. Her breasts are swollen and dripping milk, which is so miserable to the writer. She says her pathetic situation to God as, “He took my other little baby, a boy this time. I got breasts full of milk running down myself. But I don’t think he kilt it. I think he sold it to a man”. (2)

The fear of Celie about the life of her sister, Nettie which is clearly expressed by the novelist in the novel as, “I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I’ll take care of you. With God help”. (2) But Celie believes that almighty God will protect Nettie from the cruel and brutal step - father Alfonso. In all our desperate situation, the powerful and the graceful God will help us. Celie also says strongly to her step- father as “ I can’t let you have Nettie. She too young.” (8) In this letter, Celie informs God that Fonso has been trying to seduce her lovable sister, Nettie.

Black woman are accepting all the words and pains of Black man, which is miserable. In this novel Celie accepts the violent and brutal act of her step- father and Nettie also likes to get a boyfriend who is already married. In the initial part of the novel itself, we can see the theme of Black Feminism, sexism that tortures Celie. Audre Lorde says about sexism in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (1984) as, “Sexism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over the other and thereby the right to dominance.” (631)

Then, Celie is forced to marry a widowed farmer, Mr. Albert with three children. She marries him and advises Nettie to marry Albert in order to protect herself from Fonso (step-father of Celie and Nettie). Celie encourages Nettie as, “I say Marrie him, Nettie, an try to have one good yea out your life. After that, I know she be big.” (6)

Celie finds a blues singer, Shug Avery and she portrays her beauty as,

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Shug was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my mama. She is about ten thousand times more prettier than me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like something tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motorcar. Her eyes are serious. Sad some. (7)

Here, we can see the sexual attraction of Celie to Shug Avery. Celie turns towards her because she represents love, warmth and feelings of solidarity. Celie affirms her sexual identity in her relationship with Shug. Sexual identity is the another theme of Black Feminism in this novel. Celie is seeking her gender and sexual identity in this letter.

In an interview with Appiah, Chinua Achebe reflects on the nature of African identity as, “it is of course, true that the African Identity is still in the making. There isn't a final identity that is African.” (222) The above words of Achebe is true only because still Africans are struggling to search their identity. In this novel, we can see the poor Celie who is seeking for her gender identity.

Then Celie says the almighty God pathetically that her husband and her step- father expresses their views about Celie as “She ugly. He say.” and “She spoiled. Twice.” (9) Again Celie search for her identity where she stands in the life. She expresses her emotions that she was ignored by the Black patriarchal system. Celie's poor condition makes us to feel pity for her.

Celie feels for her inferiority, born as a dark skinned, uneducated, ugly and poor woman in the world. This shows her racism problem in the novel. According to Audre Lorde's “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (1984), “Racism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one races over all others and thereby the right to dominance.” (631)

Mr. Albert's choice of Shug Avery hurts the mind of Celie. Celie addresses the Lord that she was suffering physically as well as mentally. The psychological trauma affects her mind and heart throughout this novel. Celie's other letters also expresses her physical and mental agony that she undergone by the various oppression of black men in the society. But Celie cannot bear such violent, brutality and tortures of her step- father and her husband.

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Finally, she ends her private letters as, “Dear God, Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God. Thank you for bringing my sister Nettie and our children home.” (292) This final letter of Celie shows a Prayer of thanksgiving and joyously end with uttering ‘Amen’.

Alice Walker ends the novel with reunion of Celie’s family and their reconciliation, regeneration is complete. The impact of Harlem Renaissance in the novel is that the self-sufficient act of regeneration in the life of Celie and Nettie and reconciliation of the whole family. But Celie and other black women, not liberated from this arrogant black patriarchal system. As a woman, we have to regenerate successfully as a bold, courageous, independent and powerful woman to face the hurdles of our life.

According to Audre Lorde’s “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (1984), “it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes.” (630) Here Audre Lorde says that if we explain about our pain and sufferings to the oppressors, they may not know our pain and sufferings. Therefore educate them clearly in what way we are suffering by their cruel atrocities. Audre Lorde also says about rapism as “Rape is on the increase, reported and unreported, and rape is not aggressive sexuality, it is sexualized aggression”. (634)

As Kalamuya Salam, a Black male writer points out from Audre Lorde’s “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (1984), “As long as male domination exists, rape will exist. Only women revolting and men made conscious of their responsibility to fight sexism can collectively stop rape.”(634) Therefore as young women, we have to fight for the restriction of male domination and their atrocities in the society. We should not eliminate the men in the society; rather we should put a limit on their sexual tortures, oppression and suppression.

Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, provides an opportunity for black women to defend themselves in patriarchal system and gain individuality and social role. The writer says that

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the bright and colourful future of black women lays in their hands only. They can change their marginalized situations by developing their skills and talents.

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