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The Symbolism of Family and Color in Alice Walker's -The Color Purple

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Abstract-

Alice Walker's, *The Color Purple* is one of the most acclaimed novels of the 1980's, which, by introducing black femininity into the male-centred black nationalist discourse, contributed powerfully to the re-shaping of traditional Black Aestheticism. The novel beautifully brings out the deep trauma of Afro- American women by unflinching representation of the sexual oppression and domination of black women by black and white men. The paper attempts to explore the rich symbolism in the novel by examining the significance of family and the use of color purple in the intense portrayal of black women characters.

Key words- black, purple, family, home

Hailed as one of the great voices of contemporary African American literature, Alice Walker has earned widespread recognition for her considerable achievements as a fiction writer. Her third novel, *The Color Purple* (1982) is her life-changing breakthrough masterpiece which won American book award and the Pulitzer prize for fiction in 1983.

The novel 'The Color Purple' is set in Georgia, which is in the Southern part of United States of America, in the 1900s. The central protagonist Celie keeps writing letters to God and the novel is epistolary. The narrative moves through letters- (1) written by Celie to God (2) letters written by Nettie to Celie and (3) letters written by Cele to Nettie. Celie is an uneducated, poor girl who is 14 years old and is constantly raped and beaten by her father, Alfonso. When the novel opens, Celie has already been pregnant by her father and given birth to a baby girl named Olivia. Alfonso forcibly took Olivia away shortly after her birth and Celie thinks that he had killed Olivia. Celie gives birth to another child, this time a boy named Adam who is again taken away by Alfonso. Celie's mother who had been ailing for long dies but she curses and holds Celie responsible for her misfortunes.

Celie has a younger sister Nettie who is 12 years old and they come to know that a man named Mister, referred to as Mr. throughout in Celie's letters, wants to marry Nettie. Mister is a widower and wants someone to look after his house and children and when Alfonso refuses to let him marry Nettie, Mr. agrees to marry Celie. Celie suffers physical, sexual and verbal abuse from Mister and his children also ill-treat her. After Celie is married, Nettie runs away from her home as her father tries to sexually approach her, she seeks refuge at Celie's home but Mister wouldn't let her stay after Nettie refuses his sexual advances. Powerless, Celie advises her sister to seek help from a black woman she recently saw at the general store and is the only woman Celie had seen having her own money. Celie does not know that the same woman had adopted Olivia. Nettie leaves Celie's house promising to write to her but Celie receives no letters after that and thinks her sister is dead. Mr.'s two sisters Kate and Carrie visit them and Kate takes Sofia shopping and gets her a new dress. She also advises Celie to fight back for her rights and not to give in to Mr.'s exploitation.

Mr.'s son Harpo falls in love with a girl named Sofia, impregnates her and despite his father's reluctance marries her. Sofia is assertive unlike Celie and in a short span Harpo and Sofia have five more children. Celie is astonished at Sofia's defiance of Harpo's attempts to control her and she is jealous of Harpo's love for Sofia. When Harpo is unable to bring Sofia into submission, he asks his parents for advice and they advise him to beat and control Sofia. When Harpo does so Sofia fights back and confronts Celie on her advice to Harpo. Celie is ashamed and confides in Sofia about 's Mr.'s ill-treatment that she had been suffering for so long. Sofia advises Celie to defend herself from further exploitation from Mister. A jazz and blues singer, Shug Avery, had been a long-time mistress to Mr. Celie had seen her photograph earlier and has been fascinated with her ever since. Shug falls ill and Mr. brings her into the house. Mr.'s father and brother visit them and disapproves saying that Shug and Mr. had three children out of wedlock but when Mr. accuses him of fathering the kids he leaves the house in disgust. Celie takes to nursing Shug and although Shug is initially rude to Celie, they later on become friends and Celie seems infatuated with Shug.

Harpo takes on to his father's ill-treatment of women despite Celie telling him that he should be supportive of Sofia and angry Sofia leaves him with her children. Harpo opens up a Juke joint few months later and initially when it is not successful, Shug begins to perform there. She also decides to stay back when Celie tells her that Mister beats her when Shug is away. Shug and Celie grow close. Harpo has a new girl-friend Squeak. Sofia returns with her new boyfriend, the Prizewinner to the juke joint and when Squeak calls her a bitch and slaps her, she immediately punches her knocks her teeth out. Sofia leaves and later one day when she is on the street with her boyfriend and their respective children, she is insulted by the Mayor's wife Miss Millie who wants her to work for her as a maid and when Sofia refuses the mayor slaps her. Sofia gets into physical fight with the mayor and is brutally beaten by police, her skull cracked, ribs are broken, she gets blind in one eye and her face is left unrecognizable. she is sentenced to 12 years in jail.

Squeak who is of mixed-race realizes that she is niece of the Mr. Hodges, the warden of the prison. She tries to blackmail him for release of Sofia and in turn Mr. Hodges rapes her. While Sofia is in prison, Squeak looks after Sofia's children and the two women form a bonding. Sofia is eventually released and she begins working for Miss Millie, the mayor's wife and detests that. Shug gets married to Grady but when she visits Celie Shug initiates a sexual relationship with her. She also helps Celie find letters hidden by Mr, that her sister Nettie had been writing to her for decades. From the letters Celie comes to know that her sister befriended a missionary couple, Samuel and Corrine. Corrine is the same woman whom Celie had seen at the store and the couple had unwittingly adopted Celie's children- Olivia and Adam. Nettie had accompanied them to Africa to do missionary work and when Corrine noticed that the children resembled Nettie, she suspected them to be the children of her husband and Nettie. Corrine tried to distance Nettie from her household and Nettie is disillusioned with the missionary work.

Nettie asks Samuel about children's adoption and comes to know that they are Celie's children. She also finds out that Alfonso is their step-father. Their real father was a store owner and was lynched since the white men resented his success. Alfonso manipulated their mother after her mental collapse to control the wealth she was left with.

Nettie's letters reveal that Corrine was very sick with fever and when Nettie confessed that she was the children's biological aunt, Corrine refused to believe her until she reminded her of meeting Celie at the store and dies accepting Nettie's version. Celie meets Alfonso and he confirms Nettie's version. Celie is very disturbed and starts losing faith in God and stops writing letters to Him and writing to Nettie instead. Shug explains to Celie her own philosophy and helps her understand that God is not like other men who have power over her.

Celie decides to leave Mister for good and before leaving him puts a curse on him. She goes with Shug and Squeak, who wants to have her own singing career. Celie settles in Tennessee and sews pants. She comes to know that after she left him, Mr., loses his fortunes and has a deep change of heart. Celie begins to call him by his first name, Albert and when Albert proposes a marriage "in spirit as well as in the flesh", she declines.

When Alfonso dies Celie inherits all his property and moves back into her childhood home. Shug falls in love with her band member, Germaine and travels with him all over while writing postcards to Celie. Celie feels crushed but resolves to keep loving Shug without expecting reciprocation. Nettie marries Samuel and before they return to America Adam marries Tashi, an African girl. When Tashi has to go through the African female rituals of circumcision and facial scarring, Adam decides to undergo the facial scarring in solidarity with Tashi. While Celie feels content and learns to live without Shug, she returns after ending her relationship with Germaine. Nettie, Samuel, Olivia, Adam and Tashi arrive at Celie's house and all are re-united. The novel ends with the re-union and all introducing each other to their new families.

Alice Walker has depicted various aspects of family life in *The Color Purple*. A whole range of family relationships can be studied here, involving all the major and minor characters.

The central character, Celie, comes from a large, poor family. Her mother is perpetually pregnant and frustrated with her numerous children. Because of this large family, Celie is often left alone with her abusive, terrifying father. She feels anxious about the well-being of her sister Nettie, more so because her father is visibly attracted to her and has malevolent intentions of abusing her as a sexual object. She promises to look after her beloved sister no matter what happens. She vows that she would never allow Nettie to get married to a wrong person so that she would never be miserable like their own mother. On getting married to Mr., she finds herself in a new family, for better or worse. Her new stepchildren are dishevelled and are unkind to her. They beat her and taunt her with perpetual insults. She worries about this new family. She knows that these children are not her real children, no matter how much time she spends with them.

Celie feels an inexplicable obsession for the kind, white lady with the baby in town. She believes the baby to be her own, who was taken away from her after birth. She tries to inquire about them and follows them into a store. In her quest to find her true biological family, she undertakes many ventures that connect her to this woman. Celie's stepson Harpo discusses with her regarding his interest in a girl he meets at Church. He declares his intentions of marrying her and inducting her into the family permanently. He asks her for advice and she shares with him that his father and she are not married for love but are together for other reasons. This goes to throw some light on the dynamics of family relationships of Afro-American families. Harpo marries the girl, Sofia, but they spend much of their time engaged in violent battles with one another. He does not beat his wife, as is the accepted thing in these families. But this causes him to feel less of a man. He is advised to thrash his wife, by both his father and even Celie. But when he begins this, they

end up in constant physical brawls. As a result, Sofia leaves him to visit her sister Odessa, where she is always offered refuge.

The structure of family relations for Olinka is different from that of a regular family in America. Men are permitted to marry more than once. The wives, on the other hand, are not allowed to even be alone with any man, much less to have multiple husbands. The wives relate to each other and can even be friends. But they have no other companions. Their role in the family is only of nurturing: producing and raising children, serving the husband, cooking and cleaning and hence family plays an important role in the novel. In the very beginning, readers find that Celie is the one who is forced to take care of her family since her mother is ill. The only thing she gets in return for her caring nature towards her family is abuse by her father, who raped her frequently. She only knows to stand up for the women in her family, and protects her mother and sister by willingly sacrificing herself to her father. Two children were born of this incest, but Celie never sees these children as her father takes them away from her, and till later, she believes that her father had killed them. Celie is then forced to be a part of another family through marriage to Albert who is older than her and already has four children. While living with him, she suffers abuse and rape again. This reflects on the patriarchal family structure that was dominant at the time when Walker wrote the novel.

During a visit to town, when Celie is sitting on the wagon while Albert was in the dry goods store, she thinks she sees her daughter whom her father had taken away from her. "I seen my baby girl. I knowed it was her. She look just like me and my daddy. Like more us than us is ourself." This shows how connected Celie feels to her own flesh and blood, and she feels that this daughter, who she never had the chance to nurture, instinctively knew her too. She loves her own children unconditionally, though she has Albert's four children who are not her own. "Everybody say how good I is to Mr. _____ children. I be good to them. But I don't feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo back not even like patting a dog. It more like patting another piece of wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chifferobe. Anyhow, they don't love me neither, no matter how good I is." (Pg. 30) Celie was kind to Albert's children, but at the end of the day, they are not her real family (Nettie is her only real family) and they do not even treat her like family. Family should be more about love and treating each other with respect, and not just about marriage.

This shows that for Celie, family means the relationship she shares with her sister over many years. Even though Celie is separated from her two children and Nettie, she never loses her love for either of them. Nettie, a smart and benevolent young lady who means more than the world to her, also goes through problems but always puts Celie before herself and tries to help her big sister overcome all her problems. The strong familial bond that Nettie and Celie share helps to develop bravery and self-esteem for Celie. While being apart from her family she starts to make friends like Sofia and Shug. Both these relationships might have started off on a bad note but ultimately they find friendship and a temporary substitute for family in each other.

On being confronted by Corrine about the parentage of Olivia and Adam, Nettie reveals that they are her sister's children. They are therefore her niece and nephew. She thus explains the truth behind her family. They are all one family together, whether white or black. Samuel also reveals to Nettie that her father is not her true biological father. He was lynched and her mother married another man, before going crazy and dying. So the family she believed to be her family was not really hers. Now, this new family of Corrine and Samuel has become her own, despite the lack of a biological connection. Shug and Celie visit Celie's "father" and are introduced to his new family member, his new wife, Daisy. Celie seeks her biological parents grave. She then realizes that they are each other's family now, and have no one else in the world. Another new family is created by the marriage of Eleanor Jane and Stanley Earl while the friendship (and family structure) breaks between Sofia and her. Shug eventually tries to discover her own family. Only one of her children, James, wishes to know her better. They realize the importance of family bonds. Tashi marries Adam in an Olinka ceremony and agrees to join him in America to be a member of his extended family. Finally, Nettie

and her family return home. The sisters embrace and shed tears of joy. Following thirty years of separation and growth, they are now one family. They can now live and grow together and share their lives.

Along with the importance of the family, the significance of the title “The Color Purple” holds true throughout the novel. ‘The Color Purple’ is not just a title or a color but goes on to being symbolic of the various transformations in the book. Thus the title is significant throughout the span of the letters and gives us a better understanding of the book and helps the reader connect to it and understand Celie and the era she was living in. Walker’s definition of ‘womanist’ also suggests the significance of the title: Walker says, “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.” The title of the novel symbolises the richness and Walker’s love for the colour ‘purple.’ In the preface to her novel she mentions, “This color that is always a surprise but everywhere in nature.” A colour which suggests the ability to overcome the hardships in life and come out of their oppressive situations triumphantly. It is also a colour which suggests bonding as told by Walker herself, “I bought some beautiful blue-and-red and purple fabric.....And, of course, everything was happening.”

Purple colour has some interesting semblances in the political scenario too. In the 70's purple became the colour of the women's liberation movement and was chosen as a tribute to the suffragette movement. 'The Purple Rain Protest' was part of the struggle against apartheid which eventually led to the slogan 'The Purple Shall Govern'. The colour 'purple' symbolises freedom, courage and transformation.

The color purple can also be a biblical reference as when Christ was crucified and the blood of the innocent was spilt. The color purple then is symbolic of pain, torture and injustice. Celie is subjected to violence and rapes within her own household by her step-father. She gets pregnant twice and delivers. When she is married off to Mr. she again faces violence and sexual subjugation. Similarly, her sister Nettie somehow escapes rape, Sofia faces violence by Harpo and later by the mayor and the police and Squeak is raped by the white warden. When Sophia is arrested for arrogantly replying to the mayor’s wife and hitting the mayor in defence, she was beaten up and Celie compared her face to that of an “eggplant”. The eggplant is purple and here the color symbolizes the bruises and pain that the woman went through. The color of the bruises is purple and for these women it’s just not a color but a color of violence against them. It is symbolic of the bruises on the soul of women. The scars on the Olinka women were purple showing the bruises of tradition that women carry. Thus, the color purple seems to have a meaning much deeper than could be fathomed at first glance. The title of the novel is as complex as it seems simple.

Purple is the color of Celie’s private parts which is her site of violation as she is raped by Alfonso, her step-father and later exploited by her husband Mr. Thus, it becomes the color of sex for her. Later, when she meets Shug Avery and they bond over as friends and lovers, the color purple has a new meaning to her. She discovers her anatomy and her pleasure zones and learns to experience sex as a pleasure. Shug teaches her to see the beauty of nature and to enjoy the pleasures of life.

Celie, as the novel starts, is a staunch member of the church who states that, “As long as I can spell G-O-D I got somebody along.” After she reads Nettie’s letters, her belief that God, the angels and the prophets from the Bible are all white changes drastically. She realizes that Jesus had hair like the lamb. It is then that she realizes that god is more like her. Her perception about God goes under complete transformation after listening to Shug who believes in respecting the nature and beauty of life and rejects the narrow perceptions of the church asserting “it pisses off God if you walk by the color purple in the field and don’t notice it.” The title “The Color Purple” is based on this philosophy. Something as simple as the color purple should be enjoyed in life as it is a gift from God. By appreciating the beauty of nature and respecting it, Celie finds a more liberating religion. Shug urges Celie to enjoy everything that God gives as he is a genderless, race less being, who enjoys being admired. This admission changes her life. The color is no more just a color but helps her understand that God isn’t a white man but an entity who is a source of wonder and marvels.

It is a veritable fusion of transformations of people, cultures and worlds. The title has a significant part in this transformation. In the beginning of the novel Celie is subjugated by Albert and his children. Even M.'s sister Kate feels bad for Celie and asks him to buy her new clothes. This is the first time Celie mentions her fondness for the color. She imagines Shug in this color who according to her is beautiful, royal elegant and liberated. This color has historical significance as it has been associated with royalty and status. The Romans wore togas that were purple which was symbolic of respect. Thus in the West, this color was associated with authority and power. Hence Celie and Kate search but find no purple cloth for her to wear. This is an indication of how Celie is not yet liberated. She wears colors which are dull colors instead of happy colors like red and purple in the beginning.

Later with Shug helping her, she finds her own identity and independence and this again is indicated as she makes pants for Sophia that are red and purple. This not only is symbolic of Celie's independence but also the advancement of women who now wear pants as earlier this was an abhorrent idea to the society but is acceptable now. Celie owns a house now in which she decorates her own room with red and purple. She now finally gets what she likes and deserves. The color purple here is no more just a color but shows Celie's dignity and her transformation as a person and also the change in the thoughts of people of the society.

In the western, Purple symbolizes elegance, authority and dignity. At the beginning of the story, Celie does not wear purple clothes, which suggests that she has not got independence and self-identity. With Shug's help, Celie begins to make a living by herself, gets independence on economy. She sets up Folks Pants Unlimited Company. The changing of colors indicates that, faced with the future, she becomes optimistic towards life. Albert, the husband of Celie, has carved a purple frog to her as a gift. It denotes the recognition for Celie, the equality of black men and women, and the respect that the black women regain.

Meanwhile, purple stands for homosexuality. When black women are oppressed and have no right to make resistance, homosexuality is a way for them to develop their own life style. Influenced by the tradition, it is also the cultural extension of black women. In order to get rid of men's control, women in the novel join together, caring for themselves, and loving each other. Only in this way they become strong and independence, which contributes to gaining their self-identity. Walker portrays female homosexuality as a means for women to summon the courage to tell stories. These stories allow them to fight against oppression and men's dominance. Relationships among women form a refuge, providing reciprocal love in a world filled with male violence.

Thus, in the novel the family and color purple bring out rich symbolism and presents shades of meaning to the text and into the lives of the female characters.

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