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## Breaking the Gender and Politics of Culture in Alice Walker's

### *The Color Purple*

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#### **Abstract:**

The feminist critics generally propagate a prominent notion that gender is a cultural and social construct resulting from the androcentric or patriarchal ideology which treats women as subservient to men. These critics highlight also the role of this culture formation dominated by male power in suppressing and marginalizing women who are repeatedly represented either as complementary to male characters or always marginal and subordinate. Therefore, the construction of gender allows the assertion of superiority of one over another on the basis of sex. The present novel is an account of abuses—sexual, mental and physical which Celie, the protagonist, has to endure throughout the novel just because of her gender. The horrifying account of her sexual abuse beginning from the first page is a sad commentary on the androcentric culture which condemns women to a subordinate state. Although, Celie is the victim yet herself feels defiled and corrupt because she interprets her position from the view point of male supremacy, and therefore is not able to overcome her feeling of guilt except towards the end that shows the dominant aspect of politics of culture. The cancellation of the word “I” on the first page is a testimony to the extent that women have been conditioned to blame themselves for the atrocities committed to them. However, the novel articulates also the complexity of struggle of African-American women, and their indomitable will which enables them to develop as individuals, defying the exploitative constraints of a society dominated and conditioned by white people and black men. Therefore, the present paper tries not only to explore the gender and politics of culture but also shows the breaking of these social constructions in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

## **Full Paper:**

The construction of gender is an essentially masculine activity which springs from the male's aggressive need to dominate the female on the basis of sex. In this androcentric world, men expect all the women to conform according to the strictures that are constituted by society. Women's free and independent existence becomes intolerable to them, and therefore, they deny women's demand for equality. The fact is that women have always been viewed as incapable of doing any serious and worthy task from social point of view. Moreover, an institution like marriage traps them and confines their role strictly to wifedom and motherhood. This socialization treats women as inert and inferior. Women's marginalization and treatment as 'other' objectify them in the eyes of males and make them believe that men ought to be superior to them. Therefore, women have been conditioned in our society in such a way as they accept this kind of treatment as their ultimate destiny. It is here that politics of culture is appeared on the surface. This master-slave relationship which is a relationship of dominance and subservience between the sexes is the ultimate consequence of gender construction which is mostly a social construct. For instance, as Abrams and Harpham rightly have stated:

It is widely held that while one's sex as a man or woman is determined by anatomy, the prevailing concepts of gender—of the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in temperament and behavior—are largely, if not entirely, social constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization. (122)

Women have continuously been denied of respect and stability, and therefore exploited—racially, economically and sexually. “The female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to fear or to hate their bodies” (Ross 17). It explicitly highlights the politics of culture that always works for men in order to provide authority of keeping women under some certain limitations. Alice Walker, in her endeavour to examine thoroughly and objectively the weaknesses and strengths of black women, has found a very fertile ground for her fiction which is a veritable account of her central character's encounter with pain and suffering, denial and dispossession. The novel powerfully depicts the journey of a black woman's life characterized by her subjugation to physical and psychological violence, sexual exploitation and oppression and a denial of freedom to live a life of wholeness on her own terms. Her experiences as a daughter, wife and mother explicitly show how her own family dominated by male authority tends to deprive her

of the opportunities to develop her sense of self-worth, and thus prepares her only for the role of a slave throughout her life to serve the male-master. Walker has tried also to expose the customs and traditions of black community which have been so devised as to keep woman subservient to man by denying her the right of control even over her own body and mind. By showing the Olinka tribe of Africa, the novelist illuminates the fact that women are universally treated no better than a mere object and “the husband has life and death power over the wife,” (CP 152). For instance, when the missionaries suggest to the tribal people to educate the children of the tribe, they refuse to educate their daughters because they think that, “A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something” (CP 140). Thus, the novelist has enriched Afro-American tradition with this novel in which she exposes the politics of culture and gives voice to a silent black woman named Celie.

The novel is in the form of letters first written to God by Celie and later to her sister Nettie. Celie, writes to God to help her in surviving the spiritual, emotional and physical abuse that she has suffer at the hands of her step-father Alphonso. 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. When he finds out that her mother does not respond to his sexual advances, he tries to find out a substitute in her. Consequently, he makes brutal sexual attacks on her, and she is subjected to rape. To add injury to insult, he terrorizes her, “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (CP 1). So, she tolerates all kinds of indignities and humiliations from him with silence and a sense of shame. Her body as well as her soul is torn apart as he continuously humiliates her. She asserts, “He act like he can’t stand me no more, Say I’m evil an always up to no good” (CP 5). As a result she becomes pregnant. Motherhood may be a pleasure to some women, but for her, it is an unspeakable pain and burden. She is not allowed to love her own kids as they are taken away by him. And when her mother dies, he marries another woman and passes her on to Albert as his wife. But unfortunately her fate does not change and now she has to suffer at the hands of Albert. To be his wife, for her, means to be submissive, to be subordinate and to be a punching bag. She meekly accepts the verdict of Albert’s verbal abuse. “You ugly, you skinny, your shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth ... You black, you pore ... you a woman ... you nothing at all” (CP 186-187). He beats her whenever he likes but she never makes a protest: “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 she, in moments of extreme physical and mental pain, transforms herself into a tree is a significant example of a black woman’s proximity to the passive suffering and agony of nature. Her narration of her

moments of marital sexual involvement with her husband represents a similar dehumanization, one in which the conjugal act assumes the form of rape. Rape, within or outside marriage, is rightly demystified as an instrument of oppression. The crudeness of the language and the graphic nature of the description reinforce the dehumanizing aspects of the act. Albert's inhuman act of hiding her sister Nettie's letters from her is an example of her exploitation on the emotional level. So, all these incidents clearly show that she has to suffer at various moments just because of her gender. She does not even oppose this brutal treatment by her husband because she is conditioned in such a way as to accept this treatment as the will of God. It is here, the novelist depicts the role of culture which works against women in this patriarchal world. Moreover, the conventional idea of Christian God also contributes to her exploitation of by men. She has been conditioned to, "think bout angels, God coming down by chariot...Angels all in white, white hair and white eyes...God all white too" (CP 85). Such a God, she believes partakes all of her sorrows and pains. This image of God, in fact had been, Walker suggests, projected on the Bible through the Church. Blindly believing in such a God, she tries to share all the secret burdens of her life with Him naively trusting in His justice. Her faith in this God, however, fails to mitigate any of her sufferings in her life. Her prayer to God does not save her from the lust of Alphonso. She has to lose even her children and her pains and degradation at the hands of her husband are in no way alleviated by the prayer to this Christian God of Justice. And then she thinks that, "the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (CP 173).

But then begins the story of her transformation into a strong, self-respecting and an independent woman because, "The world is changing. . .It is no longer a world just for boys and men" (CP 145). This process of self-growth and development starts with the arrival of Shug Avery, her husband's beloved. She is a blues singer and suffering from "womanly disease." Celie cares and nurses her and Shug provides her with the example of reciprocity, and a bond of warmth and friendship is created between the two. Therefore, in this patriarchal world, only women come forward to console and help each other in all possible ways. Now, Celie stops turning to God for His justice and help as Shug teaches her:

God is inside you and inside everybody else...It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it" (CP 176).

This new concept of God dwelling as an integral part of her brings about a radical change in Celie. Her feeling of alienation disappears, and she begins to participate in the fullness of life. God for her, thus, is not 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, and begging for His mercy. This marks her deliverance not only from fears but also from her sense of worthlessness as a 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 confining concepts and assumptions embodied in old customs and institutions like church. In fact, it is Shug who initiates a desire for selfhood in her and an awareness of her own beauty and warmth. Celie who has so far hated her body and considered it to be responsible for her oppression, now learns to love it and value it. She becomes aware of how sexual violence upon her body has robbed her of the awareness of beauty and mystery of her womanly creativity. She no longer regards herself as a mere piece of property. Shug helps her also in recovering her sister's hidden letters which symbolizes her rediscovery of self.

This sense of belonging to body builds a confidence in her by which she comes to gain a control over herself. It is significant that she, who remained tight lipped over her brutal oppression, now comes to throw back angry words at her voluble oppressor Albert. She no longer bears such invectives, and vehemently affirms her existence against her husband's alleged "nothing," and asserts her new found freedom, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook...But I'm here" (*CP* 187). Nettie also helps her 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 her with a model of resistance against sexual and racial oppression. In her relationship with Sofia, she gains a new perspective of life. It is Sofia, who demonstrates to her how to live with one's husband as a self-respecting wife. Thus, Sofia represents the black woman who chooses to fight for her own dignity. Her struggle for dignity as an individual who is both black and female makes a tremendous impact on Celie's thinking. Thus, she begins to learn the approach to use militant resistance against any type of injustice in life.

Alice Walker, through Celie's story, also exposes how institutions like marriage tend to work as instruments of hegemony. It makes husband-wife relationship into a kind of

master-slave bond, wherein it is enjoined upon the wife to obey her husband and to please him as he wants. As it is clear when Teddie in the novel *Meridian* retorts “his pleasure should please her” (67-68). This politics of culture allows man a right to her body and thereby to prove his superiority through his sex. He, thus, turns her into a kind of mere object for his sexual gratification which leads a woman to a state of unhappiness, and denies her an independent human identity. Here, the novelist severely attacks on patriarchal thinking of gender construction which presents a woman’s body as weak and thereby a subject to condemnation. Therefore, the novelist regards the freedom of a woman’s body as prerequisite for all other kinds of freedom and happiness. Therefore, Celie for whom life was nothing but misery now comes to discover how it can be full of sweetness and joy. With the re-obtaining of her body, she comes to a stage where her body and its natural urges and energies become a means of hope, self-expression, regeneration and an affirmation of her self as a woman.

Alice Walker is also of the view that economic freedom is a crucial factor for black women in achieving self identity and a whole life of their own. It is important to note that both Celie and Shug are women and Albert turns to both of them for his personal needs. But the difference in his attitudes towards both of them seems to be rooted in their economic status. It is the economic freedom of Shug that gives her the courage and strength to defy Albert. If Celie is dominated by Albert, it is Shug who dominates Albert in their relationship. In this way Celie’s journey to Memphis is the symbolic representation of her movement from a life of slavery to freedom, from abject dependence on Albert for her survival to a state of economic strength and self-reliance. Celie grows into a successful seamstress earning her freedom with the money she makes in the business. Thus, the novel illustrates that Celie who despite poverty, illiteracy, physical and mental exploitation, transcends her plight through self-awareness, and achieves the freedom by breaking all the gender construction of patriarchal society. Through different stages of Celie’s life Walker has underlined the fact that despite their odious circumstances the black women are able to raise their collective voice against the patriarchal order and attain an autonomous state. Shug and Sofia defiantly oppose all oppressive designs of gender and racial differences. Through these characters, Walker has epitomized the realities of the lives of the black women and registered a vociferous protest against the debilitating gender construction and oppression of women through cultural ideologies by the patriarchal society.

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