

Violence in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract: *The Afro-American womanist Alice Walker who was awarded with the Pulitzer prize in 1983 for her path-breaking epistolary work *The Color Purple* (1982) advocates women-bonding and female creativity to derive strength and inspiration to survive the plethora of violence suffered by the triply burdened Afro-American women. This paper focuses on the multifaceted violence suffered by them especially the protagonist Celie. The novel honestly explores the damaging effects of male domination upon Celie's spirit and explores the frank treatment of sexism within black community and also white racial oppression of blacks both in US and in Africa in the period between the turn of the century and Second World War.*

Keywords: *Psychological oppression, sexual oppression, rape, incest, dehumanization, racial discrimination.*

When she tried to defend herself by telling him the children were just frightened of him because he was drunk he beat her senseless. That was the first time he knocked out a tooth. He knocked out one and loosened one or two more. She wanted to leave him, but there was no place to go.

Alice Walker

While African American writers in the 1960s and 1970s, especially during black nationalist movement intended to emphasize on community and revolutionary future, Alice Walker and other African American women writers like Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange etc. complicated the notions of black unity and revolution by showing that their utopian ideals would not be achieved without paying due attention to the relationships between black men and women and addressing the specific issue of black woman's lives. Violence, especially in domestic space, curbs women's resistance and fractures female subjectivity as it poses threat to both women's wholeness and the establishment of a whole black nation – the professed goal of black nationalism.

In tracing the life of one woman, Celie, from the early 1930s to the mid 1940s, *The Color Purple* reveals the plethora of violence in the form of harsh economic, social and emotional crisis facing the blacks, especially women in the rural South during the first half of the twentieth century. Celie's relationship with her step-father and husband is characterized by psychological and sexual oppression in the patriarchal society in America. The epistolary form of narration addressed to God and the tone of factual reporting seems to be a stylistic method used by Walker to delineate the extent of vulnerability experienced by Celie that she can't even muster up the courage to discuss with her mother or any other human being the agony she was experiencing in life. Celie's 'Pa' is a "walking phallus" (Badode 36) who tries to find a substitute in Celie, when her mother doesn't respond to his sexual advances. Consequently fourteen year old Celie is raped by her Pa repeatedly and the graphic description of the rape forces the readers to confront the ugliness of child abuse:

He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say you gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up against my heep and sort of wiggle it around and grab hold my tithes. Then he pushes his thing around my pussy. When that hurt I cry. He starts to choke me saying you better shut up and get used to it. (19)

Equally pathetic is the callousness with which Pa takes her two babies away from her and then arranges to have her married to a neighbour of his own age. Celie's narration of her moments of marital sexual involvement with Albert is similarly dehumanizing, in which the conjugal act assumes the form of rape.

Mr. ___ come git me to take care of his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me. I say. (109).

Its much later that Celie learns that Pa is not her biological father. But the apparent incest which opens *The Color Purple* sets the aura of sexual violence which permeates the novel.

Celie endures a barrage of rape and brutality that causes her to experience her body as fragmented and as being possessed by her victimizers. As Gabriele Griffin observes we can see that "the body constitutes the site of oppression and become the source of permanent anxiety. The body dominates the novel... The central character has no control over her body and her physical environment. Victimized from an early age she is the object of perpetual abuse (21). A similar comment is voiced by Deborah Mc Dowell in her essay 'Regarding Family Matters' in which she cautions the ways in which black women's bodies are reduced to the terrain upon which white and black men enact a struggle for power and control over literary landscape.

The, combination of psychic oppression and direct physical assault to which Celie is subjected on a regular basis results in her sense of loss of identify and individuality. Celie's marriage to Mr. ___ is the end of violence on the part of her father but it is a new beginning of violence on the part of her husband whom she denotes as Mr. The patriarchal society gives the right to a husband that he can use his wife as he wants and he can abuse her in anyway he wishes. This is seen in Mr. ___'s answe 'cause she my wife' (30) to his son Harpo's question why he beats Celie. Celie realizes the futility of her existence with Albert and his children. Celie submits to his ill-treatment and accepts everything he does. Called ugly and worthless very often by both her Pa' and her husband, she comes to accept their judgment. She simply endures, wanting only to survive and to do so she retreats into a numb, unfeeling state and drastically curtails her emotional life.

It's all I can do not to cry I make myself wood. I say to myself,
Celle, you a tree. That how come I know trees fear man. (23).

The fact that Celie in moments of extreme physical pain transforms herself into a tree is a telling example of "a black woman's proximity to the passive suffering and agony of nature". (Badode 38). In the same way when people compliment her on how good she is to Mr. ----'s children, she says, "I be good to them. But I don't feel anything for them. Patting Harpo back not even like patting a dog. Its more like patting a piece of wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chifferobe" (31). Such comparisons with nature suggest dehumanization, retreat from feeling, a conscious aloofness of individual from feeling, a conscious aloofness of individual from surroundings as a result of lack of self-worth and self-esteem which is testified by Celie's cancellation of the word's 'I am' on the very first page of the novel.

Similarly her acceptance of her husband's beloved Shug Avery, which causes a great deal of psychological violence against her is also ample proof of the fact that she possesses no sense of individuality in front of her own eyes. Mr. ---brings the sick Shug for her cure and orders Celie to stay in the room with her all the time at her beck and call. Sofia's questions about her patience instigates Celie who vents out her frustration regarding all sorts of agony she has been subjected to during her lifetime. She says:

I can't ever remember the last time I felt mad I say, I used to get mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is, I couldn't stay mad at her. Couldn't be mad my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible says Honor father and mother no matter what Sometimes Mr. _ get on me pretty hard..... But he my husband. I shrug my shoulder. This life soon be over. I say. Heaven last all ways. (47)

Celie's only confirmation of existence to herself is the letters initially written to God both in hope and hopelessness. And the little ounce of hope left in her is lost when she discovers that Mr. ___ has been intercepting Nettie's letters addressed to her. Its then she makes her strongest religious statement addressing God, "You must be sleep" (183).

The oppressions that Celie is subjected to results in a lack of purpose and direction in her life. The absence of purposeful activity generates a vacancy in women's lives and has been discussed by many critics like Betty Friedan who had commented that without a purpose woman lose the sense of who they are as it is the purpose which gives the human pattern to one's life. Gender oppression is also a main factor operating in the oppressive paternal ideology in which a father's control of the family's private resources effectively gives him license to violate his women. It reveals the family's weak internal structures in African – American families where a girl child is not safe even in her own family. The word 'domestic' usually implies the sense of protection, comfort and the place where one can feel one's own identity. However the various forms of brutal violence like incest and rape perpetrated within home reveals how the relationships of mother, daughter, wife or sister have lost their meaning for the male sex. Family as the site of oppression is an important concern for Walker. Walker's vision of womanism brings out the fact that black women. This aspect has been criticized by various critics saying that Walker is waging treacherous assault upon a mythologically unified black community.

It is interesting to note Walker's use of the name "Mem" for the protagonist in her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, whose name when translated is "the same" indicates the prevalence of domestic abuse in homes all over the world and the devastating aspect of violence on women universally.

As discussed in the earlier chapter, the prominent cause of domestic violence and gender discrimination is the result of the anger of black males oppressed by white society. For instance Grange & his son Broomfield oppressed by white society take out their frustration by brutalizing their women in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The reader is made to feel that a personal bonding between the sexes is difficult as the males are too frustrated by the oppression and discrimination of the white society. They become very harsh and incapable of showing any understating and care towards the females and intend to dominate them. Walker's texts present whites as concrete and continual threats to the black character's lives. As the novel takes place in the South during the Jim Crow era, the presence of whites in or around the community has more immediate and painful consequences than in many other black relationships. In such an environment, blacks have little protection form white attack. This is particularly true when one considers that Celie's and Nettie's

biological father was a wealthy man in the community and that it was his wealth, which surpasses that of many whites, that leads to his being lynched.

Male domination coupled with racial violence engenders a diabolic power which crushes even strong-willed Sofia. Sofia's plight stands testimony to the fact that no amount of strength of an individual can bring a radical change to a group violence. Racial violence is overtly depicted through the incidents that happen to Sofia as she refuses to serve Mayor's wife as a maid. The devastating experiences of slavery and violent treatment by whites that Sofia is exposed to in the jail, which she shares with her family, would move the heart of any reader.

They got one in a little store room up and under the house, hardly bigger than Odessa's porch, and just about as warm in the winter's time. I'm at the beck and call all night and all day (100)

The discrimination of race dominates to such an extent that Sofia is not allowed to sit in the front seat with the mayor's wife while teaching her to drive, pointing to her that "This is the South". Neeru Tandon observes, "the jail that Sofia is held is a metaphor for all black people caged by racism. For others, though they do not serve in a literal prison and instead and confined to servitude and domesticity within their homes" (Ray 62)

Interestingly Sofia never acquiesces to her husband's patriarchal authority though he continually attempts to dominate her. In stark contrast to Celie's silent obedience in Mr. ___'s home, Sofia demands to be treated as an equal by Harpo, while Harpo tries to imitate his father to rule in the private sphere.

Harpo want to know what to do to make Sofia mind. He sit out on the porch with Mr. He say, I tell her one thing, she does another. Never do what I say. Always back talk (37).

We can see that Mr__ Pa, Harpo represent the patriarchal fathers who identify with the racist violence of (white) culture in the South by miming that violence in their relations with their sons. Black fathers shaped by white racism try to gain access to manhood through the re-creation of a violent patriarchy in their own homes. This subtly hints at how 'whiteness' becomes a backdrop for these intra racial, masculine assertions of power.

The latter section of the novel, dealing with Nettie's letters about Africa, is in the form of other African works and the portrayal of violence, though is local, the causes they address is indeed global. The very idea of Africa in western discourse has Africa geographically situated as a place of violence. Nettie writes about how Africans' land was taken over, without 'compensation, to build roads and how the villagers were forced to pay for water which had been their natural right. Nettie sadly points out how,

Children of eight and over are ... workers in the fields. In order to pay rent for the barracks, taxes on the land and to bring water, food and wood, everyone must work. (205)

Olinka girls are denied education and woman are defined only in terms of the value they have for their husbands. Nettie is told by one of the Olinka women, "A girl is nothing to herself, only to her husband can she become something: the mother of his children" (162).

Celie's daughter-in-law, the African woman Tashi, also the protagonist of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, has to endure cultural violence to achieve a deeper bond with her African roots. She becomes a victim of her people's ceremonies, a rite that years earlier had left her sister dead in a pool of blood. The ritual female circumcision and facial scarring are practices which leave African women joyless and spiritually dead as they struggle "to reconcile the two warring cultural consciousness" (Ray 63)

Walker herself has been quoted saying that her sense of activism as a writer, against the plethora of violence against women in the form of gender discrimination, imperialism in Africa and racism in America is voiced in her works such as *The Color Purple*. To conclude, it can be said that the perpetrators of violence in the novel are themselves victims of sexism and racism. For instance Harpo beats Sofia only after his father implies that Sofia's resistance makes Harpo less of a man. Mr.___ is violent and mistreats his family much like his own tyrannical father treated him. And the characters are largely aware of the cyclic nature of violence as can be seen in Sofia's rejection of Eleanor Jane's son Reynolds and the white race as a whole, which is caused by her deep sense of pain and hurt being separated from her children for twelve long years after which they hardly recognize her. She says, "I don't have nothing to offer him" (272)

Richard K. Prieb, in an article "Literature, Community and Violence: Reading African Literature in the West, Post 9/22" remarks how representations of violence in any literature as in life, does three things, in broad human terms:

They may overwhelm us with a sense of banality of violence, they may impress us our capacity for the demonic, or they may serve to leave us with some sense of the sublime.

And we can see *The Color Purple* doing all these things. The novel examines violence and its potential to act as a destabilizing agent of identity, subjectivity and selfhood and it also shows how the lines of demarcation between perpetrators, victims and observers are blurred in the face of violence.

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