

THEME OF OPPRESSION AND LIBERATION: SKETCHES OF THE FEMALE CHARACTERS BY ALICE WALKER IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*.

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*Well ye know
What woman is, for none of woman born
Can choose but drain the bitter dregs of woe
Which ever to the oppressed from the oppressors flow.*

SHELLEY

“The Revolt of Islam. A Poem in Twelve Cantos. Canto Eighth”

The year 1982 was taken by storm with the winning of the coveted Pulitzer Prize for the novel The Color Purple. The much acclaimed, writer is Alice Walker. In the history of Afro-American Literature, Alice Walker is not a mere name but a reality and has created history for her dominant themes. And one of the themes is, the theme of oppression and liberation in the female characters of her ‘magnum opus’ The Color Purple.

The female characters in Alice’s The Color Purple show their destiny in relation to God, the coloured woman’s position in relation to man, society, white people, financial freedom, sexual freedom, and identity.

In The Color Purple the religion of the black people takes centre stage: The black people have directness, a down-to-earth approach. They are honest and straight from their heart in their approach to religion. God is not a commodity, but friend and the best friend. Unlike the white people to whom religion, spirituality and God has been institutionalised. They worship God for their own selfish ends. Their love for God is need and commercialised and there is a stipulation that we can reach God only through the institution of Church. And over the years this Church does not accept black and the marginalised class have been pushed over the pale of the Church for one reason or another. So God for the black people is their very own and without any medium and they sometimes realise God to be existent in their very beings. They live and breathe with God without any external help or appendage.

The word ‘oppression’ cannot be compartmentalised like other words. Its root and destination begin from nowhere and ends nowhere thus giving us a range of literal, figurative, etymological, metaphorical and epistemological meanings to our understanding. Oppression can be in the form of armed struggle, economic disparity, racism, casteism, religious intolerance, slavery, lynching and other societal reservations, including gender bias.

The history of oppression has remained for ages and become more prominent with the advancement of human civilisation, social development, technological advancement, and

rationality used in a diverse field. The word 'Oppression' in Latin, means being weighed down with physical or mental distress and for centuries human beings with their guarded behavioral patterns have either been an agent of oppression or served as a catalyst. But the question lies whether human race alone is to be blamed for such an act or external factors together have crippled and strengthened the success rate of oppression. Physical, societal, economical, and political environment together give rise to the form of oppression as existing in societies, advanced or backward, where we live and interact and this gives rise to various modes of oppression. There are certain 'inequalities of race, ethnicity, class, colour, and particularly of gender' (On the Origin of Women's Oppression: Pat Brewer) that have flared the differences, distinctions and made the scars in class societies. "Our variants of socio-biology, genetic make up, evolutionary psychology, genes that determine our sexual behavior, oppression against women, seem to justify systems of exploitation, oppression, domination, class hatred and the like as something inescapable, unchangeable, and inevitable." (On the Origin of Women's Oppression: Pat Brewer)

In the foregoing paragraphs there is an attempt to explain the nature, origin and meaning of the term oppression. In The Color Purple, the female characters Celie, Nettie, Sophia, Squeak, Corrine all represent the microcosm in the macrocosm of the world of women in pain under the patriarchal subjugation and repression in a coloured segment of society which bears the stamp of male domination and patriarchy.

The story revolves round the central character Celie, the persona who plays a pivotal role and acts as a microcosm of oppression, physical and mental both, in the vast macrocosm of the repressed class. She is under fetters by man-made institutions like marriage and also the Church. But Celie after years of being weighed down for years breaks loose all fetters.

Her story starts when she is 14, stigmatised from birth for being born in a poor family. She loses her father. Her mother is bogged down in bed giving birth to multiple children in dirt and squalor and she cannot turn her mind on anything else. These ill-fated midnight's children become part of Celie's responsibilities. She herself is deprived of family love, care, attention and the food for the healthy growth of any child. Her worst curse is being a nigger child in a black family where love and care are far away cries especially if she is darkest of the lot and not fortunate to be a good daughter, and under the conspiracy of a step-father.

Celie's religion is that of a black one, where she is in direct communion with God. God is her very own, her father, her mother, best friend and most importantly her confidante. 'Celie fearfully heeds Alphonso's warning, as told by Ernece B. Kelly in "Paths to Liberation in Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982)" 'not never tell anybody but God'.(60) She feels safe in the haven of God who appears to be white-skinned. Maimed physically through rape, scarred psychologically through inhuman and beastly treatment, Celie has no one in her life except her sister and friend, Nettie and perhaps also God in whom she can confide and disclose all her emotion.

In the progress of the story, we travel through Celie's intense trauma and inflicted scars and reach to the bedrock of her suffering. We get the slice of her life. Celie is the representative of

several women as found not only in Afro-American literature but also in literature of all other climes and if I am to expand the horizon she pictures the naked truth of uncountable oppressed women in several un 'civilised' societies. Her picture represents not merely a particular territory but is a universal story of all the oppressed women of the world.

Celie is not one of those fortunate ones to be born with a silver spoon in her mouth, but chosen by her *karma* or her 'actions' to be born in a nigger family with unhealthy and dark atmosphere prevailing in her life. The author makes it clear as the readers sail through first part of Celie's life. There is an interpretation closely related to Indian philosophy and religion in relation to Celie's nature of existence. Some critics have, introduced the concept of 'karma' to explain the darkness in her life.

While turning through the pages of the novel, and realizing the pain in Celie's life, one is reminded of the effects of *Karma* in one's life. "The concept of karma is part of the world view of many millions of people throughout the world. Many in western cultures or with a Christian upbringing have incorporated a notion of karma. The Christian concept of reaping what you sow from Galatians 6:7 can be considered equivalent to Karma. According to karma, performing positive actions results in a good condition in one's experience, whereas a negative action results in a bad effect. The effects may be seen immediately or delayed. Delay can be until later in the present life or in the next. Thus, meritorious acts may mean rebirth into a higher station, such as a superior human or a godlike being, while evil acts result in rebirth as a human living in less desirable circumstances, or as a lower animal."(Wikipedia).

In Western New Age and Theosophy, the same concept of *Karma* was accepted and given stand in the Occidental world .The reading (construal) of *Karma* suggests it to be some sort of luck associated with virtue i.e. if one does evil or wrong things, one can expect detrimental effects and bad luck. This idea is allied to the Neopagan *Law of Return* or *Threefold Law*, which states that 'what goes around comes around'. To add to this there is also the metaphysical idea which I believe is more rational, that states *Karma* is energy of life and not some responsive creature capable of making verdict. *Karma* or action is not all about good and bad doings, because to the civilised and sensible society that would sound too critical, but to emphasise on the early Sanskrit word 'oorja'(energy), it is all about good or bad, constructive or unconstructive, where unconstructive energy can incorporate things not usually seen as bad like 'sadness and fear' and nstructive energy can be caused by being inspired and offering solution to problems and emanating love and indulging in moral acts.

If without being biased, I am to analyse the character of Celie, did *Karma* or action of her previous birth have any effect on her present birth; the one which anguishes the readers who equally feels tormented like Celie in the wave of emotions. The Christian evaluation to a man's good or bad life is directly dependent on his *Karma* (*as ye sow so ye reap*) as found from the definition in 'Wikipedia' and popularised in the Western philosophy. In Western New Age and Theology, it is initially seen that the negative karmic influence is seen in the first half of Celie's life, where negative energy has incorporated sadness and fear in her early life and in the later half Celie has got solution to her problems and more profoundly radiated love through Shug,

Nettie, Harpo, Sophia even to some extent Mr. Albert. If *karma* suggests good action and be stationed well in the next birth or as a lower animal (in case of a reverse action), than to Celie rebirth took in this life only, rebirth from inhumane oppression, financial dependence, sexual duress.

Yes, Celie, the oppressed soul was finally liberated and this liberation was through the 'other', 'challenging', and 'defying the norms of the society' Blues cabaret singer Shug Avery. In other words Shug brought in a new chapter in her life that gave the central character a new meaning in her bare existence. She learnt the art of expressing her sexual freedom, financial freedom, psychological freedom through Shug Avery.

Retreating few steps back, the long lost letters of Nettie, which Celie thought to be no more as it contained the information of Nettie, and Celie's only source of strength, warmth, love and inspiration to live her life were really not lost but kept away from Celie by her husband, Mr._____. To Celie the letters were her life-blood which enabled her to live and walk the path of her life alone. The letters acted as a touch stone for all her pains, miseries and sufferings. But it was Shug Avery who helped to unlock the letters hidden in the chest of Mr._____. Shug transformed Celie from the hellish life to the fresh lease of life, as it clearly pronounced that her dear sister was alive in a far away land and is doing well with the missionaries and is to return soon to her native land and meet her. The letters were written despite the fact that Celie was unaware even of her sister's being alive or not. She kept her pen moving on and poured her life to her sister through these letters.

After discovering the letters it seemed that Celie identified herself through her long lost voice by signing in the next series of letters while writing to Nettie from then onwards. She was gradually removing the shackles of her life. A person not even having the liberty to be master of her own body, and dispossessed from her own self, ultimately wins freedom by discovering her own boy, and learning to love herself and then Shug Avery, thus gaining sexual freedom.

Financially crushed by Mr. Albert very so often, Celie earned financial freedom, by making comfortable ladies pants from any range of light to heavy work and ultimately becoming a name in the common households. She also feels jubilant and liberated, with conquering the soul of Albert's and making him a bit humane and introspective about his past actions. He ultimately settles with friendship with Celie and even thinks of sharing a man- woman relationship with her.

Celie is often referred to as 'the mule of the world' concept passed on to by Jean Toomer, Zora Hurston and Alice Walker; it did not necessarily denote strength in the positive. In the first place, a mule, as the story goes (here an old one, thrown into the well by its master on account of its old age and thrown mud over it so that it dies) is not very smart to shake of its load, but then it seizes opportunity from the obstacles that comes across (imposed by the surrounding elements as in the case of Celie) and finally comes out of the well, thus liberating itself from the clutches of wicked people (here Celie liberated herself from the depraved elements of her life). The old mule and its thorns in life connote the story of Celie.

The characteristic feature of the female characters of Walker's women is that they know to bear pain, sorrow, burden to an indefinite extent and have patience enough to bear every storm in their life. Some are big-hearted and self-righteous. Some are forbearing and compassionate even to the people (men) who undermine and debase them. Some are unquestioning and unwearied. They become supple with passage of time and gradually come to win over their misfortune and to their wonder and to that of the readers they liberate themselves in their own ways.

To Celie 'God' is a foreign concept and bears the image of white skin, but staying with Shug Avery, this realisation dawns upon her that God is your very own and is within you. Walker's modern women in that way discover God within themselves like, Celie, Shug and Meridian, and that is also a path to liberation.

Sophia is a foil to the common female characters of The Color Purple, leaving aside only Shug, be it physically, mentally or even verbally. A robust woman and wife of Harpo, the son of Mr. _____ from his first marriage, is a kind of misfit into Mr. Albert's family. She is strong unlike other woman characters of the novel and is having more of society framed masculine qualities where "repairing the roof and cutting the wood" is more considered of male activities. With the sketching of the character of Sophia we get reflections of a woman being 'de-womanised' in the sense, she protests against any off-beam done to her, or is engaged in male activities as mentioned, or even does not take a step back (hesitate) to hit her husband, if hit at her, which is unlikely of the women class in general or even in the genre of Afro-American literature.

Sophia loves Harpo, marries him under strained family circumstances and mothers his children. Harpo is not too stereotypically characteristic of Black men and helped Sophia in household chores like washing the dishes and looking after the hearth. The problem cropped with Harpo's too much eating and short temperedness and instigated by his father's advice to tame a woman is to whip/ and beat her, as the latter did to Celie. To this ill advice Harpo acted accordingly and the result was Sophia's hitting back at him, as she is not a woman to tolerate any misdemeanor. Under such circumstances, once when she was asked by the white skinned jailor of the town to act as a maid in his family, she strongly denied, and defying the colour and racial norms even blew a knock at the jailor.

The result is obvious that for a black to survive in a white man's land would mean to listen to the white man's dictates. Nonetheless the punishment for hitting a white man was, Sophia, jailed for eight years. The punishment did not end over here. She became extremely submissive like Celie and performed her duties behind the bars too obediently and as a result her punishment got reduced. A woman strongly conscious of her self-esteem and possessed by self-righteousness had ultimately to serve the white jailor's family, the humiliation for which Sophia initially had hit the white man. But, now she is left with no choice. For Sophia the fresh breath of air comes when the little daughter of the white household, Miss Eleanor befriended Sophia and makes her confidante which is quite surprising and unexpected. To a reader's point of view this is a rare incident and to me especially it seemed that winning over the heart of a white child, let's not consider the 'innocence' is like finding a new form of liberty amidst white subjugation. Amidst

all her miseries, Sophia is asked by the White lady, the jailor's wife to drive her to some place and enjoy with her family members. This is also some way of attaining liberation amidst chains from white domination as it is not to be expected from a white man. Somehow fate had some other game and by accident as the car did not function well, Sophia again had to drive the white family back from town. That was incidental, but owing to circumstances Sophia emerged triumphant even for the countable 15(fifteen) minutes. Living with the white family and growing, learning, adapting she ultimately changed from the murderous person to a kind- hearted person. A comparatively, weak personality, Mary Agnes, fondly called as Squeak and second love of Harpo, a character came into play, no sooner than Sophia was jailed. Squeak, was a kind of pet to Harpo. An inwardly fragile character but good at heart was a person similar to that of Celie. Weak in spirits, she was regularly abused by Harpo. But the good person in her made her does something, which was again quite unusual, and can be expected only out of fellow-feeling. She took charge of herself to find some kind of connection with the jailor only to liberate Sophia from the clutches of confinement, but, was used as a prey by the jailor in a sexually, self-consuming extent. She sacrificed her self respect and showed immense strength of character to liberate another oppressed woman. Finally she discarded her diminutive nick name 'squeak', only to gain confidence, give power and ascertain her Christian name Mary Agnes, so as to reveal her individuality and identity and not be just some cocky pet to some man as expressed in the words,

“Harpo say, I love you, Squeak. He kneel down and try to put his arms round her waist. She stand up. My name Mary Agnes, she say.”(Celie's forty-first letter)

Mary Agnes liberated her soul from every kind of domination by getting a new life of her own through the channel of music; she made music her life with the slightest help of Shug Avery and then growing musically big, but independently. Squeak attained liberty through the world of music, leading to the emancipation of art, soul and finally self.

Amidst the enslaved black world, the only character is Corrine who has grown out of it both in humanitarian way and well as spiritually. In the bleak, dark, world of the Blacks, Corrine is the only woman of courage, education, love, cleanliness, health, peace and a symbol of happiness for the black women. She and her husband Samuel took a revolutionary step to save the black race from torture and agony in any form. In other words they stood as a saviour and they were missionaries. The couple in their initial search for freedom and a happy state for the black Africans was later joined in this zeal of theirs by Nettie, sister of Celie. In the later development of the story the readers learn that the two children of Celie who were a result of rape by Celie's (so called) step-father (of incest fathered by her step father) are actually adopted by Samuel and Corrine as their foster children. And Nettie knew the fact, but joining the Christian Missionary couple was more a matter of chance than choice. With development of the plot Corrine and Samuel both become very good friends to Nettie and Nettie was happy amidst them and the two children. But with passage of time and the gloomy and sick atmosphere of the African place Corrine however started losing faith in Nettie and unfortunately doubted Nettie with Samuel, to the extent she even believed that the children were of Samuel's and Nettie's. The symbol of

strength and happiness soon became an example of self-annihilation. She troubled herself mentally, suffocated herself and advanced her death age, only to be liberated at the end when she finally reconciled with the fact that nothing wrong was between Nettie and Samuel. Thus Corrine with this realization and peace of mind her soul was liberated to rest in peace.

Olinka, one of the tribal races of Africa is brutally suppressed in many ways be it economically, culturally, colour, industrialisation, education, in every possible way, compared to the so called advanced nations of the world. The steep cultural practices still exist and they carry it in their heart and soul. Tashi, one of the Olinka women, friend of Adam and Oliva (adopted children of Samuel and Corrine) and later love of Adam, also carries in her heart the ritual of cultural practice and abides by it. The ritual of circumcision and initiation, a brutal practice which the Olinka people think distinguishes them from the other prevalent cultures and gives them a sense of identity. Tashi is no different. She goes through this ritual however inhuman and this causes a rift between Adam and Tashi. But historically Adam who was so against this, being from a non-Olinka background and educated parents does all this only to be united in love with Tashi. So the girl Tashi, after oppression in the hands of beastliness of man, destiny, self-annihilation, imposed by tradition, colour and race, ultimately finds liberation in love when Adam goes through the same process of initiation.

Nettie is the little sister of Celie, and a strong character has been portrayed through the eyes of Alice Walker. But fate showed no mercy in the initial years of her life. Nettie educated and strong was dearer to her step-father than her sister. But Nettie also gradually became a victim of dirty gaze of her step-father. Shielded by Celie in most of the times, Nettie was the greatest source of inspiration, pride and confidante of Celie. Days were rolling by, when Nettie all of a sudden became an object of lust (dirty looks) for a man called Mr. Albert. He tried to become unusually close to Nettie. But Alphonso, step-father of Celie and Nettie wanted somehow to get rid of Celie first and so lured Albert towards Celie, uttering words like:

She ugly...But she ain't stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it' (Seventh letter).

Reluctant though, Mr. ----- married Celie out of spite. Nettie to flee from the clutches of her step-father came to stay with her sister for shelter, and love. But by the dictates of character, Mr. Albert did not stop his dirty glances towards Nettie. Celie out of fear asked Nettie to leave the place and be by her own, and be in touch with her through letters. In the process of time, Nettie became a constant companion to a missionary couple and coincidentally they adopted the discarded children of Celie. Nettie's role transformed to an aunt and a friend to these children who were absolutely fond of Nettie and looked more like Nettie for the virtue of being her sister's children. While the missionary couple was in Africa, the swampy, sordid, dismal nature of the place deadened her spirits and Corrine started doubting Nettie with Samuel, which led to her insanity and ultimately death though reconciling with the fact that Samuel and Nettie were more like brother and sister and never played foul with Corrine. Till here we can however mark the first part of the story and hence forth starts a new episode in Nettie's life in holy union with

Samuel. Nettie united with Celie years after, first through letters and then physically with Celie and her children, Adam and Olivia. So liberation takes in the form of unification in love first with Samuel, Adam, Oliva and finally with her beloved sister Celie, and most importantly her work as a missionary that helped her to live a healthy mind.

In the study of the female characters of Alice Walker's The Color Purple, it has put in the picture of Celie, Nettie, Sophia, Mary Agnes, Tashi and as women whose fate turns out to be the characteristic fate of women as laid in The Old Testament. Walker's women characters turn out to be Eve's daughters according to The Old Testament, in the first book of Genesis. The book states the subservient status of women which always position them below men and is treated as mere objects; Here Eve's lowliness is established in Genesis 3:16 when the Supreme power (God) discovers that she has tasted the forbidden fruit of knowledge. The line states the dictate of God as "Unto the woman He said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."(KJV, Genesis 3:16) The word rule used in Genesis 3:16 comes from the Hebrew *ma'shal* (????), which can mean to rule, to have, reign and to have power (Strong's). Different translations of the bible translate the word differently but the meaning remains similar. For instance, the Living Bible translates the word as "master" and the Modern Language Bible translates it as "dominate". This single word, "rule", powerfully communicates Eve's position beneath Adam. Because Eve committed a transgression against God she is punished by being made totally subservient to Adam's will. Eve is transformed from Adam's helper into Adam's slave or property. All these women will be inferior at birth and will inherit Eve's subservient role. " (The words are quoted from The Representation of Women and their Social Position in the Holy Bible: Renee D Mattila).To support the aforementioned history on the oppression of women there is also this article which states that "Women's unequal role in society is justified in terms of the role and functions she has to carry out in giving birth and raising children in the family. Women's subordination is thus seen as based on her biology and is thus her destiny."(On the Origins of Women's Oppression: Pat Brewer). Supporters of Marxism contradict this evolution of women's suffering as not biological, but social and have evolved over time.

In the same lineage of The Old Testament, we have gathered enough evidence of the pitiable and subjugated status of Celie, Nettie, Sophia, Mary Agnes, and Tashi who have endured torturous suffering in the hand of the 'other gender', race, culture, and victimized like Eve's daughters.

But defying the age-old theories and reversing the law of Holy Bible, to the surprise of self-possessed believers, the characters find salvation and emerge victorious by defying ages of slavery, domination and man-made laws. They are the modern heroines and paving the path of liberation for future generations giving the strength and sunshine to outdo the aberrant norms of society.

The main theme of the book is triumph of good over evil that is the first indication of oppression followed by liberation. Interestingly the novel sailed through, "...oppressed Afro-American slaves moved from object to subject, from silence into speech". (Alice Walker's The Color

Purple and History : Kevin Patrick Mahoney.) In the journey of the novel, we find there is a sort of inter-connectivity between the characters, where the black woman influences each black woman and they attain liberty through them also. “The story of Celie, is a simple Southern woman--abused first by her father and then by the man to whom her father eventually marries her off--whose confidence and self-awareness are awakened under the guidance of a free spirited cabaret singer, Shug Avery.”(Interview, Ebony, May, 1992: Charles Whitaker) Again it is this Shug who proves a turning stone for the submissive Mary Agnes to gain her self identity through music. A single free-spirited woman paints colourfully the colourless lives of Celie and Squeak. Celie and Nettie, the two sisters live for each other and finally re-lives for each other, and liberate their souls. Corrine, being a missionary, in the generic sense had already a “dramatic gesture of racial uplift,” but also had profound impact on the life of Nettie, transforming her life from nothingness to a meaningful existence. Sophia, the daughter-in-law of Sophia becomes a source of undaunted strength and pillar to Celie and Squeak, which leads them to their development. So the bonding between the black women especially as depicted in the novel, between Celie and Nettie, Sophia and Celie and Squeak, and Celie and Shug Avery, speak “a great deal about the liberating possibilities of the bonds between black women” and the women characters can be real example who provide warmth in the lives of other women and is a constant source of liberation from oppression.

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