

Identifying the Cultural Aspects in Alice Walker's '*The Color Purple*'

Ruchika Hooda
Research Scholar
MDU, Rohtak

The novel '*The Color purple*' written by an American novelist and activist, Alice Walker, is set in Rural Georgia in the early 20th century, 30 years before World War 2. It was the time period when slavery got abolished but unfortunately the situations were unaltered. Though blacks were not slaves any more but still treated as one. They worked as sharecroppers; they worked on the land which was owned by the whites. There was no ownership for blacks. However, some African-Americans had entrepreneurship, establishing themselves as businessmen. In the novel, there are two characters who owned property, ran farms and a dry goods store challenging the social norms of the society. Celia's father, Alphonso ran a dry goods store and Albert, Celia's husband, owned property and land which helped Harpo, his son, in maintaining a good life for his family. Walker also explains how Alphonso got this business and later Celia as the store was basically owned by Celia's biological father and was lynched by a white people mob. Ironically, both blacks get the ownership after the death of Celia's natural father. Walker described the system and culture of America which was divided by diversity and united by none. Whites looked down on blacks and always expected them to work for them naturally that's why in the novel the character of Sofia illustrates what happened when a black tried to revolt against the system which was always in the favour of whites.

America in the 1920s was still culturally colonized. Whites over Blacks and black men over black women. The constant fight by the blacks against the subjugation through their native cultural practices has been portrayed in the novel. Walker lionizes the different elements of African culture like Quilt-Making and The Blues in her epistolary novel, '*The Color Purple*'.

Quilt-Making and its significance in the formation of Sisterhood

African American Quilting is as old as America. Black women were told to work as weavers and were indulged in the activities of spinning, quilting, and weaving. The quilts were made out of scraps and different patterns were designed out of them. "Some intriguing theories have been proposed that link African American women's quilting to their African roots. Strip construction, large-scale designs, strong contrasting colors and variations from symmetrical

patterns all appear to reflect textile patterns found in parts of Africa.” Walker in her novel connects the activity of quilting with sisterhood and self-creation. The process of quilt making resembles the sisterhood between Sofia, Shug, and Celia. Through this, they sustain self-hope and survival. Making it from the scraps it also describes the diversity of ideas and inspirations. The process of quilt making is considered to be equal to the resistance towards racial oppression by the three women. It's been very clear that women of black color had to face double oppression. They were oppressed by the men in their houses and whites outside their houses. And recycling the clothes to make a quilt is thus seen as a means of survival. Lei Sun states in her work, “Only by unifying the different scraps can they create a new quilt, while only by unifying each African American woman’s strength and talent sisterhood can be retained.”

The three women helped each other when in need. Without Sofia’s encouragement and Shug’s support, Celia would have never stood against the oppression that she faced all her life. Similarly, Sofia got all the support she required when she lost her self-confidence. Sofia loses her respect in her own eyes but Celia stood next to her. Thus we can say that it’s just the sisterhood that helps these women to resist the oppression. “They create a cultural form of sisterhood that transcends their disparate experiences to invent a world of their own. Walker proposes quilt-making as an approach to sisterhood, which she identifies as the most significant source of the container for double oppressions.” Another point of view that has been added by many readers is that like quilting, reading the novel itself gives the same effect. Just how quilting involves joining of scraps into a new work the novel also let its readers pick bits and pieces of hope towards a bigger picture. In *Sister’s Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women’s Writing*, a book-length study named after Celie’s quilt, Elaine Showalter describes *The Color Purple* as “a narrative quilt pieced from the spectrum of literary and cultural texts which Walker has inherited.”

In the case of the language of the novel, it included multiple perspectives and dialogues which blend in together on its own making the novel a masterful quilt.

Blues and popular Blues singers

Blues is a music genre that originated in America in the 1870s in the south of the country by the African-Americans. The roots of this genre are connected to African folk music and culture. It included spirituals, work songs, field songs, shouts, chants etc. The first appearance of the

blues is often dated to after the ending of slavery and, later, the development of juke joints. It is associated with the newly acquired freedom of the former slaves... "Blues, as a form of typical African secular songs, implies an underlying strain of melancholy and self-pity. It embodies the characteristics of Africans, expressing their intention to sublimate their feelings of subjugation to achieve their own world. Blues, to some extent, signifies the pristine distillate of African culture—the spiritual strength to assert one's identity, and the resolution of arranging a sense of order in the community. African American writer Ralph Ellison defines blues as "...an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness ...by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (as quoted by Bell, 1989. p. 26), highlighting the blues as a form of African American cultural self-expression."

Shug Avery is a character in the novel that previews the artistic culture of African-Americans in the novel. She is a woman loved by all, men, women, married or unmarried. She was a black beauty admired by everyone for her charm. Where men were attracted to her beauty and attractiveness, women were a fan of her confidence and her voice. Shug's character gives power to the voiceless through her songs which represent the real meaning of Blues as a genre.

The music parallels with the novel in its themes, a life of indignity and emotional poverty that's been redeemed at the end of the novel (Shug helps Celie in attaining these). Shug Avery can be understood as the physical representation of the blues. When Celie embraces the blues she is reborn as a subject rather than an object. Shug teaches her how to be tough like a bee and sweet like sugar, and that's what's been presented in the Blues music by the women. There are several Blues moments in the novel that occurs in the life of the protagonist, Celie, for example when she states,

"My mama dies, I tell Shug. My Nettie runs away. Mr. ____ come git me take care of his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. Nobody ever love me, I say.

..

(When Shug names her song after her name)

First time somebody made something and named it after me"

This is just one of the times where Celie felt important because of Shug. Shug loved her like nobody ever did and this made Celie feel like a human again and that's what Blues did to the people of the Black community in America after the abolition of slavery.

Celie found her true voice through the music. Before getting introduced with Blues music Celie did not have a voice of her own. She was raped by her stepfather and was married to a person like an object. She did not speak for herself all this time and was oppressed every day in one way or the other. Her Silence was so all over her mind that she started encouraging the beatings Sofia used to get from her husband. Celie did not like Sofia in the beginning as Sofia stood for herself and Celie was never able to think of it. Through Shug and Blues Celie found her voice which led her to a position she never thought to would claim.

It was not just Celie who faced these Blues moments, Sofie, another major female character also had a moment when she confronted her family after years of imprisonment under the mayor because she stood for what was right, she demanded her right, sadly from a white. Sofie expressed,

“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. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me.”

Celie did not only break free from the gender stereotypes when she starts her own business of folk pants after leaving her husband, unisex pants for both men and women, but she also attains financial independence too which for a woman of African origin was a huge deal in those times.

Conclusion

As the novel unfolds the reader gets a preview of the culture of the society in America and the power struggle between the two races, women crushing in between from both the sides. Alice Walker has used these aspects of black culture to put light on the mechanisms of the society and ways adopted by people especially women to cope up with oppression. Through her epistolary novel, Walker gives voice to the voiceless, the women. Through Nettie's description of Africa, Walker puts light on the real side of the culture. Though rich and varied, the culture of Africa did involve women subjugation which explained how women are not given education as their sole purpose of life is to take care of the household. Lei Sun has very rightly spoken

about how, "Alice Walker has employed the symbolism of African traditions and cultures to depict Celie's triumph of her struggles against racism and sexism, ultimately into the wholeness of her being. Bestowed with the symbolic meaning of sisterhood, family history and self-creation from African quilts and quilt-making, Walker portrays a successful initiation story of Celie. Furthermore, the blues, in the novel, has been interpreted as the spiritual strength to assert one's identity, and as the resolution of arranging a sense of order in the community, to help Celie to be independent."

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