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Black Sisterhood and Selfhood in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract

Upon the publication of *The Color Purple* in 1982, Alice Walker won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. She also received immense praise for her vivid depictions of black women in her novels. In addition to being written by a woman, *The Color Purple* embodies an acknowledged tradition of women's literature in terms of the technique of narration and voice used to attain their actual identities. Besides, Walker shatters the idea of male dominance in *The Color Purple* by providing a thorough psychological description of both the male and female characters who live in a traditional patriarchal southern family as well as a representation of the contemporary matriarchal African-American family, in which the woman plays a prominent role.

The storyline of *The Color Purple* revolves around Celie, the central protagonist of the novel, who had to struggle with all of these slings at the age of twelve while other women, including Sofia, Shug Avery, Aids, and Nettie, also suffered from the existing male chauvinism. However, these women express their individuality while helping one another during their challenging times. As a result, it not only ties them together but also gives them solace and a sense of security. Hence, the protagonist of the tale, Aids, represents the idea of sisterhood. Celie is also released from the job of "mule of the world" due to her relationships and bonds with Sofia, Shug Avery, and Nettie.

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Walker depicts the severe effects of patriarchal dominance and brutality on women in *The Color Purple*. Still, at the same time, she projects how their bonds with other women help them to survive such brutality. In this way, the study demonstrates how female connection and sisterhood helped the novel's prominent female characters become more independent. Thus, the present study strongly emphasizes the solidarity of the African women's community and how, regardless of familial links, they share the burden and develop their sense of selfhood.

Keywords: Black sisterhood, selfhood, patriarchal dominance, individuality, black feminism

Introduction

Alice Walker is one of the most influential Afro-American authors. She came up with the phrase "womanism" to support black rights. In her 1982 novel, *The Color Purple*, Walker touches on several significant subjects that she emphasizes in her work. Some of the major issues that the novel addresses include racism, sexism, intra-racial racism, traditional gender roles, domestic abuse, authoritarianism, impoverishment, a focus on the family, racism, gender struggle, and having an identity. Alice Walker is one of the most renowned and celebrated contemporary black female novelists. According to the school of thought known as black feminism, racism, sexism, and class oppression are all intricately linked. The Civil Rights Movement's exclusion of women and the racism of the feminist movement contributed to the rise of Black feminism in the 1960s. Black feminism proponents contend that black women are situated inside power structures in fundamentally different ways than white women. Walker makes the argument that a person's identity is considerably more nuanced and comprehensive than their race. In the novel, *The Color Purple*, the character's abilities lead to abuse.

Black feminism is a socio-political movement that seeks to address the intersectionality of race, gender, and class as it relates to black women's experiences. It emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in response to the shortcomings of mainstream feminism, which largely ignored the unique challenges faced by women of colour. The first major text of the black feminist movement was *A Black Feminist Statement* (1971) by the Combahee River Collective. Other Major black feminist texts include *Ain't I a Woman*? by Sojourner Truth, *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde, *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* by Alice Walker, *Sister Citizen* by Melissa Harris-Perry and *Ain't I a*

Woman: Black Women and Feminism by Bell Hooks. They explore some of the key themes and ideas that have emerged within the field of black feminism.

The depreciation of Black femininity, according to Mgadmi (2009) prompted black scholars to change these "values" through the Black Madonna Movement, which included the black women's club movement, literary works, and other critical articles. Initially, this was done to end the derogatory image of black women as the sad mulatto, the sex object (the Jezebel), and the 'inept domestic servant' (the mammy). If perceived through her dependence on men, Celie was not just an excellent "housekeeper," but also the idealized woman image. Bell Hooks stated that it was, because they were terrified of being alone, of not having male partners. Women of all races had accepted sexism and sexist oppression out of a passive dread of being abandoned or rejected. Besides, *The Color Purple* is based on the story of Celie, a poor Black woman in the American South. Several aspects explored in *The Color Purple* are sexism, racism, womanism, class, gender, violence, oppression, race, survival, discrimination, colonialism, subjugation of society, and eco-womanism. Thus, Black feminism has brought attention to the unique experiences of black women and has sought to create new frameworks for understanding the intersecting forms of oppression that they face.

Sisterhood

The book *The Color Purple* tracks the psychological growth of black women generally, from their inexperience to their self-identity. After experiencing racial exclusion, Celie finds freedom. The white women who stand by the white men who oppress the black women also contribute to this marginalization, not only the black males. Sofia's experience is one example. When the mayor punishes Sofia and imprisons her, the mayor's wife stands by her husband. Because of her physical strength, she is viewed as a man by others around her, and as such, she is entitled to what occurs to her. She must submit since she is a woman. Black women in the novel assist one another and even look after each other's children, reflecting the transition from feminism to womanism. The children of Mr.__ from a previous marriage are cared for by Celie, while Sofia's children are looked after by Squeak, and Celie's own biological children Adam and Olivia are adopted by Corrine. They become inscrutable to men. Every time they encounter a problem, they handle it on their own in a non-dominant female role. Also, they make an effort to diminish the male characters in the story because they understand that doing so will ensure their status as women in society.

The dominating White society is revealed through Celie, Nettie, and other female characters. Being a father, he abuses Mr. __, exploits as a husband, and Samuel and Corrine serve as emblems of the wrongdoing committed by colonial nations and white people. Men mistreat women, men abuse black people, and colonial powers wrong their former colonies. Walker chooses a manly-looking, well-mannered character. She is identified as a black woman in each scene where she is portrayed as a servant. Celie shows signs of anger in the book. But she encounters three women who care about her and force her to reconstruct herself: Shug, Nettie, and Sofia. She believes that God isn't paying attention to her or assisting her at all because God is just a man like every other male; she has encountered who doesn't care about women's colour discrimination. "Ain't no way to read bible and not think god white, she say. Then she sigh. When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest" (*The Color Purple* 1983: 175). She no longer sees herself as just an ugly, black, impoverished, ignorant, weak, and useless person; instead, she now sees herself as brave, gorgeous, assertive, and strong. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) in *Black Feminist Thought* notes:

> The first controlling image applied to U.S. Black women is that of the mammy - the faithful, obedient domestic servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black Women's Behavior (72).

For women, education is the main priority. Celie has never had any formal education. Until Nettie teaches her reading and writing, she is unable to read accurately. She skips school because she is overweight and ugly. She is even ignorant about pregnancy. It's "fat", she calls it. In the book, every single woman is portrayed as terrifying and self-denying. They are "suspended women", Walker claims, which means that society and males take advantage of them. They lack voices with which to yell or speak. The first act Walker takes as part of her womanism is to form a close sisterhood among the females in the novel. Alice Walker herself says, "Therefore we must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know" (Walker 5). Besides, the African traditional handcraft of making quilts is chosen by Walker as a representation of the "female bonding that restores the women to a sense of completeness and independence" (Majid 2016: 4). To create one piece, the quilt requires the collection of several items. Celie does this by gathering her personal components and forging a fresh, resilient identity. She can now speak up for herself

and reject the gender roles that are prevalent in her society. Shug leaves the young man she recently married and goes back to her house. Squeak pursues a singing career and insists that everyone addresses her by her given name, Mary Agnes.

The patriarchal treatment of the black woman as a simple pig in the story is exemplified by Mr. Alfonso's malice, Mr. Albert's retaliation against Celie, and Harpo's scornful attitude towards Sofia. As a result, a woman becomes isolated in her home, loses her domestic community, and must turn to other women for solace, protection, security, and togetherness. Undoubtedly, the central theme of the book is sisterhood. Dill (1994) says: "The concept of sisterhood has been an important unifying force in the contemporary women's movement. [...] this concept has been a binding force in the struggle against male chauvinism and patriarchy" (42).

According to Cazenave, the majority of black women in black society's obedience were an unanticipated outcome of their decision to reject the negative connotations of being matriarchs or Amazons. One of the reasons why black men sought to subjugate black women was because of the black matriarchy. It was thought that they had "too much influence and power in their households" (Cazenave 1983: 341). Abbandonato (1991) writes, "the story of the most marginalized of heroines, the black lesbian, who challenges patriarchal constructions of female subjectivity and sexuality and thus makes representation itself a compelling issue for all women, regardless of their ethnicity or sexual orientation" (1).

Celie, Nettie, Shug Avery, Sofia, and Mary Agnes are among the women characters in *The Color Purple* forming a close-knit sisterhood. Their sisterly bond makes it possible for Celie to grow up and become free to be herself. Women are shielded from the negative impacts of physical exploitation, domestic abuse, and political instability by their emotional connections and shared understanding. The African women relish their friendship. Folktales are told, quilts are knit, gardens are adorned, and songs are sung. Walker view them as creative individuals who use colour to depict their fantasies. She emphasizes the bonds that form among the female group as a result of their shared afflictions. The 'quilt' Celie gives Sofia in the book as she is leaving for her mother's house is a representation of the sibling love they both share. In the Olinka region, there is also evidence of similar female bonding. Reverend Samuel likes how well-liked women are to one another. As in the novels, women share their labour and care for each other's children through household tasks. Adam and Olivia, the Rev. Samuel and Corrine's adoptive children, are cared for by Nettie. Later, Nettie learns that Adam and Olinka are Celie's children as a result of her stepfather's unholy impregnation. She recalls her past

when her sister Celie takes care of her just like a mother "thinks about the time you laid yourself down for me" (*The Color Purple* 1983: 115).

The women in the book were free to reimagine themselves as either autonomous or naive women. We have faith in Celie because she is the narrator, her suffering is genuine, and because the oppression she experiences at the hands of the men in her life has a profound effect on her spirit. All women in the South have experienced male violence in some form or another; as a result of this oppression, they reject it and stand up for their human rights in their communities. D. S. Williams's book, *Sisters in the wilderness: The challenge of womanist God-talk* reflects how sexism stands for women's many oppression, "It is this sexism that represents one of the many oppressions that women face which can be overcome through the communion of quilting that empowers women to rise above their condition enforced by the many oppressors in their lives" (Williams 1993: 53). Bell Hooks expounds, "black women were told that they had overstepped the bonds of femininity because they worked outside the home to provide economic support for their families and that by so doing they had de-masculinized black men" (Hooks 1981: 75). The pleasant conclusion is that all the female characters come to terms with themselves and recognize their own value as individuals. She begins the novel with the terrible pains that female characters experience. Throughout the entire book, Celie senses a lack of respect and love. Her two children, sister, friends, and Mr.__ are all present, but only as close friends. She won't serve as his wife again. The gathering taking place on July 4, is also known as Independence Day. Shug, a character in *The Color Purple*, may thus best represent the modern woman or the new definition of womanhood. She presents the image of modern women, "with their physical freedom, energy, and independence" (Dumenil 1995: 22).

Selfhood

The supremacist organization saw the entire African population, particularly the African men, as despicable beings. They were humiliated, beaten, abused, thumped, and treated horribly. This had a psychological impact on them because one's sense of masculinity was lost. By subjecting their female counterparts to the same humiliation that African males endured at the hands of the Americans, they were able to vent all of their frustrations. In the African community, women were subjected to oppression and subordination that caused alienation and compelled them to cultivate sisterly love to counteract the impacts of patriarchy. Hudson-Weems observes that sisterhood is a concept that can only be comprehended by a female:

> This particular kind of sisterhood refers especially to an asexual relationship between women who confide in each other and willingly share their true feelings, their fears, their hopes, and their dreams. Enjoying, understanding, and supporting each other, women friends of this sort are invaluable to each other. With such love, trust, and security, it is difficult to imagine any woman without such a genuine support system as that found in genuine sisterhood (65-66).

Women's alliances with one another are where the community's real power is to be discovered. Nettie's letters, which discuss the relationship between the Olinka wives of the same husband, are one example, and Celie finds Shug her best ally. Mary Agnes is inspired to perform in front of the audience at Harpo's jukebox by Shug Avery, a blues singer, and Mr. Albert's mistress. Celie became liberated from the miserable situation she shared with Mr. Albert when she became intrigued by the life Shug Avery was living.

In this book, the sister's bond is put to the test on numerous occasions and is shown to be dangerous. Shug was rude to Celie when they first met at Mr. Albert's residence. Another example is shown in letter 36, where Harpo wants to dance with his estranged wife Sofia, and Squeak, his lover, grows jealous. Nettie and Rev. Samuel are accused of having an affair with Corrine, Rev. Samuel's wife. Her inconsistency enables us to comprehend the solid foundation upon which sisterhood is based.

The foundation of female unity is shared belief, trust, and faith. Shug disliked Celie and mistreated her, but over time, they grew close. Shug loathed Celie and treated her poorly, but over time, they grew close. Shug ultimately led to Celie's release and gave her the material goods she needed to live independently and make money on her own. The 'quilt' part illustrates Celie, Sofia, and Shug's friendship. It represents the fusion of several characters. Walker posits: "Let's make quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains, she say. And I run git my pattern book" (*The Color Purple* 1983: 41). Shug Avery joins them in the quilting scene, which is once more referenced, "Me and Sofia piecing another quilt together" (54). "She (Shug Avery) pick up a random piece of cloth out the basket. Hold it up to the light. Frown. How you sew this damn thing" (55).

Rev. Samuel emphasizes that sisterhood is something that only women can comprehend and that they become emotionally and mentally bonded with other women via their profession. Alice Walker says:

> Perhaps I can help with her work. It is in work that the women get to know and care about each other. It was through work that Catherine became friends with her husband's other wives. This friendship among women is something Samuel often talks about. Because the women share a husband but the husband does not share their friendship (150).

Mr. Albert also doesn't comprehend Celie and Shug Avery's friendship. Shug stands by Celie in every situation, and the two of them get along so well that later Shug rebels against Mr. Albert's treatment of Celie. As described in the novel- "I never understand how you and Shug got along so well together and it bothered the hell out of me" (246). Celie's letters serve as a testament to the Black sisterhood's spirit while they endure oppression and patriarchal dominance. The mother figure, who serves as the glue holding the Black community and individual families together, is a significant symbol of female togetherness.

According to Bell Hooks, "black women were informed that they had overstepped the bounds of femininity because they worked outside the home to care for their families and that by doing so they had de-masculinized black males" (75). This is where the notion of black matriarchs originated from. The term "black matriarch" refers to the female head of household, female-headed households, and the dominant black woman figure. These predicates lead to a negative image of black women rather than giving them positive power in the home. Women are criticized for showing their husbands less respect and for acting in an unladylike and unwomanly manner.

In fact, some critics describe the book as "a quilt" made up of 90 pieces of communication from various sources. The search for the Black woman's secret, private mind is called "the quest for self." Afro-American women recognize one another's humanity and the right to exist as moms, daughters, sisters, and friends. A lady searches for her identity both outside of her house and inside of it, where she is constantly reminded that she is a girl who must be humble, gentle, meek, and obedient. Before a "Male", the women's group should speak quietly. At this moment, the women attempt to console one another by sharing their anxieties. Throughout the story, this is what we see. Collins states, "When I am with other black women I always laugh. I think our humor comes from a shared recognition of who we all are in the world" (97).

Sisterhood, then, is something that brings women together to not only share their thoughts, affections, sorrows, and ideas, but also to help them share their household duties, childcare responsibilities, and necessities. It enables a woman to set aside her sorrows, advance in life, and experience liberation similar to Celie in the book.

She establishes her own tailoring business with the help of other women, moves into a new house, and, last but not least, regains her family, including her children, sister, and even Mr. Albert, who at long last realizes how important she is. The world would have been a better place to live if people had cared for, shared, and lived with a sense of community. Celie is introduced in *The Color Purple* as a dependent and lonesome figure. Yet as the story progresses, she goes through a transformation that makes her into a unique, black female character. Walker shows how Celie's development of her identity is aided by her conception of womanism and feminine bonding. The most important female character in Shug's journey from self-negation to self-actualization is a woman. Shug feeds Celie's thinking and inspires her to keep speaking up for herself in the world. Celie's stepfather regularly sexually assaults her as a youngster and treats her like an object. Celie, a teenage girl, serves as an alternative for her husband because her mother is too ill to have sex with him. She must serve Mister as his wife-slave and fulfill his sexual needs. Celie should be who Mister wants her to be and follow his instructions, according to Mister. Because he does not want Celie to feel like she belongs, he keeps Celie from getting Nettie's letters. Even calling Mister by his real name is forbidden. Her view of herself is that of: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly" (*The Color Purple* 187) and she physically and mentally rejects herself. She fears men and sees herself as wood since she has never experienced kindness or love from any males in her life: "I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man" (23).

Celie is unable to develop her sense of self because of these problems. She has low self-confidence and self-esteem as a result of rejecting her true self, but because of her love for Shug, she can restore her sense of self. Shug can love both herself and others, especially other black women, making her a prime candidate to represent Alice Walker's idea of womanism. Shug, who is Mister's mistress, adores Celie and supports her in developing a strong sense of self. Celie comments after taking a glance at Shug's photo: "Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motocar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some" (8). Shug is an independent female character who is not constrained by limiting social norms.

Celie progressively learns about her own uniqueness and power through watching Shug. Shug is taken care of by Celie in the early scenes. Unless their positions alter,

this picture holds. The bond between Shug and Celie grows, as do their respect and love for one another. Miss Celie's song is a song that Shug dedicates to her. For the "first time somebody make something and name it after me [Celie]" (70). Also, it is the first time that someone has shown her support. Shug shields Celie as a spiritual mother to keep her safe from harm in the patriarchal society. Shug agrees to be by Celie until she can make sure that Mister won't abuse her again after she informs her that he hit her. Shug informs Celie that when they relocate to Memphis, "I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet" (218), and Shug informs her in a matriarchal manner "Girl, you on your way" (221). She advises Celie to learn how to sew so she become self-sufficient financially. In addition to helping her commit her time as well as resources to Celie's career, she additionally nurtures her. Celie does not like to accept her own body because Pa and Mister have been abusing her sexually. She decides to destroy both her body and her spirit to survive. Rojas claims in *Women of Color and Feminism* that "Women are traditionally taught to fear the erotic, to interpret the pulse of the emotion it inspires with shame. At the same time, men have used the erotic to control female sexuality, redirecting it so that women believe their sexuality is primarily tied to pleasing men" (136).

Celie joins a group of women and rejects male dominance, thanks to her newly discovered identity. The novel's portrayal of patriarchy gradually gives way to the emergence of womanist values. The patriarchal values in the narrative tempt the female characters to fight for their own rights. Celie writes letters to God at the beginning of the book, but over time she learns to doubt him. Celie writes a letter to God after realizing that her own children are not the consequence of incest: "My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa. You must be sleep" (160). She then states that her sister Nettie is now the addressee: "The God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other men I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown" (173). Celie's opinions have fundamentally changed because she used to think that:

> I can't even remember the last time I felt mad. Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. Sometime Mister git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to the Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life be over, I say. Heaven last all ways (40).

Yet with Shug's encouragement and support, things improve. She says to Celie:

> I believe God is everything, say Shug. My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I

> was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed (176).

Celie is significantly affected by this feeling of interconnectedness and relatedness. Her most recent letter includes all living things in addition to God as the recipient. Celie was a victim of others' dominance from an early age and was incapable of self-defense. Shug teaches Celie how to defend herself in the supremacist culture so she can survive. This pivotal moment illustrates how Celie has reclaimed her authority and accepted her uniqueness in the supremacist culture. She records: "Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. […] He been there so long, he don't want to budge. Us fight. I hardly pray at all. Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it" (177).

Celie even scolds Mr._ :

> Any more letters come? I ast. He say, What? You heard me, I say. Any more letters from Nettie come? If they did, he say, I wouldn't give 'em to you. I curse you, I say. What that mean? he say. I say, Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble. He laugh. Who you think you is? he say. You can't curse nobody (186).

Shug also assists Celie in locating Nettie's letters that Mister had hidden. Celie's sense of belonging is something Mister wishes to keep from her. He considers himself to be in danger because of Celie and Nettie's relationship. Celie becomes emotionally reliant on Mister as a result of being denied access to Nettie's letters. Celie learns that Pa was not her biological father and that Celie's children were not the result of incest after obtaining Nettie's letters with Shug's assistance. Celie strikes up a correspondence with her sister by reading and responding to Nettie's letters. She is also aware that her own children are residing under Nettie's care. Celie is helped to recognize her 'self' as a unique black female by Nettie as she describes Africa, Olinka, and black people. She shares her background and ancestry with Celie. Celie's sense of belonging develops as a result of Shug's assistance and their connection. Celie believes Shug to be her only family when she leaves Mister, "us each other's people now" (Barker 1999: 59). Celie is shown as a strong, independent, black woman by the novel's conclusion after first being portrayed as a supporting character. Celie not only loves herself but also all living things. Her relationship with Shug gives her strength and a sense of identity. They have a strong female friendship that gives Celie the confidence she needs to live freely and embrace her uniqueness. Elsley (1992) notes that the quilt metaphor shows:

> A woman makes the world her own by taking apart the patriarchal ways of being to create a space for herself. That space allows her to accept her own fragmentation, embrace those fragments, and thus validate herself. Recognizing rather than denying her pieces is often a woman's way to become 'sole or whole' in a more feminocentric way (1-2).

Conclusion

To conclude, *The Color Purple* is an acknowledged tradition of women's literature that shatters the idea of male dominance. It depicts the severe effects of patriarchal dominance and brutality on women, but also how their bonds with other women help them to survive such brutality. Delores S. Williams (1993) writes:

> Alice Walker wants us to recognize that the inordinate demands men make upon the nurturing capacities of black mothers are destructive for women... Walker's work suggests that the exertion of male power to make sure women meet these demands constitutes sexism in the black community (53).

According to Bell Hooks, "both black females and males were uncertain about their womanhood and manhood. They were both striving to adapt themselves to the standard set by the dominant white society" (178). The protagonist of the tale, Aids, represents the idea of sisterhood and Celie is released from the job of "mule of the world" due to her relationships and bonds with Sofia, Shug Avery, and Nettie. This study emphasizes the solidarity of the African women's community and how they share the burden and develop their sense of selfhood.

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