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The darker side of Black Women's life: A study with reference to Alice Walker's The Color Purple

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Alice Walker is a Black American novelist, essayist, short story writer, poet, critic, biographer, editor and Pulitzer Prize laureate. Walker won several fellowships and awards for her works. She was the first Black American to get the Pulitzer Prize for fiction which placed her in second position in the Black American women writing next to the Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison. Walker uses the past to highlight the present condition of black women. In her works she proposes a way out of their drudgery by attaining self-confidence, self-esteem and an unified selfhood.

Alice Walker's stretches portray black women in their gradual develop and this particularly she distinguishes her as an apologist and chronicles for black women. Like any other women writer Alice Walker explores the tragedies in the lives of black women. Her works covers the tragedy of poverty, the suffering given by black men who are themselves abused by the whites and tragedy of physical deterioration. Alice Walker captures the experience of black women in her work as a series of movements from women who are victimized by the society to women who have taken control of their lives consciously. She has explored the lives of black women in depth and even questions their fate. She has courage to see through the seeds of time and declares that in future black women would no longer live in suspension.

Alice Walker explained: "*The black woman is one of America's greatest heroes... Not enough credit has been given to the black woman who has been oppressed beyond recognition*". Walker's insistence on giving black women their due resulted in *Color Purple* one of the most widely read novels in America today. "*Perhaps even more than Walker's other works*". *The Color Purple* is a woman's story about pain, suffering, endurance, and friendship a story of hardship and hope, of reunion and reconciliation. *The Color Purple* is Alice Walker's third novel. This *Color Purple* is remarkable in language, radical themes, and technique. The language used in the novel is of the "vernacular used by poor southern blacks". Perhaps even more than Walker announced a decade ago: the survival and the liberation of black women through the strength and wisdom of others. *The Color Purple* exemplifies her belief that history is a necessary element of depth, that nothing is a product of the immediate present.

Gay Wilentz compares this novel with Ama Ata Aidoo's Dilemma of a ghost and stresses that they have striking similarities like "*Difficulties of African American return to the Motherland*" (Black Women Writers in Africa in the Diaspora, p.412). In 1985 the film version of *The Color Purple*, directed by Steven Spielberg, was released to great praise and blame. He filmed this novel under the same name. It was a controversial film like the novel among blacks for showing their negative character in it. Though the movie is a controversial one it was a sensational hit and nominated for the Oscar Award but missed it narrowly. Though it did not get any award but, the success of this film brought Alice Walker "*International Renown*" (The Unforgetting Heart: An Anthology of short stories by African American women, p.291) says Asha Kunwar.

The Color Purple is supposed to be the story of Alice Walker's great grandmother who Trudier Harris states that, "raped and abused at the age of twelve" (The Oxford's companion to women's writing in the United States, p.903) and this paves the way for the theme of abasement in this novel. Triumph of this novel and the protagonist, Celie. Walker considers being a victory of her great grandmother. As Celie, the main character, records the details of her life, she does so in images and in languages that express the impact of oppression on her spirit as well as her resistance to it. Walker subject matter is also emphatically womanist; for the emphasis in *The Color Purple* is on the oppression black women experience in their relationship with black men and the sisterhood they must share with each other in order to liberate themselves. As a vehicle for these themes, two sisters letters _ Celie's to God, Nettie's to Celie and finally Celie's to Nettie – provide novel's form. Form and content, then are inseparable. *The Color Purple* focuses on black women who are ill treated like slaves by their fathers and husbands. Their empowerment through protest and sufferings is also studied. The brutal nature of African men and American whites are portrayed in this novel.

The novel traces thirty years in the life of Celie, a poor barely educated, southern black woman who is victimized physically and emotionally by both her step father and her husband. Celie's struggle to escape from brutal treatment of men is poignantly portrayed. This novel is about the struggle between redemption, Walker is saying, is the strength of the relationships between women: their friendships, their love, their shared oppression. Even the white mayors who are a missionary in Africa – Celie's not only brought the *Pulitzer Prize* and *The National Book Award* to Walker but also a world – wide recognition.

The novel follows what is known as black folk speech, music and religion. It deals with the theme of what black woman should do and ought to do. The idea of lesbianism seems to be the rite of passage to selfhood, sisterhood and brotherhood rather than heterosexual love. *The Color Purple* is Alice Walker's attempt to embody her own particular vision of black feminism in a work that transcends ideology. On the surface, the novel displays a typical feminist analysis: Women are

oppressed by males and by their own passivity and will end that oppression only when they bond together in affirming their family is redeemed when his daughter care for Sofia's sick daughter. There is a note of tendentiousness here, though the men in this book change only when their women join together and rebel-and then, the change is so complete as to be unrealistic.

The Color Purple is written in the old, well-known epistolary form. In the first half of the novel Celie writes to God, in the second she directs them to her sister Nettie, own self-worth and refuse to participate in the inhumane male system. A detached assessment of the characters in *The Color Purple* might suggest that are, as a group, a little too neat. All the women end up strong and self-actualized, all the men end up chastened and more humane.

Incest, exploration of body and souls, beating of wives, abuse of black woman and racial discrimination are well shown in this novel. Mellisa Walker says that there are "striking similarities" (Black women's Novel in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, p.60) between *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The child Molester writes letter to God about the conditions of little girls in *The Bluest Eye* and in *The Color Purple* Celie writes letter to God about her sexual abuse and her feelings. *The Color Purple* marks a major advance for Walker's art.

The Color Purple is set between 1916 and 1942, a period in which the blacks remained almost unchanged in the Deep South. This novel is composed of intimate's letters from the protagonist, Celie, who first writes about the rapes by her (step) father, Alphonso. As her Ma falls ill she is made a sexual convince by her father. She is warned not reveal this to anyone but God. She finds difficult to accept her father's standpoint but voluntarily takes up this role when her father eyes Nettie, Celie's younger sister. Celie gives birth to two children, conceived while she is being repeatedly raped by Alphonso, who she believes to be her father; both children are quickly taken from her by him.

Celie is married off to an older man Albert, a widower with four children, and he is interested in the wedding gift, a cow than the bride. Her husband is also a firm believer of patriarchal authority. Moreover he has been offered in place of Nettie only because she is a hard worker and has got experience in taking care of children and to satisfy the biological need. She is not received well by the children. Harpo, the eldest son gives her trouble even in the very first day, Shug Avery, whose real name is Lillie, a vivacious and determinedly independent blues singer, is Albert's mistress. Albert brings her home on day and asks Celie to treat her well and bring her back to normal life from some disease.

Celie has already come to know about this woman and is in admiration. These two become friends and later loves. Confident, flamboyant, independent, Shug is considered to be immoral by some church folk but is nevertheless popular and admired as performer. She is wise in the cultural values of the black community, and her presence has a transforming effect especially Celie and also on others. With the help of Shug Avery, Celie returns the letters written by Nettie from Africa. With the support from Shug Avery and strength from her sister and decides to leave with Shug Avery to Memphis. Though Albert taunts her with her ignorance she determinedly leaves.

Celie, in her new place she starts sewing pants, pants for every occasion. She becomes famous and luckily gets a house from her real father. She shifts her business to her new house and surprisingly finds Albert with some changes. In the meantime Albert has changed a lot and is content to live a peaceful life.

The Color Purple ends in happiness, reunion and celebration with a positive note. Celie gets her family back and joins with Albert in an understanding way. She is reunited with her children and with Nettie. Celie, addresses her last letter to everything, she finds God in everything. She began with letters addressed to God, all powerful conception ends by addressing everything that has divine nature in it. *The Color Purple* escapes being a narrow, political tract in fictional clothing by its humility before life. This humility derives from Celie's own and is reinforced by the device of conveying the work through her letters. Written in the vernacular used by poor, Southern blacks, the letter convey, not a self-righteous parceling out of blame and judgment. On walkers' part, there is genuine, empathetic search for love. The values that Celie discovers and affirms are universal ones.

The chief motive in Alice Walker's works is revealed at this point of the novel. Celie does not lose hope after seeing the telegram. She feels Albert seems to be the only one understands her feelings. Albert in the final part is seen along with Celie, "I'm satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural ma. It feels like a new experience". Celie's achievement of selfhood is mainly accomplished with the help of Shug Avery, but Nettie's letters have also played an important role in it.

Celie at the end is a self-confident and self-defined woman, who takes control over her own life and positions herself beyond the reach of those who had over powered her earlier. *The Color Purple* is Alice Walker's attempt to embody her own particular vision of black feminism in a work that transcends ideology. She is searching for living that rejects dead orthodoxies and oppressive systems and which draws its energy from what is advocate, rather than from what is condemns. On the surface, the novel displays a typical feminist analysis. Women are oppressed by males and by their passivity, and will end that oppression only when they bond together in affirming their own self.

Celie's development follows the proposed feminist pattern. First, she learns from mentors, strong women, such as Shug and Sophia who give her insight and courage to act. Second, she experiences true love and acceptance from other women. Through being loved and valued, she learns to love and value herself. Third, she learns the value of motivating anger. Her outrage at Albert for withholding Nettie's letters enables her to break out of a lifetime of resigned suffering. Last, she learns that she has skills, that she can do things, and her making of pants becomes an expression of who she is and of what she values.

In the novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker has made a personal construction of the history of black woman life. Women under this construct can be divided into three cycles of Black Women characters. Most of her black women characters belong to the first cycle of this personal construct. This first part of the cycle projects the suspended woman – women who are cruelly

exploited whose spirit and body are mutilated, who is confined to the most narrow and limited life and sometimes even driven to madness.

In the second part of the history of black women, Walker depicts black women who belong to the forties and fifties. These women want to be a part of the mainstream author of American Life. These women are victims not of physical violence but of psychic violence, because assimilation in the mainstream requires alienation from their roots.

The Women in the third cycle is shown at the background of the political events of the sixties. More than being a political activist, a fundamental activity the woman search for meaning in their roots and traditions. The contrast between second and third cycle woman is obvious the latter tries to find a solution for the existing problems using its own tradition. Walker in *The Color Purple* powerfully exposes the female experience across boundaries of race and class.

Alice Walker uses her own experience to equate the poor conditions of black woman and thereby suggests a way out. The transformation of the most abused of the abused has been possible with the publication of *The Color Purple*. "Walker makes possible transformation in the three stages. The final stage gets completed by announcing the survival and liberation of black women through the strength and wisdom of others" (Black Literature Criticism, p.1810).

Thus the study would try to show the importance of Alice Walker as a representative of black woman. Walker writes about the darker side of the black women's life and empowerment of black women. She wants them to overcome the difficulties and problems they face physically and mentally. She asks black women to fight against obstacles; with their will power fill they achieve victory.

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