

Ideas of God, Gender- Roles and Self-Discovery in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Article Received: 01/04/2022, Article Accepted: 10/05/2022, Published online: 11/05/2022,
DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.2.25

Abstract

Patriarchy has always put boundaries on women and it becomes worse when women are from black community in an Afro-American society. Alice Walker in her novel manifests the true image of God which is different from archetypes and how her women characters come out of the shelf and fight for themselves and embrace selfhood. The novel, set in the early 1900s, uncovers the female African-American encounter through the life and battles of its storyteller, Celie (a black woman), and parodies the slave narrative tradition. This paper tries to explore the ideas of God, gender-roles and search for self in the Afro-American society and journey of its protagonist from being an oppressed woman to the state of self-realization and self-discovery.

Keywords: Patriarchy, black woman, archetype, self-discovery, God, gender-roles, slave.

Introduction

Alice Walker is quite possibly the most appreciated and observed African-American essayists, battling for equity for all African American. She additionally arose as a noticeable voice in the dark women's activist development. Walker makes sense of the following in her prologue to the tenth anniversary version of *The Color Purple*: "This is the book that allowed me to express a new spiritual consciousness, a rebirth into deep feelings of Oneness. I realized I had experienced and taken for granted as a child; a chance for me, as well as Celie, the main character, to encounter that which is beyond understanding but not beyond loving, and to say: I see and hear you clearly, Great Mystery, now that I expect to see and hear you everywhere I go, which is the right place". This strongly points that the spiritual journey of Walker is being depicted through the character of Celie, who unifies the two women companions of the journey.

As a 'woman's novel,' *The Color Purple* is often referred as and according to her, womanist writing focuses on twentieth-century African-American women. African-American women have long been subjected to oppression and subjugation at the hands

of both white men and their own black men. Women are usually shown in these works as battling against all odds to ensure their own and their families' safety and well-being. In their fractured and divided communities, these women are frequently moms who want to safeguard and bring their families together for the benefit of their coming generations. And the characters of Sofia, Squeak, Celie, and Nettie (who, ironically, raises Celie's children) are examples of this fact that women try their best to keep their families together under one roof in any circumstance. Men and women's natures and expected gender roles are explored in great depth in this novel. It is a way to hear the voices of oppressed women and to protect them in embracing their self. Patriarchy and its set ideologies has always been the reason for the marginalization of women and it intensifies when they belong to black community. Because of this, African-American women are marginalized not just from white males, but also from their own male family members.

Idea of God:

The novel is expressed in the form of letters to God, which is a form of expression that represents a sense of self. Celie begins the novel by writing to her 'Dear God' and she ends the novel with a letter whose words read as, " Dear God. Dear Stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (p.g. 259). This is a transition which shows the understanding about the idea of God which exists all around and is a part of mortal

happiness rather believing in one single God, an old white man with a long beard.

"You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy". (p.g. 3)

This shows that Celie could not believe anyone except God until she meets Shug Avery whose perspectives regarding the existence of God changes Celie's view point. God and spirituality are the key premises of the novel, but God, as primarily emphasized by Celie and Shug, God serves as a metaphor for a far more expansive and pervasive form of religious consciousness. First, Celie writes to God in order to survive her father's carnal abuse, but after Shug convinces her that God is beyond what white people assert and what church dogma confirms, she begins to believe God as an expression of nature's beauty. Shug believes that God may be anything that offers joy— a feeling of joy or connection to another person or with nature—and Celie finally realizes that God (whom she addresses in letters throughout the duration of the novel) is more of a state of mind than anything else; it's a feeling of joy or closeness to another human being or to the natural world.

Although Shug not being a usual pious woman; she believes God desires everyone to be joyful, and also believes that God, like humanity, also craves love. Nettie, on the other hand, is a missionary to the Olinka people with the goal of spreading Christianity, but she like her sister, realizes that God is everywhere, more widespread and entwined in nature

than any doctrine can convey. Mr.____, too, realizes that he was a bad kid, and his developing faith in the "wonder" of God's creation transforms him into a better person and a friend to Celie. That family unity is a beautiful manifestation of God's might can be seen in Nettie's final homecoming to Celie.

The Color Purple is narrated through a sequence of letters, the majority of which acknowledged to God. God appears to her at first as a white guy with a long beard, similar to Dumbledore or Gandalf. But later on she puts questions on this image of God as nothing good happens in her life, she rebels against this image because being a black woman she has been abused by men all her life. This assault compels Celie to envision God as unisex, race less and a more universal being who believes that people should partake in all aspects of life-from nature to coitus to *The Color Purple*.

Idea of Gender-Roles:

The notion and nature of men and women, as well as their assumed gender roles, are major themes in this novel. Women are always subject to oppression and submission in all forms. They are seen as physically and even mentally weak compared to men. Simon de Beauvoir rightly observes in her book *The Second Sex*, that the world of women " is everywhere enclosed, limited, dominated by the male universe; high as she may raise herself, far as she may venture, there will always be a ceiling over her head, walls that will block her way" (p.g. 325). Walker tries

to explore the ideas of gender, stereotypical roles, and sexuality throughout the novel and resisting these norms can be harmful. It totally depends on the person how he/she wants other to treat him/her. There is a most famous line of the book *The Second Sex*;

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in the society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine".

These above quoted lines compel one to think once again about female, her psyche and her status in the society. *The Color Purple* is a vivid description of domination and oppressed women are shown as sex objects. Celie being forced to obey her abusive father in the beginning, and then her husband Mr.____ in the end, while Nettie, who refuses to do either, and she flees. She leaves behind the duties of motherhood but coincidentally raises Celie's two children in Olinka just fulfilling the duties of being a mother. Men are given more prominence in the society and thus they want to have complete control on women. Alice Walker explains in her book that "He (God) thinks man should have dominion over the Earth, which includes land, water, women, animals and children"(The *Color Purple*, XV). The men in the novel, on the other hand, choose an alternative trajectory. It is often assumed that black men work on farms and that their women follow them in any way, but the writer diffuses this notion by portraying the

characters of Shug Avery, Sofia and Squeak who do not surrender in front of the abusive nature of their respective partners. Instead they resist and retaliate leaving them all alone. Mr.____ and Harpo realizes how much they took them for granted and how much they have trusted on the efforts of women all across their lives. We witness the enterprising Harpo establishes up his juke joint and pulls in the formerly famous blues singer Shug, despite not adhering to the established norms. And so it is with Nettie, an African woman who marries a widower Samuel fulfils expectations about her gender roles while still pursuing her individual path in life, ultimately volunteering as a missionary for nearly two decades in Africa. All through the novel, the male characters' sense of superiority is so firmly ingrained that they are unaware that they are acting inappropriately. For example; 1) In Harpo's mind, he is entitled to beat his wife in order to get her to obey him and it is his sole right to do so. 2) When Harpo's wife Mary Agnes wants to be a singer, he cannot digest the fact she is going to be independent despite he provides everything in their marriage. 3) When Mary Agnes wants his white uncle to help Sofia to get out of prison, then he thinks that he has an absolute right to extract payment from her in form of sex. This shows that Alice Walker manifests the conditions of women in Afro-American society in America where they face doubly marginalization. But she gives voices to the black women through the characters of Sofia, Nettie and Shug who deny submitting to the men's controlling nature.

Idea of Self-Discovery:

The novel speaks of the oppressed women (dual recipient of humiliation) and transformation of a vulnerable woman into an independent being embracing the self-identity and selfhood through the character of Celie. Celie who just always submits to the needs of all men, either her father or husband, finds solace and guts in the presence of a singer Shug Avery who introduces Celie to her own identity and her own self. The novel seems to be a journey that Celie and other characters take towards the self-discovery and self-realization. Celie was kind of submissive but was able to stand up with the help of women around her. Shug Avery and Sofia never submit in front of male, rather they fight back. Alice Walker has shown the reverse roles assigned to male and female in a society while portraying the characters of Sofia and Harpo. The former one does works other than households' and the latter loves to do chores at home; taking care of children, cooking, etc. Sofia even fights for her husband Harpo. Typical white patriarchal men like Mr. Pa and Harpo, who are molded by white racism, so as to achieve the powers of manhood solely through violent patriarchal norms.

Sexist, racist, and gender-based discrimination are all depicted in *The Color Purple*. In a patriarchal society, women are viewed as inferior to males, but Walker argues that in these Afro-American surroundings, women have their own identity and can be self-sufficient. Nettie claims that Africa once had all the richness, but that it was looted. Nettie's letters make

Celie more mature and active and compel her to leave her rural surroundings and get an understanding of African lives. The novel depicts the relationship between women as multi-dimensional. This gives her courage to leave behind her abusive wedlock and take a stand for her and this is shown when Albert tries to questions her when she leaves with Shug but she replies bluntly saying;

"You a low down dog is what's wrong. I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the creation. And you're dead body just the welcome mat I need". (p.g.-180)

She has really been able to create a better life after gaining confidence and raising voice against societal stereotypes. She starts her own pant business, becoming an independent and strong woman and the symbol of pants is to portray the path of self-discovery and free from any kind of oppression. The author uses the characters of Nettie, Samuel and Corraine to convey the powerful message;

"Only white people can ride in the beds and use the restaurant. And they different toilets from the colored". (p.g.-121)

As a result of the arrival of this extended family, Celie and Nettie's journeys of self-discovery come to an end. After many years of an abusive marriage, the sisters have met each other and even found solace and peace.

Conclusion:

It is Alice Walker's novel that challenges the cultural standards of Afro-American society in the United States and

provides a platform for black female characters to assert their individuality and gain a voice in the patriarchal society in which they live. Ultimately, Celie transforms from a fearful black woman to a confident character that stands up for her own values. Walker's portrayal of Celie's journey assures her guests as a black woman in early 20th century America is preserved for descendants through her words and deeds. She gives voices to those who were not able to rebel and fight for their rights. There is an adage saying that domination of one sex over other sex always creates havoc and troubles in a society. And is it made clear in the novel through the introduction of characters like Nettie, who runs away to avoid any sexual assault, Sofia who is not timid rather a strong woman who does not abide by the rules of her husband, Squeak resists and gets into a fight with an army couple which results in imprisonment and Shug who loves to fulfill her dreams without giving a second thought to the society. Even Famine and Masculine roles are shown reversed in the novel as Harpo loves to stay back at home and does household chores, whereas Sofia stays out of the house.

The novel centers on the notion that every African-American woman may learn to love her and become a "woman" with the help of another woman. Mutual understanding and reconciliation between the sexes is feasible if this is accomplished, which will aid in the restoration of equality and peace, as well as the cessation of violence and oppression in society.

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How to cite this article?

Shikha Sharma, " Ideas of God, Gender- Roles and Self-Discovery in Alice Walker's The Color Purple", *Research Journal Of English(RJOE)*7 (2), PP: 192-197,2022, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.2.25>