

**THE THEME OF FEMALE SOLIDARITY IN ALICE WALKER'S THE
COLOR PURPLE AND MERIDIAN**

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Abstract

Alice Walker, being a true black female writer in African American literature depicts the humiliation, exploitation and marginalization in the lives of the blacks in general and black women in particular. She not only talks about the black women's sufferings but at the same time she provides the paths for them to follow in order to survive in the racial and male dominated African American society. The present paper particularly investigates into her two novels The Color Purple and Meridian with the purpose to reveal the true potential in Alice Walker's respected novels. The novels not only attacks on the age old norms of racism as well as male patriarchy but at the same time they provide the solution in the form of female solidarity . In both of the novels the theme of female solidarity is observed in its best form and it is the only way according to Walker for black women's survival.

African American literature talks about the painful sufferings of the blacks on the account of racism and classism. The situation of the black women is worse than black women who faced the triple oppression of race ,class and gender. So black women became more vulnerable due to the male patriarchy and its horrible effects upon their lives which completely marginalized their existence. The black women writers like Toni Morrison, Zora Neal Hurston, Gloriya Naylor and Alice Walker discuss the sorrowful fate of the blacks in general and black women in particular. As Simon De Beauvoir in her famous book *The Second Sex* (1988) aptly writes about the subordinate status of the black women. She says : “ Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, she is not as regarded as an autonomous being... He is the subject, he is the absolute- she is the other.” (16)

Celie, The female protagonist of *The Color Purple* (1982) has affinity with her sister Nettie. The story of the novel centers around Celie and her relationship with the other females in the novel with whom she comes into contact. Alice Walker shows the ugliest form of male patriarchy in the African American society where the daughter is raped and humiliated by her

step father. Being raped Celie is helpless. Later she is forcefully married with one man Albert who too like her stepfather exploits her. In such a situation also Celie thinks for her younger sister, Nettie and advises her to leave the home in order to save her from the evil clutches of Her stepfather and Albert. Here Celie's sisterly feelings are observed. Verma rightly observes about Celie : " She (Celie) offers herself like a sacrificial lamb." (249) This is indicative of Walker's ideology of sisterhood. Celie has emotional bonding not only with her sister Nettie but also with the other female characters Shug Avery, Sofia and Squeak in the novel. Though Celie and Nettie live away from each other they share their feelings with each other through letters. It is through letters we come to know about their intimacy and closeness..As in one of her letters Nettie writes : " I meant to write you in time for Easter but it was not a good time for mr. and I did not want to burden you with any distressing news." (152) The lines show Nettie's genuine feelings for her sister. Celie too shows her feelings and love towards her sister:"Nettie I am making some pants for you to beat the heat in Africa. Soft, white, thin. Drawstring waist. You won't ever have to feel..."(193) In the novel one of the female characters namely Sofia who hits the mayor and consequently gets imprisoned. In this critical situation there are other females like Celie, Shug Avery Sofia's sister and Squeak who help her. In this respect Chamber asserts : "Walker in *The Color Purple* creates models for love and sacrifices that are willingly made for others." (58)The relationship between Celie and Nettie is one of sisterly love relationships. They communicate with each other through letters. Though Nettie goes away from Celie's life she misses Celie every time. As she writes to Celie : " But I miss you so much. Please write to me soon as you have a chance. Every day I think about you. Every minute... I love you with all my heart." (115) Celie's relationship with Sofia and Shug is also very important regarding the theme of female solidarity in the novel. Sofia is a woman portrayed by Walker who stands for female solidarity as well as female individuality. She doesn't want to live life under the dominance of her husband, Harpo. She wants freedom and in Harpo's company it impossible for her to achieve. Therefore she takes a brave decision to leave Harpo. Even she doesn't hesitate to protest against the white mayor who slaps her when Sofia rejects his offer of being his maid. Sofia is not like Celie who remains silent. She too slaps the mayor. In the novel it is Sofia who inspires Celie towards self-realization. She is a woman who unburdens the sorrows and sufferings of Celie who became the victim of male patriarchy in the novel. When she comes to know that Celie's husband Mr---- beats her she says to Celie: " You ought to bash Mr---- head open ,...think about heaven later." (40) Shug is also a woman like Sofia, a blue singer. Shug Avery is Albert's mistress. Her role in the novel is very significant because of her relationship with Celie. Once she makes a song and gives it Celie's name. It makes Celie very happy. As in one of her letters Celie mentions : " Shug saying Celie. Miss Celie. And I look up where she at. She say my name again She say this song I'm about to sing is call Miss Celie's song... First time somebody made something and name it after me." (70) In the company of Sofia and Shug Celie becomes confident and ready to defy the domination of her husband, Albert. Shug helps Celie to find out her identity as a woman. It is Shug who teaches Celie about her body. With the understanding of her own body Celie's self-realization takes place. Mukul Sengupta comments on Shug and Celie's relationship which is very important regarding Celie's quest for identity:

"The ecstasy that Celie receives from Shug in their erotic relationship is tender and caring and above all creative, not devastating like her experience of rape by her stepfather or her husband Albert." (191) The process of her awakening from darkness to light, from death to

survival starts from Shug who transforms Celie's life. Celie's physical union with Shug is given very boldly by Walker. As she writes: "Ugh! All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose... I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me." (75) With understanding her own body Celie develops her confidence. Daniel Ross comments on this Celie's awakening process: "After her initial revulsion Celie sees in succession three things: the hair that shielded her vagina from view, her black lips, and finally her feminine beauty, symbolized as a rose." (71) Gradually Celie becomes aggressive and ready to resist the male domination of her husband, Albert. Celie changes her habit of sewing in the profession which is the most symbolic thing showing her attempt for identity formation. She engaged herself with the sewing business and tries to develop her position in the society. She sews pants with Sofia also. Their attempt is to become independent in the patriarchal set up of the society. At the end of the novel Celie is seen very happy and independent with her all her close ones Sofia, Nettie and Shug. All this happened only because of the mutual co ordination that the women showed for each other So *The Color Purple* advocates the ideology of female solidarity for black women's survival.

Like *The Color Purple* Walker's *Meridian* (1976) to handles the theme of solidarity. The protagonist Meridian's life journey is one of sufferings and isolation. Seeing her mother' Mrs. Hill's sufferings Meridian feels guilty and thinks that she would not have borne to her. Here at this stage only one understands the presence of the theme of solidarity in the novel. Meridian, a victim of sexism doesn't want to live like an ordinary African American woman. She thinks beyond the set stereotypes of ideal images of daughter, mother and wife. She is seen as a woman who thinks for other women. While pursuing her further education she meets a girl namely Wile Child. She is a town girl who is neglected at the campus and not allowed at the campus. But Meridian dares to bring her at the campus and feeds her like a mother. Here it is worthwhile to mention that Meridian a woman who abandons her own baby child as well as her husband feeds later to a girl Wile Child, an outcaste in the society which is contradictory. But the minute study of the novel makes it clear that Meridian leaves home in order to find her ultimate goal. She doesn't want to limit her role just as a mother of one child and an ideal wife of a husband. Being helpful to Wile Child Meridian becomes a universal figure who struggles hard for the betterment of the downtrodden people. Meridian actually wants to help her. As the narrator writes: "With beads of cake and colored beads and unblemished cigarettes she tempted Wile Chile and finally captured her. She brought her into the campus with a catgut string around her arm." (25) Though Wile Chile is not seen as a normal girl like others Meridian wants to help her in her difficulties because she was pregnant. This is *Meridian's* sisterly love is highlighted here in the novel.

While participating in the Civil rights movement she gets familiar with Truman, a Civil rights activist. Her love too shows her attempt of identity formation. Already she is in the emotions of loss as well as guilt since she has abandoned not only her husband, Eddie but also her child. Therefore she tries to seek solace in Truman's company but her attempt of identity formation fails on the account of racial violence in the community. Truman though likes Meridian starts dating a white girl Lynne. Here Truman is also seen as a victim of age old custom of racism who prefers a white girl to settle down. He marries Lynne in order to create his image better than other black men. So Meridian's attempt to find a soul mate in Truman fails and she becomes frustrated. It makes her feel guilty of being black as well as to search her own existence in the society at large. In this respect Kashinath Ranveer rightly observes: "...

Meridian, a woman who feels guilty of being a black woman, starts reclaiming the black woman's history and tries to associate herself with that positive and inspiring history of black women." (85) Because of Lynne Meridian and Truman's relation was destroyed. But still Meridian does not keep any hatred towards her. Instead, when Lynne is in trouble she is always there to help Lynne.. Miss Winter one of minor character in the novel too stands for female solidarity who shows her kindness to Meridian when Meridian is in trouble. As the narrator writes : " She acts as the surrogate mother Meridian needs in order to recover from the various traumas she has experienced, including her abortion." (85) Meridian's attempt to take care of the girl Wile child ; her genuine involvement in Lynne ,the white girl in her trouble are the examples which show female solidarity in the novel. It shows how Walker's women struggle for each others' development. Seema Murugan rightly asserts about it : " For Walker the black American woman is a universal symbol representing hope and resurrection. Through her female characters ,she advocates the importance of bonds between women who contend with negative social mechanism. In fact, she speaks the female experience more powerfully for being able to pursue it across boundaries of race and class." (104)

Thus, Walkers both novels *The Color Purple* and *Meridian* stand for female solidarity which provide the new ways for women to follow. Both novels speak for Walker's ideology of female solidarity and the need for mutual understanding between women to stand against any odds and sufferings. Celie, Nettie, Sofia, Shug and Squeak in *The Color Purple* and Meridian, Lynne in *Meridian* represent the theme of female solidarity.

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