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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### FEMINISTIC ISSUES IN ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOUR PURPLE.

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#### Abstract

Alice Malsenior Walker is an African-American author and feminist. Her works focus on the role of women of color in culture and history. She is an open bisexual, and sympathetic towards people of all sexualities, ethnicities, and races. She has described how both the African-American men and women have faced oppression in terms of race, class, and ethnicity. *The Color Purple* has represented the very bottom structure of the society. Walker not only describes the oppression and suffering of black women but also suggests certain solutions for these tribulations in the novel. Female characters such as Celie, Shug, Nettie and Sofia in *The Color Purple* are dominated both psychologically and physically. Celie, the downtrodden, degraded, despised, abused, is transformed into an independent and liberated woman at the end of the novel. She has moved from being ugly to a figuratively beautiful swan. She has moved from being the beast of burden to physical and mental declarations of independence, to a reunion with her children and her sister. This article explores the important feministic issues and analyzes the protagonist, Celie in the novel *The Color Purple*. Over the centuries, the role of men and women are regarded according to their societies' perception of living.

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#### Introduction:-

Alice Malsenior Walker is an African-American author and feminist. Her third novel *The Color Purple* was published in 1982 which received both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for Fiction in 1983. It is a feminist novel about an abused and uneducated black Women's struggle for empowerment. It has been praised for the depth of its female characters and for its eloquent use of black English vernacular. *The Color Purple* is a song of joy and triumph: it's a triumph of a woman's struggle against racism, sexism, and social determinism ultimately leads to the wholeness of her being. Her writings focus on the role of women of color in culture and history. She is an open bisexual, and sympathetic towards people of all sexualities, ethnicities, and races. She has expressed her own experiences as a child containing violence, abuse, and pain in the lives of her female characters. These moments have left a deep mark in her mind and soul.

Walker's *The Color Purple* has portrayed the suffering and exploitation of black woman and community in the United States. Her subjects contain the folklore and traditions of arts of her heritage. It begins and advances describing the problems which are solved by writing letters, sisterhood, and making friendships. The author has described the character Celie as a black woman who faces many difficulties and exploitation and describes her struggle to free herself and become an independent black woman. Celie in *The Color Purple* has represented the

very bottom structure of the society. She is treated as an insulted black woman or subhuman by whites, and also treated badly and abused by black men (Walker, 1984:262).

### **Patriarchal Oppression:-**

Walker writes about subjects that are connected to her own life experiences as a black woman living in a white patriarchal society. The definition of patriarchal oppression has harmonized the prevalent system of gender in the novel. Oppression of black woman is made by black men has been called de-masculinization, because there is no attention has been given to the Persecution, abused, and oppression of black women during slavery. Experiences of men are more important than those of women, that is why they are able to assert themselves masterfully. Walker in *The Color Purple* not only has described the oppression and suffering of black women but also suggests certain solutions for these tribulations. Celie, a black woman has faced immense oppression, suffering, and patriarchy then after she successfully liberates herself from being a sexually abused girl and wife (Jovanovich, 1982:76). She has presented the female characters Celie, Nettie, Shug, and Sophia in *The Color Purple*. All of them have suffered from the pain and torture of the patriarchal and repression by the colored community which symbolizes male domination and patriarchy (Fifer,1985:155).

*The Color Purple* has opened with a warning or rather a threat from the stepfather of Celie which silences her, thereby depriving her right to even speak of herself with anyone. She is not even allowed to share her feelings of joy or sorrow with anyone except God. She has addressed God in her letters and mentions all her thoughts, her fears, her impressions of others and her aspirations in simple broken language. The crudeness and the style of her language reflect her traumatized, depressed, mental and emotional state of mind. Walker writes of Celie, “She has not accepted an alien description of who she is; neither has she accepted completely an alien tongue to tell us about it. Her being is affirmed by the language in which she is revealed, and like everything about her it is characteristic, hard-won and authentic.”(64) Walker is very realistic about the language she uses for Celie. She has celebrated the oral tradition that is black and southern. Celie’s words have revealed not only an intelligence that transforms illiterate speech into something that is, at times, very beautiful but also effective in conveying her sense of her world. Her speech reveals what has been done to her by a racist and sexist system, and her intelligent blossoming as a human being despite her oppression demonstrates that whether her oppressors have persisted even today in trying to keep her down or not. Celie’s communication with God through her letters confirms her very existence. Through her letters, she asserts that she is still alive. She has been raped twice and impregnated by her stepfather whom she thought was her real father. She has felt ashamed to reveal her father’s real character and she thinks that she deserves it. “She ask me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God’s. I don’t know no other man or what else to say” (3). Celie hates herself and has no desire to get to know her body which had been a constant source of exploitation. She had suffered from an overpowering sense of incest.

Celie’s stepfather has given a very bad picture of Celie to Mr. Albert. When Mr.\_ comes to ask for Nettie, their father flatly has refused to give her. Instead, he offers Celie for Nettie. He tells Mr., “Fact is, he say, I got to git rid of her. She is too old to be living here at home. And she has a bad influence on my other girls. And another thing — She tell lies” (9). Celie has no right over her body and life. Her living standards are clearly revealed when her father tells Mr., as “You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it” (9). Celie is constantly reminded of her ugliness which makes her feel inferior and downtrodden in her own eyes. She tries to ignore herself, and her body which has been put to repeated sexual and physical assaults. Daniel Ross has stated that “To confront the body is to confront not only an individual’s abuse but also the abuse of women’s bodies throughout history; as the external symbol of women’s enslavement, this abuse represents for woman a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status.” (Ross, (1988:70)

### **Racist Oppression:-**

Celie is insulted and degraded because she is a black woman. Mr.\_ links Celie’s weakened position to her blackness. He has behaved as if he is a white man. He uses the white domination, racism, authority and prejudice against her. This comes from his need to try or transfer the dominance of the whites. Although he and his lover Shug are black, he considers himself as superior. He treats his wife (Celie) as different from himself and insults her by saying that the black woman often assigns identification with minority cultures. Celie is abused sexually and oppressed by her step-father and husband. Thus, she is not aware of what has been happening to her. It is believed that female body is the target of male exploitation; therefore, Celie has learnt to hate her body. Because of her repeated rapes and beatings, she has no desire to discover the beauty of her body (Ross, 1988:70). The oppression, rape, and inhuman have injured and scared her physically and psychologically (Wall, 1988: 83). Harries (1986:10) has stated that her

silence has come from her fear that her rebel against Pa (Alphonso) and Mr. \_\_\_ has brought problems to her. Therefore, she prefers to be a victim and believe that this is her fate and her silence is the only way to be lived. The letters symbolize the touchstone of all oppression, pain, sufferings and miseries. With the help of Shug, she resolves her problems. She also helps Celie in finding the letters of her sister Nettie brings them to her. Shug helps Celie to change her life from the hell and oppressing life to a new happy one (Harris, 1986:5). Through the letters of Nettie, she knows that her sister is still alive. Nettie's letters imprint to Celie that she is proud of being an African woman and of her heritage; she starts to love herself, "Did you know that the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That the Ethiopia we read about in the Bible meant all of Africa" (Walker, 1983:138). Cyrulnik (1999: 56) has stated that sending letters to each other enables her to get some comfort to her soul, she pours her pain in writing, and uses her voice forgetting her silence and suffering. "Their letters and the arrival of Nettie with Celie's children support and help them to challenge patriarchal oppression" (wingman, 2006:27).

According to Walker, women of color are victims of both racism and sexism. Black woman suffers from the discrimination from black men who use the oppression against black women reflecting the oppression of whites. The author also mentions that black woman is loyal to black man even more than to herself (Walker, 1984:318). Walker has depicted the racist and economic oppression and the victimization of black women in her earlier two novels. She has emphasized the universal oppression of black women, focusing primarily on Celie's story in *The Color Purple*. Christophe (1999:120) has opined that the concepts of otherness and power relationships have been appeared within a multicultural society in American society. In the United States, racial hegemony uses the power over the minority's culture and race.

#### **Sexism in *The Color Purple*:-**

Alice Walker has focused the prevalent sexism applied on the characters. Female characters such as Celie, Shug, Nettie and Sofia in *The Color Purple* are dominated both psychologically and physically. Bernard Bell (1987: 24) has rightly pointed out that *The Color Purple* is "more concerned with politics of sex and self than with the politics of class and race... its unrelenting, severe attacks on male hegemony, especially the violent abuse of black women by black men, is offered as a revolutionary leap forward into a new social order based on sexual egalitarianism." The novel *The Color Purple* is a historical novel. The "history," Walker (1982) in the novel has said that "starts not with the taking of lands, or the births, battles, and deaths of Great Men, but with one woman asking another for her underwear" (9).

Apart from the criticizing of black female oppression and heterosexism, black feminism can be identified in the representation of sexism. Walker has challenged socially constructed gender roles by reversing them, and the way in which the characters attempt to resist the oppression they face. "Alice Walker has manipulated the expectations that are associated with the historical novel as a concept by using the epistolary form. By using this style, she creates an intimate setting and uses private events as a critique to American political issues such as black female oppression in a broader perspective" (Gates&Appiah, 1993:212). "Celie's oppression can be identified within her vulnerability that has grown from her as a woman being dominated by her stepfather" (Gates&Appiah, 1993:215). Sexism is a discrimination based on sex. Male domination has made her to believe that she is less important than her male counterparts. There is resistance against sexism though, as Walker creates strong female characters that are rebellious and independent, and resist the patriarchy or at least attempt to do so. Shug and Sofia have served as a role model for Celie. Shug has a sense of self that is not defined by any man. Additionally, the idea of sisterhood between the women and how they have supported each other and help each other to grow in the novel is described emotionally. Oppression of sexuality binds oppressions of race, gender and class together, as they all share the core feature of the controlling of black women's sexuality. Race controls sexuality in terms of the controlling images of black women, like the "hoochie" or the "mammy." Gender controls the sexuality of black women because of the dominant role of the men in American society. Class controls sexuality because white women have different controlling images of their sexuality. They do not have the stereotypes of the "hoochie" and the "mammy." The controlling of black women's bodies has always been present within US society, and is also evident in *The Color Purple*, for instance when Celie's stepfather 'sells' Celie in a way to Albert. They talk about how Celie is ugly, but she can work hard. They treat her like property, or a servant. They also talk about how Nettie is prettier, and Albert talks about Shug in a biased manner. Moreover, Celie's mother is not able to satisfy her stepfather's sexual needs, which her stepfather sees as an excuse to rape Celie. The regulation and exploitation of black female sexuality is presented here. By regulating black women's sexuality, an assumption arose of 'good girls' and 'bad girls.' This serves as a way of creating a sexual hierarchy within American society, and maintaining the social order of male

dominancy. It can be seen that the discrimination based on sex is presented in American society, as well as in *The Color Purple*.

#### **Male Domination in *The Color Purple*:-**

*The Color Purple* is one of Walker's most famous works. The novel is in epistolary form set from the beginning of 1900 through the mid-1940s. The main character is Celie, a 14-year-old girl from the South who has faced oppression mainly from the men in her life. Celie writes letters directed to God, because she feels lonely and God is the only one she can turn to. She talks about the hardships and oppression she faces as a young black woman. From a young age, she has lost her privacy and over her body. She is repeatedly raped by her stepfather, whom she first believes to be her father. She gets pregnant from him twice, and he takes both children away. Besides, raping her and impregnating her, her stepfather also beats her and forces her into a marriage with a widower named Albert, in the novel often referred to as Mr. \_\_, who is actually in love with blues singer miss Shug Avery. Albert treats Celie as a servant and "an occasional sexual convenience" (Gates & Appiah, 1993:16). When his son asks why he beats Celie, he says it's simply because Celie is his wife, representing the dominance of the male in a marriage in their time. Generation upon generation, men were raised to dominate their wives. Albert learned this from his father and is teaching it to his son as well. However, Celie gains enough courage to stand up to him, and in the end, feeling supported by the women in her life, especially her sister Nettie, Celie is able to break out of Albert's control and leaves for Memphis where she starts a business to design clothes.

In this book, some major themes come to light that mirror the society of the early twentieth century. "The theme of violence within relationships was not much written about until the 1960s, as black writers wanted to avoid anything that might reinforce racial stereotypes" (Gates & Appiah, 1993:17). "In *The Color Purple* the role of male domination in the frustration of black women's struggle for independence is clearly the focus" (Gates & Appiah, 1993:17). Walker explores this theme in the love triangle of Albert, Shug Avery and Celie. Celie and Shug become friends, and their friendship even evolves into a sexual attraction between the two. Albert tells Shug that he beats Celie because she is not Shug. However, Shug rejects Albert because of the fact that he physically abuses Celie. This is an example of the way in which black women dealt with the frustration of male domination; they stand up for each other and fight back for independence.

Celie also has to deal with the fact that she is forced by her stepfather to leave school when she first becomes pregnant, which shows how controlling her stepfather is. When Celie is forced into marriage with Albert, Celie is treated more or less like a slave in a slave auction. First, her stepfather has convinced Albert to marry her by telling him that Celie works hard and will obey him. Subsequently, Albert "looks her over like a head of livestock and marries her in desperation because he needs someone to cook and clean for him and take care of his four children" (Winchell, 1992:86). Celie is treated like property and like a servant here, handed from one domineering black male to the other. She is not a slave in the literal sense, but she is still very much dominated by the men in her life, not able to make her own decisions. In the end, Celie gains enough confidence to leave Albert, when she has learnt that there is a definition of God that 'even' loves poor, ugly black women, because that is how she feels herself to be.

She has feared the men in her life, because they behaved with her very violently. One such example is that her stepfather beats her when he sees her winking at a boy in church, even though Celie tells God in her letters that she is scared of men as "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them" (*The Color Purple*, 7). Moreover, when Albert has sexual intercourse with Celie, it is unromantic at best. "He git up on you, heist your nightgown around your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never knows the difference... Just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (74). The dominant role of the man in the marriage is clear in this scene. However, there is also a sort of acceptance about male domination. It has frustrated her, but Celie also accepts that that is the way society is in her time. Even though he physically abused her, Celie has appreciated that Albert has been changing his attitude throughout the story and he tries to better himself. The fact that Celie is so easily forgiving illustrates how deep the oppression goes; this man does horrible things to her, but because of Shug and the fact that he is trying to better himself is enough for her not to hate him. Moreover, it shows how society was at the time, how men were able to get away with dominating their wives.

#### **Self-Esteem:-**

Self-esteem is one of the issues dealt with by black women in their writings. But Celie initially lacks this characteristic. Even though she has the idea to liberate herself from the clutches of male domination, she is too dependent to assert her black womanhood. In the beginning, Celie tries to escape with the assistance of her sister,

Nettie. She marries Mr., knowing very well that her life would be no better than the present one, devoid of love and self-respect: "All I thought about was Nettie. How she could come to me if I marry him and he is so love struck with her I could figure out a way for us to run away" (10). Though her ability to envision success is evident, her plan is thwarted since it is linked to Nettie. Celie's has planed and hoped of escaping remain dormant for many years for she thinks that Nettie is dead. They are once again renewed after she learns that Nettie is alive. Celie has led a passive life and even she is not aware her inner talents and potentialities. She needs the intervention of someone or the other to constantly keep reminding her of her personal value. Her dependent nature is evident even in confrontation of her day-to-day problems. She is again linked to Shug Avery, the blues singer and the lover of her husband, who consistently shows her ability to ensure her own well-being.

Shug becomes a good mother for Celie and provides an environment for her to reveal her true feelings and to establish a stable and autonomous self. She is brought to home by Albert so that Celie nurses her back to health. Celie is not even informed anything about her. But still she serves her with love, devotion and admiration, "I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short" (51). Shug also hates like everyone and shuns Celie in the beginning, but later starts liking her and she takes the place of Nettie and brings out the true self of Celie and restores her dignity and self-respect. She literally helps Celie attain transcendence.

### **Empowerment in *The Color Purple*:-**

Walker introduces the art of quilt-making in the novel which she herself has worked on while writing: "I bought some beautiful blue-and-red-and purple fabric, My quilt began to grow. And, of course, everything was happening. Celie and Shug and Albert were getting to know each other" (20). Quilting symbolizes female bonding, sisterhood, and togetherness. Walker's mentioning of the art of quilting reflects her respect and love for black cultural heritage. Speaking of a quilt that hangs in the Smithsonian Institution as the work of "an anonymous Black woman from Alabama," Walker has said that the anonymous woman was "one of our grandmothers ... an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use" (22). The metaphor of quilting has represented Walker as the creative legacy that African-Americans have inherited from their maternal ancestors. Walker has felt that this functional work of art made of bits of worthless rags reflects the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling: Weaving, shaping, sculpting or quilting in order to create a kaleidoscopic and momentary array is tantamount to providing an improvisational response to chaos... It constitutes survival strategy and motion in the face of dispersal. A patchwork quilt laboriously and affectionately has crafted from bits of worn overalls, shredded uniforms, tattered petticoats, and outgrown dresses stands as a signal instance of a patterned wholeness in the African diaspora. Celie and Sofia have sat and made quilts together. Celie supports Harpo to beat Sofia to submissiveness. Sofia learns Celie's betrayal and returns the curtains Celie has made. Later sewing establishes a harmonious relationship between the two women. Shug too develops an interest in quilting. "She picks up a random piece of cloth out the basket. Hold it up to the light. Frown. How you sew this damn thing? she say. I hand her the square I'm working on, start another one. She sew long crooked stitches, remind me of that little crooked tune she sing" (59). Quilting brings together the lost relationship. Shug discovers and develops Celie's ability to make pants. She even makes Celie wear pants, which marks an advance in Celie's life. When Shug insists on taking Celie to Memphis along with her, Albert would not allow her to. He starts saying all nasty things and Celie retorts confidently and boldly by saying, "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need" (207). When Albert still resists, she could no longer tolerate him. She curtly tells him thus: "Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail" (213). Mr. \_\_\_'s inability to understand, "What that mean?" becomes definitive of a separate tradition of voice and text. Celie's curse brings havoc upon the patriarchal household and makes a claim for her own space within creation. Her acknowledgment of Mr. \_\_\_'s disclaimer negates its power and rejects its attempt to define appropriate roles and standards for Black women.

Celie responds to Mr. \_\_\_ in a very positive manner, but she is still critical about her looks. Her evaluation of her appearance has not changed: "Sometimes, I think Shug never love me. I stand looking at my naked self in the looking glass. What would she love? I ast myself. My hair is short and kinky because I don't straighten it anymore. Once Shug say she love it no need to. My skin dark. My nose just a nose. My lips just lips. My body just any woman's body going through the changes of age. Nothing special here for nobody to love. No honey colored curly hair, no cuteness. Nothing young and fresh. My heart must be young and fresh though, it feel like it blooming blood" (266). Celie never believes Shug's affection showered on her. On top of it, Albert keeps on reminding her by repeatedly saying that she is black and ugly. Celie too believes that she is ugly and she centres that belief on her blackness. Walker feels sorry that blackness is not much valued. She has resented people who differentiate

themselves from their ancestors because of their dark skin. She has stated that such ignorant people, are sure to end up in self-eradication. "For no one can hate their source and survive, as has been said." Shug takes Celie along with her to her place. She treats her as a friend and her equal. She even scolds her when Celie tries to work for her. "... she say. You not my maid. I didn't bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet" (218). Though Shug is criticized and called a tramp, slut, hussy, heifer, and street cleaner, she builds upon good rapport with Celie. She moulds Celie into a new being and supports her endeavor to build up a new identity within the feminine domain.

The transformation Shug brings about in Celie makes her visualize the beautiful creations of God. Walker's definition of 'womanist' suggests the significance of the title: "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender." Celie, the downtrodden, degraded, despised, abused, is transformed into an independent and liberated woman: From a used and abused woman, Celie emerges as an independent, creative businesswoman. She moves from being ugly duckling to a figuratively beautiful swan. She moves from being Hurston's mule, the beast of burden, to physical and mental declarations of independence, to a reunion with her children and her sister. She moves from being beaten and used by others to establishing her own business. She moves from the back room of the house in which her stepfather has violated her to sharing a huge house in Memphis with her lover to returning to a house, property, and a store she has inherited. She moves from being Albert's footstool to demanding his respect and teaching him how to sew.

#### **The Colour 'Purple' Symbolizes the Indomitable Female Spirit:-**

The colour 'purple' symbolizes the indomitable female spirit. Sofia, the Amazon-like woman, represents the plight of the female in rebellion. Sofia's struggle for a meaningful existence displays her strong will power and ability to transcend the racist and sexist society. She struggles for self-respect and dignity, in spite of her defeat and mutilation Sofia even brings up the white girl Eleanor Jane with love and affection. She stands in contrast to Celie in her effort to put up with the male-dominated world. She tells Celie that she had been fighting all through her life, right from her childhood: "She say, All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house" (42). She is put in prison for fighting back, when slapped by the Mayor. She is tortured and turned into another Celie by circumstances. Sofia tells Celie, "Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say" (93). Celie has developed a good relationship with Sofia. She even makes pants for Sofia, one leg purple and other red in colour. She dreams of Sofia wearing them and jumping over the moon.

Celie thus undergoes a series of changes. Walker through her character Celie has represented not only the living status of Celie, but that of the whole community of black women living under the same oppressive conditions. Walker, through all other characters in the novel, celebrates communal harmony by bringing all of them together towards the end of the novel. She feels that being a black Southern writer, she inherits a sense of community as a natural right. Celie's children, Adam and Olivia, returning to America, to the south reflects, the continuity of generations. The novel starts on a very pessimistic note and ends up optimistically. Celie's story has represented the story of the marginalized of heroines, the black lesbian, who challenges the patriarchal constructions of female subjectivity and sexuality. In *The Color Purple*, Walker shows her heroine trapped in the whole range of possible oppressions. Celie's struggle is to create a self through language, to break free from the network of class, racial, sexual and gender ideologies to which she is subjected. Walker has enriched understanding of black American women and paid homage to the lasting beauty and magic of the black oral tradition.

#### **Conclusion:-**

Alice Walker shows how little black women have overcome the oppression, patriarchy and sexual abuse. Her female characters have learnt from the painful experiences of slavery, domination, sexism, and racism of black men unseated of the domination of whites how to struggle to unshackle their submission and suffering and be independent and strong women to live a purposeful life (O'brain, 1982: 73). It is obvious that the black man is guilty in all forms of oppression, sexism, racism and the wrong use of their authority and power (Walker, 1984 : 262). Celie thus undergoes a series of changes. Walker through Celie, has represented not only the living status of Celie, but that of the whole community of black women living under the same oppressive conditions. Walker, through all other characters in the novel, celebrates communal harmony by bringing all of them together towards the end of the novel.

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