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Exploring womanhood through Female consciousness in Alice walker's color purple

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the female voice to survive the plethora of suffering in the form of race and gender encountered by the Black Women through a strong female bonding and an inward journey of consciousness. Through the lens of Black feminism, this study delineates the journey from speechlessness to articulateness of Black Women contravening the barriers of sex, race and dogma in Alice Walker's famous novel *The Color Purple*. It reveals the latent strength of black women to achieve a standpoint in the male-dominated society and their gradual advancement. This paper is an attempt to explore the triumph of Black Women against multi-faceted oppression through the construction of female consciousness.

Keywords: Black Feminism, Womanism, Female consciousness, Racism

1. Introduction

"How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?" Orphaned at age five, hired out as an indentured servant, Maria W. Stewart, the first Black-feminist abolitionist in America challenged the African-American women to voice against the crestfallen images of Black womanhood so prominent in her times. In most of her speeches she condemned the system that denied the black women's education and advancement pointing out the race, gender and subjugation as the fundamental causes of Black woman's poverty. Though the Black women were at the forefront in promulgating the struggle for human and civil rights shedding their blood, sweat, and tears with the goal to sustain families and communities, their problem was rarely addressed since the Black Power movement was inherently patriarchal. They were confronted by the issue of gender and race:

The black man...particularly since the Black Movement has been in a position to define the black woman. He is the one who tells her whether or not she is a woman and what it is to be a woman... (Simmonds, 1990:314)

Hence Black Feminism emerged to question the masculinity-patriarchal ideologies of the black movement and to question the racism in feminist movement. In 1990s writings of the eminent feminist critiques Patricia Hills Collins, Hortense Spillers and Hazel Carby marked the beginnings of black feminist consciousness and aimed to create an awareness built upon the experiences of black women. Black women writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Buchi Emecheta, Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, Jude Jordan, Terry McMillan, Rita Dove, Ntozake Shange, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ifeoma Okoye, and so many made an effort to delineate their experiences and to retrieve their self-image battered by their three enemies: racism, classism, and sexism through their writings. They aimed to spread awareness among the black women about their oppression, plight, position and positive and negative aspects of life to change the patriarchal, racist and sexist social order to restore the equality of human being irrespective of sex, race or class indicating the black women's self-development.

Black feminist writing focuses on the formation of communities of black women. Informal friendships, family interactions, black women's organizations constitute 'safe spaces' where the black women can meet and form 'sisterhoods' (Patricia Hill Collins). This peripheral

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form of association plays a crucial role in paving the path towards liberation from their captivity and the motif of this journey is the recurrent theme of these Black women writers. Their protagonists shift from victimhood to self-realization. In the words of the eminent black feminist critic Patricia Hill Collins:

Black feminism is a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanistic vision of community. Many African- American intellectuals have advanced the view that Black women's struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity and empowerment. Alice Walker's preference for the term 'womanist' addresses this notion of the solidarity of humanity. (39)

2. Discussion

Alice Walker defines the expression as “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (Collins 38). According to her, the ‘womanists’ are “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male or female.” It opens a new horizon to foster a strong bonding between men and women. She refers to all people as the ‘people of color’ “...the colored race is just a flower garden with every color flower represented”. With this notion of humanity and integrity she universalizes the struggle of Black women.

As a womanist, Alice Walker asserts that black women derive strength and inspiration from women-bonding and female consciousness. In her most acclaimed volume of essays *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* she puts forth the meaning of ‘mother’ from her own mother to other female relatives and neighbors’ and then to the women of strength and significance. She uses this black cultural distinctiveness and integrity in her Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award winning “anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist” (Hall, 1992, p. 90) [4] novel *The Color Purple* to describe the women of two movements that are the foundation of women's rights and equality. In this novel she has explored the theme of gender discrimination, racial discrimination, rape and sexism. It demonstrates how gender discrimination can influence black women's subjectivity and lead them to misery. It shows how racism controls black people's lives, as black men are in the margins of white society, black women are in the margins of the margins, among black men and whites. In fact, they are like white and black men's slaves. As Cheung observes, “some of these women are, moreover, thrice muted, on account of sexism, racism and a ‘tonguelessness’ that results from prohibitions or language barriers” (Cheung, 1988, p. 163) [2].

The novel *The Color Purple* (1982) articulating a tinge of the Civil Rights Movement though begins in misery and frustration but ends with an optimistic note. It revolves round a poor, illiterate black girl Celie who despite all the physical and mental exploitation transcends her plight through self-realization to gain a respectable position in the society. In this epistolary novel Celie writes letters to God to help her to endure the emotional and physical violence that she suffers at the hands of her step father Alphonso and later by her husband, Mr. _____. At the age of fourteen she becomes the tool of insatiable desire of her step father who rapes her repeatedly and sells her two children whom she bore of him. Eventually she is sold into a loveless marriage with a widower who for the next three decades subjects her to beatings and psychological torment. Celie writes letters describing her ordeal to God and to her sister, Nettie, who

escapes a similar fate by serving as a missionary in Africa. Mr. _____ oppresses her and keeps her sister's letters away from Celie who is nothing but a slave at Mr. _____'s house that was the actual reason of marrying her. Here the novelist draws our attention to the misery of Black women in America and simultaneously criticizes the so-called male chauvinism predominated in a society which is ignorant of the Civil Rights Movement. Francis Mogu (2002:13) [8] 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”.

A consciousness-raising move directs the victim of subjugation to question the patriarchy which is seen in the form of sisterhood and friendship in this novel. Here the novelist depicts the efficacy of black women's relationship with one another to provide a platform for their activism and self-determination. Sara Mills (1989:52) [7] asserts that there was a forum in the 1970s for women to discuss their experiences called the “Consciousness Raising Movement” which encouraged sharing individual experiences as a means to defeat a patriarchal oppression. Shug Avery's arrival marks the turning point in Celie's life and their friendship leads her to the progression of her growth and self-discovery. She stands beside her through trials and tribulations as she treads the path of liberation. Gradually, Celie possesses a fearless, undaunted spirit to face the challenges. Sofia's strong relationship with her sisters strengthens her to fight against all the oddities. Celie's discovery of Nettie's letters with the help of Shug plays an important role to form her own powerful narrative. Therefore one woman's consciousness of another's situation and then making an effort to correct such situation through a bonding is essential for Black women's personal augmentation and survival. Lorraine Bethel (1982:179) [1] observes “women in this country have defied the dominant sexist society by developing a type of folk culture and oral literature based on the use of gender solidarity and female bonding as self-affirming rituals”. Maria Stewart invokes: “By no means, let every female heart become united, and let us raise a fund ourselves; and at the end of one year and half, we might be able to lay the corner stone for the building of a High School, that the higher branches of knowledge might be enjoyed by us.” (p.41)

A woman's journey from passivity to freedom is also required to promote self-awareness. Deborah E. McDowell (1993) [6] finds this journey as a recurrent theme of the writings of Black women writers. Mary Helen Washington (1980:43) [11] says that the female character becomes “part of an evolutionary spiral, moving from victimization to consciousness”. In *The Color Purple*, Walker demonstrates this aspect as a major trend in female consciousness as we see Celie gradually transforming from a diffident woman to an efficient professional. In Kristeva's view, a woman is controlled by “a whole series of authorities: her own mother and father, her husband's mother and father, her husband, and, finally, her son” (Kristeva 1993, p. 194) [5]. Celie was victimized for many years by the male dominance. She gradually discovers herself, learns to articulate her feelings which were silenced for so long and unshackles her confinement. Her movement to Memphis and an awareness of self indicates her independence from captivity.

3. Conclusion

Alice Walker chronicles the black women's journey from submissiveness to self-recognition exploring possibilities in broader sense. She provides an opportunity to the black women to revolt against patriarchal ideology and to secure a respectable position in the society. This transformation is equally important for the men too for the formation of the Black community. Celie's emancipation brings transformation in Mr. _____'s Character—a transformation from bad to good where she can reconcile with her previous aggressive situation. The novelist has paid attention to the sisterhood of the black women that leads Celie to the freedom of choice and attainment of a social role. It helps her to perceive her desires, respect them and follow them in society and search for an identity. This new perception prepares her to experience an unadulterated wealth in future and to find out a respectable position in the society. Therefore this novel is an outbreak of the voices long suppressed and suspended by the victimizers and this consciousness of victimization allows the black women to discover the social reality.

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