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**CONCEPT OF WOMANISM: A STUDY OF ALICE WALKER'S  
THE COLOR PURPLE**

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**ABSTRACT**

*An effort has been made in the present research paper to explore the concept of “Womanism” in Alice Walker’s novel The Color Purple (1982). In this novel, Walker examines the estrangement and violence that have marked the relationship between black men and women. The story chronicles the life of a black African-American girl Celie—a poor, barely literate black woman in the South who struggles to escape the brutality and degradation by men. Walker’s black womanist consciousness is characterized by sexual, racial, cultural, national, economic and political considerations. Celie’s initiation into black womanhood is achieved through her relationship with Shug Avery. Celie celebrates her own genuine and real black womanist self by liberating herself from the patriarchal dictatorship. For achieving this, Celie reinterprets history by initiating an alternative myth—the goddess before God, the mother before the father; womb envy rather than penis envy by forming community of woman who facilitate one another’s growth in course of the action in the novel.*

*Key Words: Womanism, estrangement, facilitate, racial, sexual, economic.*

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Alice Walker defines “womanism” in her prose work of essays *In Search of our Mother’s Garden* as:

A woman who loves other women, sexually and or non sexually. Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people male and female. Not a separatist. One who appreciates the wholeness of entire people male and female.

Besides in this book, Walker sheds light on the issue of why many African-American prefer “womanism to black feminism. This was because womanism is rooted in black woman’s concrete history in racial and gender oppression. Walker has taken the term from the Southern black folk expression of mothers to their female children, “You acting womanish” (qtd in AW 28). Womanish girl acted in an outrageous, courageous and willful ways that freed them from the connections which long limited them. They are the ones who want to know more and in greater depth than is considered good for one. They are more matured and act like grown up and not frivolous like girls. In an interview to the New York Times Magazine in 1984, Walker said:

. . .I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it, because I cherished the spirit of the women. . .the word calls to mind. I dislike having to add a color in order to become visible, as in black feminist. Womanism gives us a word of our own. (qtd in AW 68)

Walker suggests ‘womanist’ is to feminist as purple is to lavender. The term ‘womanist’ brings a radicalized and often class located experience to the gendered experience suggested by feminism. This term has helped to give visibility to the experiences of African-American women and other women of color who have always been in the forefront movement against sexual and racial systems yet have been marginalized in history, texts, medieval feminist movement led by white feminists or by rights movement led by men of color. Sherley Williams suggests in contrast to feminism ‘womanist’ inquiry assumes that “it can talk both effectively and productively about men” (49).

*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker won her the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1983 for creating a very powerful black womanist character Celie who succeeds in the process of survival both at the level of self and community meaningfully in the context of the racist, sexist and classist society of America. The novel chronicles the life of a black girl Celie who despite poverty, illiteracy, physical and mental exploitation, transcends her plight through self-awareness, and attempts to scale the subtle and warm dimensions of womanist consciousness. Walker tells Celie’s story in the form of letters first written to God and later to her sister Nettie.

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Celie, writes to God to help her to survive the spiritual, emotional and physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her father. Thus, she begins her journey from powerlessness to the state of full empowerment and from self-abnegation to self-recognition.

The very first letter Celie writes to God indicates the miserable way in which she falls as a victim to the sexual advances and atrocities of her step-father. The father described in Celie's letters appears to be a virile and strong man who is like a walking phallus. When he finds out that Celie's mother does not respond to his sexual advances, he tries out to find out a substitute. Consequently, he makes brutal sexual attacks on Celie. She is subjected to rape. As a result she becomes pregnant. To add injury to insult, her father asks her not to tell about this to anybody, he orders, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (CP 1). Motherhood may be a pleasure to some women but for Celie, like Meridian, Mem, Josie and Margaret, it is a burden. Celie is not allowed to love her own kids as they were taken away by her father. Once Celie's mother dies, Alfonso, her step-father, marries another black woman and passes her on to Albert as his wife. Alfonso has internalized the humiliating judgment of white men. His main relief is the humiliation of his wife.

Celie suffers at the hands of Albert. To be his wife, for her, means to be submissive, to be subordinate and to be a punching bag for the man. Albert beats Celie as and when he likes:

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. (CP 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. Albert's inhuman act of hiding Nettie's letters from Celie also suggests the exploitation of Celie on the emotional level.

In the relationship between Celie and Nettie letters reveal forms of self-revelation that occur in the ordinary course of their everyday lives, yet they relate two very different bodies of experiences, which eventually intersect to produce discourse on the plight of black women. Celie's letters are generally focused on self-narration and representation, while Nettie's are largely ethnographic readings of African culture. The two sets of letters together present the novel's ideology. Celie's narration of her private life prompts the exploration of the public lives of the Blacks. This self-described "black, pore and ugly" woman, with all the suggestions of race, class and gender oppression implied in that description, represents the suppressed voices of

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Margaret, Mem, and other anonymous women of Walker's earlier novels, and through strategies of representation and defamiliarisation, highlights their status as oppressed.

The presentation of the family as the site of oppression is a major defamiliarising strategy of the novel. This is particularly evident in Celie's narration of the sexual episodes in her life. The graphic description of Celie's rape by her step-father forces us 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 gainst my heep and sort of wiggle it around then grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying you better shut up and get used to it. (CP 11)

Celie's narration of her moments of marital sexual involvement with Albert represents a similar dehumanization, one in which the conjugal act assumes the form of rape: "He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me, I say" (CP 109). Rape, within or outside marriage, is totally demystified and seen as an instrument of oppression. The crudeness of the language and the graphic nature of the descriptions reinforce the dehumanizing aspects of the act.

It is through Nettie's analytical letters that we learn about the wider world of Africa. By providing the history of the black race, Nettie reveals the history of the power of the black race. In Africa, Nettie writes to Celie, education is denied to the native Olinka girls. Women are expected to fulfill a subservient role in their village, never looking directly into a man's face. They 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," and is told, "The mother of his children" (CP 162). Thus, Nettie compares the power the Olinka man has over his wife to the power their step-father had over her and Celie, and the general desire of the African society to keep women uneducated to the desire of American whites to keep the blacks ignorant.

The two sets of letters—Nettie's narration of the Olinka experience and Celie's self-narration—intersect to map out Walker's womanist ideology. Both marginalize the historical discourse that would focus primarily on imperialism in Africa and racism in America in order to emphasize another "history"—the story of the universal oppression of Black women. While the novel attempts closure with its representation of an economically and socially empowered Celie and its

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strong suggestion of reconciliation, its ideological project—the mapping out of womanist ideology—is strikingly highlighted.

The fact that Walker regards freedom of a woman's body as a pre-requisite for all other kinds of freedom and happiness becomes all the more clear through the example of Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*. Celie-Shug relationship is very crucial in the novel as it facilitates Celie to constitute her "essential womanist consciousness". It is Shug's friendship which speeds Celie's growth. Shug follows one of the few professions open to black women: blues singer. In her chosen career as a blues singer, her refusal to settle for a life of domesticity, and her insistence on enjoying all the sexual freedom generally limited to men, Shug becomes the embodiment of feminist existential freedom. More important, her character functions in the text not only as the antithesis of Celie but as a vehicle through which Celie becomes conscious of, and empowered to address, the conditions that oppress her.

Lesbianism, then, becomes an essential aspect of 'womanist' theory and praxis, encoded in the novel through the bonding between Shug and Celie. Whether evoking the "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. It is strongly suggested in the scene in which Shug, after arguing that 'it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in field somewhere and don't notice it,' presents a cosmography to Celie that forces her to reevaluate her personal world view and come to terms with her oppression "Man corrupt everything," say Shug. 'You think he God. But he ain't". Celie's deliverance importantly begins only when she stops turning to God for His Justice and Help and begins to steer the course of her life herself with the help of women of flesh and blood like Shug Avery. Shug teaches her that "God is not someone apart from anything else including yourself" and "god is everything. . . , that ever was as will be" (CP 109). Moreover, God is not separate from human beings and they too are part of Him. This new concept of God dwelling within human beings and they themselves as an integral part of his creation brings about a radical change in Celie. With this changed concept of God, Celie loses all faith in the image of Christian God as just, merciful and loving and she begins to see him as "acting alike all the other men she knows" (CP 110). Celie's awareness of God as someone present in everything—humans, birds, animals, trees, stars, oceans, hills—fills her mind with a profound feeling of joy. Her feeling of alienation disappears and she begins to participate in the fullness of life. God for her, thus is not

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someone that can be confined to any institution like Church but is a force that pulsates through the whole creation. The God that she discovers within herself and all around her is the one that gives her a sense of dignity and joy instead of degrading her by demanding prayers, begging for His mercy. God enables her to love and value her own being as well as all the things around her. This marks her deliverance not only from fears but also from her sense of worthlessness as a black woman. This signifies the fact that the process of growth in the life of Walker's woman and her march towards freedom is inextricably linked to her abilities to achieve the freedom of her mind from the constructing concepts and assumptions embodied in old customs and institutions like Church.

Celie's role then, is one of effecting change in Celie's character by bringing about a transformation that will allow her to extricate herself from her oppressive situation. The association of "purple," a polysemous sign with Shug, places her character at the centre of the novel's ideological enterprise: the processing of a "womanist ideology." The erotic episode, with its tenderness and caring, contrasts with the brutality that pervades the heterosexual unions and represents not only one aspect of lesbianism in the novel but also is suggestive of a larger discourse of the possibility of women's autonomy. Shug's love for Celie is deep-rooted and results in an ongoing physical relationship as well as a powerful emotional affiliation. As a result Shug inspires Celie to celebrate her existence. She also loves Shug in a way that radiates all elements of God's world that she has given to Celie. Once Shug implants the idea in Celie that she is somebody, she undergoes a transformation which encompasses her sexual awakening. Daniel W. Ross has described this point very effectively by stating:

One of the primary objects of feminism is to restore women's bodies, appropriated long ago by a patriarchal culture, to them. Because the female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to fear or to hate their bodies. (*MF S 17*)

Shug's presence generates an erotic stirring and creates a spiritual bond between her and Celie. "I wash her body, it feels like I am praying" (*CP 53*). It is Shug who prepares Celie to love sexual pleasure guiltlessly. Shug reveals to Celie the mysteries of the body and sexual experience. She encourages Celie to explore her body and feel its different units when Shug asks the way her body looks, she responds instantly as if she has found something beautiful and precious. "I mine. I say" (*CP 60*). She is surprised to see that she is beautiful. In finding and knowing with pride her own body, Celie begins to desire for selfhood and becomes aware of her

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body and falls in love with it. Prior to this event, Shug asks her what she feels when Albert loves her? Celie replies:

I don't like it at all. What is it like? He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never knows the difference. Never ask me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep. (CP 81)

It is Shug who gives many lessons of life to Celie. Thus, Shug becomes a model for Celie and a mother 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. Shug invites Celie to come to Memphis to live with her and to give her lessons in economic autonomy by teaching her how to stitch pants. Thus, 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. Thus, Shug becomes the embodiment of feminist existential freedom for Celie.

In her relationship with Sofia, Harpo's wife, Celie gains a new perspective on life. It is Sofia Butler, who demonstrates to Celie how to live with one's husband as a self-respecting person. Sofia is not one of those black women who would like to become a white man's housemaid. When the mayor's wife asks her, "would you like to work for me, be my maid? Sofia declines the offer: "Hell no" (CP 120). When the mayor listens to the way Sofia replies, he slaps her. As Sofia is a spirited lady she promptly retaliates. The mayor, however, takes revenge by ordering the police to use third degree method to torture Sofia. Thus, Sofia represents the black woman who wants to fight for her own dignity in America for Celie. Sofia's struggle for dignity as an individual who is both black and female makes tremendous impact on Celie's thinking. Thus, Celie gets lessons about the ways of using militant resistance against any type of injustice in life. The same is the case with Tashi, the heroine of the novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. She considers "Resistance is the secret of joy" (PSJ279). As Celie, Shug and Sofia stitch, quilt, cook, and garden, they produce a communal art by which the cultural heritage is reestablished as a living connectedness linked to the collective human need for warmth, food, beauty, relationship: the significant values which Celie comes to recognize as hers and denied to her by her history as a black woman living in a racist and sexist society. According to Babara Christian:

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Walker is concerned with ‘heritage’ which to Walker is not so much the grand sweep of history or artifacts created as it is the relations of people to each other, young to old, parent to child, man to woman. (*BFC* 194)

In fact, Nettie, her sister, Sofia, Harpo’s wife, and Shug Avery, Albert’s beloved all these women stand united against racist and sexist tyranny. Thus, Celie succeeds in constituting her “essential black womanist self” by forming a community of women which facilitates one another’s growth in the course the novel. Shug helps Celie to save her from the linguistic and sexual abuses she suffers at the hands of her step-father and husband by providing her with the knowledge of body, sisterhood and artistic creations to struggle against all the forms of patriarchal and sexual oppression. Rashmi Gaur rightly observes: “Shug is a catalyst, empowering agent and mother figure for Celie. She completely transformed Celie’s life” (49).

Nettie helps Celie in breaking the linguistic silence through writing letters and thereby giving her the knowledge of the world and reality that she lives in. Mary Agnes helps her by giving the gift of creativity through designing and marketing pants which could be used by men and women with equal grace and comfort. Sofia, a black woman warrior, provides Celie with a model of resistance against sexual and racial oppression. Writing about Sofia, Shug and Nettie allows Celie to relive, to rehearse their speech or action, thereby composing a new self to enjoy freedom at all levels of her existence. Thus, Celie draws her literary strength less from “books of men” than from “the tongues of women”. She writes to Nettie, “I am making some pants for you. . . . I planned to make them by hand, every stich I sew will be a kiss”. The intimate figure of speech threading together her three creative modes—writing, sewing and loving—acquires freshness and distinctiveness by being so much a part of herself. Transformed Celie affirms her existence against her husband’s alleged, “nothing” when she retorts, “I am pore, I’m black, I may be ugly. . . but I’m here” (*CO* 187). She also begins to perceive what official history writes out in its legitimization of a particular set of power relations as “truth:” class relation filtered through racist victimization and sexual relations determined by economic domination. Thus, Celie celebrates her economic independence, achieved through nurturing sisterhood and communal arts, as a viable mode of survival in the institutionalized forms of oppression in America by creating the black womanist consciousness. After all being said and done, we can safely conclude that Alice Walder’s concept of ‘Womanism’ includes all the invaluable values of life: self-reliance, self-esteem, self-identity, self-dignity, economic freedom, mental freedom from the narrow

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limitation and above all the freedom of body, which is the very essence of self-respect for a woman. And all these precious values are manifested through the character portrayal of a simple illiterate girl Celie, who at last becomes the very embodiment of “Womanism.”

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