



## Alice Walker's Novel 'The Colour Purple'-Oppression and Suppression to Self knowledge and Emancipation

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**Abstract :** *Alice Walker, one of the major womanist black woman writers, thus, appeared on the literary scene in the 1970s. Her own sufferings and emotions needed to be outpoured. She found novels a better form through to depict a realistic picture of black people in general and predicament in particular. The black history and culture that has been a long tale of spirituality and culturally crushed people, of which has given birth to many black writers. Alice Walker's voice is the voice of the long suppressed, oppressed and exploited black women for whom she is known as a spoke person. The novel 'The colour Purple' paints a vivid, critical picture of life for a Black woman in the South in the early 20th century. It a parody of the tradition of the Slave Narrative, stories written by male and female former slaves about their experiences under slavery. She tells a truthful, meaningful, factually proven story of women, but it is not without blending of fiction. Walker's protagonist, Celie, undergoes an arduous journey of self-discovery, helping her overcome conflicts that otherwise would oppress her. Shug helps Celie realize that God is not someone who has power over her like the rest of the men in Celie's life. Rather, God is an "it" and not a 'who'. This paper is an attempt to bring out the journey of protagonist from oppression and suppression to self knowledge and emancipation'*

**Key words :** *oppression, emancipation, emphasize, racial, literature.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

Walker has become an acclaimed womanist writer by taking the predicament of black women to the front to bring about desired changes emphasizes racial oppression. The study of her major works reveals these facts. It is not because of her bulk of literature and in different forms of literature she had been trying her hand with, but because of the myriads of themes she has dealt with, her art of characterization, her narrative techniques as a story teller, the use of dialect as used by black illiterate people, her style, images, and symbols she had employed, sentence structure and vocabulary is also unique in a way or another. Alice Walker has been exclusively praised by her critics. As stated earlier in the literary background to Alice Walker, she has emerged as an artist with a purpose of her own i.e. spiritual survival of her people in particular but the humanity in general. Though her stories chiefly revolve round the black people- both men and women, they have been taken as type. She moves from individual to type and represents them as representatives of any age in the human history. They cross the boundaries of continents, nations, races, classes, gender and regions. They embrace all and encompass the whole humanity.

The novel 'The Colour Purple' revolves around the idea like estrangement and reconciliation, redemption through love, sisterhood, racism and sexism, oppression and suppression, political and economical emancipation status of women, relation between men and women, gender discrimination, lesbianism etc. It reveals her concerns with black women and family. She deftly sculpts her people and delineates their relationships. She writes with a world of experience. She exposes incest in 'The Color Purple' and has precipitated more discussion within her community on sex. As the very purpose is to bring out the predicament of women caused by their oppression, exploitation twin affliction of racism and sexism, violence and their struggle for survival, Walker has exhausted her creative powers to the making to the making of her women. They struggle to prove their own identity. They are also type because they represent the predicament of all women. Alice Walker makes powerful sketches of black women's struggle for spiritual wholeness and political racial and sexual equality.

Alice Walker is apologist for black women as her cause is the liberation of black womanhood... In 'The Color Purple', she lifts Black women of their knees, uses love as a defense mechanism and raises Black women to the love of royalty. Thus the rise of American Feminism has a strong effect on Afro-American literature. Black women writers



seem to find their voices and audiences and black men seem to lose theirs. Alice Walker explores the relationships between men and women and brings out the predicament of women through it. She wanted to explore the relationship between men and women and why women are always condemned for doing what men do as an expression of their masculinity. Why are women so easily 'tramps' and 'traitors' when men are heroes for engaging in the same activity? Why do women stand for this? Women are condemned for their sexual freedom; on the contrary, men are heroes for enjoying the same with other women. Walker has raised this discriminatory issue of sexism and intra racism in her novels of which the black women are victims.

'The Color Purple' provides an insight into predicament of women on the domestic front. The story revolves around an unfortunate, abused woman Celie and other women characters and brings home the predicament perpetrated against black women. The predicament as the history bears a testimony is the result of their sexual racial and interracial suppression and oppression, physical exploitation and violence.

The women in the novel are in unpleasant, difficult perplexing and dangerous situation. They are always in a dilemma, in a quandary. Though they try to come out of it, they are put in not and suffer a lot. They become victim of racial and sexual discrimination, inhuman treatment and the patriarchal system which encourages women's oppression and offers secondary status. The women are treated like slave. They are deprived of freedom and social position. They are mere puppets fallen badly in the hands of men and mere objects of sex though it is against their will. The men suck them till they die and bring home another teenager to gratify their sexual desire. They are so mean that they don't even spare their 'daughters'. They are estranged so that they should not find solace in the company of another. The women are as if toys that are born only to be played by men in whatever way they want. Alice Walker depicts these multifaceted problems and predicament of women quite realistically and naturally in this novel. The novel provides them a wide canvass to put forth their sufferings and pains in a new light. Her aim is to emphasize and highlight the predicament of women caused by repetitive violence, suppression, physical and sexual exploitation and patriarchal taboos so that the men would be introspective, sympathetic and considerate towards women and becomes the spokesperson of them.

This is the story of a poor black girl named Celie. It is the story of the love between two black sisters that survive and separate over years. During the same period, the shy, ugly and uneducated sister discovers her inner strength through the support of female friend. In fact it is not the life exclusively deals with the protagonist but it portrayals of women characters victimized by racial and sexual oppression. They receive inhuman treatment because they are either black or women. Celie is the protagonist and a black woman who shapes her life and also tells her tale of predicament. Nettie, Celie's sister, Shug Avery-the blue singer, Sofia – the strong willed daughter-in-law, Tashi an Olinka tribe girl and Squeak who goes through awakening of her art. Celie is the centre of this community of women, the one who knows how to survive. There are several women portrayals and especially multi-colored portrayal of Celie deserves genuine efforts to explore her sorrows and sufferings caused by the male dominated society to understand literary genius of Alice Walker.

Walker accepts lesbianism to depict affairs between women. Walker's accepting attitude towards lesbianism apparently influences her depiction of the affair between Celie and Shug. This segment of the novel marks the gradual humanization of the characters and the slow empowerment of Celie. One of the most unusual characteristics of Celie is her ability to suffer without getting angry. In fact, she is jealous of the ability of Sofia and Shug to lash out in fury whenever they feel wronged by the men. Celie instead writes that she simply accepts things the way they are and does not seem to be capable of anger.

If all men are born free, then why have the humanity observed a prolonged slavery and servitude? The history of human civilization bears a testimony to it. The strongest rules the land, the stronger rules the strong and the strong rules the weak. The white people ruled the black men and next the black men ruled their women. Nevertheless as it has been explored the black women have been doubly oppressed and victimized by the white and the black men alike. Celie, the central female protagonist of the novel the Color Purple is repeatedly raped by her so called step father whom they call 'Pa' and she conceives two babies who are carried away and sold to someone else. Nettie her sister gets away from her father who looks for the chance to repeat what he did with Celie. But Celie, already suffered much, realizes this intent and defends Nettie from 'Pa' as well as from her husband Albert. Sofia appears to be strong but proves weak before the might of both black and white. She is made to spend years of estrangement from her children and husband. Her husband Harpo, a true copy of his father, bullies her but proves too weak to. Celie's mother dies of child bearing. Thus, black women literate or illiterate, girl or woman; stronger weaker are portrayed as victims of their black and white men. All are to suffer from painful experiences in life.

Alice Walker highlights how these black women characters become conscious of their situation and oppression through their painful experiences and how they initiate struggle to emancipate them from all these circumstances. Once they come to their understanding they reject their oppression and refuse to co-operate their victimizers and exploiters. Celie is sexually abused, physically beaten and spiritually crushed at the hands of Albert. But she never opposes him. It



is through the influence of Shug Avery and activities of strong minded Sofia and Nettie's letters that she starts overcoming her problems and regaining her identity and becomes economically independent by adopting pant making business and rejects and leaves her husband, She finds "God in nature". She tries to be sexually and economically independent.

The black women, struggling to overcome their existence, are vividly portrayed by Alice Walker in her novels. All these Walker's women undergo suffering. It is because that they are lazy or ignorant, it is also not because they have no ability and creativity. They suffer only because they are black and women. Celie is a good in housekeeping and children keeping but is forced to work and exploited. She is admired for her ability to work. Nettie is also good companion and teacher but not allowed to teach Tashi. Celie learns pant making and becomes perfect in it and earns well. It indicates that the black women have creativity and ability but their creativity is stifled by the obstacles of oppression and exploitation. Since they are put to hard work they cannot just come out of it to do anything creative. Mentally and physically crushed women cannot nurture their creative instincts. They have to suppress their creativity. It comes out only when they have congenial atmosphere or when they are awakened to spirituality and feel emancipated like Celie, Shug or Nettie. Despite their ability they are at the lowest level of social ladder. They are crushed spiritually as man wants to rule over them, dominate them and put them under their patriarchal dominance. Hence they are to suffer internally and externally, spiritually and physically, sexually and racially. The result is their predicament. It is also a biological fact.

Alice Walker has been strongly criticized for her harsh treatment given to male characters. They are portrayed as mere stereotype characters who know only to do wrong to the female characters. She portrays the male characters as brute, inhuman, unaffectionate, and unsympathetic. They enjoy giving troubles to female. They suck them until they die. This is true about Celie's mother who dies of child-bearing. When Alphonso is not contended with his wife, he starts raping Celie, a stepdaughter and also eyes another, Nettie. Even after the death of her mother, he brings another girl home who also dues of his oppression and exploitation. When he finds Celie defending Nettie from him, he marries her off to Albert and tells him she has 'experience' and will be 'good wife.' It indicates that they look upon wives/women as only object of sex and exploitation and have no personal sympathy. Celie, who is already crushed by 'Pa,' can not enjoy sex with Albert and hence is beaten hard many times for no fault. Later on Shug, in her company teaches Celie how to keep husband happy sexually.

Patriarchal dominance is another factor that is strongly observed by men and they leave no stone unturned to beat or abuse women. This is carried on from generation to generation by other men, notably Harpo, son of Albert, follows the same and is revealed from many of his instances. Women are also responsible to some extent. They have become so habitual to these things that they have to accept them as their fate. If the woman like Sofia tries to break the bondages and tries to overpower her bullied husband, other women don't like her treatment. Besides, her confidence and strength prove deadly for herself. She has to remain in jail for years away from her children and husband. The women had no option rather than sustaining the lot and living life as animals. This is the main reasons posed by Alice Walker, for her harsh treatment to male and free use of sex in the Color Purple seem true from her point of view, being a feminist or womanist. She writes, "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival whole of my people. But beyond that I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the loyalties and triumphs of black women. For me black women are the most fascinating creation in the world." (Walker, Alice, 1983) It is to free from all kinds of oppression, suppression, dead taboos regarding women, racism and sexism and also from all those reasons that caused their predicament.

'The Color Purple' is a novel that emerges the central concern with the existence, experience and culture of Afro- American and brutally complex system of oppression that shape these. It also deals with the role of male domination in frustrating the black women's struggle for identity and independence. It shows like other novels, how women are oppressed and manipulated by men and humiliated into powerlessness. It is also a novel of liberation and redemption, showing woman oppressed by violence moving from victimization by society and men particular to a growth in consciousness that allows them to control her own lives.

Therefore, self- knowledge, self- restraint could be a better solution. 'Celie' is a heroin whose story works transformative magic. In the ending part of the novel The Color Purple, the narrator, protagonist Celie, and her women' are propelled towards a fairy tale ending with more velocity than credibility. The portrayal of Celie is not logically progressive on the whole. Shug is a magic maker. Celie's transformation from a worst sufferer to an independent woman, free from oppression and suppression through the influence of others is not predictable. The world of transformation is that of a fairy tale. As an artist the author desires to foresee an ideal vision of the new black world of the new black womanhood.



## 2. CONCLUSION :

To conclude after analyzing and interpreting critically the novel 'The Colour Purple' it has been observed that Walker has presented the black women as victim of 'twin afflictions' i.e. racism and sexism. They are doubly oppressed and suppressed by their own men at home and by white men in the racist society. The factors causing their predicament have always been in society since a very long time. All characters are portrayed as the victims of sexism, racism, poverty, and patriarchal dominance. The condition of women has also been quite similar which have been revealed through the biographical details and have been held responsible to cause emergence as a womanist writer writing for the sake of black women. The black women Walker has depicted have been taken as a symbol, as representative of all women striving to get out of the stalemate by starting a fight against their fate.

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