

The Colourful Conciliation in Alice Walker's The Color Purple

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Abstract

The Color Purple is a rewriting of the powerful patriarchal order existed in the Afro-American community. The age old struggle for liberation and assertion of individuality as a human being is a terrible battle waged by the Black community in the colonized communities, particularly in the White dominated societies. The coloured people are always an object of ill-treatment and sexual harassment. Even the evangelical people also misused the natives. But the Harlem Renaissance opened new vistas for counter propaganda. Many glittering literary luminaries from the Black community emerged and fought a battle for the noble and necessary causes. Alice Walker thus depicts the saga of the oppressed in a powerful way and it has created a momentum in the history of the struggle of the Afro-Americans. The protagonist and her stepson's wife react to the oppression in exactly opposite ways. While one is a silent sufferer, the other one is a powerful fighter. The novel is most obviously the story of Celie's changing fortunes from oppression to liberation. Though through a different approach, Harpo the young black native also reaches conciliation, and it is in tune with the women folk's liberation ventures.

Keywords: Oppression, liberation, resistance, colonialism & black writing.

Introduction

Alice Walker is recognized as one of the leading voices among the black American women writers. As a historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced literary masterpieces specifically designed to oppose oppression. Among the black feminists who struggled hard through their literary writings with a well schemed motif Walker enjoys an unenviable position. She has contributed heavily to the treasury of literature in the forms of poetry, novel, short story, essay and criticism. She has been praised for the insightful depiction of black life, in particular the experience of black women in a sexist and racist society. According to Barbara Christian "Walker is concerned with 'heritage' which to Walker is not so much the grand sweep of history or artifacts created as it is the relations of people to each other; young to old, parent to child, man to woman" (Kane). The struggle of

black women throughout history to maintain an essential spirituality and creativity in their lives is always a matter of great interest to Alice Walker. “We must fearlessly pull out ourselves” says Walker, “and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great grandmothers were not allowed to know” (Kane). In the words of Carla Kaplan “Alice Walker is a writer working within the recuperative, archeologically tradition of feminist criticism” (Bloom 183). The goal of the article is to establish that Alice Walker through her fictional work promotes silence and resistance as powerful weapons for the liberation of the traditionally oppressed black women.

Review of Literature

Black feminist writings and Alice Walker’s contribution in this domain are a major matter of discourse in the academic circles. Patricia Hill Collins’ *The Black Feminist Thought* (2000) gives an overall survey of black feminist literature and the black art forms which promote the liberation of the miserable women. Harold Bloom’s *Alice Walker* (1989) is an outstanding study of Walker’s traumatic life and majestic literary struggle for the liberation of fellow women. There is a plethora of literary articles analyzing the different aspects of her prize winning novel. Among them Margaret Walsh’s “The Enchanted World of *The Color Purple*” (1987) narrates how the transformation happens to the beastly black men by the grace of the young woman. Similarly Om P. Juneja’s “The Purple Colour of Walker Women: Their Journey from Slavery to Liberation” (1990) is a remarkable study about the bold attempts made by the woman protagonist and her supporter for their liberation from bondage to the world of free air. However, this paper focusing on the main characters, Celie and Sophia as representatives of the power struggle in different dimensions is an entirely new attempt where as other studies concentrate on the transformation of the black women and their unending journey towards it.

Discussion

Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1983) is definitely a celebration of all that it means to be female. It is a superb narration of the traumatic life of the black American women, or a collective consciousness of the black women. In a way it is an exploration of the oppression, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of the black female in their conflict with the white and the chauvinistic black male. This award winning novel chronicles the life of a poor and abused southern black woman who eventually triumphs over oppression through affirming female relationships. Walker has described herself as “Womanist” – her term for a black feminist – which she defines in the introduction to her book of essays, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* as:

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/nonsexual. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility . . . and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual man . . . Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. (Hayes)

“Womanism,” says Tuzyline Jita Allan in her article “The Color Purple: A Study of Walker’s Womanist Gospel”, “has brought Alice Walker and her characters safely to the land of psychic freedom after a perilous journey fraught with fear, self-hate, and guilt” (Bloom 119).

What interests one is the silent protest of Celie the protagonist and the vehement and rebellious fighting back of the young Sofia while they were treated as mere dehumanized objects. Both of them represent Alice Walker in her steady campaign for the liberation of the mentally and physically oppressed black women. Celie’s troubles start at her tender age, in spite of the fact that she is innocent and sincere. Celie complains to God: “I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (The Color Purple 3). The psychological oppression is too much for the young mother who was forced to marry a man too old and too arrogant. To her dominating husband she is evil and never good. But what is intolerable to Celie is that he questions her faithfulness. She recollects: “He beat me today because he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got something in my eye but I didn’t wink. I don’t even look at mens. That’s the truth” (7).

In the Afro-American context women have been victimized intellectually, emotionally and physically by men. More than protecting herself and identity Celie is greatly concerned with the protection of her young sister Nettie who has been viewed as a prey by Mr-----, Celie’s husband. Nettie advises her sister not to be run over and to maintain the upper hand. But Celie is a novice. She says: “But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (18). Celie in the eyes of her husband is totally inhuman. When his sister Kate on a visit asks him to buy clothes to Celie, his response reveals his real attitude to his life partner:

Buy Celie some clothes. She say to Mr-----

She need clothes? He ast.

Well look at her.

He look at me. It like he looking at the earth. It need something? his eyes

say. (21)

The male domination and the brutal treatment of women in black life have been there for centuries. “Black women’s lives are,” says Patricia Hill Collins, “a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African-American women with our objectification as the Other. The struggle of living two lives, one for “them and one for ourselves” (99). Alice Walker skillfully depicts its continuance. When Kate asked Harpo, the young son of Mr----- by his early marriage to help Celie, his response is also in line with the male tradition:

Harpo, she say. Harpo the oldest boy. Harpo, don’t let Celie be the one bring in all the water. You a big boy now. Time for you to help out some.

Women work, he say.

What? she say.

Women work. I'm a man. (The Color Purple22)

However, the same Harpo moons after Sofia but finds he is no match for her physical strength and prepossessing size. Embarrassed by his failure to control his wife as his father dominates the submissive Celia, he embarks on a marathon eating binge designed to make him Sophia's match but winds up tearful and sick, consoled in Celie's arms.

Many black women are well aware of the necessity to fight back for their survival. It is very much evident in the words of Kate. "You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself" (22). According to Lauren Berlant, lost in a wilderness of unnamed effects, "Celie is nonetheless able to resist her silencing by embodying for God's (and the reader's) benefit the generic scene of female humiliation" (Bloom 8). Celie is raised to the level of female exemplum when every woman who sees her tells her "You got to fight". Nettie, her sister separated from her also reminds her through her first letter to Celie: "You've got to fight and get away from Albert. He ain't no good" (The Color Purple 114).

The powerlessness of the black women is expressly evident in the life of Celie. Celie was repeatedly raped by her stepfather. Celie becomes a helpless victim of the greed of patriarchal sexual practice in the family circle. She was only fourteen when she became pregnant and she could not even understand why such bodily and mental changes were happening to her. In the words of Bell Hooks in *The Color Purple* patriarchy is "exposed and denounced as a social structure supporting and condoning male domination of women, specifically represented as black male domination of black females, yet it does not influence and control sexual desire and sexual expression" (55). Black women's sexuality is generally viewed as a totally contemptuous affair. When Harpo, Celie's husband's son by his former wife brings the pregnant Sofia as his wife Mr-----'s reaction is an unpardonable insult to the entire womenfolk. Shamelessly he questions:

Who the father? he ast.

She look surprise. Harpo, she say.

How he know that?

He know. She say.

Young womens no good these days, he say. Got they legs open to every Tom, Dick and Harry. (The Color Purple31)

Here the reader takes this novel in the context of a white and black supremacist patriarchal society wherein black women have been and continue to be sexually loose. However, this biting remark gives rise to a very strong and challenging response in Sofia. Walker narrates: "Sofia face git ruddier. The skin move back on her forehead. Her ears rise" (31). Moreover, Sofia is an entirely different person who has shown the feelings of

resentment and cannot be easily subjugated. She is the first woman Celie knows who refuses to accede to both the patriarchal and the racist demands for abjection. According to Lauren Berlant the “social coercion of Afro-Americans to participate in a discourse that proclaims their unworthiness is resisted by Sofia . . .” (Bloom 13). Gradually Sofia gains enough strength, physically and mentally to fight back the oppression. Walker narrates her growth: “Sofia look half her size. But she still a big strong girl. Arms got muscle. Legs too” (The Color Purple32-33).

Harpo, the continuation of patriarchal authority is quite embarrassed by his wives behavior. To him “wives are like children. You have to let ‘em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating. . . She need to be taken down a peg”(35). But the developments are on the contrary. Sofia cannot be easily pegged down, not like the gentle and suffering Celie. Sofia’s challenging and unyielding temper simply reflects on Harpo’s face. Celie narrates: “Next time us see Harpo his face a mess of bruises. His lip cut. One of his eyes shut like a fist” (36). Here The Color Purple’s strategy of inversion, represented through the elevation of female experience over traditional male domination, is a critique of the biological inferiority attributed to the female.

While one notice the sweetness of temper and the big amount of patience and resignation in Celie, Sofia emerges as a strong fighter of women’s because. The fight scene is an ample proof of the female resistance. In her strikingly vivid narration Walker tells:

But it Harpo and Sofia they fighting like two mens. Every piece of furniture they got is turned over. Every plate look like it broke. The looking glass hang crooked, the curtains torn. The bed look like the stuffing pulled out. They don’t notice. They fight. He tries to slap her. What he do that for? She reach down and grab a piece of stove wood and whack him cross the eyes. He punch her in the stomach, she double over groaning but come up with both hands lock right under his privates. He rolls on the floor. He grabs her dress tail and pull. She stand there in her slip. She never blinks a eye. He jump up to put a hammer lock under her chin, she throw him over her back. He fall bam up gainst the stove. (37)

Black women’s liberation is possible only through self – assertion, many believe. However, Celie the protagonist is noticeable for her patient endurance of suffering. It is highly surprising that she maintains remarkable tolerance when her husband Mr----- keeps his lady love Shug Avery in the same house. Even her father-in-law notices Celia’s remarkable patience. “Celie, he say, you have my sympathy. Not many women let they husband whore lay up in the house” (53). Celie doesn’t “care who Albert sleep with”(73). But she is only jealous of Sofia because she can’t react in the way Sofia reacts. Sofia is, in fact, a victim of fights ever since her childhood. “All my life I had to fight, “ Sophia says. “A girl child is not safe in a family of men,” she believes (39).

There is a noticeable effort for the unsettling of the patriarchal supremacy in the character of Sophia. She develops an insatiable curiosity that borders on rebelliousness and it leads to a forceful struggle for existence. The novel builds upon a new ground of self-assertion. It is very much evident in the words of Harpo who wanted to keep his wife under male tyranny. But his attempt, inspired by his father's example, is met with failure: "But not Sofia. She do what she want, don't pay me no mind at all. I try to beat her, she black my eyes" (60-61). He is totally unaccustomed with this rebellious behavior. He had expected total obedience from his wife that he had noticed in Celia: "When Pa tells you to do something, you do it, he say. When he say not to, you don't. You don't do what he say, he beat you"(60). In this context it is worth to quote the words of Tuzyline Jita Allan: "In Walker's womanist universe the collapse of male-erected boundaries that separate woman from herself is a necessary first step toward coalition building"(Bloom 133). Here Alice Walker treats the marginal as central and it causes an unsettling of the hierarchical relations.

Sophia's personal fortunes shift considerably during the course of the novel, too. She was jailed for attacking the mayor and his wife, behavior they find most unbecoming in a black woman. Sophia is bold enough to challenge the colonial supremacy in disobeying the commands of the Mayor. "No character in *The Color Purple*," says Carla Kaplan, "is more known for her rebellious, contestatory voice and for 'fighting back' than Sofia" (Bloom 193). For knocking down the Mayor Sophia is mercilessly beaten and sentenced to solitary confinement. "They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swore from head to foot"(The Color Purple 82). Though met with imprisonment and harassment, her undaunted behavior is a remarkable movement in the direction of self assertion and a revolt against white supremacy.

However, Celia's assertion is in an entirely different way. Contrary to the predominating cultural concept, Celie is sexually alive. Though a victim of extended rape, her drained desires were awakened in the company of Shug Avery. Though her sexual experience with her husband is only black male's tyrannical attempts, Celie finds consolation and bliss in the company of her husband's lady love. Her sexual instincts have been gently stirred by Shug and the unexpected experience takes them to a world of equality and mutual sharing. Here the reader witnesses a female subjectivity which redefines itself as autonomous and at the same time self assertive. The genuinely assertive growth of Celie reaches its peak when Albert questions her decision to go with Shug. He threatened her that she had to walk over his dead body if she wanted to leave. Her swift response shocks him and the mail tyranny: "You a lowdown 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" (180). It simply justifies what Patricia Hill Collins in *The Black Feminist Thought* says: "Silence is not to be interpreted as submission in this collective, self-defined Black women's consciousness" (98).

Conclusion

What makes *The Color Purple* a classic narrative of black suffering is its outstanding conclusion. In spite of the fact that it closes with a happy reunion and celebration of kinship, this fictive autobiography of the common black woman delivers the message that it is time for the liberation of the poor oppressed female black. A successful negotiation of gender disparity has been achieved when Albert joins with Celie as a supportive and loving husband and Harpo as an assistant to Sophia and to the women's venture. In the words of Diane Gabrielsen Scholl the "resolution of the novel offers us an apocalyptic vision of the 'peaceable kingdom' established by human beings in search of love and justice" (258). As a critique of an oppressed black woman's journey from sexual slavery to freedom, *The Color Purple* stands apart from the primary texts of autobiographical writing which have shaped and influenced the direction of Afro-American slave narrative. In uncovering the voices of the suppressed black women Walker has successfully overcome the boundaries erected by the patriarchy. The goal of the paper was to establish that silence just like resistance is also a powerful weapon for the liberation of the traditionally oppressed black women. By presenting the novel as a critique of black female liberation and the achievement of their targets the article has proved that Alice Walker's contribution towards this end is really praiseworthy.

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