

CELIA AS AN EMBODIMENT OF FORTITUDE IN ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE

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ABSTRACT

Alice Walker one of the leading literary personage in America is known for her revolutionary fiction. Her *The Color Purple* articulates the complexity of the struggles of black women in America and illuminates their indomitable will which enables them to burgeon as individuals, defying the exploitative constraints of a society dominated and conditioned by white people and black men. Celie represents the enduring power and the spirit of self-sacrifice among black women. Celie endures sexual, physical and emotional abuses to save her mother and sister from the cruelty of Pa, she quietly takes her own abuses. The ability to endure under worst circumstances is Celie's key to survival.

Keywords: Fortitude, Miserable Creatures, Innocent Victim, Demoralize, Sexual Objects

1. INTRODUCTION

Man is designated to be the masters and women are never to be granted freedom. It has emerged from the debate of anthropologists and sociologists that the subservient role of the female gender is either the result of biological necessity or the construct of power relationship culturally determined by society. For centuries, Black women have been called the 'mule of the world' and 'slave of a slave' and had the status of the wretched on the earth. Alice Walker is the principal star in the galaxy of African American woman writers and also she is fighter as well as a meditative poet and a novelist. She has taken part in the struggles her people have waged, and she knows the struggles they must yet face in this greatest of the world's democracies. Her novels consistently reflect her concern with racial, sexual, and political issues, particularly with the black women's struggle for spiritual and political survival. Uprooted from her native African culture and placed in a dominant, she was very often intimidated by racists. Initially, the main concern of the Black Women's organizations was to abolish all kinds of economic and political disparities against them. Kashinath Ranveer asserts:

Black Women in America are triply burdened and disadvantaged. They are black, female and economically under privileged. This triple burden restricts them from a fuller and meaningful

participation in American society mainly because they are confined to their race and the narrow enclosures of sex. As a result they suffer as blacks amongst the blacks, slaves of the slaves and forced to occupy a very marginal place in the Americans social life (Stade and George, 1985).

The women in Alice Walker's fiction are miserable creatures, mainly the protagonists are presented as uneducated, inarticulate, deprived, abused by their family and usually trapped by circumstances, which they seem unable to control. Mem and Margaret in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Celie in *The Color Purple* are victimized physically and emotionally both by their men. The protagonist of the novel *The Color purple* Celie's life is devastated by the hidden forces of evil that exist within the black society itself.

The Color Purple is a novel that emerges out of Alice Walker's central concern with defining the existence, experience and culture of African American women and the brutally complex systems of oppressions. It deals with the role of male domination in frustrating the black women's struggle for identity and independence. It shows how women are oppressed and manipulated by men and humiliated into powerlessness. *The Color Purple* with its African American ethos views the problem of gender politics as cultural stereotypes that makes women physical, social and emotional victims of male sexual agency represented through husbands and sons. The story is primarily through Celie's letters, which out of isolation and despair, she initially addresses to god.

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Celie's first letter in the novel reveals her sexual exploitation, marginalization and suffocation. . Since her voice as a woman is silenced, she writes:

Dear God

I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. He (her father) never had a kind word to say to me. Just say you gonna do what your mammy wouldn't... He start to choke me, saying you better shut up and git used to it... And now I feel sick every time I be the one to cook (Walker and Alice. 2004).

Celie, the protagonist, whose condition in the novel is deplorable and is abused physically, sexually, emotionally and socially.

Walker's heroine is an innocent victim of evil and fate. Celie consequently does not rise to confront her fate for a great many years. It needs all her faculties, in the mean while, simply to survive. Celie, meeting her fate alone, watches her mother die "screaming and cursing" (3). After she has been repeatedly raped by her father, he takes her away from school in spite of her tears and protests. Celie tries to keep alive the curiosity for knowledge in her by studying her sister Nettie's lessons. Celie is in a futile struggle to conserve in herself the spark of healthy vigor that is necessary to acquire knowledge. She is prevented from sustaining this. Bewildered and ignorant, she watches her body swells and grow larger, and her surprise knows no bounds when a child comes out of herself, kicking and squalling. Celie faces her ordeals, she and her pregnancies alone. Nobody comes to the house to see her. While she puts up with physical violence in the form of whippings, beatings and rapes, fears lest her growing sister Nettie, should meet with the same fate at the hands of their father.

At the beginnings of the novel, Celie is circumscribed by the paternal command, "you better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy. It clearly demonstrates his power and powerlessness of the other. She is pulled to marry Mr. Albert, a typical male gesture to emphasize woman's subordination. If her condition as a daughter is unbearable, her life as a wife is no better. She is married off to a middle aged widower because she has been trying to protect her younger sister Nettie from the evil intention of her so-called father. Her case is recommended to Mr._, "She ugly. He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God alone fixed her. You can do everything just like you wan to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it".

Fonso says no kind word to Celie, but degrades and demoralizes her verbally and physically, and psychologically. Introducing Celie to Mr._, Fonso describes her as a hard and clean worker, a liar, and a stupid, ugly, and spoiled girl who is too dumb to go to school. Furthermore, the entire process of Fonso's exhibition of Celie to Mr._ resembles the inspection of slaves on a slave market. This is seem to be a business transaction, a capitalistic deal in which Fonso wants to get rid of a spoiled slave, and Mr._ wants someone to mother his children, to cook for the family, and to satisfy his sexual desires. Walker portrays Celie as a victims of many imaginable abuses and a few unimaginable ones. She is a

woman who believes she is ugly and she centers that belief on her blackness

Another aspect of this capitalistic transaction associates Celie with the image of a cow. Fonso offers Celie and the cow she raises to Mr._ but refuses to give up Nettie. Mr._ consents to take Celie and asks, "that cow still coming?" (12) Associating Celie with the image of a cow places her in the role for domestic work, field work, and sexual duties. This traditional role of love the wife offers her no love and affection. In fact this role makes her subservient to her stepfather, her husband, and God. Fonso also alienates Celie from objects or symbol of love. His lecherous advances force Nettie to leave, and he gets rid of Celie's children. These are the people whom Celie loves dearly and who would return love to her. Furthermore, Celie's love for cutting hair has been transformed into hatred and nightmare. Celie tells Shug:

I did love to cut hair... since I was a little bitty thing. I'd run go git scissors of I saw hair coming, and I'd cut and cut, long as I could... It got to the place where everytime I saw him coming with the scissors and the comb and the stool, I start to cry.

From beatings, abuse, and rejection at home, Celie is passed to Mr._ to endure a similar fate for the next three decades. These men illustrate the loveless, lustful, and cruel world of Walker's fictional men. George Stade vividly describes these men:

As for the men, with a few telling exceptions, they are brutal in the flesh because they are impoverished of spirit. They are pitiless when they are not self-pitying. They are misogynist and they are pedophobic. They are petty, spiteful, lustful and treacherous. They are also arrogant, complacent, lazy, insensitive, incompetent, vain, inartistic, contemptuous of women, but quick to take credit for their work. Above all they are lechers, mechanical monsters of sexual appetite.

Celie's insensitive and her selfish husband offers her no love, but he uses her to satisfy his wants and needs. Every society considers culture to be superior to nature; culture is the means by which man controls nature and women. A women's psyche is further debased when as a wife, she is controlled by her husband. She is forced to redefine herself and an active reshaping of the personality to confirm to the wishes or need of the husbands.

As Celie prepares to emancipate herself from a slavish marriage, she receives more verbal abuse from her husband who often compares her with his mistress, Shug. As a wife, it is very terrible to tolerate:

Shug got talent. She can sing. She got spunk. She can stand up and be noticed. But what you got? You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in Memphis is to be Shug's maid. Take out her slop-jar and maybe cook her food.

He finally sums up his estimation of her: "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman Goddam, you nothing at all" (Ranveer, Kashinath.2002). Conventional society convinces Celie that she is ugly and unloved. In the three decades of her

friendless life, Celie chops cotton in the fields, takes care of Albert's four unmannerly children, cleans the house, cooks, hates herself, hates the world, and silently allows men to dominate her.

Albert's oppression is not merely physical but mental and emotional. He uses his male sexuality to batter Celie, forcing intercourse on her so that Celie becomes revolted at the idea of sex. But Celie cannot fight back. All she can do is survive passively. She says, "I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight. I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" (22). To her, to survive is of supreme importance, and she does survive through all odds. She knows that wife means to be submissive, to be subordinate, to be obedient and to be a punch bag for the man. She suffers both at the hands of her husband and her step children. She has yet to realize that one must not only survive, but survive without being splintered and degraded, survive "whole".

Traditionally, the family is the place where one first experiences affection, but Walker advocates the failure of the family to provide affection. Her experiences and the experiences of women, particularly black women, have influenced her negative view of the family. Almost at the point of death in her first pregnancy, she thought about various members of her family and found nothing positive or comforting. Her family members never replied to her cry for help while called her a slut. This is why Walker believes and advocates that "wherever there's a man, there's trouble," (212) and she demonstrates this point through the cruel treatment her female characters receive from the males. Albert beats Celie the same way he would beat his children, except he seldom beats the children. To survive beatings, Celie destroys her emotions:

He beats me like he beats the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree".

Mr. Albert's physical abuse of Celie is too intolerable and hence she wishes that she could transform herself as tree or a piece of wood, so that his beating can make no effect on her physic. This is an obvious example of a black woman's identifying herself with the passive suffering of Nature. Wendy Wall explains that "Celie's attempt to negate her pain by desensitizing herself creates within her emotionally hollow spaces," (84) which result in fragmentation, alienation, and unresponsiveness.

For Celie passivity is the only strategy available in order to keep alive. She begins to face the realities of life when she is still ill-equipped to face them. Celie is never given a respite to develop her faculty for fighting back. All that she can do is to take Albert's blows without buckling under, and to accept without flinching her step children's violence and hatred for her. She becomes incapable of living or looking up to men. Men, to her, possess an undeniable capacity to hurt, physically, sexually and, therefore, mentally.

In the novel *The Color Purple*, Walker pays much attention to the manner in which African American men brutalize their women. Young women are made sexual objects. At the arly stages of Celie's story is devoid of identity. She is totally incapable of defining herself. She sees herself, both physically and emotionally, as living in irreconcilable fragments. Dieke says, "Celie has been fragmented into pieces, which are given away to others" (164). All her life is a series of sacrifices - to Pa's desires, to Nettie's safety, to Mr.'s brutality. She has been torn into pieces - from childhood by Pa's rape, torn from her children, and torn from Nettie. She can identify nothing of her own self; she does not feel that she belongs to this world.

Walker in all her novels, explores the limitations placed on women's definitions of self and their often fruitless battles for physical security and psychological health. A woman is a puppet in the hands of fate. It is deaf, blind, and fickle and the helpless woman is forced to dance to the ever changing tunes of fate. In *The Color Purple*, the roles of male domination in the frustration of black women's struggle for independence is clearly focus. In this novel, Walker's choice and effective handling of the epistolary style has enabled her to tell a poignant tale of women's struggle for equality. Distinguishes Walker in her role as an apologist and chronicler for African American women.

2. REFERENCES

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