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Patriarchal Oppression and Gender Discrimination in Selected Novels of Alice Walker

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Abstract

The current study sheds the light on the presence of African American women through selected novels of a contemporary feminist writer Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, *Meridian* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The main aim behind this study is to create a new identity and give a voice for black women in American society in the recent era and make them self-confidence socially, emotionally and spiritually. Racial discrimination, patriarchal oppression, gender violence, the Civil Right Movement and slavery, these subjects shape the core of walker's works. Walker was the first female who coined 'Womanism' a term of black feminism which affricates women's culture, women's strength and women's flexibility. The writer tells her themes through her heroines in order to offer the reader a real depiction and insightful and sent a message for all the world by the ill treatment, marginalization and multi faced exploitation that most of Afro- American women have been suffering for centuries. Further to reveal the gradual development and social changes in the life of her protagonists from self-abnegation, silence and powerless to self-acceptance, resistance and empowerment.

Keywords: racial discrimination, patriarchal oppression, slavery, civil rights movement, marginalization, black feminist, gender equality

Introduction

During the second half of twentieth century African American writers particularly during black nationalist movement intended to concentrate on black society and revolutionary future. Alice Walker as a black feminist theorist born in 1944 Georgia in the rural south of America was the first who incorporates the feminist ideology with the racial issues and inflame the first spark of black women emancipation civil rights movement of blacks.

This research highlights important topics that have written about gender bias and in touch with the existence of black women. The present study addresses the notion of multi-level oppression of black women in the American male dominating society through selected novels of Walker these novels can be said to be strongly autobiographical. Walker's wanted to declaim injustice and try to reverse social views and perceptions towards black women. Frankly, it is noticeable that Black women are treated with brutality, losing their human rights and their disparity through the black American and white American men. They as long as demanded to shatter the patriarchy. They wish to demolish the violence living with the white and black American men. The Afro-American women attempt to deny the

strength of patriarchy. They wish they could unite against men. These women attempt to stand together and play the role of masculine.

Walker's selected novels have a universal appeal because oppression of women exists in all communities. It also clearly explores the suffering of African American women from patriarchy. These themes were put into play by her protagonist like, Celie, Shug, Sophia, Harpo, Brownfield, Grange, Margaret, Ruth, and Meridian. In *Meridian* Walker's second novel that was published in 1976, the author explores the psychological makeup that enchants or fascinates the black woman in the Civil Right movement.

Literature Review

Shalini (2014) stated that black women keep themselves on the path of literature. They are not a negative thing. Women don't want to deny their dignity; they want to have equal rights in their social, political and economic life. Some writers are Maya Angelou, Harriet Jacobs, Deborah Gray-White, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Zora Neal Huston. These black women writers seek to maintain their dignity, their feminine unity, self-esteem, self-realization, and to spare their sexual consciousness. Alice Walker's signification as a black writer not only gives voice to black women but also gives voice to supply their freedom.

Another black writer Koynucu (2014) admits praises the real value of Walker's works, which usually aspires to give the female their voice in order to stand together against all shapes of offence, violence, cruelty and inhumanity. This study concentrate on walker's protagonists in her selected novels reveal how big is the anguish and pain of American black woman. The heroine in *The Color Purple*, Celie a poor ugly black woman is not a skilful soldier when she was a child. When she grew up in the light of her hearth, she destructed combat for survival in the concept of Feminist Criticism. This study concentrates on selected novels which are in touch with gender issues, such as, *The Color Purple*(1982), *Meridian*(1976) and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*(1970) with respect to its famous themes of women's offence, abuse, male dominance, racism and sexism.

Padhi defines Celie, the protagonist in *The Color Purple*, is a black American female who undergoes oppression by her patriarchal family and racism on the hand of whites. It means that women are only more follower and subordinated to men. Walker stressed that being a woman is a problem but being a black and woman is very hard. Women are anticipated to do and obey all that is ordered by men, whereas men are the most superiority and dominance, or arrogance as the researcher calls it. In this novel, Celie is a very unfortunate daughter, because she was abused twice by her stepfather irrespective of being only fourteen years old. She is obliged to get used to it as she can't withstand it (Padhi, 2015).

Brown (2004) points out that the debut novel of the American author Alice Walker's, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, which was published in 1970, a good depiction of a poor black sharecropping family in South America. Several issues that occupy Walker's career were addressed in that novel, such as the Civil Rights movement, the black women abuse caused by their fathers and husbands, and their necessity of women's self-reliance and moral responsibility.

Grange and Margaret are a clear representation of violence against black women, they began in the novel as optimistic sharecroppers, whereby the time their son Brownfield was born. Although the white landlord's exploitation of Grange's labour causes him an irreversible debt and hopeless frustration, Grange's feelings of inadequacy precipitate him a rage that insults his wife and son.

Some critics have argued about the way Walker has used the term feminism, where black feminist women have superior power to the white feminist women, irrespective of the fact that this allegation was rejected by Walker herself. She considers womanism supplementary to the feminist movement. The Womanist movement also supports black women in ways that allow them to discuss gender issues without provoking black men. With reference to the survival of the black society, some problems like abuse of women and gender inequality are entirely addressed by the womanism rather than feminism.

All throughout *Meridian*, Walker accentuates the universality of the human expertise and proposes that there is no one who cornered the bazaar on suffering. Some individuals may belong to different backgrounds, but they may share a common history of exploitation, guilt, misery, violence, and eventually, liberty, triumph and acceptance, arrogance and uppishness (Amrutha, 2017).

Double Oppression of African American Women

Padhi (2015) suggests that most of Walker's works vividly depict the suffering of a new black woman, and particularly her famous work *The Color Purple*, in which her protagonist Celie is an ugly black woman who wonderfully portrayed the gradual forming of the African American black poor woman through patriarchy, sexism, and racism. In this work, she not only appears the humiliating and insulting position of black women but also appears her insistence to raise and enhance their social status and condition by promoting the deep sense of their right and their condition in the community. In fact, this distinguished work not only gave the black women a voice but also made them the way to protest for their freedom more rewarding. Celie portrayed real-life events related to the author, from being a sexually exploited child to a lifeless wife and finally to an emancipated and liberated woman. So, the black American women encountered many grief and agonies in their life, and they were thus obliged to face double sufferings: being a black and being a woman (Padhi, 2015).

Being Afro American womanism activist Walker has strived more than any other contemporary author in the USA to project to the world the extent to which the black women in America suffered violence and oppression. The author is also one of the first black women writers who brought to everyone's attention the difficulties facing the black women in America, especially sexism when the majority of other blacks believed that only racism was the source of all of the suffering of the Black American people. Possibly the most controversial aspect of her themes is embodied in most of her works especially the epistolary feminist novel *The Color Purple* which gained the Pulitzer Prize in 1983, as well as The National Book Award in the same year. With this Award-winning novel, Walker was highly praised for her insightful and remarkable portraits of the black women's life. *The Color Purple* deals with several themes like racism, sexism, gender bias, oppression of women, slavery, male-female relationship, culture and traditions (Mirshojaei, 2016).

Lauret (2012) points out that the blacks commit as usually highlighted in the TV. The protagonist Meridian as American black women suffers the conflict between the traditional African American values acquired during slavery and the controversial revolutionary arguments adopted by the Black Power Movement, as this evidence suggests: "The trauma is that of the Afro American past and physical pain manifests itself in / on Meridian's body, with the hysteria staged in public acts of atonement for the suffering of the people" (Lauret, 2012, p. 127).

As regards dominating the black women by the white men in Hurston's protagonist in Janie's story, Hurston refers to the stereotypical oversimplification, widespread objectification, and forthright denial of black woman rights. The black female, in the white man's view, is simply an object used for satisfying his sexual desire. Rape and exploitation of black women in such stories are anxiety and reiterative obsession for Nanny. Rather than love, protection has become the nanny's insistence to convince her granddaughter Janie to marry to Logan Killicks in order to erase the sexual exploitation by white males from her memories. Obviously, she struggles to create a situation for Janie in which she avoids what herself had experienced previously (Farda & Zarrinjooee, 2014).

Whenever white men are present, the practice of raping black women becomes widespread. Nanny is one of those black women who had been traumatized by this devastating disregard for the dignity of the black females in and out of the plantation. After being raped by a white man, Nanny gave birth to Leafy, as mentioned earlier, and now tells her granddaughter about what has happened to her mother. Rape and sexual harassments by the white men must be expected by those black women who live in a white society. These women are seen as objects to be sexually fantasized for the white men. Education for the black woman results in rape. This is ironical that Nanny Hopes Leafy forget her teacher, but she later becomes the object of the white male's gaze. In the end, she leaves her mother's house to avoid the trauma and shame after being raped (Fard & Zarrinjooee, 2014).

Mirshojaei, (2016) points out that the novel *Meridian* gives an example of Walker's capability of combining political and personal fiction. However, in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker's first novel, the events move chronologically. *Meridian* is put in a smaller chapter that makes up the novel much more like pieces of cloth composing a quilt, as Walker describes it. Furthermore, *Meridian* seems to support issues dependent on personal interaction rather than a universal rule. *Meridian* took charge of what was going on. She wasn't afraid of noticing the truth. She simply knew that she was going to have only one chance to succeed, and that was her time to exploit it. Others suggest that this novel explores the ways in which women's oppression were formed. The novel does not suggest a simple (cure), but rather a series of questions that make one learns from his past and his painful moments (Mirshojaei, 2016).

McLaughlin and Davis (2003) comment on the novel *Meridian* in that Annie Marion told Meridian, "I know violence is as American as cherry pie!" (Meridian, 1976, p.18). The nature of the black family and the society introduced in *Meridian*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple* is summarized in this aforementioned quote. The general pattern in Alice Walker's works shows that the woman community is specifically plagued by verbal and physical violence in both the public and domestic domains. From a sociological point of view, reflective of the varied American demographic landscape in relation to imprisonment McLaughlin and Davis's analysis (2003, p. 286) "it would be incorrect to miss the truth that black women bear and tolerate the "criminal label". Furthermore, "the racial disparity, in imprisoned people is not recognized as proof of structural racism but as a consequence of the assumed criminality of black people". It is worth-reminding that black women bear the criminal label and racial imbalance (Mhandu, 2012).

In this study, the researcher aspires to share Sharma and Dwivedi in their opinion. They expressed in their literature that black women need to raise the voice and be proud of their culture. They also documented and depicted the calamity, tribulation, and dilemma of the African-American immigrants in America. The researcher through Walker's works reflects on different dimensions of the writer's tales by showing the extent to which her female characters suffered racism in America and how they got gradually stronger to get themselves rid of patriarchy (Sharma & Dwivedi, 2017).

The best definition to the racism it means the belief that the followers of one race are basically superior to the members of other races. In *The Color Purple*, racism is set as a white antagonist against helpless black one-sided evil-being; those who bring about the violence are themselves the victim of some form of abuse. Alphonso's son beats his wife Sofia after Mr. implies that he was undermined by Sofia's resistance. Walker (1985) says that nothing can make that better than a good sound beating. His family and the people nearby him were treated by him the same way they were treated by his own autocratic father. Generally, racism is symbolized to a cage in the novel, in which the whites are insulting the blacks. Sofia's imprisonment metaphorically refers to how the blacks were imprisoned by racism, and how they were cornered to slavery and domesticity in their own homes (Abdulimam & Yasir, 2015).

Barrios (2016) analyzed some topics related to Walker's works and found that they generally focused on hatred, particularly her second novel *Meridian*, where it addresses the extent to which racial segregation, hatred, stigmatization, and outbursts of violence is existent between the white and black Americans particularly, against women. This study aims to address this segregation in *Meridian* by focusing on ethnic prejudice and negative stereotyping. In *Meridian*, Walker portrays the prejudice that black women hold against the white who enslaved and humiliated them. This was to show how race-related hatred can trigger more hatred.

As females are of no consequence in black cultures, the health of a girl baby is of no consequence as well. A caretaker woman called Kutlu (2003) mentions that a little female baby wasn't taken to a doctor when she feels sick. They say "She is a girl. God will protect her if he wishes." (Kutlu, 2003, p. 222). She grew up as a deaf and dumb child. Being unimportant children, girls are always the victim of their father's rage and are beaten for inane reasons.

Both documented and portrayed violence against women in their writings. Oppression against black women is a manifestation of the lower status patriarchal order sets for women and it cannot be stopped

even these women are treated as equal human beings like men. Kutlu and Walker's work (2003) have significant roles in American literature, particularly in documenting every matter concerned with oppression against women. They promoted public awareness for putting an end to these crimes against humanity (Kutlu & Walker, 2003).

One of the major reasons of racial oppression against women is caused by prenatal sex which is committed in some countries and would always be in favour of male kids. 30% of the pregnancies who were identified with female embryos were all aborted, whereas 90% of the pregnancies who were identified with male embryos had a normal delivery. Sometimes mothers were ignored or even beaten for giving birth to a daughter, while women giving birth to a male kid were highly respected. In her short story *The Unfinished Story of Mademoiselle Dimitra*, Kutlu tells "how Nadya Hamm gives birth to her fifth daughter, and how Nadya and all her daughters were beaten violently by her husband" (Kutlu, 2003, p. 51). However, "when Nadya gives birth to a son at the end, her husband made her a ceremony and gave her different gifts" (Kutlu, 2003, p.54). In the United States and western cultures, prenatal sex selection is not common, and this isn't mentioned in Alice Walker's *The CP* (Kutlu, 2003).

The Double Oppression of Women inside and outside America, by Tony Morrison Hardy and Gilbert

The conventional classic heroine in Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was intentionally portrayed as being abused by her parents. Due to poverty reasons, they forced her to quest friendship with Urbervilles, a wealthy man. Tess is depicted as innocent, submissive, and sacrificial. The novel shows how Tess's whole life was shattered for the sake of her parent's greed. Hardy (2008) seemingly predicates that "social prejudice and men's blind cruelty embedded in masculine pride" (Gorsky, 1992, p.p. 69-70).

Gilbert (2000) maintained in different ways the sexual ideology of the 19th century ; particularly by not confining the oppression of women to Corsets, but also to the private house with all its deprivation and discounts. On the other hand, its aesthetic and political imperatives had been particularly inspiringly engendering, not just a range of revolutionary movement but some of the richest productions of the female imagination. John Stuart Mill, Mary Wellston craft, and Kate Millet, who encouraged the feminist academia, (Jaggar, 1983, p.19) have described the 19th-century woman's movement in the United States 'as an improvement to the woman's condition'. Morrison argues that the mentality of male authors consolidates the cultural identity and racial prejudices. Morrison (1990) arouses the readers' awareness to read critically. She wrote the following:

American literature has been obviously the preserve of white male views, genius and removed from the numerous and overwhelming presence of blacks people in the United States. The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to have at the margins of the literary imagination (P. 5).

Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* is not alone to criticize the features of mainstream American male author's mindsets against black or to support women in public. Similar marginal African Americans and Chinese American feminist authors also voiced out their huge impetus to female oppression, pain, anguish and suffering. They tried to portray through their protagonists how black women seek to live in dignity (Srisermbhok, 2016).

Exploitation of Black Women in African American Literature

Critics have extensively shown in many short stories and novels how Alice Walker has addressed this rhetorical complexity in her depictions of sexuality, from early 1960s till recent work. They have initially analyzed her literary depictions of the Black male sexual abuse of women. This was mainly portrayed in her first fiction *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), as well as other short novels,

such as *The Child who favoured Daughter* (1973), *Meridian* (1976), and *The Color Purple* (1982). While all of these tales incarnate several examples of sexual abuse, in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the researcher highlights special relationships in the aforementioned novels. For example, the relationship between Brownfield and his wife Mem, whom he shoots and murders, is examined. As regards *The Child Who Favoured Daughter*, the researcher analyses the violent act of a father who cuts off the breasts of his daughter and serves them to his dogs (Seaman, 2009).

In *Meridian*, the researcher focused on the scene in which a Black woman called Lynne was raped by a Black man called Truman Hill, whereas, in *The Color Purple*, the researcher comments on the repeated rape of black woman as in Walker's protagonist in *The Color Purple* Celie faced multi types of rape and incest by both her stepfather and her husband's permanent offence of her. In some examples, critics have not only examined these special cases of offence, but also have taken into account other subsequent aspects, including taboo love, forbidden love, eroticism and sexuality, and how they developed directly or indirectly in another character in reaction to such acts of violence. Truman's substituent relationships with both his wife Lynne, whom he loves platonically by the end of the novel, then with his friend Meridian, with whom he becomes emotionally engaged by the end of the tale, are in one case in point (Sussman, 2010).

As far back as this study, the researcher can analyze and summarize that the dual oppression is embedded in the nature of the social structures, where the attitudes and habits continue to put the African Americans women back in place. The inherent nature of bigotry makes it difficult to treat or overcome, and even nearly impossible to blame especial individuals.

The Oppression of Whites against Black Women in African American Literature

Walker shares and in accordance with Guillaumin's opinion in the concept of arranged marriage and abuse of black women. This is reflected specifically in some works through her protagonists like, Celie, Margret, Sofia, and Nitte, who are black Afro American women suffering from a lot of offence and oppression. Celie tried to endure the worst circumstances, particularly the hard sexual abuse of her step-father Fonso and her husband, who is as her father's age and whom she calls mister. She was also too patient with the loss of her babies, the cold cruelty of Albert, the loss of her sister Nettie, and above all poverty (Guillaumin, as cited in Tyson, 2015).

Concerning the gender discrimination and racial oppression of whites against black poor women, in *The Color Purple* Sofia's encounter with the white upper-class officer foregrounds issues of race and class. Sofia's refusal to work as a nanny for the mayor's children and then her retaliation to the mayor puts her in trouble. She is imprisoned and for twelve years. In the jail, she is beaten mercilessly, humiliated as "They crack her skull and ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye" (Walker, 1985). Sofia's blind eye is reminiscent of Walker's own blind eye. Alice Walker lost her sight in a childhood injury. One of her brothers was responsible for this accident and she views that this mishap was not accidental. This blind eye is a recurrent simple occurring in many works (Walker, 2010).

Sofia's relationship with Miss Eleanor Jane and other members of the mayor's family offers more finely coloured and extended critique of race integration, albeit one that has often been overlooked. With the efforts of Squeaks and Celie, Sofia was shifted from prison to the mayor's house and she worked as a maid for his children. Miss Eleanor Jane is mayor's daughter and is the only sympathetic one towards Sofia. Miss Eleanor Jane and Sofia appear to have some genuine feelings for one another. However, Sofia's feelings for Eleanor Jane are ambivalent. The prison in which Sofia was in is a metaphor for all the black women who were caged by gender bias (Shahida, 2013).

Patriarchal oppression of black men against black women in African American Literature

Nadu (2017) depicts the extent to which women suffered oppression by referring to Walker's protagonist Meridian, and other practices like divorce, abortions, slavery and lack of successful marriage. Meridian made her camp among the poor black woman.. Truman came searching for her as

he had used to do in the past ten years. She protests against the continuing racial discrimination even after the legal abolition of segregation. This first glimpse of Meridian reveals her social commitment to the black community, her belief in nonviolent resistance and her link with children finds that degeneration is a disease in the lives of blacks and they really have to be encouraged to overcome it. Hence, her characters became revived with the help of hope, and those revived characters became models for the whole universe.

Regarding to aforementioned, it is evident that the public awareness towards issues related to gender equity had increased during and after the period of the 18th century. This makes one wonder why this awareness did not show that the female condition has improved in our time, particularly when we have more advancements in education, living conditions, and technological progress than those in old times (Srisermbhok, 2016).

Conclusion

To conclude what has said the researcher can summarize that the novels of contemporary black feminist writer Alice Walker *The Color Purple*, *Meridian* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* have portrayed the impact of multi-faced oppression and prejudice that have been practiced against black women during American male dominating society. Through her heroines like Celie, Sofia, Meridian and Margret Walker succeed in exposing the afflictions and misery of colored women. The black characters in Walker's novels attempt to tolerate gender discrimination, patriarchal practices, racial attitudes and sexual abuse. Further, Walker as a radical feminist writer is the first who deals with the forbidden issues like incest since she wants to reveal the fact of black woman's life.

As a black feminist writer Walker in this study traced and addressed the plight of black women in her own way under the guidelines of black feminist principles trying to declaim injustice and presented a black culture as a new genre in American patriarchal society especially in the rural south of America. Walker's selected novels further offered choices and possibilities to some of the stereotypes and some habits that patriarchy had imposed on communities for centuries. Walker explores that patriarchal ideology and mistreatment towards black women through some of her characters like the relationship of Albert with his wife and his son (Harpo), Alphanso with his wife celie, Grange with his wife Margret and Truman Hill with Meridian.

It is evident, that the writer through her autobiographical works was very successful and skillful to create a black culture and black female characters who are independent and who increasingly able to shift from subjugation and slavery to resistance and empowerment black women learned how to stand against male domination even if the price they have to pay is often absolutely high. Further, she successfully revealed how both gender and race act as a catalyst for oppression against African American women.

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