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Race, Gender and Sexuality

An Overview of The Color Purple

NAMRATHA MANOHARAN[1]
[1]ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH KMM GOVT WOMEN'S COLLEGE, KANNUR
NAMRATHAMANOHARAN@GMAIL.COM

Abstract

Alice Walker's The Color Purple explores the interconnected issues of race, gender, sexuality, and social oppression experienced by African-American women in a predominantly white and patriarchal society. This paper examines how racial discrimination, gender inequality, and colonial influences shape the lives and identities of Black women, with particular emphasis on the experiences of Celie and other female characters. It analyses the multiple dimensions of oppression, including racial prejudice, domestic violence, economic exploitation, social exclusion, and the suppression of female individuality. The discussion also highlights the impact of colonialism on African culture, traditions, and indigenous identities through the experiences of the Olinka community. Furthermore, the paper investigates the significance of female solidarity and sisterhood as powerful means of resistance against patriarchal domination and racial marginalization. Relationships among Celie, Nettie, Sofia, Shug Avery, and other women demonstrate how emotional support, friendship, self-expression, and economic independence contribute to women's empowerment. Through these interconnected themes, the study reveals how Walker challenges established structures of power and questions conventional understandings of race, femininity, and sexuality. Ultimately, The Color Purple emerges as a significant literary representation of Black women's struggles for dignity, identity, freedom, and self-determination.

Keywords: Alice Walker, The Color Purple, Race, Gender Discrimination, Sexuality, Black Feminism, Patriarchy, Colonialism, Sisterhood, Women's Empowerment.

"America is an oppressive system that divides people into groups on the basis of their race, sex and class, creating society in which a few have capital and therefore are able to influence the lives of many. There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerless. There is a large circle in which White people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which Black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in the second circle is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which Black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability." (Wade- Gayles 62)

American society is notorious for its discriminations against people on the basis of their colour and ethnicity. In a White dominated society, where they control the economy, polity and law of the land, the Blacks are made to obey them and do things in accordance with their wishes. The coloured men often feel powerless in such a situation and they resort to domestic violence on account of their physical strength to prove their superiority. This leaves the coloured women as scapegoats as they have to face the double jeopardy of race and gender or in other words they are victims of "geometric oppression". (as quoted by Kulkarni 56) According to Patricia Collins; Black women are socialized through oppression in three interdependent dimensions- economy,

polity and ideology. By economy she means forcing Black women into drudgery and engaging them in menial activities so that they have little opportunities for intellectual work. By polity Collins means the politics of excluding or forbidding Black women to have the rights and privileges enjoyed by their male counterparts. Ideology represents the process by which certain constructs are attached to Black women so as to justify their oppression. (Collins 6-7) The unified effects of these forces condition the minds of Black women, scarring their psyche and bringing them into conformity with their oppressor's ideologies.

The Blacks are always discriminated against in a White dominated society regardless of their education and social status. Corrine, the wife of Reverend Samuel is not treated with respect by the clerk at the cloth shop although she is much superior to him in social status. Far from being able to raise her voice against the injustice meted out to her, Corrine is forced to agree with the clerk's opinions regarding what she is to purchase. The prejudices of the judicial system against the coloured in America can be clearly seen in The Color Purple. Although, it is the Mayor who first raises his hands at Sofia, he escapes punishment. Miss Millie too, who examines Sofia's children as if they were mere exhibits on display is not penalized. Instead, it is Sofia who ends up in prison where she is treated inhumanely by the prison authorities so as to confine her to the prevailing social norms of accepting White superiority and to be condescending to whatever they ask. The fact that Sofia is imprisoned without any trail speaks volumes about the discrimination of the American legal system against the coloured. Instead of adopting legal measures in order to secure Sofia's release from prison her relatives and friends think of alternate ways to free her. Apart from imprisonment, Sofia is forced to work as a maid in the Mayor's household where she is ill-treated again. The Whites usually consider the coloured as dull and good for nothing and it is with the help of these constructs that they maintain their superiority. They see to it that the coloured do not rise up the social ladder and therefore adopt crooked means to suppress and torture hard working coloured people.

The dominant Whites often use abusive language against the coloured and punish them physically so as to injure their psyche and to induce fear of the Whites in them. A White man humiliates the coloured missionaries by remarking "niggers going to Africa" (141) when they tell him where they were heading for. This utterance projects the view of Whites that America is only for them and that Blacks have no place there. The White man at the Missionary society in New York too views them contemptuously as if they were incompetent people who cannot match the faculties possessed by their White counterparts. Although, Harold, the young coloured child who was with the White Missionary was quite free with Adam and Olivia, he did not speak much in the presence of the White Woman. This raises questions about the possibility of kinship across racial lines, while his ease in the presence of coloured people like himself suggest that feeling of kinship occur almost spontaneously within racial groups. The fact that Whites often moves away from the woman and child and that the Captain of the ship always assigned them the same table along with the coloured people adds to this fact. When Samuel and Nettie presented the problems of the Olinka to the bishop, he was least interested in it and was more concerned about their personal lives.

Celie's letters are addressed to God whom she envisages as a strong, powerful White male who is capable of knowing and understanding all her sufferings and miseries: "God all White too, looking like some stout white man work at the bank." (96) This equating of God with the White man is just because Celie has seen power and authority only in their hands. The ego and pride of the Whites are brought out through the mayor's wife who forces her husband to buy a car for her, due to the simple reason that even some Blacks own them. This ego is also manifested when she takes special note of the wrist watch which Sofia was wearing and the car in which she came to town during their first encounter with each other. As a reward for giving her driving lessons, Miss Millie grants Sofia the opportunity of spending a day with her family. It is agreed that Miss Millie would drop her home and pick her up the same evening. But Sofia is humiliated and reprimanded as soon as she climbs into the front seat: "This is the South. Have you ever seen a white person and a colored sitting side by side in a car, when one of 'em wasn't showing the other one how to drove it or clean it?" (109)

In a racist society like America, Blacks are powerless and neither can they win favours easily nor can they get things done according to their wishes. In The Color Purple we see Squeak having dressed up as a White lady to plead Sofia's case, as White is considered as a standard of beauty and power. It is highly ironical that the warden of the prison who punishes Sofia heavily breaks the law himself by committing much more serious offences like sexual abuse. But

loopholes within the legal system leave him unexposed. The public transport system in America too makes discriminations against the coloured and provides superior facilities for the Whites only. We get a glimpse of this injustice through Nettie's words: "We had to ride in the sit-down section of the train, but Celie, there are beds on trains! And a restaurant! And toilets! Only white people can ride in beds and use the restaurant. And they have different toilets from colored."(141)

The American success myth encourages all citizens of the country to work hard so as to be successful in life irrespective of their colour or ethnicity. But the mainstream American society dominated by the Whites alone control the economy of the land and they see to it that the Blacks remain under privileged on the basis of their class or the amount of wealth they possess. This is clearly depicted in the novel by the author when she mentions about Celie's father, a prosperous merchant being beaten to death just because he was so successful in his business enterprise. In spite of the fact that the constitution of the land grants equal opportunities for all ethnic groups, the minorities are often at the mercy of the Whites and they have to pay them handsomely in order to carry out any profitable enterprise. Although all citizens of America have to do compulsory military service, the Whites are often exempted from it while the coloured people are sent to rough terrains across the world. The authorities are least bothered about the plight of the coloured people as is clear when they do not pay any concern to the news of ship wreck in which coloured people were travelling even though the relatives ask them frantically to enquire into the matter.

Although the Blacks as a community are discriminated against by the Whites in America, they do not stand united to resist this common oppression. Instead the Blacks commit the blunder of discriminating between members within their own community on the basis of their class or status in society and depending on their degree of blackness. Corrine's remark that the White clerk treated her like "any ordinary nigger" (193) although she "was Samuel's wife and a Spelman Seminary graduate" (193) illustrates the fact that educated coloured people want themselves to be recognized as a separate group and that they do not want to be identified with ordinary uneducated coloured people who are forced to do menial work for their survival. Nettie, a missionary who has been to several places is also differentiating the coloured based on their amount of darkness. The coloured people in the neighbourhood never came forward to help Celie's mother when her father was brutally killed by the Whites mainly because they were jealous of her wealth and good fortune. These discriminations within the Black community prevent them from uniting against their common enemy. Blacks do not take pride in their ethnic culture and heritage; they shun it and try by all means to be incorporated into the main stream of the society. Moreover, Americans both Whites and coloured, ostracize Black people who have undergone the facial scarification ceremony as part of maintaining their ancient African customs.

The Blacks in America feel so let down by the injustices towards them in their own country that they do not feel any sort of national consciousness and keep themselves away from celebrations in which the nation as a whole usually participate enthusiastically. Moreover, only "White men with long hair" (236) adorn American stamps and Black men who had either participated in the struggle for independence or helped in empowering the nation are completely neglected. Although Harlem a locality in New York is a residential area of the Blacks, where they lead a very good life, it should be seriously contemplated whether this can be counted as an achievement of the Black community because it is just a very small area compared to the whole of North America. Blacks can be completely empowered only if they are integrated fully into the main stream of the society.

The novel also provides valuable insights into the African culture and heritage which was plundered and looted by the White colonial forces. American texts depict Africans as a "different species" (142) and portray them as "savages who didn't wear clothes" (137) and as "people who need Christ and good medical advice."(137) They are also depicted as greedy people who sold off their brothers and sisters for money to the White land lords. On the pretext of civilizing the deprived, downtrodden barbarians', the colonial forces sent Christian missionaries to the Dark Continent which was once the cradle of humanity. These missionaries, who are least interested in the welfare of the Africans, impart English education to the natives and teach them the Bible which of course operates through a racist angle. The illustrations in the Bible have only White men in it. Thus with the help of these pictures the colonial forces successfully argue that they are the chosen people of God who has been assigned the duty of civilizing the 'noble savages'. Similarly the colonial powers forcefully teach the natives texts like Shakespeare's The Tempest which aid in the construction of a negative image of the natives in their minds. The natives thus

imbibe the notion that they are good for nothing and that the Whites are superior to them in all respects. The colonial forces loot the resources of the colonies, destroy magnificent cities by waging wars on them with the help of sophisticated weapons mainly for capturing slaves and thus destroy people and civilizations. The White missionaries also prohibit the natives from conducting their customary rituals and with the aid of pictures of the Christ, the Apostles, Mary, the Crucifixion and so on teach them the ideals of Christianity which they are forced to follow. They also cause the death of various tribal languages by compelling the natives to rehabilitate themselves and through the imposition of English language upon the tribal people. The crops which the natives cultivate and whose fruits or vegetables make them resistant to certain diseases are destroyed and they are themselves forced to move out to some other unfertile or barren area. The colonial forces manipulate the land, destroy the flora and fauna of the area and replace the native vegetation with certain other crops which are commercially important to them. The natives are also forced to consume food stuffs which are not nutritious and which is quite unsuitable for their climate. The Olinka, a tribe in Africa is known for their beautiful cotton fabric which they hand weave and dye with berries, clay, indigo and tree bark. As a direct consequence of the destruction of plants and trees unique to Africa, the White colonizers pronounce the death of these art forms too. The hunting grounds of the natives are also destroyed by the destruction of the forests and they are made to do hard work in plantations. Thus, the imperialistic forces loot the wealth and riches of the colonized country.

Shops are mostly run by White men, there by monopolizing the trade of the colonies. Some of the shops are rented out to the natives so as to conduct business. Thus by gaining economic power over the natives, they gradually control the polity of the place too. Nettie describes the plight of a tribal group whose land has been encroached by the colonizers: “Since the Olinka no longer own their village, they must pay rent for it and in order to use the water which also no longer belongs to them, they must pay water tax.”(176) Most of the English stories have their original versions in some African language and the Whites borrow them without acknowledgement. The African custom of polygamy is discouraged by the missionaries and they propose the Christian ideal of monogamy thereby negating the positive side associated with this custom, which is the close bonding between women which gives them the power to defy patriarchal norms to some extent. Apart from manipulating the land and exploiting its resources and depleting them, the colonizers forcefully change the life style and behavioral patterns of the natives. This is how the Whites destroy the self esteem of the Blacks and make them disinterested in their own culture and heritage.

The coloured women are further marginalized than their male counterparts in American society as they are subject to racial prejudices as well as domestic violence in the name of patriarchy. Celie is sexually assaulted by her step father leaving her terrorized. As Celie is ostracized by the society, her bundle of joy, her children are forcefully taken away from her. Alphonso makes advances towards Nettie too, and he also brings in a young girl to satisfy his lust. But the society in which Celie lives finds fault with her only and not with her step father. There is no emotional bonding between couples and Alphonso argues with Celie’s mother to have physical relationship soon after child birth, unconcerned about her health. This is repeated in the case of Celie too when she is forced to have sex with Albert even though she is badly injured on the day of their marriage. Although men lead a wayward life, they curtail the individuality and creativity of women. They are forbidden to express their emotion, let alone voice their opinions and they are considered as mere slaves to do household chores. The patriarchal norms are also imbibed by the male child even at very early age as is clear from Harpo’s words, “women work” (22). Celie is paraded before Albert when he comes to see her as if she was a mere object to be sold off to the first bidder and her qualities are listed out. After her marriage with Albert, Celie is made to look after his four unruly children who do not obey her. She is just considered as a substitute for doing household work, in place of Annie Julia, Albert’s first wife. Celie’s reply to Corrine on being asked who her husband is suggests lack of emotional attachment between them. She says, “He do look alright… most times mens look pretty much alike to me”. (16) Instead of calling her husband by name, Celie speaks about him as Mr._ and addresses him as ‘sir’ which also reveals the lack of love and affection between them. She lacks the basic amenities like clothing and healthcare and even when she wants a dress she cannot have a choice of her own. There is alienation and fragmentation taking place to womens’ identity as they are both physically and psychologically subordinated as in the case of Celie.

Men consider themselves as providers for their family and prevent women from earning

their livelihood. But it is ironical that Harpo who himself adheres to this view makes use of feminine sexuality to draw people into his juke joint in order to make money. Men think that certain household duties are to be done by women only; like looking after the kids, cleaning the household and they forget the fact that all women do not have the same tastes. Moreover men also consider women as mere objects for their sexual gratification without taking into account their emotions and feelings. In such circumstances women lose the capacity to react and only think about how they can please the master of the house on whom they depend for everything. Albert's first wife is also treated in a cruel manner. He does not love her a bit and leaving her at home he spends time with his lover. Annie Julia is forced to bear children at a young age. The girl's family does not inquire about her well being once she is given in marriage and this adds to her misery. The coloured people also think that women can rise in social status only through marriage as Daisy says that her family too has benefited out of her marriage with Alphonso. Black men see to it that their female counterparts do not get sufficient education so as to defy patriarchal norms. The do not pay much attention to womens' intellectual abilities and are just interested in their physical appearance.

Alice Walker also provides us with a glimpse of how the Olinka, a tribe in Africa treated their women folk. They believe that "a girl is nothing to herself: only to her husband can she become something… the mother of his children". (162) Even though the women have to work hard without having any other pleasures; they believe that the greatest thing for them is to have a family of their own. The Olinka men believe that women need not work outside their homes as their men would provide them with whatever they want. According to Nettie there is no difference between the Olinka men and the coloured men in America in their approach and attitude towards their women. The facial scarification ceremony and initiation rites are only performed on females among the Olinka people as a part of maintaining their heritage. This raises the serious question whether women are the sole bearers of culture and tradition whereas men can lead their lives as they wish. Those women who oppose patriarchal laws which control them are punished severely by the society so as to efface their individuality.

The coloured women have to face both racial discrimination as well as injustices in the name of gender and it is through their close emotional bonding with each other that they are able to overcome this marginalization which they suffer in their day-to-day lives. This concept of sisterhood is manifest in The Color Purple. There is close emotional attachment between Celie and Nettie even when they are adolescents. Nettie encourages her to work hard so that both of them would have a good job in future by means of which they can leave their home in search of greener pastures. Celie protects her younger sister from their step father's sexual advances towards her. She also gives refuge to Nettie when she escapes from there and also protects her from Albert by encouraging her to seek refuge in Reverend Samuel's house. Nettie too provides Celie with strength to fight against Albert and his unruly children. This bonding between the two sisters is present even when they are adults. Kate and Carrie praise Celie for managing her household duties beautifully and thus boost her morale and self worth. Kate even understands Celie's needs and asks Albert to buy proper clothes for her and also asks Harpo, the oldest child of the house to assist Celie in housekeeping. Strong love and affection exists also between Sofia and her sisters; they stand by her and support her in moments of crisis. Celie too lends a helping hand towards Sofia by providing her the curtains required for her new home. Celie is very much disturbed when she betrays Sofia and asks Harpo to beat her in order to make her obey. Celie confesses her guilt to Sofia there by opening the doors of friendship between them. The emotional attachment is also seen between Sofia and Mary Agnes. Agnes takes care of Sofia's children when she was imprisoned and Sofia looks after Jolentha when her mother leaves the place aspiring to be a singer.

The women cultivate their friendships and share goodwill by engaging themselves together in traditional crafts like quilt making. They praise each other's achievements and successfully utter the statement "all womens not alike" (59). Shug Avery also encourages Squeak to sing in the public by giving her confidence, support and by providing her with opportunities for beginning a career. The most remarkable relationship is seen between Celie and Shug Avery. Shug first makes Celie aware of her individuality and worth by dedicating a song which she sings at Harpo's juke joint. She also makes her aware of her creative talents which have been lying hidden in her. Shug diverts Celie's energy in the proper manner and advises her to sew pants. Pants can also be viewed as a mode of liberation for women who otherwise have to do her daily chores wearing long skirts which are quite uncomfortable. She also encourages Celie to make it her vocation so that she would be financially independent. It is only due to the support and

consideration given to Celie by Shug that she is able to confess about her husband's cruelty towards her. This confession from Celie even draws the two women more closely to each other; and Shug helps Celie to get hold of Nettie's letters which were in Albert's custody. Moreover, when Shug comes to know that Celie has never experienced pleasure while engaging in sex, she helps her explore her sexuality by telling her about her genitals. This too is a revolutionary move as female genitals are usually termed as 'a lack' in the Freudian sense as a result of which they cannot experience sexual pleasure.

Thus Shug gives new dimensions to Celie's personality, out look towards the world and her sexuality. She even provides Celie with newer dimensions of God which helps her in enjoying bodily pleasures without guilt. It is only through Shug's support, friendship and encouragement that Celie gains self confidence and comes to know of her worth. Shug is engaged in physical, emotional and psychological relationship with Celie even when she has a steady relationship with a man. By depicting such a relationship, Walker tries to prove the notion that homosexual love prevails only in the absence of heterosexual relationship, as a myth.

The spirit of goodwill among the Black community can also be seen when people residing in Sofia's neighbourhood bring food so as to cure Henrietta's disease. By portraying Celie as a representative of the oppressed coloured woman, Alice Walker in The Color Purple depicts the discriminations faced by them in a racist and sexist society.

According to Mary Helen Washington, Alice Walker has successfully depicted: "[B] lack woman herself- her aspirations, conflicts, her relationship to her men and her children, her creativity" (as quoted by Ranveer 25) in The Color Purple.

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