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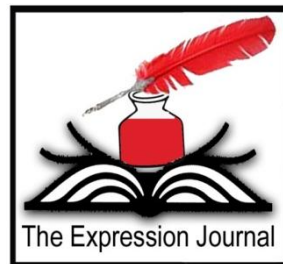
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Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

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REGENERATION OF CELIE AS THE NEW EMERGING LIBERATED WOMAN IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOUR PURPLE*

R. ESTHER RESHMA

PhD Scholar in English (PT)

Reg. No. MKU21PFOL10268

Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai-625021

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Abstract

As an African-American writer, Alice Walker has earned her name and fame. Alice Walker has won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983 and National Book Award also the same year. She has received many other prestigious awards. Her notable works are *Meridian* (1975), *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). Apart from it, she has written several poetry collections and other non-fiction works also. This paper aims at projecting Alice Walker as one of the most versatile and influential authors in African American and feminist womanist writing in the twentieth century whose major concern, as a black womanist, novelist, is an the black women themselves getting preoccupied with the spiritual survival of the black people, specifically committed to exploring the expressions, the insanities the loyalties and the triumphs of black woman and also presenting the problems, conflicts and aspirations of the blacks and depicting them as life-like characters. It neatly explores the writer's personal sufferings, and humiliation on account of her gender and race and also her fortitude and agility to transcend her racist and sexist circumstances with particular reference to the character portrayal of Celie, who, though black and ugly, gets regenerated as the new emergent liberated women.

Keywords

African-American Literature, Alice Walker, Feminism, Race, Ethnicity, Struggle, Individualism, Transformation, Sexism, Survival.

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Alice Walker occupies a significant place as one of the most versatile and influential authors in African-American and feminist-Womanist writing in the twentieth century. As a black womanist novelist, she is after the 'Whole truth' of African- American life. However, her major concern is on the black women themselves. She made it very clear in an interview with John Oberien thus:

"I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival of whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the expressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women." (192)

Walker presents the problems, conflicts and aspirations of the blacks and depicts them as life like characters. Her personal sufferings and humiliation on account of her gender and race enabled her to enter deep into the lives of her characters and became empathetic towards them, especially the Black, women. While challenging the social definition of women Walker's women characters denounce the past tainted with white values and forge a head for a collective vision of black woman hood.

Such a notable writer was born on 9th February in 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia as the eighth child of share-cropper's Willie Leo and Minnie Lou Grant Walkers. She grew up in that small southern town at a time when many blacks, like her parents, worked in the fields for a pittance and when whites exerted control over practically every aspect of black life. Her childhood was filled with the stories of the past lynching. The young Walker was affected by the pervasiveness of the violent racist system of South especially the impact it had on black families. In an interview in *Library Journal* on 15th June, 1970, she explained how this relationship affected her first novel, *The Third Life of Grand Copeland*:

I was curious to know why people in familiar (specially black familiar) are often cruel to each other and how much of this cruelty is caused by outside forces such as various social injustices segregation, unemployment etc. (TCP 260)

Perhaps Walkers was practically attuned to the relationship between social forces and personal development because at a young age, she lived through the feeling of being an outcast. Despite the ooppressiveness of the racist southern system, she had many excellent teachers.

They saved her from "feeling alone; from worrying that the world she was stretching to find, might not exist" (261). And they lent her books, for her, reading was a necessary element in her development. "Books became my world because the world I was in was very hard" (261).

At an early stage, Alice Walker saw black people working together to accomplish goals necessary to their survival and development. As a little girl, she walked and played with black convicts who were accused of murders. Like the character Men in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker's mother created art as part of her daily life against the pressures of working in the fields and this tendency of her mother has given Walker insight not only into the lives of black women but also into the essential nature of art as a human process of illuminating and cherishing life. Writing literally saved Walker's life. She married Melvyn R. Leventhal, a civil rights lawyer in 1967 and got divorced in 1976. Her married life was not a happy one, but writing was a source of happiness to her. In her words, "Writing also clarified for me how much I love being alive" (261) and it is this feeling that influences *To Hell with Dying* her published short story. She has published the following novels: 1. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, 2. *Meridian* 3. *The Color Purple* 4. *Possessing* 5. *The Secret of Joy*.

The very first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is the story of Grange Copeland and it also the story of the sufferings, pains and hardships that black women - Margaret, Mem, Josie face in their life. Their sufferings lead them to understand their situations to launch a struggle to gain a meaningful place in the black world. Her second novel *Meridian* is about the female protagonist of the same name who gradually awakens from her subordinate status as a black female, daughter, wife and mother to her own self and tries to become the maternal provider of the larger black community. In spite of Meridian's painful private experiences, she is born a new and succeeds in evolving a new self, thereby emerging as a leader of black race. As the first novel by a black woman to win a Pulitzer Prize it provided controversy for its portrayal of black male oppression of black women. Alice Walker defines herself as a black feminist. But she claims to be a 'Womanist'. She has defined the term 'Womanist' in her anthology *In Search of our Mother Garden: Womanist Prose* thus:

A woman who loves other woman sexually and or non-sexually appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexual and or other women. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Moreover, 'womanist' is one who loves music, loves dance, loves the moon, love the spirit, loves love and food and roundness, loves struggle, loves the folk, lover herself. (IV)

Walker's third novel *The Color Purple* does exemplify her belief that history is a necessary element of depth, that nothing is a product of the immediate present. Her subject matter is also emphatically womanist for the emphasis in *The Color Purple* is on the oppression black women experience in their relationship with black men. Like many of the protagonists in her short stories, the heroines of her third novel triumph despite the tremendous odds against them. In *The Color Purple*, Walker adds another dimension to the sexism, black women experience. Through Nettie, Celie's sister, who escapes her condition in the South to become a missionary, Walker describes the subordination of women to men in Africa. She therefore suggests that sexism for black women doesn't derive from racism, though it is qualitatively affected by it. "We're going to debunk the myth that Africa is a haven for black people especially black women. We've been the mule of the world there and the Mule of the word here" (270). Nettie's letters also provide other dimension of history. They graphically demonstrate Afro-American's

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knowledge of their ancestral Olinka to Africa, which contrary to American myth predates the black power movement of the 1960; and they emphasize concrete ways in which colonization disrupts African life and values.

All the novels of Alice Walker are inter-related, for the characters, Margaret Copeland Mem Brownfield and Ruth are together incarnated as Celie in *The Color Purple*. Celie is in the beginning like Margaret Copeland. Then she begins her transformation with the help of Shug and she resembles Mem and in the end, she becomes emergent as Ruth and Meridian. Walker presents the problems, conflicts and aspirations of the blacks and depicts them as life-like characters. Rita Felski affirms this when she says that Walker's art grew out of her own isolation, "Her writing helped her to overcome the pain and begin to unearth a talent that would allow others the chance to heal" (Felski 19).

Walker's main concern in her writings is a commitment to struggle against the multiple oppression Black women face and she urges that the liberation must entail the wholeness of the entire black community. Celie, the protagonist of *The Color Purple* writes letters to God because she has no one else to write. In the beginning she is in a pitiable condition as she is like the Mule. Being born in a poor family, she is forced to overhear her mother and father. Celie addresses her letters to God sharing her confidences with him, who serves as the epistolary confidant in the narrative discourses of *The Color Purple*. She views God initially as a man with whom she can share her confidences and who can provide her the necessary protection from the world around. Initially, in her traumatized, isolated state of mind God works as a 'shadow confidant' to whom she can neither mail her letters, nor can she completely convey her thoughts, leave alone the sharing of her feelings and emotions. As a 'shadow confidant' God, however, performs the dual function of listening to her story and also of providing a repository for her confessions. The first letter combines these two functions when she writes:

Dear God,

I am fourteen years old. I have been always
a good girl. May be you can give me a sign

letting me know what is happening to me. (12)

With the laconic opening remarks, she tells the tale of sexual oppression of her mama and by another one sexual abuse by pa later on. This unsigned letter therefore, is symbolic of the sexual abuse the Black woman by Black man; a lover or a husband or a brother. Another character Sofia represents the black woman who wants to fight for her own dignity. Sofia's struggle is for dignity as an individual who is both black and female. Though her struggle is not always successful, it provides an opportunity to her to display her fortitude and agility to transcend her racist and sexist circumstances. Her varying responses to her environment illustrate the need for the development of the black society which allows for an individual to define one's meaningful existence within the larger American society. Naturally, the very presence and activities of Sofia make tremendous impact on Celie's thinking. Thus, Sofia unknowingly convinces Celie that the black women suffer not because of any inbuilt disabilities and faults in them but because of their race and lack of will to fight. Celie, a black girl who suffers from self-scorn learns to love herself and also other black men and women and becomes aware of the womanist tradition of self-reliance and self-esteem. Celie, the Mule has been transformed as Celie, the emergent. For becoming emergent, many women help her and Alice Walker through Celie, advocates sisterhood. Her answer to oppression is through female Celie's friendship with Shug Avery, her love for Sofia and her affection for Nettie help her in the transformation process. The degenerated Celie, who thought that she is poor, black and ugly, is

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now regenerated as the new emergent liberated women and she attains the intellectual process referred to by Adrienne Rich by overcoming her negative attitudes.

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