

Celie-Voice of the Black

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**Article Received: 09/06/2022, Article Accepted: 25/07/2022, Published online:
30/07/2022, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.3.20**

Abstract

The Color Purple is a 1982 epistolary novel by American author Alice Walker which won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the National Book Award for fiction. The journey of Celie is of tremendous change. Celie brings the more significant change within herself to change the outer world. She takes uncountable smaller steps to alter her suffering life. The basic message that the story gives is that a woman alone is more than enough to change the conditions of her life, which make her life suffer with pain, defamation, economic crisis, submission at every step, and many more. Even though their learning journey of Celie is not easy, she becomes courageous; further, she sheds her fear about what society is going to say?. Millions of women do not get that inner strength to live because they are stuck to the stigma of an organization that does not want self-opinioned women. Most women are worried about remaining in society's questionable frame- what people will say. Protagonist Celie discovers the weaknesses within her, but when she realizes that her cruel husband is responsible for her plight, she decides to cut off that fetter that chains her.

Keywords: Racial Discrimination, courage, feminism, Black people, detachment

Alice Walker is an Afro-American novelist and poet who gained fame after authoring *The Color Purple*. Alice Walker is known to raise awareness with the help of her literary contributions. She voices against the evils of society. Her compelling work, *The Color Purple*, won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the National Book Award in 1983. The genesis behind the pain of Afro-American women is multilayered - race, class, gender, poverty, etc. But their struggle is under-represented. Alice Walker points out that power is within a black woman who can stand against all discrimination she faces in a capitalist, male-dominated white-dominated world. The suffering of a female protagonist is increased as they are black, poor, and woman.

Alice Walker believes in the emancipation of black women from the constraints of patriarchy, racial discrimination, and poverty, the one action which will make their condition favorable. Black women need to get united against whites who consider black inferior. Alice

Walker stresses the purpose in her interview with John o'Brien(1994); "I am preoccupied with spiritual survival, the survival of the whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of Black women"(p.75). The trauma of Black women mounts up being black and woman. They are twice marginalized for color and sex. Black women are neither recognized by their community men nor by white people who want Black people as sexually and spiritually dead, completely spell-bound. Black women are thrice muted because of sexism, racism, and dumbfounded behavior from severe restrictions. Black Women empathize with each other as they stay on the same sinking boat. Celie, the protagonist of *The Color Purple* a black woman with an image of oppression, a universal phenomenon irrespective of caste, creed, and culture; her struggle highlights the prolonged sufferings of a black woman. Afro-American literature has a significant theme of racial discrimination; the mission of Afro-American writer Alice Walker is to expound on and modify the black women in her literary contributions; walker introduced a new term - "womanism," which shows the dual oppression of black women first being black second being a woman. Feminism reveals the sexual trauma of women. There is nothing about racial discrimination, which is why the concept of 'womanism' is introduced to take both aspects parallel. American author and poet Alice Walker first used the word 'womanist' in her 1979 short story " *coming Apart*" and again in her 1983 book " *In Search of Our Mothers*

Gardens: womanist prose" Alice Walker defines a 'womanist' as 'Black Feminist' or 'Feminist Color'. Bell Hooks also propounded the term 'womanism' through her literary work *Ain't I a woman; Black women and feminism, 1981*

"Why are women so easily 'tramps' and traitors when men are heroes for engaging in the same activity in the same activity? why do women stand for this?" -Alice Walker

The Color Purple was later adapted into a film and musical with the same name. The novel has been the frequent target of censors. It appears on the American Library Association list of the 100 most frequently challenged books of 2000-2009 at the number seventeenth, particularly in terms of violence. Alice Walker is the first black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize. *The Color Purple* was also named a PBS Great American Read Top Hundred Pick.

On November 5, 2019, BBC News listed *The Color Purple* as one of the 100 most influential novels.

As part of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS), the author declined publication of the book in Israel in 2012. Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz criticized this decision and argued that Walker "resorted to bigotry and censorship against Hebrew-speaking readers of her writings," Walker, an ardent pro-Palestinian activist, said in a letter to Yediot Books that Israel before her works could be published there.

Walker writes about the journey of Celie from being a sexually abused child, a passive wife, and finally an emancipated woman.

Celie becomes dumbfounded she doesn't know what to say? How to react? The only thing she can do is absorb pain; this is the only way for her to survive.

"But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (*The Color Purple* 26), "I do not say anything. I stay where I'm alive" (*The Color Purple*)

Celie becomes a victim in the different walks of life; she gets exploited by her own Paa. As a malicious man, Alphonso breaks the norms of savagery when he sells Celie to a widower who wants a woman to serve him, manage his house and bring up his children. Unfortunately, Celie has had childbirth; she hasn't seen them growing up as children were given to foster parents. Celie becomes lonely; to expel out her sufferings, she addresses God "it is worse than that; I think If I were buried, I wouldn't have to work. But I just say, never mind, never mind, long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along" (*The Color Purple*, 26). Address to God reveals loneliness, detachment, and marginality, which Celie experiences.

"Celie is coming with us," Shug Avery, the theme of *The Color Purple*, gives a powerful message and keeps fighting with the odds of life. Alice Walker uses a sad tone in the story. Celie speaks in the first person narrative with the help of

private letters. She writes to God and later to Nettie. At first, Celie's letter focus on what she hears sees, and feels. Later, the situation becomes more complex; the narrative shifts back and forth between letters written by Celie and Nettie. However, the letters from Nettie are still read through Celie's eyes. Celie addresses God in a confessional tone. *The Color Purple* is a historical novel from 1910-1940. The setting of *The Color Purple* is rural Georgia

The terms 'womanism' and 'feminism' appear to have the same trend, but there is some distinction between both words; feminism is centrally focused on gender stereotypes, while womanism shows the dark side of racial discrimination. Feminist Literature is "Protest Literature," which nails upon deep-rooted patriarchy and its effect on women's psyche. White writers adopt feminism to generate awareness, while Black writers progress with "womanism," a broad term that includes patriarchy, sexual harassment, and racial discrimination.

Women believe that black women suffer twice, first being women and second being black. Their oppression has a more significant impact on their minds. Black women encounter pressure regarding classicism, racism, and sexism from Whites. *The Color Purple* unfolds the saga of the struggle of Celie, a poor southern black woman who is sexually abused and emotionally distorted. She starts her journey from spell bounded to fully empower and from ignoring herself to accepting herself.

Alice Walker can create Celie as an authentic portrayal of the struggle of black women. Walker's pain is found to be released through the character of Celie; she knows well the trauma of being a woman and a racially discriminated human being. The consciousness of oppression is impending and pictorial.

"It allows women to discover what social reality is"(Bartky,1999:P.254).In this context, Simon De Beauvoir's (1999) words are appropriate, "The humanity is male," but for the Black women, "The humanity is white and male"(p 93). The self-esteem of black women is lower in society; they have to fight multiple times they stand against sexism, racism, and class oppression. Black people are not part of White society. Black men may be neglected by racism, but racism allows them to be exploiters of women. According to Bell Hooks, Black women must understand the reason behind their marginalization and "make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classicist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony" (p 58)

Black women have to fight fiercely to confirm their identities. So they encounter various kinds of obstacles. They battle against Whites, patriarchy, white women's racism, and Black men's sexism. This horrific trauma gets reflected in the psyche of Black women. To set themselves free from the constraints of racial discrimination and patriarchy, Black women must approach life with a braver aspect; they need to shed their guilt of being Black and backward.

RajendraThorat (24) explains that "The Black women's ability to forge the individual unarticulated, yet potentially powerful expressions of everyday consciousness into an articulated, self-defined, collective standpoint is important to black women's survival. It is an attempt toward self-definition to show who one is, what one is, and what one would like to be. The Black feminist consciousness indicates the Black women's self-definition. Thus, the Black women's struggle involves embracing a simultaneously Afro-centric consciousness that reveals the Black perspective and, at the same time, feminist."

A womanist always praises the efforts of women put together to transform their lives. A womanist pays more importance to humanity; she is a universalist, not a separatist. Alice Walker states the reason behind the term womanism "she explores the individual identity of a black woman and how her identity and bonding with other women affects the health of her community at large. Alice Walker describes this affinity among women as womanism. For her, a womanist is committed to the survival and integrity of the entire Black race."

(Walker.16)

The concept of womanism is evident in her novel *The Color Purple*. For her, womanism is the string of Black women's efforts toward emancipation and liberation to confirm their identity. Walker portrays the world of Black women who love other women as being

'whole'(Walker,1983) 'womanism' got currency due to continuous neglect and ethnocentrism. Black women define 'womanism' as the more intense fight against persecution and prejudice.

Both Celie and Nettie stress the sense of solidarity and sharing the importance of being whole that brings about blossoming in self and society. Both represent their trauma of being exploited. Nettie believes in change which is necessary for survival and harmony. Celie realizes the fact that a woman is complete for herself. As a womanist, Alice Walker wants to bring women together strength. The woman is ready to modify her approach toward herself. Men under the influence of other women happen with Celie, the protagonist of *The Color Purple*, who revolts against Albert after becoming a friend to Shug and Sofia, who influence her to change her approach towards life. Celie takes steps from a silent naïve young girl to a self-reliant woman, which proves that now Celie is a mature human being, not a meek, submissive, racially segregated woman.

Financial liberation also leads to emancipation. Financial Liberation is a weapon to enable a woman to face difficulties in life. *The Color Purple* shows how poverty degrades the life of Celie and how the poor conditions of Celie force her to face miserable and catastrophic circumstances. Celie becomes the puppet in the hands of Whites. Mr. Albert banned her from doing anything; she toils the whole day on Harpo's farms, but the harvest

proceeds belong to Mr. Albert. He doesn't pay her anything as he considers Celie an enslaved person; further, he exploits her to quench his greedy means. Unfortunately, Celie is an illiterate woman who did not get the opportunity to educate herself, but she is blessed with skills in designing pants. Celie is motivated by Shug to make her stand. Celie realizes to leave her husband's home to gain financial and social authority. Celie moves to Memphis, where she sets up a small business to generate money. She appreciates Shug, who sets herself free from oppression; her journey doesn't stop here; she establishes a garment company. "Folks pants unlimited "company ."Celie's economic liberation makes a turning point in her life; she makes a positive approach to herself; she considers herself complete she feels that "Black is Beautiful."

The color purple is an epistolary novel *The Color Purple* written in the form of letters between Celie and Nettie. Letters appear natural as they have a colloquial dialect, reflecting the characters' psychological states.

Celie's submissive behavior can be examined from the fact that Celie promised herself and her step-father that she would not inform him about being raped by her step-father except God. Her addressal of pain to God is considered a revolt against suffering and oppression. Celie's act of writing letters to God indicates that she has lost all her faith in human beings; she knows how malicious they are. Through letters, Celie gets a void to expel her grief; while writing letters, she creates her world

within the notes she feels free; this freedom paves the way to find herself writing as the tool to rebuild herself.

“walker’s heroines articulate clear visions of the wrong they face and the hope and strength that cannot be quenched within them. Not every Walker heroine works up the courage to say, as Celie in *The Color Purple* does to her abusive husband...”(8)

The novel brings the spirit of celebration moment she realizes her inner power; she awoken consciousness forces her to shed off pain and suffering in the real brutal world, which spares none. When Celie feels she is enough for herself, she takes steps to establish the terms of feminism and liberation. The major plagued and the tormented context in *The Color Purple* is about grief inflicted by racial discrimination.

Mel Watkins of the New York Times Book Review wrote, "it is a striking and consummately well-written novel," appreciating its power-packed emotional impact and epistolary framework.

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How to cite this article?

Dr. Haroon Rasheed ,“ Celie-Voice of the Black ”, Research Journal Of English(RJOE) 7 (3), PP: 161-166,2022, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.3.21>