

**WOMEN BONDING AND HEALING IN ALICE WALKER'S
*THE COLOR PURPLE***

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Abstract

This paper looks at how the protagonist Celie and other female characters in the novel survive the multi-faceted oppression and empower themselves by strong female bonding, re-imagining God and inclusive spirituality through an inward journey of consciousness. The Afro- American Womanist Alice Walker who was awarded with the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for her path-breaking epistolary work *The Color Purple* (1982) advocates women – bonding and female creativity to derive strength and inspiration to survive the plethora of violence suffered by the plethora of violence suffered by the triply- burdened Afro- American women.

Keywords - Epistolary, female bonding, womanist, consciousness, lesbianism, quilt, inclusive spirituality.

*For us to be free
We have to know we
Don't let anyone 'ethnicize' us
Into them marginal categories.
Our positive self cannot be
Through negative definition,
Saying 'Well, we're not them'
To work our own position.*

*Don't look to his-story
To discovery our existence
Don' hide in another's idealogy,
To develop our own resistance.*

*For us to be free
We have to know we
Our own truth
And our own strength
And our
Black,
Black,
Black,
Black creativity!*

Marsha Prescod

For women across the globe the act of writing has always been a political act of breaking their enforced silence, of speaking out and valuing their lives. Historically, slave narratives were counted as proofs of identity and testimonies to lived individual experiences. Maya Angelou's five part fictional autobiography and Zora Neale Hurston's *I Love Myself When I am Laughing* are fine examples of it. Alice Walker has always attempted through her body of work, to create a new and powerful voice which reflects the perspective of down-trodden. According to Walker, "to have Celie speak in the language of the oppressors would be to deny her the validity of her existence, to suppress her voice would be to murder her and to attack all those ancestors who spoke as she does..." (<http://www.seeingblack.com/2003/x022803/Walker.shtml>)

Even in Walker's earlier novels, with the use of first person narration, the Margarets, Mems, Josies and Mrs. Hills are given a prominence previously denied to them. Walker's deliberate use of dialect and colloquialisms of local speech rather than the established literary prose is a radical intervention in terms of the writing, speaking and reading practices in the literary scenario. The epistolary format has been used by Walker to show case the power of narrative and speech to assert selfhood and racist oppression. Further as various critics point out, it is their letters and diaries which have enabled contemporary historians to reconstruct the private lives of women before late nineteenth century, when the literary market place became receptive to female "scribblers." These intimate literary genres are thus often identified as the forte of women and in particular of women like Celie, who have no other outlets for their emotions and creativity.

Celie, through her bonding with other female characters like Shug Avery and Sofia, garners sympathy and understanding and learns lessons that enable her to find her voice. Walker portrays female friendship as a means for women to summon the courage to resist oppression and dominance. It is also a form of refuge providing reciprocal love in a world filled with male violence. As Bell Hooks in her essay- ‘Sisterhood- Political Solidarity Among Women’, says:

Women do not need to eradicate differences to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiments to bond us together, so great is the wealth of our experience, culture and ideas that we have to share with one another. We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity (67).

Female ties assume many forms in the novel-some are motherly or sisterly, some are in the form of mentor and pupil, some are sexual and some are simply friendships. Sofia claims that her ability to fight comes from her strong relationship with her sisters. Nettie’s relationship with Celie anchors her through the years of living in the unfamiliar culture of Africa. As Samuel notes, it is the strong relationship among Olinka women that makes polygamy bearable to them. And Shug plays a very significant role in the transformation of Celie and her attainment of a sense of self. In renaming Celie a “virgin”, Shug shows Celie that she can create her own narrative, a new interpretation of herself and her history that counters the interpretations forced upon her.

Celie- Shug relationship is very crucial in the novel as it facilitates Walkers’ womanist consciousness in Celie. The erotic episodes with their tenderness and caring is a contrast to the brutality that pervades the heterosexual union and represents an aspect of lesbianism in the novel, which is crucial in the context of surviving violence in the novel, as the Radicalesbian essay ‘Women Identified Woman’ states that lesbianism helps in creating “a new consciousness of and with each other” and “help in seeing each other as prime and find our centers within ourselves” (Zimmerman 204). Shug is a true feminist as she restores back her body, mind and voice to Celie.

As Celie, Shug and Sofia stitch, quilt, cook and garden, they produce a communal art by which the cultural heritage is re-established. The image of quilting reminds us of the image of weaving in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*. The quilt composed of different patterns sewn together, is symbolic of diverse people coming together in unity as it happens in the end of the novel. Celie’s pant- sewing business is a high water mark point in the novel because Celie overturns a ‘marginal and unimportant women’s pastime’ (as has been conventionally seen) into a lucrative, empowering source of economic independence. Celie writes to Nettie, “I am making some pants for you.. I planned to make them by hand, every stitch I sew will be a kiss” (221). It is interesting to see the intimate figures of speech threading together her three creative modes- writing, sewing and loving. Walker showcases how emotional, mental and economic emancipation is achieved through nurturing sisterhood and communal arts.

Cora Kaplan regards the novel as seminal as it offers:

A paradigm of change through the agency of black women and fictional celebration of their capacity to assess and affect the social relations in which they find themselves. An ability to survive the brutal exploitation of

their bodies and their labour, by both the dominant culture and their own world of social relations. (Griffin 3)

Celie's erasure of the image of the patriarchal male God and reimagining of God in her own terms as "Dear God", in her last letter symbolizes a holistic development in Celie, who epitomizes Walkers' and other African- American authors like Bell Hooks and Maya Angelou's inclusive spirituality which embraces Eastern religious beliefs like Buddhism. No wonder, Walker in her most recent book- *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, calls *The Color Purple* –'a Buddha book that is not Buddhism', because though she embraces the broad-vision views of various religions like love, comparison, sympathy, bonding etc, she doesn't believe in an organized religion, as Shug points out "God is inside you and inside everybody else", and to find God all one must need to do is "lay back and just admire stuff. Be Happy. Have a good time" (200) Walker herself identified this attitude as 'animism' and we can discern echoes of Transcendentalism and Emerson's 'Over Soul' and Paulo Coelho's 'Universal Soul' in it. Walker recognizes the need for some faith in modern society which is beset with grave concerns like environmental crisis, sexual abuse, poverty, injustice, war, despair etc and yet she remains full of hope and belief that we can create positive change in ourselves and the world by opening our hearts, expanding our vision and planting the seeds of love in our lives. And this aspect is conveyed in a very beautiful way to the readers. Walker gives the message that we need to understand ourselves as Earthlings, not as American, Canadian, African or Indian... as the cosmos, the universe, the whole thing... It is this oneness realized by Celie, who even forgives Albert and accepts him, which makes the novel attain universality.

Workscited

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