

DECONSTRUCTION OF POWER: THE SEARCH OF VOICE AND IDENTITY IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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Abstract

Being a proponent of black feminism and conscious of the 'womanist' ideals, Alice Walker, in her novel 'The Color Purple', encompasses a holistic picture of her own black community in which the women struggle for their existence or cultural identity. In this novel, Walker exhibits how the power gets deconstructed in search of voice and identity of various characters. In the first part of the novel, Walker tends to throw light on the marooned nature of the women being suppressed and oppressed by men in the patriarchal society as men have occupied the hub of the society. Celie, the protagonist of the novel, is continuously raped by her step father, yet she cannot afford to disclose the incestuous relationship that her step father had with her to anyone, keeping in mind the reverence of the family and the prospect of assault. She has lost her identity as a black woman just treated as a commodity not only in her house but also in her married life in which Mr__, her husband, has treated her more callously as he used to beat her up viciously as his aspiration of winning Nettie remained in vacuum. Sofia, the robust and unyielding personality of the novel, is coerced to bow down before the Whites as she is a woman as well as a black. Here, she has also lost her identity as an unflinching personality by accepting meek and mild traits. But, in the later part of the novel, being ignited by the vigorous personality and unprejudiced thinking of Shug Avery, Celie fences herself off from the choking atmosphere of Mr__'s house and builds up a community of women with Shug Avery, Sofia and Nettie. After being cruelly tortured in the jail, Sofia is released and regains her dignity and personality. Celie also regains her dignity and reverence after wielding the power that she gains after leaving the house of Mr__. Mr__ becomes mild and generous and finds beauty in Celie after being failed to wield the power, so he proposes her for remarriage. The paper focuses on how the power, exerted from the agency of race and gender gets deconstructed with the progress of the novel that gives the emergence of new behaviours and identities and a voice to the unvoiced characters. Power here acts as an identity, as identity alters with the alteration of power.

Keywords: Identity, power, deconstruction, gender, race, community, remarriage.

As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods—
They kill us for their sport.

--- King Lear, William Shakespeare

In the present age, with the emergence of various theories such as Marxism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Postcolonial, Queer Theory; Deconstruction approach in textual analysis gets an impetus as all these theories advocate the same idea i.e. decentralization of centre or deconstruction of hierarchy or structure that is the focal point of deconstruction theory. Jacques Derrida, the proponent of Deconstructionist theory first raises question about the eternal presence of centre in the structure in which centre from the outside of the structure shapes and moulds all the things that are present in structure and in this process the centre remains unaffected. All these theories stand on the same principle i.e. there is no single essence or fixed structure in the society, as the life of people is in flux and the wheel of nature is dynamic. There are no eternal values and truths, but they are in flux. The reality is not determined, but is still in the making. The pragmatists such as C.B. Pearce, William James, Schiller, John Dewey, Kilpatrick etc. advocate the same view about reality— i.e. it is in flux. The same view about reality is also advocated by Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that we must overcome the idea that power is oppression, because – even in their most radical form – oppressive measures are not just repression and censorship, but they are also productive, causing new behaviours to emerge. He was of the view that “Where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault 95). Shakespeare has also used the word ‘omnipotent’ as the alternative identity for the name of God. He is supposed to wave the fabric of our identities and destines and gives light to the direction of our ways. Man is always projected as the puppet in the hands of God. Our existence and identity are nothing but the toys to the God. The image of the marooned identity of man is the diurnal picture of the society as well as in Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*. Being a proponent of black feminism and conscious of the ‘womanist’¹ ideals, Alice Walker, in this novel, encompasses a holistic picture of her own black community in which the women struggle for their existence or cultural identity. The novel documents the very important aspects of the society such as identity, gender, power, incest, race, community etc. in which power is considered to be the hub of the society that moulds and shapes every aspect and sphere of life. The novel also focuses on some binary images such as man/woman, white/black, White God/Black God which tend to be bridged by the hands of Walker.

¹Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (San Diego, 1983), p. xi. "Womanist" is a neologism of Walker's invention that refers to “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one.... Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually.... Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually.... Traditionally universalist, as in ... 'the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.”

Power propels some characters to accept some false values, norms and ideas which are imposed upon women to take dominion over them. Women and Blacks are treated like the unanimated objects as they are not in the hub of the orbit. In this context, Shakespeare’s comparison of man with insects can be properly cited that has similar denotation of power. But with the progress of the novel, it is observed that resistance comes from the side of women emerging out of the power or oppression. So power is not static, but dynamic— changing in accordance with time which also provides the new shape and behaviour to the different

characters and to their identities. Here Walker documents how the power gets deconstructed in search of voice and identity of various characters.

As power is the hub of the societal orbit, it steadily affects the whole sphere of life irrespective of religion, gender and race. In the present age, issue of race is considered to be the emerald to the writers who always tend to focus on this aspect in their novels. Walker also did the same thing in this novel by showing the dichotomy between two opposite sects in which one group who is in power excoriates and moulds the identity of other group. Sofia, a robust and unyielding personality had lost her identity as a woman and common human being as she was incapable of wielding the hub of power for being black and far behind from the mainstream i.e. from Whites. She was totally crippled before them and was coerced to mould her identity as it was desired by them. She only found everything dark before her eyes, therefore, there was no way but to accepting the values of them or bowing down before them. In the process of her getting true identity, she was viciously tortured and assaulted. Her skull and ribs were fractured and one of her eyes was blinded. Her body was purple in colour due to the extensive bruises rendered by the severe blow and injuries inflicted on her body. Later, she was attended and cared after by Celie with the help of the black attendant who tried to heal her bruises. “Sofia is the first woman Celie knows who refuses to accede to both the patriarchal and the racist demand that the black woman demonstrate her abjection to her oppressors” (Lauren 843). She was portrayed as a stout and bouncy woman like the ferocious tiger, but she was metamorphosed into a meek and mild creature like the sheep. Her true identity as an unflinching personality was completely lost in the midst of power and later she was categorised as a mentally unstable prisoner.

“Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say” (Walker 93).

Gender disparity is also properly worked out in this novel. Silence is considered to be proper grace of women as when they tried to raise their voice and to hold their heads high, they had been forcibly subdued to the point when they became completely benumbed. The true identity of the women was shielded by fear of being beaten up and prospecting of unflinching torture impinging upon them by the dominant people. Celie, a fourteen-year old girl, was continuously raped by her step father, and was unable to disclose the incestuous relationship that her father had with her to anyone, keeping in mind the reverence of the family and the prospect of assault. So she wrote to God to tell him her repressed words:

First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he 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 git used to it. (Walker1-2)

She was treated like a beast in her ignorance of the world around her. She had two children by her step father who had taken them away from her disregarding the wishes and desires of Celie. She was treated as a mere commodity after being used by her father, transferred to Mr__ who granted her harbouring the desire of winning the heart of Nettie. Mr__ was even more callous and barbaric towards Celie than Celie's father as he used to beat her up more viciously, sometimes using his belt, as his aspiration of winning Nettie remained in vacuum.

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. 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. (Walker 23)

His attitude towards her was more like an animal having only impassioned carnal relationship devoid of mutual consensus, love, understanding and feeling; there was only gratification. It was against the norms of romantic perceptions of life which was based on the consensual relationship, mutual understanding between two contended persons having the same opinion, interest, feeling and understanding. At one time she started fearing the man folk who came to contact with her at one or different time. “Celie's particular negation arises not only from the (f)act of rape, effecting her bifurcation into a subject and a subject-made-object-to-itself. Rape here only intensifies the negation that grows from the ongoing patriarchal subjugation of women. Her oppression, as represented early in the novel, circulates around the vulnerabilities that grow from her gender, as constructed within the social space which her "Pa" respectably occupies.” (Lauren 838-39)

At this juncture, she had also lost her identity as a woman as she was treated just like the livestock brought from the cattle-fair or just like a commodity, after being used thrown up and transferred to others. Celie identified herself with the tree as she found herself unable to escape. It is also to be noted that the power gave Mr__ a new identity i.e. animalistic personality which he procured by his callous attitude towards Celie as well as Sofia.

When Celie was conversant with her origin, she was totally collapsed under the weight of painful knowledge that was unconnected to the facts of her contemporary situation, but it completely destabilized her identity: “My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa” (Walker 183).

Walker had also taken into consideration the matter of religion very seriously and addressed that the image and identity of God came into being from the power centre. Through the words of Celie, Walker was able to project the white image of God, constructed by those who were in power centre, especially the White people. At that time, Black people had high regards and opinions about the white people as they enjoyed the supreme power and got the upper hand in the society. As the White people occupied the hub of the societal orbit, they projected the white identity of God. Blacks were propelled to accept the white image of Christ, came from the Eurocentric perception of a white God. Celie had also inculcated the same image of the God in her mind and delineated God as an old man with white beard, blue eyes, wearing a white robe. When Sofia was in incarceration, she had a vision about God coming to save her. She envisaged:

God coming down by chariot, swinging down real low and carrying ole Sofia home. I see 'em all as clear as day. Angels all in white, white hair and white eyes, look like albinos. God all white too, looking like some eyes, look like albinos. God all white too, looking like some stout white man work at the bank. (Walker 96)

But, at this point Celie's concept of God after confronting with Shug Avery took a new turn and direction, and her first quest for voice started. Celie's traditional concept of God, based on conservative notion of religion was shattered after coming into contact with Shug Avery. From this juncture, the deconstruction of power starts as Celie's journey towards the search for voice and identity ventures. She inculcated a pantheistic faith in her mind after having been elucidated God from naturalistic outlook by Shug Avery.

God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. (Walker 202)

So, it is observed that in America God is projected as a white being contrary to Africa in which the black image of God is depicted. Here the identity of God gets deconstructed with the alteration of power.

But the real deconstruction of power starts in the later part of the novel, as the wheel of power took a reverse turn shifting from oppressor to oppressed people as the wheel of nature is dynamic. At this juncture, the oppressed people got the position of centre, later that led them to decide their own identities as well as the identities of others. In search of their identities and voices, the oppressed people decentralized the centre or deconstructed the order of hierarchy that was prevailing in the society.

After many upheavals, the women and Blacks were able to wield the position of centre which enables them to form and get their own identity i.e. dignified, self-assertive, respected organisms and to establish women community and black aesthetics, keeping aside the norms, values, and ideas of patriarchal society and white people. Women began to get respite in the society and relief from the shackles of patriarchal ideologies which stood as the huddles in their way of getting true identity, and serving as the choking wreath hanging around their necks. But women did wield the power by their realization of self and potentiality, not by the men's vest of power to the hands of women. After serving many years under the Whites, at last, Sofia traced back her true identity i.e. a dignified, self-assertive and respected woman. She obliterated her past identity that had demolished feisty and spunky nature by forgetting her sufferings and traumatic situations. In major's house, Sofia became surrogate care-taker and the instrument of supporter of major's daughter Eleanor Jane who was totally confiding in her.

With the advancement of the novel, Celie was also transformed to a new woman – a woman of resistance and a woman who could retaliate and protest. She took a new form of identity i.e. a challenging, protesting and self-assertive woman from the docile and submissive one. These new traits of Celie's behaviour were in her personality for a long time shielding by fear, but these traits came out in her external personality after getting the true source of ignition. Her new identity came after being ignited by the vigorous personality and unprejudiced thinking of Shug Avery, and robust personality of Sofia which enables her to fence herself off from the choking atmosphere of Mr__'s house and builds up a community of women with Shug Avery, Sofia and Nettie. In this way, "Celie manages to create both meaning and community in her own small way. She surrounds herself with a variety of figures who teach her what it means to be strong: her husband's mistress, the beautiful blues singer Shug Avery; Sofia, the all-but indomitable wife of her stepson Harpo; and eventually even long-lost Nettie, whose experiences as a missionary in Africa indicate both the promise of and limitations of Western religion and civilization." (Donnelly 73)

Celie regains her dignity and reverence after wielding the power that she gains leaving the house of Mr__. In her new house, Celie started an entrepreneurship that made her socially and economically self-assertive. Shug Avery inculcated in Celie's personality a fire of protest and retaliation and instigated her not to succumb to the bullying of men, retaliated in equal measure. She paved her path according to the ideals and direction of these feisty women, who implanted in her mind a feeling of bravery, audacity, vigour, and gallantry. She, at last, left Mr__ and took departure from Mr__'s house to Shug's where she was totally a changed woman, confident in her dress as well as in demeanour. She got respect, dignity and position in that house where she met with Adam, Olivia, Nettie, Samuel, Harpo, Sofia, Shug and so on that led her to feel young in her old age. She said:

My skin dark. My nose just a nose. My lips just lips. My body just any woman's body through the changes of age. Nothing special here for nobody to love. No honey colored curly hair, no cuteness. Nothing young and fresh. My heart must be young and fresh though, it feel like it blooming blood. (Walker 266)

Therefore, it is observed that Celie got her family, her identity after wielding the power that came from her bravery and protesting nature. So, as she got the power, she also got identity, contrary to her previous situation where she had lost her identity by failing to wield the power. The same thing was happened with Sofia also.

“Black women are at the center of *The Color Purple*, but because it is a novel of transcendence, Walker gives us all hope by showing not only that women were not put here to be oppressed, but that men can actually change”(Smith 175). Mr__ had transformed into a new character from tyrant to human being after losing his power and that was a great transformation in his part. His personality was totally metamorphosed from a fierce and excoriated man to a meek, mild, loving and caring man. When Celie and Shug left Mr. __, he was close to death, shut himself up in his house, and was haunted by a life of meanness. After that, contrary to his previous nature, he did all the house chores, worked in the field, cooked, did the dishes and attended Mass which made Celie taken aback by this avatar of Mr__ as a caring and social man. So, being failed to wield the power Mr__ transformed from tyrant to human being and started finding beauty in Celie, so he proposed for remarriage, but his proposal was refuted.

“Black women have at times been brutally and matter-of-factly oppressed by Black men, that they have suffered from sexism as well as from racism, and that Black women's love for each other has formed the bottom line of our survive”(Smith 170). As the novel is centred on the Black Women, the lives and freedom of Black women are of crucial importance and concern. All the women who had been viciously exploited and tortured found relief from such torturous negotiating in conversation among women that later led to form women community. Celie got solace and real support only from other women. Both Nettie and Mr__’s own sister instigated Celie to fight, but Mr.__ banished these two allies from his property. In the beginning of the novel, Celie advised Harpo to beat his stout and strong-willed wife, Sofia as she was devoid of the freedom, enjoyed by Sofia. But, later Celie felt tormented in her interior heart when Harpo executed her advice and found solace only after apologizing to Sofia, thereby opening the way for their friendship. Being an independent, beautiful, and magical woman, Shug also cared deeply about women. “The bonding they share, of identity and sexuality, is but one expression of the ideal of sisterhood as it gives shape to the novel. At its best *The Color Purple* explores the different ways women might love one another regardless of whether they are sisters, lovers, friends, or even enemies.” (Blount 119) So, Walker’s depiction of women loving each other consolidated the bond between women, especially between Celie and Shug that ended in lesbianism.

Thus, the novel projects, on one hand, the men and Whites as the weavers of identities of the weaker sections as they occupied the position of hub of the society securing the upper hand position and unfathomable power. They were the people who woven the fabric of identities of various people subsuming God. Here the structure of the society or order of hierarchy remains intact as like the traditional society, the privileged group – men and Whites people - exerts power on the underprivileged group – women and Blacks. On the other hand, the novel also highlights the reversing turn of the wheel of destiny which ensured the transferring of power from one folk to another resulted in revamping of identities of various characters. The power, exerted from the

agency of race and gender gets deconstructed with the progress of the novel that gave the emergence of new behaviours and identities. The identities of Celie, Sofia, Mr__ and God venture in the process of transformation depending upon the altering of power. Power here acts as a weaver of identity or acts as a metaphor for identity as identity alters with the alteration of power. So, in search of voice and identity the power gets deconstructed and supplementation of order of hierarchy takes place.

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