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Affirming Black Womanist Self in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Alice Walker introduced and explicated the concept of “womanism” in “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose” (1983). “Womanism” refers to African American feminism or the feminism of women of colour. It is derived from “womanish,” a folk term peculiar to the African American lexical tradition, which connotes to a characteristic of boldness, premature adulthood, and a spirit of inquiry inappropriate to children, particularly female children, but which also suggests capability, responsibility, and leadership. A womanist, according to Alice Walker, loves women, womanhood, and women’s culture. A womanist is committed to the welfare of an entire people and claims the universality and diversity of the black race. A womanist values African American experience in general and African American womanhood in particular. According to Walker, feminism is an empowered form of feminism just as purple is a bold and empowered version of lavender. Womanism is believed to address the triple action of sex, race and class on African American women and to compensate for the traditional loopholes of feminist and African American liberation discourse that have excluded the African American women. The concept of womanism, therefore, removes African American women’s discourse from subjugation to traditional white feminist and African American male discourse. A dominant feature associated with the concept of womanism is sisterhood that decries the practice of certain women to exploit feminism in pursuit of their own opportunistic ambitions in a male-dominated society. The sisterhood values the advancement of an entire group. This notion of sisterhood became evident in nineteenth century African American female writings where autobiography was the form used to explore the evils of patriarchal, slave-holding society in which white women were as oppressive as white men. Womanism has been a dominating ethos in the twentieth century. The works explore the issues of gender, race as well as local and international culture in addition to national and global politics and economics. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker delineates the same concept of womanism. Celie, the protagonist of the novel, affirms her black womanhood through her relationship with Shug Avery. She celebrates her black womanist consciousness by liberating herself from patriarchal domination. “To do so, she reinterprets history by initiating an alternative myth – the goddess before God, the mother before the father, womb envy rather than penis envy forming community of women who facilitate one another’s growth in course of the action in the novel” (Badode 36). As the novel begins, Celie is portrayed as the victim of her step father’s and her husband’s sexual oppression. Both men have internalized the White myth of male domination and hence leave no stone unturned to practice the same. The novel archives the life of a black girl Celie, who irrespective of illiteracy, poverty, mental and physical exploitation, goes beyond her predicament through self – knowledge.

Alice Walker adopts an epistolary form of narration in the novel, Celie’s story is unfolded to us in the form of letters first written to God and then to her sister Nettie. Her writing letters to God is suggestive of her only way to survive the emotional, physical and spiritual abuse that she suffers at the hands of her step father. Celie’s sexual victimization at the hands of her step father is put forth in the very first letter of the novel. He exploits her sexually and later orders her, “You

better not tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (1). He gets Celie married to Albert who persists in beating Celie whenever he feels like. It is in these moments of extreme pain that Celie writes, "It all I can do not to cry I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man" (23). Albert comes out to be a typical husband who hides Nettie's letters from Celie thus exploiting her emotionally as well. However, it is through the letters between Celie and Nettie that Walker succeeds in presenting a black womanist discourse. The two sets of letters – Celie's self – narration and Nettie's narration of Olinka experience, collide to formulate Walker's womanist ideology. Both recreate a new "history" – the story of the universal oppression and suppression of black women, both marginalize the historical discourse thriving on the imperialism in Africa and racism in America.

Moreover, it is the relationship between Celie and Shug that forms an important part of the story and it is through this relationship that Celie survives the odds meted out to her. Shug represents a character who does not accept domesticity and enjoys her sexual freedom thus rejecting the view that sexual freedom is limited to men only. Shug makes Celie aware of the latter's plights so much so that she is empowered to address them. Right from evoking "Mister's name, Albert or leading Celie to reexamine her relationship to an anthropomorphic God, or providing her with Nettie's letters, which Albert has hidden, Shug becomes an empowering agent for Celie. This is strongly suggested in the scene in which Shug after arguing that 'it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it'. It forces Celie to account for her personal world view and come to terms with her oppression. Shug says;

Man corrupt everything. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock. (79)

Shug acts as a catalyst in bringing transformation in Celie that allow her to liberate herself from her oppressive condition. Shug stimulates Celie to celebrate her existence and reveals the mysteries of the body and sexual experience to her. She inspires Celie to explore her body, finding and knowing with pride her own body. Shug becomes a mother for Celie that she never had, "she protects Celie from Albert, gives knowledge about her body, the essential spirituality of the world, retrieves back her lost sister, Nettie and Nettie's letters from the custody of Albert and also makes her financially independent". At the end of the novel, Celie as a new emergent woman, addresses God as "Dear God, Dear stars, Dear trees, Dear sky, Dear people, Dear everything" (292). Sofia and Shug both stand united against sexist and racist tyranny. Nettie too helps her in breaking linguistic silence through letters and gives her knowledge of the world and reality that she is part of. Mary Agnes helps her by giving the gift of creativity through designing and marketing pants. "Celie draws her literary strength less from the 'books of men' than from the 'tongues of women' " (Badode). Celie affirms her existence by retorting, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly . . . but I'm here" (187). This last affirmation "I'm here" leads to her self-recognition and self creation. Walker, in the end presents Celie as a black woman who asserts her valuable black self.

Alice Walker presents the tradition of "Quilting" as a form of freedom for women. She speaks about this dependence of quilting and writing in her essay, "Writing *The Color Purple*".

Quilting, in African American tradition, leads to female bonding as women sit together in groups and make quilts. The joint quilting which Celie does with Sofia, her daughter-in-law, marks another phase of Celie's journey towards selfhood. Their quilt-making is a process of healing. (Baskaran 361)

In a *Newsweek* interview, Walker remarks; "I liberated Celie from her own history. I wanted her to be happy." Walker creates a work where an oppressed black woman rediscovers herself without any political effort and any radical change in the society. When Celie is angry with Mr -----, she wants to slit his throat with a razor; instead she takes the needle and begins creation. She also tells him: "We all have to start us somewhere if we want to do better and our own self is what we have to find" (278). Thus all the women characters in the novel make it easy for Celie to undergo her journey of selfhood. Walker puts forth the special bond of sisterhood in *The Color Purple* leading to their emotional dependence on one another quite contrary to the heterogeneous relationship between men and women.

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