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## **A study of black oppression in Alice Walker's the color purple**

**Dr. Mohammad Naji Hussain**

Asst. Prof. English Department, Faculty of Basic Education College, Diyala University

Email: [basiceng3te@uodiyala.edu.iq](mailto:basiceng3te@uodiyala.edu.iq)

**Mr. Maytham Ali Khalefa**

Instructor, Faculty of Basic Education College, English Department, Diyala University

Email: [basiceng18te@uodiyala.edu.iq](mailto:basiceng18te@uodiyala.edu.iq)

**Abstract**--The life of most women in American society during the era of the nineteenth century made them into victims as the case with the protagonist of the novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. Such a life of women as depicted in the novel is full with obstacles that come around due to the negative dealings they face by men aided with bad social norms, which make men use women as a tool to satisfy their sensual desires. Thus, the experience of black women in America is one of such great suffering. This study aims to clarify how Celie and other women suffer a lot to justify their life under the dominance of males as well as filling out their suitable seats in such environment of unjust social norms. Therefore, by studying this topic about the southern slave system, the research is going to have a good understanding of the community of the American society as a whole.

**Keywords**---concept, black, oppression, Alice Walker.

### **Introduction**

Black people in America have suffered from and gone through a long history of oppression, persecution, discrimination, and racism by the white Americans. Those who were originally brought from Africa as slaves concentrated mostly in the American south working for the white southern American aristocracy in their plantations. Numerous American writers, on top of whom is William Faulkner, have in their works touch upon the issue of the black oppression in the American south. In Faulkner's *That Evening Sun*, for example, he reflects the rural life of the American south. From the narrator to the environment of the story, a reader gets through that a sense of ignorance and inattention of the American southern

whites to the problems and issues of their black workers and subjects. The white Americans were not only exercise oppression and prejudice upon the black Americans, but also turn a blind eye to their miserably dire state of being. They do not care, do nothing to address such problems, and they are completely indifferent. Black Americans' problems in the south go unnoticed, unaddressed, and met with total denial. Hence, though most of the black people's problems are the result of the white's deeds, all white people are careless and ignore such problems. The white Americans inflict injustice upon black people, especially women, and take it for granted because black Americans are merely niggers.

Such literary works expose and present the troubles and ordeals of black Americans. Black women; however, seem to receive the greatest portion of such tribulations as they become, in most cases, victimized by men both black and white. In *That Evening Sun* by William Faulkner, it is shown that Nancy's husband suspects that she is pregnant with another man's child, a white man's child. Though the story insinuates that Nancy's problem is the outcome of a white man's deed, all white people around Nancy were careless and turn a blind eye to it. The Compson father and mother refuse to accommodate Nancy in their house because she is a nigger, a black woman. They do not even consider the possibility of speaking to Jesus, Nancy's husband, not to harm his wife. They do not address Nancy's deep fears and rather deal with the matter as non-existent. The story ends in suspense with Nancy waiting for her husband's vengeance, and with the Compson and their children are not doing anything at all to stop that from happening. From short stories to novels and even to plays, the concept of African American is addressed in American literature. In Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*, for instance, the events describe and delineate of the life of a black African American family, to begin with. Though the play does not directly discuss or point to the problems of black Americans, the concept of African Americans is the focal theme of the play. Audience watching the play could relate to the realities of African Americans and their sordid living conditions.

The black family of the Youngers live in the South Side of Chicago; however, white Americans live in this place and black Americans are marginalized and pushed aside to the outskirts of the place. The family live in a very poor living conditions and their financial condition improves only when the head of the family dies as he is entitled to ten thousand dollars in insurance. In terms of residence, they are pushed away to concentrate in the outer slums in what came to be called the Black Belt. This indicates that segregation was a common practice to make sure that black Americans are not blending with the whites. This practice of segregation indicates the degree of racism exercised against black Americans at the time. For example, when all family members decide to move out of the Black Belt and eventually agree to buy a house in a white area and settle there, the white people in this area refuse to accept the younger family to live in their midst because they are black.

### **Black Oppression in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple***

Likewise, *The Color Purple* is a story about growth, endurance, loyalty, solidarity, and joy — all nurtured by the strength of love: “Her underlying message is that every soul is to be cherished, that every flower is to bloom” (Kamelia, 2014). It

plainly suggests Alice Walker's literary intention of both displaying a variety of traumas, which almost systematically affected the black woman in the twentieth century, and showing the redemptive value of writing. (Croisille, 2001)

Alice Walker is an Afro-American female writer, who was born in a sharecropper's family in the South of Georgia in U.S.A in 1944. She becomes a mature woman, yet still lives in poverty and a life of hardships. The white landowner prevented the Walker's children from their rights such as attending school forcing them to work in his field. *The Color Purple* is written in order to pass on Alice Walker's history as a human record. Alice Walker is very proud of her black heritage, the solidarity spirit of sharing one's burden in community as well as the richness of creativity by both genders, expressed in quilting, sewing, etc. Alice Walker wants to redeem the lives of the past with a new identity, dignity and happiness in the novel. She wants to liberate them from the injustices inflicted upon them by the most rigid, sexual, social and racial gender roles perpetrated by the white dominant patriarchal society. *The Color Purple* tackles the problem of sexual abuse by Celie's father. All women are victimized due to the consequences of male law especially those who are surrounding Celie, whether they are black or white: "Celie, a black teenager who endures sexual relationships with the man she thinks is her 'Pa', but whom she later will learn is her stepfather," (Manal and Mohamad, 2019 ). The turning point is that she has to keep silent despite her hurts.

The novel itself is dealing with a series of letters, which came as bad evidence in the protagonist's life. The first of which the novel opens with are the letters whose she addresses God as Celie was unable to guide herself because she did not understand what is happening to her: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mummy," (*The Color Purple*, 1987 p. 50). She is, in fact, pregnant with the second child though her age was only fourteen. Alphonso, who is Celie's father, was the main reason behind her misery. He was fulfilling his sexual desires with her as his wife was sick and thus she can no longer endure Alphonso's sexual demands.

As black women always live under patriarchal rules, they do not regard themselves as free people who can control their own lives. The protagonist of *The Color Purple*, Celie, believes that the only way to survive in her husband's house is to obey his rules, to tolerate the beatings and to remain silent. (Kamelia, 2014) The death of Celie's mother is another problem by which the story of the heroism turned into negative attitudes toward the kind of life of the black-colored people. As a result, Celie turns her attention to protect her sister, Nettie, from her father's sexual abuses. The consequences of the mother's death continued to the death of Celie's first baby by Alphonso who steals her baby and kills him while she was sleeping. Alphonso is not only doing that, but also sold Celie's second child to a stranger couple who had no children yet. Therefore, Celie remained with no children and was suffering because of her breast milk. Alphonso kept treating Celie badly as he beats her for winking at a boy in the church and for the sake of her type of dressing 'trampy':

"Her image reminds one of the oppression of women as universal phenomenon regardless of culture, caste and creed, yet her struggle highlights the plight of

black women in particular,” (Manal and Mohamad, 2019 ). Celie suffers a lot of consequences due to her loveless marriage to Mr. Albert as she has to take care of her husband's children. She has also to bear his regular beating and frequent rapes. Ironically, there is a great similarity between Celie and Sofia's ordeals and this made the couple form a strong bond as a "sister's choice" who are both guilty. It is just as scraps of cloth come together to form a new, strong, useful product. Black women like Celie and Sofia come together to forge a similar strong and useful bond: “Celie's next bond of sisterhood is established with Sofia, Harpo's wife. Sofia is a strong and bulky girl but brave and self-confidant. Celie first meets her when she is eight or nine months pregnant but feeling neither she nor guilty about it,” (Ibid).

Sofia's deeds appear in her personality when she punches the mayor of the town, which made the people in authority send her to prison. Such act made her lose her social value independence accordingly. The loss of the social value did not end but continued with other women who happened to be with other lovers, as the case with Harpo and Sofia after they have split up, as a result of releasing Sofia from prison. Similarly, when Squeak was trying to release Sofia from prison, she got raped by her uncle who was working as a prisoner, and this is again another type of losing her social rank. Finally, Sofia suffered a lot, so she finds herself caged nonetheless, working as a maid in a white household: Celie learns courage from Sofia and gets a sense of understanding of herself. She learns that all men want a dog for a wife, and that a girl is not safe in a family of men, so she has to fight for herself and her rights, that Sofia will even kill Harpo before she lets him beat her. Sofia possesses a high self-respect and refuses to work for the mayor's wife. The mayor slaps her but she blows a knock at him. The police beat her black and blue: “the color of an eggplant,” (Hill, 1990).

Celie suffers a lot from Albert's acts who hides Nettie's letters from her. As a result of that, she discovers soon that her two children are living with a missionary couple with whom Nettie works. Nettie's letters reveal many facts, which made Celie very angry about her rape, her beatings, and the love and affection of the men in her life as they all have kept from her. Nettie's letters also reveal the truth of Celie's world and the African world concerning the bond that can develop among the multiple wives of African men. They can also reveal the truth of the deep friendship and love that exists between two women as well as the deep love of a man for a woman.

Since Alice Walker is a female writer, she named herself as a 'Womanist' instead of 'Feminist'. She first used it in 1979, as it is in Black Feminist Theory. It is defined as a school of thought, which states sexism, class oppression, gender identity, and racism, as all terms are inextricably bound together. This theory exposes the reality of racism against black women, that such racism was not adequately addressed by the mainstream Feminist Movement, which was led by white middle-class women. (Ibid). This theory is deeply connected to the Second Wave of Feminism Movements as it relates feminism and culture to the existence of women in this life. Therefore, Alice Walker has used this term quite much in her works to be able to depict her idealistic point on this issue, and eventually coined the term "womanist" into a feminist vocabulary to depict her idealistic point on the issue of gender. As result of that, the word 'woman' for her evoked

strength, passion, grace of black women's history of creativity and struggle, and is traditionally used with respect among black folk. Therefore, a womanist is devoted to struggling against sexual, racial, heterosexual violence, subjugation among others the way black feminism struggles to liberate the black women from vicious domination of the society. (Monarch 1987)

Love struggle is an obvious issue in *The Color Purple* through the role of the protagonist, Celie, who has the courage to raise questions that are not suitable to truth of that current situation. Such problems are the causes of Celie's trust for her bad experience in her life traditionally and socially. At the same time, Celie agreed to be a victim of sexism as a way to live her life, and this act causes her to be used by men for their sensual desires for the simple reason that she feels hopeless and helpless: "As a woman, she is always identified as a lower sex and controlled by men. She is harassed physically and sexually" (Gillespie, 2011). Later on, with the help of Shug, she becomes an independent woman though they develop a sexual relationship.

Only through a complete reshaping of her identity, and a re-writing of her day-to-day life, can Celie come to terms with her traumas. As her letters are never sent to Nettie, whose own ones are intercepted and hidden by Celie's dictatorial husband for years, the epistolary mode reveals a tension between the dialogic and the monologist realms – at least, until Shug finally discovers the purloined letters and hands them to Celie. (Valérie, 2001). The novel seems to offer good solutions to the problems of adulthood. This is a beautiful cross to Walker's characters as they are going to release themselves from the taboo deeds, which they have done so far. As a result, Celie loses her control and subconsciously desires for Shug's body when for the first time she bathes a sick Shug: First time I got full sight of Shug Avery long black body with its black plum nipples, look like her mouth, thought I had turned into a man'.

This is indeed a new world for a woman who ignores all the systematic quality to peruse herself to success. 'Celie is totally unaware of her own body. She is confused about the hot pulsating waves Shug's touch sends into her body'. Therefore, Shug teaches her to know her own body and to appreciate her reproductive organs 'she sees her own genitals for the first time'. (Manal and Mohamad, 2019). The use of symbols in the novel is so beneficial as it is used by Walker to give strength to Celie as she liberates herself from the control of social customs and traditions. They help her to breach gender lines when she decides to wear them; they bring her economic freedom when she begins making them as a business. Just as the idiom 'wearing the pants in the family'.

The novel focuses on the notion of satire especially on male figures like Harpo. This makes the sense of the personality of each character restricted to male gender only. J.M. Bullit has referred to such practice as diminution, which means as 'a technique of rendering somebody flabby, who is either rightly larger in status or who only believes so'. Such technique was discussed in Rhetorical handbooks under the Greek title "Meiosis", meaning literally "belittling". It can be described briefly as 'the use of ugly, negative images which are meant to diminish the dignity of an object'. Likewise, the concept of "chance" helps the plot to get a clear picture of the suffering of most characters like Fonso's chance of the perversion of

values that caused Celie, and not Nettie, to be married to Albert. Chance also enabled Nettie to find Celie and Albert too. It is again chance that made Nettie pointed in the direction of Samuel and Corrine's house, a couple who, again by chance, bought both of Celie's babies.

The sense of the non-trust in the novel leads to the damage of most relationships among the characters unknowingly. One of the pictures is noticed when Corrine refuses to believe that Celie is the mother of Olivia and Adam; she says that "she cannot even remember meeting Celie" (Valérie, 2001). Likewise, Corrine is very ill unknowingly by Nettie: "She gets weaker and weaker and unless she can believe us she will die ignorant of the truth" (Ibid). Alice Walker's treatment of the social problems help to gain trust among the people and guide them to the positive side of life by giving hope to be as creative persons as possible. Thus, the story of the novel has a touch of good stimulations and an optimistic vision for the future. (Ashraf Asa'd AL Qaisi, 2016).

The protagonist of the novel, Celie, puts herself into trouble to be able to fight the social norms in her society. She wanted to fulfill her dreams and aims in life. Any type of people like Celie should revolt against the negative attitudes if she/he wants to have a happy life. For that reason, Celie should confront patriarchal system, which confined her for a long time. Moreover, the revolt against the social norms, which she made so far, enables her to transform from an invisible into a visible one.' The writer of the novel is trying to illustrate the position of the lower class treatment of women in America. This fact leads us to discover the secret behind most of the female characters in the novel. Consequently, (Francis Mugu, 2002) argues that these women "seek to create a society, which will accord more rights, privileges and equity to females in particular, and ultimately more humane conditions for the nurture of all".

Other facts also reveal the secret of the African American female's suffering. It is due to the reason of being black-skinned people. They seek for their identities to live freely in this life. They experience fighting against white women's racism and black men's sexism. This leads to reveal the tragic personality of those females. Moreover, segregation is the basic reason behind looking for establishing their own new lifestyle and business to be free from all aspects of life. (Ibid). Since men dominate over the females' side, they are considered as animals as the examples of both Mr. Albert and Celie. This is a clear case of demonstrating the state of such women who are kept away from their normal life, which made them turn into other types of women for the sake of comfort, care, security and unity.

The positive relationship among the black-skinned women as for their way of living made them educate themselves by narrating different types of social suffering stories to overcome their mistakes and pursue their life for a brighter future. The concept of the African societies creates a sense of forgiveness due to the type of life they were living in. It has resulted in the feeling of the boneless, which is the reason that has encouraged them to live a sisterly love to neutralize the effects of patriarchy. This could be explained by the taboo love affair amongst women who have trust and loyalty with each other and are really willing to share their ideas, positive feelings, fears, hopes, and even their dreams. Frederick Douglass, loyalty is presented as "a matter of pledging allegiance to one's

owner and not to one's brother,"(M.N. Khalefa, 2020). In other works of fiction such as Harriet Ann Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, it is the mother who epitomizes "the [concept] of loyalty" and sacrifice as well in her relation to her kids and family, (M.N. Khalefa, 2020).

Moreover, Celie's type of life refers to the lower class as she was a very poor girl hiding her personality among nothing to feel something: "He say why don't you look decent? Put on something. But what I'm supposed to put on? I don't have nothing," (*The Color Purple* 1978, p. 67). At the end of the novel Celie stands up for herself. It shows that she is not going to take Albert's treatment anymore and is moving on. She is finally ready to enter into a relationship with the rest of the world and start her own life: "that's it. Pack up your stuff. You are coming back to Tennessee with me," (Ashraf Asa'd AL Qaisi, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, In *The Color Purple*, readers can easily notice the difference between the struggles of the black-skinned people and the obstacles that faced women and getting their right in the community and family of the African Americans. Therefore, the protagonist's struggle is her main aim to find shelter under such norms. Alice Walker is one of the members of the Civil Rights Movement. The plot of *The Color Purple* explains the hidden tone of the perspectives of that movement. Such movement calls for the equality among the people concerning their race, gender and even religion. Those rights are marked against the lower class people and thus, the novel depicts brutality, racism, and gender issues in the rural south but concludes with an optimistic note.

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