

## Sisterhood and Emancipation in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*



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### ABSTRACT

*Women bonding and sisterhood play an important role in Celie's emancipation process in Alice Walker's The Color Purple. Celie is able to transform her life and free herself both physically and spiritually with the help of her sister Nettie, her daughter in law Sofia and her husband's mistress Shug. Female ties take many forms: some are motherly or sisterly, some are in the form of mentor and pupil, some are sexual, and some are simply friendships.*

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Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, vividly depicts the sufferings of African-American women which result from patriarchy, sexism and racism. The novel does not merely describe the sufferings of black women but even goes beyond it and suggests certain solutions for these miseries. Walker's not only tries to give voice to black women, who can be considered as subalterns, but also provides them viable opportunities to find freedom from these oppressive strategies. The emancipation of Celie, the central protagonist of the novel, from being a sexually abused child and a passive wife is the main concern of Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*. In Celie, Alice Walker has created a character that faces immense pain and suffering due to patriarchy, sexism and racism. But she also presents Celie as a woman who holds faith in her ability to find emancipation from these oppressive forces. Although Celie, the main character, suffers deeply from the effects of sexism and racism, she does not give up and even emerges triumphant and victorious at the end. The question to be raised is how, Celie, a black oppressed woman, is able to unshackle herself? What is the trail that Celie follows in order to liberate Women bonding and sisterhood play an important role in Celie's emancipation process. Celie is able to transform her life and free herself both physically and spiritually with the help of her sister Nettie, her daughter in law Sofia and her husband's mistress Shug. Female ties take many forms: some are motherly or sisterly, some are in the form of mentor and pupil, some are sexual, and some are simply friendships.

In her writings, Walker always underscores the significance of sisterhood in black women's emancipation. She explores the prospect of enablement for black women if they create a community of sisters that can rework the present-day odd definitions of woman

and man. "The unifying bond between black women is through their friendships, their love, and their shared oppression that they collectively gain the strength to separate themselves from the bondage of their past and piece together a free and equal existence for themselves and for those they love" (Smith 182).

The process of women developing solidarity among them is defined as 'sisterhood.' According to Mitchell, "When women cease to be rivals of each other or stop competing for the attention of a male, and develop deep social relationship with one another," then this situation is called sisterhood (13). Feminists exhort women that they should protect, advise and boost each other's morale to face the male-hegemony. Raymond Williams also warns women, if they "do not take initiative to change conditions no one else is likely to do so" (70). Sisterhood aims at cutting across the racial, political, class or age barriers. Freud detects jealousy as a feminine trait, but Walker's women do not manifest it. On the contrary, they bolster up each other, offer solace, help and support each other. The chief aim of sisterhood is to help women in distress irrespective of colour and class. Feminists repeatedly warn women, "None of us can be free until all are free" (Rubenstein 36).

Celie and Nettie relationship reflects the presence of sisterhood in *The Color Purple*. Both the sisters live within a family where love is totally absent. Nettie provides Celie with moral comfort in a situation when her own father rapes her repeatedly. Noticing that Celie is frequently beaten by her husband, Nettie urges her to fight him. She also exhorts her to fight against Mr. \_\_\_'s children by teaching them a good lesson and letting them know who has "the upper hand" (Walker 25). Nettie is deeply influenced by her teacher, Miss Beasley, who values her sovereignty and ideas of freedom. This

helps Nettie in shaping her own consciousness and ideas. Nettie plays the role of a teacher for Celie. She teaches her sister how to read, spell and do everything important for her. Nettie always informs Celie about the important events taking place in the world. In the short period of staying in Albert's house with Celie, Nettie witnesses his benighted brutality and knows clearly that Celie is hopeless if she keeps her submissiveness. So she tries hard to exert every possible way to teach and enlighten Celie.

Sofia Butler, Celie's step-son's wife, is another woman who becomes a good model for Celie. She is a fat woman with big legs. She grows up in a family of men and learns that only by fighting can she survive: "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers; I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (Walker 38). Unlike Sofia, Celie does not fight and keeps silent when she suffers from family violence. She even takes it for granted that men are superior to women. However, Sofia refuses to accept this unfair social rule. She, with her determination, will not be humbled by anyone in her life, whether they are black or white.

Celie's first meeting with Sofia happens when Sofia comes to ask Albert's permission of her marriage to Harpo. At first sight, Celie is surprised by Sofia's strong and confident appearance. When Albert rejects their request and even insults Sofia about her pregnancy, to Celie's astonishment, Sofia does not submit to him. She says to Harpo: "Naw, Harpo stay here. When you free, me and the baby be waiting" (Walker 38). Sofia's bravery greatly moves Celie. Sofia is an alien who is absolutely contradictory to the woman image Celie is familiar with. Sofia gets married to Harpo regardless of their parents' objection. In the beginning, the couple lives a harmonious life. They share the housework and enjoy their familial happiness: "She making some sheets. He takes the baby, give it a kiss, chuck it under the chin" (Walker 33). Sofia keeps her independent characteristics. But this kind of relationship between wife and husband is not allowed in the male-dominated social system. Albert cannot tolerate Sofia's thinking too much of herself. He instigates Harpo to beat Sofia. Even Celie, who grows up in pain and maltreatment, being unconscious of her oppression, also suggests that he should beat Sofia when he consults her how to make Sofia become subservient to him. When Sofia learns that Celie has urged Harpo to beat her, she reveals how terribly betrayed she feels.

Another woman who helps Celie in getting free is the blues singer Shug Avery. However, the female bonding that ties these two women is totally different from the one with Nettie or Sofia. In fact, if Nettie

is considered as the hope that sustains Celie alive and Sofia the rebellious spirit that encourages Celie to fight, Shug is seen as the affectionate mother and sexual mentor for Celie. Shug Avery is at first a friend to Celie, eventually a lover, but has always a subtly guiding "mothering" influence that, like the mothers of Walker's "generations" enables Celie to evolve into an independent, self-actualized woman, no longer accepting the conditions that have enslaved her.

Celie has always been deprived of maternal affection and Shug, like a mother, protects Celie from the beatings of her husband Albert. She stays at Albert's house and does not leave until she becomes sure that he will not even think about beating Celie again. Shug becomes the angel by Celie's side that helps her pave the first steps towards independence: "I won't leave, she says, until I know Albert won't even think about beating you" (Walker 79).

Celie has been the subject of repeated rapes and beatings; therefore, she has no desire to get to know her body. The only concept that Celie has of her own body is that she is ugly. To protect herself, she has had to eradicate her body as well as her soul. However, in order to emancipate, a woman should know herself not only emotionally but also physically. The importance of regaining the control of one's own body for asserting one's self is outlined by Daniel Ross in these terms:

One of the primary projects of modern feminism has been to restore women's bodies. Because the female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to fear or even hate their bodies. Consequently, women often think of their bodies as torn or fragmented, a pattern evident in Walker's Celie. To confront the body is to confront not only an individual's abuse but also the abuse of women's bodies throughout history, as the external symbol of women's enslavement, this abuse represents for women a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status. (Ross 70)

With Shug's encouragement, Celie views her own sexual organ in a mirror for the first time and shouts, 'its mine.' It was the first time that she develops an interest to her body and enjoys its beauty. According to Jacques Lacan's formulation of the "self," a subject first becomes aware of itself by identification with a person, usually the mother, "although the figure can be any constant nurturer" (Quoted in Ross 77) and the mirroring with Shug manifests itself with Celie's identification of another whom she wishes to be or be like. Jacques Lacan sees that, at some point, early in a young girl's growth, she should identify with her mother's body: "This identification foregrounds the child's ac-

ceptance or non-acceptance of his sexual organs" (Quoted in Ross 77) for Celie, seeing Shug's body begins the primary step toward this identification. Shug initiates Celie to the pleasures of sex, and after lovemaking, Celie feels true love for the first time. When Celie wakes up the next morning, she feels transformed; it is the first time that she is loved. This lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug appears not to be indecent but natural and affectionate. Their homosexual union is a first experience for both of them, but it is natural and freeing and a culmination of their love for each other.

In sum, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is a novel that wonderfully portrays the gradual forming of a new black woman, Celie, who evolves from patriarchal oppression to awakening and independence. Walker is a very committed writer who refuses the notion of art for art's sake. This is quite evident in *The Color Purple* since not only does she describe the evils of racism and sexism that African American women suffered from, but she even goes further as she proposes an outlet, a solution to their situation, a path to follow in order to escape the evils of patriarchy and live a decent life.

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