

## **A Feminist Critique of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple***

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### **Abstract**

The field of feminist literary analysis has produced some of the most vibrant intellectual works in recent years. For feminist writers, Patriarchy, the social structure empowering men throughout the history, has come under intense critical scrutiny. The author takes up Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* for the feminist critique. Celie is the protagonist of the novel. There are other female characters who are shaped and redefined by patriarchal society. This research paper attempts to examine various shades of feminist critique.

The research paper examines the possible causes of Celie's oppression in the African-American environment. Of being well aware of women's sufferings and problems under a patriarchal domination, Walker could highlight the suffering of her woman protagonist in the novel. Walker's aim, being a feminist writer, is to bring about a 'Change' in patriarchal societal system. This is a definitive aim of feminists as well as others who are related to feminism(s) in one way or another. This novel relates the story of Celie who has lost her economic independence and her status as a woman before and after her marriage. The research paper shows that Celie's identity goes above a definition of new woman in the patriarchal society.

**Keywords:-** Alice Walker, Feminism, The Color Purple, feminist Critique, Patriarchy.

## Introduction

Alice Walker is a very reputed Afro-American novelist. Her masterpiece *The Color Purple* (hereafter *TCP*) rocketed her name and fame in the world as a writer of caliber. She bagged Pulitzer Prize for the same novel. Legion of her writings have space for the genuine concern for black and color women. Her feminism has a potential to transform a world society and bring out change in human relationship.

Walker's novel protests to the overwhelmed oppression of women in various ways. The publication of *TCP* brought to light the female characters who are representatives of women as strong and capable as men. One thing that can be seen in her heroines is: they experience difficult time in their lives which destroy their life for many years. Female characters have to undergo bitter experiences in their life which men never experience that throughout their life. It seems sometimes that the female characters in Walker's novel waste a lot of energy on overcoming barriers and impediments that the society create for them.

Feminist critique of any text in modern times has brought about a revolution in literary studies. This new approach has deeply altered several assumptions. It offers a new point of view on literary text and emphasizes the need for a search of new paradigms. Its aim is not simply to criticize, interpret and analyze the text but to change the mind and consciousness of the readers and thereby change the world. Critics like Kolodny insists that "feminist critique is an assertion of women's right to choose which features of a text she takes as relevant because she is, after all, asking new and different questioning." For writing feminist critique one has to take into consideration a great number of things, such as posing questions like: looking for female stereotypes, How are the females in the piece of writing characterized?, What role do women play in the text? Are there dominant or Submissive women? Do Women play a major or minor role? What attitudes are expressed by male and female characters about women? How do male characters talk to and about female characters? How do females talk with males? and so on. By answering these and several other points one can get a full and appropriate picture of the text.

A feminist reading of *TCP* explains the operation of the economic and social forces on its protagonist, Celie. She is portrayed as the victim of pressure to conform to female stereotype. Initially her father (later known as her step-father) molds her to the traditional role of female and she doesn't resist. Her childhood is spent in a great trauma of physical and abuse of her due to her father. Her virginity is violated by her step-father. She is pregnant twice. Her babies are carried away by her father. She is spoiled by her father completely. Her immaturity and weakness cost her much.

It can be perceived in the novel that Celie's early childhood is shaped under the influence of an oppressive step-father who wastes his money on drink while his family is living in great poverty and misery. Her father doesn't understand his responsibilities towards his family and spends lavishly on no useful things. Her mother quarrels with her husband over the issue of his responsibility towards family but this quarrel brings no change in him. Rather this quarrel makes her passive and helpless. For Celie, her mother is the first model of gender role who has been dominated by the overwhelming masculine patterns. It can be observed that Celie's mother has become a feminine victim of an unhappy marriage.

Celie experiences no satisfaction after Marriage. Albert marries her for his own benefits. He wants a woman who can take care of his children and house. Hence he marries her to get free services of domestic duties. He also fulfills his physical demands from her. She has to lead a role of a wife in very traditional manner. Her husband exploits all situations to the fullest and his favour. The sense of power is observed in Albert. There is no any ideal situation for her as a wife in her life.

Celie is not allowed to assume the role of boss of the home since she is a woman. Her energy and efficiency is wasted even after marriage. Celie remains passive in her relation with Albert as he always deny her position as a being. He didn't believe that a woman can have trustworthy ideas and sound power of thinking. In patriarchal society, husband always feels that he is a boss and so implements his own ideas even though he acquires no good results. Same happens in the novel, *TCP*.

Celie plays the feminine role and conform to the acceptable roles of wife and mother. In doing these roles, she once again goes into passivity. She has already

witnessed the sufferings and endurance of her mother for many years. She realizes that this is the lot of all women. She realizes that all husbands sabotage their wives in nearly all cultures and countries. She becomes physically and mentally weak. The reasons for her physical and mental breakdown can be her step-father and husband's assault on her body and the limitations and restrictions imposed on her by both.

In patriarchal society, women are supposed to be inferior to men. Husband's indifference towards his wife and his ignorance to the problems, wishes and needs of his wife can be the reason of her suffering. Same is the case of Celie. Her husband never fulfills her wishes and dreams, not even her needs. He doesn't purchase new clothes ever for her. She undergoes life of a homeless person in her own house. Her condition is pitiable. Albert never converse with her any meaningless things too. He gives no chance to her to have a share of power. This results into her isolation and isolation reflects in her appearance and in her talk. She spends much of her time in doing domestic chores. Life of her out of this situation seems impossible. She gets complete dissatisfaction in loveless marriage.

Shug Avery, a blues singer, comes to her rescue. She makes emotional relation with her. Initially her attitude towards Celie is not good but later on it changes. When Albert get Shug in the home, she is sick. Celie takes care of her. In return Shug consoles and advises Celie to be independent in life. She becomes very important person in Celie's life when she is in great depression and in a condition of deterioration. In those days she relies on her more and more. Finally Celie submits herself to Shug in lesbian relation and feel strong and secure.

Celie's emotional relation with Shug makes her a complete taboo and an alien in a society that never stands for contravene of the society codes. That's why after discovering Celie's transgression, traditional perspective readers are socked. They realize that the relation between Celie and Shug is beyond the general rules of the society. Rather Celie crosses the boundary of the society. Celie changes herself completely. She puts on jeans. By and large men wear jeans and putting on by women is not regard good thing. But Celie does everything which any man can do. She comes out of the patriarchal society that is ruled and dominated by male defined codes and ideologies.

The patriarchal system has many things which are injustices to women. It is quite ironic that men consider themselves the owner of their wife. They do have full right over their wife. This happens in the novel when Albert behaves in the same manner with Celie. But at the end Celie breaks her silences and commence her business. She becomes successful businesswoman and becomes the head of non-traditional family. her husband helps her in this business and is seen sewing pants at the closing of this novel.

### **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that woman is a plaything in the hands of man. Man can make her dance to his tunes at any time and at any level. It can be seen in the novel *The Color Purple*. Celie becomes a victim in the hands of Alphonso and Albert who are all trying to dominate her one way or the other. Alphonso, her step-father, is the one that cuts Celie from education. He also exploits her through domestic labour she performs and care and companionship she provides. Her step-father is the one who determines Celie's fate by trying to send her away from the family. From such situation, Celie finds out her away to progress with the help of her companion Shug. Though she is not well qualified in degrees but becomes qualified in life. She brings out positive changes in her husband. Walker's feminism is not against men. She wants the violence against women out of their life.

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