

## REVISITING THE NARRATIVE OF WOMEN'S SUPPRESSION IN ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE

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### Abstract

*Most of Alice Walker's works are dissertations on the plight of black women and deeply ingrained patriarchal structures. This article traces the elements of women's suppression implied in Walker's *The Color Purple*, and the root cause of this suppression is due to the characters' ignorant demeanor. The article also posits an attitudinal transformation in the characters that awakens consciousness and leads to the dismantling of patriarchal structures and it also proposes certain impactful tools to eradicate patriarchal oppression.*

**Keywords:** *Patriarchy, Male-dominance, Womanism, Attitudinal transformation*

“He thinks man should have dominion over the Earth, which includes land and water, women, animals and children.” (*The Color Purple* XV)

By quoting this line, which is the essence of the Bible's saying, Walker illustrates the position of man in the universe, where he has a free grasp on all that exists in the world, including women. In her novel, Walker discusses the idea of God, which has historically been connected with 'Man'. Walker claims that “God is ‘God’ Everyone knows what that means- what He...(always masculine of course)”(xv) writing this Walker presents a patriarchal viewpoint that points to a distorted understanding of the Bible.

*The Color Purple*, under the canopy of “Womanism,” sheltered the black community without being biased against men or women. The present article analyzes the patriarchal structure of society in various spheres of life and this particular series of discrimination was continued due to the ignorance of women (characters) shown in the novel. The structure of patriarchy is not an overnight construction; rather, it is the result of long-practiced oppressions that men deliberately did to have an upper hand in society. Gerda Lerner, in her book *Creation of Patriarchy*, opines that history is the amalgamation of recorded and unrecorded events and these unrecorded events are manipulated by the male centric society. Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (20) and the structure was so tightly knit that women could not read the mindset behind this constructed pattern of society.

*The Color Purple*, begins with the exploitation of a girl child by a male character whom she believed to be her father. She is merely fourteen-years-old and is writing about her appalling experiences in letters that she addresses to God. “You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy,”(3) and the salutation “Dear

God”(3). She conveys the message to God that she is continuously being raped by her father. Through this, the novelist touches upon both the physical and spiritual aspects. Writing letters displays two different ideas: firstly, that God is the only medium to convey one’s indescribable feelings, and secondly, that writing letters is such a powerful weapon that it can reduce one’s mental stress. Through her letters, Celie writes about her repressed feelings which she never dares to express to anyone. Later on, Celie gives birth to a boy named Adam and a girl named Olivia, whom Alphonso takes away. Suppression of a woman by another woman is also observable in the novel; when Celie’s mother asks her about the father of her children, Celie’s silence makes her mother irritated, as Celie writes, “ My mam dead. She die screaming and cussing”(4). Celie, who is now being tamed by Alphonso, is now forced to enter a loveless marriage with Mister, and here Celie experiences the same matrix of abuse. Mister is another character who continues the chain of suppression and abuse that was first initiated by Alphonso. Celie again experiences an unhappy conjugal life where she is treated merely as a sex object for Mister. Whereas after leaving her home, Celie is worried about her younger sister, Nettie, whom she thinks is not safe in the company of her father. Nettie runs away from Alphonso and takes shelter at Mister’s cottage. Mister is attracted to Nettie and his act compels Celie to keep her sister away from him; therefore, she gives Nettie the address of a black woman whom she first met in a store. Nettie leaves Celie with the promise that she will keep on writing letters to Celie. The saga then continues with the entry of Harpo, who has an affair with a young girl named Sofia. Later on, he marries Sofia. Harpo has the same tendency toward women as his father. He tries to tame and mind Sofia, as his father used to do with Celie. Sofia never surrenders her will in front of Harpo, as Celie writes, “What he do that for? She reach down and grab a piece of stove wood and whack him cross the eyes... She throw him over her back. He fall bam up gainst the stove” (37) Celie was accustomed to Mister’s mistreatment. Earlier it is noticeable that Celie instigates Harpo to beat Sofia but later she favours Sofia. The power of sisterhood is traced here, when Sofia’s conversation with Celie enables her to revolt against Mister.

The novel then unfolds the character of Shug Avery, who is Mister’s past love. Celie feels jealous of Mister and Shug’s relationship yet she nurses Shug when she is ill and with the passage of time, they become friends. Later, their friendship turns into sexual intimacy and their sexual intimacy awakens Celie’s consciousness. It is here that the traces of lesbianism are found, which leads to the dismemberment of patriarchal structure and enables Celie to revolt against patriarchal structure. The mirror scene, plays a vital role in the evolution of Celie’s character. It happens for the first time with Celie when she becomes aware of her sexual organs by seeing them in the mirror that Shug gave her. Celie experiences the orgasm for the first time and it gives birth to a transformed Celie. The presence of Shug not only nurtures Celie’s consciousness but also saves her from domestic violence. Shug helps Celie locate those letters which were hidden by Mister. The letter unravels the mystery that Alphonso was their stepfather. By the end of the novel, Alphonso dies, leaving his property to Celie and Nettie. Both the sisters are united and enjoy financial freedom. Harpo and Mister are now changed and they cooperate in household chores. It is quite noticeable that Celie invests her free time in sewing quilts and pants. Later, Celie gives her hobby a concrete shape by establishing an unisex enterprise called Folkspant, Unlimited, which is the symbol of equality, as Celie writes, “Anybody can wear them.”(246). Shug’s love for Celie proves to be a helping tool that enables Celie to know about her anatomy and transforms Celie into a strong woman who establishes her own kingdom.

By the end of the book, Celie restores all her lost esteem ,prestige and most importantly her lost body which was appropriated by the male character from the very beginning of the novel and recovers herself from a toxic relationship.

Alphonso is the stepfather of Celie. It is through the character of Alphonso that the chain of women's suppression and male dominance gets started. He seduces Celie and threatens her not to tell anyone. Unaware of the situation and what is being done with her, Celie indulges herself in household activities and takes care of the kids. It is male dominance that has suppressed women to such an extent that she has to tolerate whatever is going on. Celie considers herself an ugly and illiterate girl. Though she is performing her household duties perfectly yet she is mistreated. Society believes that women should be under tutelage until they die. Celie, in the beginning of the novel, is tamed by her stepfather and then by Mister but as the novel proceeds, the reader sees an attitudinal transformation in Celie's character and her writing, respectively. Through the character of Celie, the novelist dismantles the patriarchal structure of society and breaks its rules and regulations. Celie is doing all those household chores for which she is not being paid. This is the socially constructed structure of society which is not only traceable in the novel but also outside the novel. On a sociocultural level, this structure is also visible. Alphonso expects that Celie should behave in a predictable way. Alphonso, who is the typical example of a male centric society, forces Celie to marry Mister. That shows the mentality that Celie's destiny is decided by the male characters presented in the novel. The protagonist has accepted this subjugation and oppression as a part of her daily life, as she has only seen what she has been shown by society.

Harpo, the son of Mr., gives a crystal-clear image of a male's mentality about women. He speaks to Celie about Sofia, "Well how you specs to make her mind? Wives are like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (35), Sofia is a strong character, as presented by the novelist. At first glance, it seems that by birth she is a strong character but after deep analysis of the text, it becomes clear that Sofia too has faced many problems. She says, "All my life I had to fight" (39) Sofia loves Harpo and she is fully committed to him but not at the cost of her freedom. She opposes him badly; in fact, she beats him badly when Harpo tries to tame her. Sofia says, "A girl child isn't safe in family of men"(39). Upbringing plays a vital role in the evolution of a personality and discrimination starts in the family at its primary level. Celie's illusion about female patterned behaviour is shattered by Sofia. Harpo tries to tame Sofia but fails in his mission, he feels ashamed of his masculinity. Shug Avery, another black female character of Walker, deconstructs the patriarchal structure by awakening Celie's consciousness. Her consciousness transforms her into a strong, confident business owner who establishes her own company and enjoys financial freedom.

### Conclusion

It can be stated that the primary factor of women's suppression is their ignorant behaviour. *The Color Purple* is the tale of the journey of a black American woman who moves from ignorance to consciousness and this consciousness leads to dismantling the structure of patriarchy. In fact, the novel is a medium of catharsis for every black woman. Celie's statement in the very beginning of the novel, where she is told by someone else about her menstrual cycle, as Celie writes, "A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more"(7) shows her complete ignorance about herself and ends up with the awareness of her body parts as she says,

“It mine, I say. Where the button” (75) this awareness transforms Celie completely and she breaks all the chains and enjoys her freedom by creating an atmosphere of equality. Thus, it can be said that the self-awareness and consciousness of women can reduce patriarchal oppression to some extent.

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