

## **Celebrating black American women's lives: An analysis of Alice Walker's selected texts**

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### **Abstract**

From the American Revolution to the present, African American female writers have not only articulated the physical horrors of the female slave, but have also celebrated the black American women's lives through their works. For Walker, African American women have suffered a triple oppression of gender, race and class. Thus, using the selected texts, this paper will show Walker's preoccupation with the black American woman, especially the way she is marginalised and subjugated by both the colonial and slave system and her black male counterpart. As an African-American woman, Walker also celebrates the lives of the American black women by giving a voice to the oppressed and voiceless. In her narratives, she criticises both racist and sexist hegemony. This article will show how the women in the selected texts have played a myriad of roles in their search for self-definition and spiritual redemption. In *The colour purple*, *The third life of Grange Copeland*, and also in Walker's essays, *In search of our mother's gardens*, she argues that the black women have been notable for standing against oppression and have made significant contributions in the making of the American nation. Hence, this article intends to show that despite being oppressed, African-American women have never succumbed to victimhood. It seeks to examine how Alice Walker celebrates the black-American women's search for identity and fulfilment through a harmonious co-existence with their men-folk. The article will conclude that Walker transcends binary oppositions to explore 'the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and triumphs of black women'. Through self-expression, her women characters undergo some form of transformation and hence celebrate a sense of wholeness embedded in a viable past.

**Key words:** African-feminism, celebration, oppression, gender

### **Introduction**

The U.S. President, Barack Obama, recently remarked on the National American History Month Proclamation, 2012 and said, "The story of African-Americans is a story of resilience and perseverance. It traces a people who refused to accept the circumstances, [circumstances] under which they arrived on [American] shores, and it chronicles the generations who fought for an America that truly reflects the ideals enshrined in our

founding documents." I find this statement relevant to this paper as it will highlight how the subaltern group, the African American women, underwent marginalised treatment in the domains of politics and socio-economics. This paper will show how black American women in Walker's *The colour purple*, *The third life of Grange Copeland*, and her essays in *In search of our mother's gardens* refuse to accept circumstances that marginalise them and denigrate them. It brings "the questions of agency, voice and resistance to the fore" (Punjab, 2013). Hence, in this paper, I call for a kind of dialogue that will enable me to examine Walker's texts in view of issues raised by African feminist scholarship. Such an examination will show that African American female writers have not only articulated the physical horrors of the female slave, but have also celebrated the black American women's lives through their works. For Walker, African American women have suffered a triple oppression of gender, race and class. They have been long "relegated to the corners and ill-fittingly described" (Punjab, 2013). Thus, using the selected texts, this paper will show Walker's preoccupation with the black American woman, especially the way she is marginalised and subjugated by both the colonial and slave system and her black male counterpart.

Du Bois, like many other male authors such as James Weldon Johnson, Fredrick Douglass and Richard Wright in writing their version of the dilemma and experiences of the black people believed that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line." Alice Walker is of the opinion that this question has been over emphasised at the expense of other burning issues within the black community. She agrees that this is a true statement, but a man's vision, because it omits what is happening within the family, "the race, at home; a family also capable of civil war" (Walker, 1984:310). She believes that their (male writer's) work is full of distortions of the truth because the Black-American woman was in most cases either ignored or misrepresented. Alice Walker describes the American Society as a "racist, sexist and colorist capitalist society" (Walker, 1983:175) where white women have to fight for their feminism and black men for their rights as human beings, but black women have to fight for both their human rights as well as for their rights as women. Ellen Willis (1982:119) explains that in such a patriarchal, dominating society, "The black woman suffers both racial and sexual invisibility," hence, she has to confront and overcome such barriers in order to fully process her self-realisation. Walker, like Hurston, believes that to strengthen the revolution among blacks, there is need to scrutinise relationships among African-American people themselves. Hence, Walker explores the contradictions within the black community and also dispels the mal-representations of African womanhood that proliferated African-American literature at the time. Her works show that it is only when these contradictions have been looked at



honestly that black people will make successful attempts for equal rights.

In Walker's essay, "From an interview," she says one of her objectives in writing is that she wanted to explore the relationships between men and women, and why women are always condemned for doing what men do as an expression of their masculinity (Walker, 1984:256). She clearly illustrates this by interrogating the gender-relationships in *The colour purple* and *The third life of Grange Copeland*. In her collection of essays, *In search of our mother's gardens*, Walker seeks to establish the role of the female writer. Whilst most of what she writes in her essays applies to black artists in general, it is my belief that Walker addresses herself to the female artist rather than to the male artist. She believes that the best authors of the history of the black Americans are women because through self-expression they can reinvigorate a sense of wholeness embedded in a viable past. They can give a new kind of leadership to mankind (Walker, 1984). Walker's emphasis is on the benefit that the African-Americans would reap from women artists. This view is echoed by Shayeree Ghosh's (2011) observation that the black women not only decided that they had a different aesthetic, but also put forth the contention that being both black and female, they could write about their own experiences from an insider's view point.

As such, Walker's preoccupation with the black woman is evident in all her writings. Her fiction especially shows the development and transition of her black heroines into "women." This concept of "Womanism" as she defines it in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983), marks the black woman with distinct qualities. She remarks that "A womanist is one who is outrageous, audacious, and courageous and wilful." This paper will show that Walker's protagonists exhibit these qualities as they undergo the transition and change to become "women." Every single female character in Walker's novels at least makes an effort to change her situation. Whatever the outcome maybe, what is applaudable is their willingness to change. Thus, this paper argues that as an African-American woman, Walker projects her vision from the point of view of black female characters who undergo a quest for self discovery. Using the African-feminism as a grid, the paper will explore the experience of the African-American woman and also examine how she searches for self-hood, identity and recognition in *The colour purple*, *The third life of Grange Copeland*, and also in Walker's essays, *In search of our mother's gardens*

### **The African American feminine condition**

The experience of the black American woman can be structured along three dimensions

of oppression: the economic, political and ideological. The economic dimension of oppression is the exploitation of black women's labour established during slavery. Both male and female slaves were exploited for their labour in order to enrich and develop economically the United States of America. The political dimension of oppression has denied the black woman certain rights accorded to the white American citizens. However, racial segregation affected both black men and women. This was the most repressive system. The ideological dimension of black women's oppression is in the controlling of images of black women that originated during the institution of slavery. Although this historical suppression has affected black people as a whole, in that both men and women African-Americans have suffered oppression by the white dominating capitalist American, the black woman has had to suffer oppression at two fronts; racially as black and sexually as a woman. In short, her problem was that of being black and being born a woman, hence she was segregated not only in terms of race, but also in terms of sex. It is such oppression that African-American women writers attempt to interrogate in their works.

Alice Walker interrogates this black-American feminine condition in her works. In *The colour purple*, Celie undergoes both physical and sexual abuse from her stepfather and her husband, Albert. This physical and psychological male oppression is depicted by Walker as being influential in the frustration of black women's quest for selfhood. Through numerous rapes and beatings, Celie's status is reduced to that of an object. In Nanny's words in *Their eyes were watching God*, "De Nigger woman is de mule uh de world" (Hurston, 1969: vii-viii). Celie fits the image of the mule since she is portrayed as an instrument of work, the object of male sexual pleasures and the machine for child bearing. It is such gender imbalance and injustice that African feminists seek to address; hence this paper advocates the need for an ideology that is relevant to the African and black-American context. I believe that African feminism is such an ideology that adopts an explanatory stance and re-appropriates concepts of African womanhood retained in African American culture from slavery to the present (Kalu, 2000).

The repressive theme of slavery of the black woman as the "mule uh de world" continues in *The third life*. Margaret (Mem) is physically and sexually oppressed by her husband Brownfield to reduce her to this standard of existence. Because Brownfield works in an atmosphere of oppression and is barely able to fend for his family, he takes out his anger and frustration at being a black man in a country where blacks are treated as less than human, on his family. He forces two pregnancies on Mem such that her health deteriorates fast and she fails to go to work, hence leaving the decent house for Mr. J.L.'s place. In addition, the black Americans, Margaret and Brownfield, are forced to play the



submissive roles to make up for Grange's feelings of lack of manhood around Shipley, and whites in general. Brownfield also notes that, "his mother was like their dog in some ways. She did not have a thing to say that did not...show submission to his father" (Walker, 1970:6). The brutal and sexist oppression that black women experienced during slavery is portrayed as the restraints that have to be overcome in order to facilitate self realisation. Walker clearly shows the dilemma faced by the black woman, that is, she is oppressed because all blacks are exploited, but she is also exploited because she is a woman, "first by the whites...and secondly by her man, because his superior position is about all that is left of the traditional structure of the society" (Weiss, 1986:7). No wonder the Afro-American woman identifies her main enemy as the black American man, and the most dangerous is the one who derives his model from the system of slavery. Both Albert in *The colour purple* and Brownfield in *The third life* are portrayed as men with an exaggerated sense of patriarchy. Because he (the black man) has been economically marginalised by the white system, he unleashes his frustration on his children as an unconscious way of making up for his diminished personhood.

Thus, by focusing on the contradictions within the black community, Walker is aware that there are new dynamics among the black people in which black women are oppressed by black men. Ironically, this is what they have been fighting against, and yet they reinforce oppression among themselves. By physically violating the woman, the black man continues the legacy of slavery, hence the slave master relationship between husband and wife. This is reminiscent of Fanon's cycle of violence, among the oppressed, in which the oppressed vent their anger not against the oppressors (the white man), but among themselves, especially the weaker ones (the black women) (Fanon, 1967). The implication thus is that the white man is exonerated from blame if the black people themselves do not stop oppression.

### **African-feminism in Walker's texts**

An understanding of the African-feminism theory will be useful to the interpretation of Alice Walker's narratives. In her essay "Stiwanism: Feminism in an African Context," Ogun-dipe-Leslie asserts that feminism is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that defies a single and homogenous definition. She tries to Africanise the term "feminism" and argues that unlike western feminism, it does not negate men. Her perspective of feminism, "STIWANISM" is an all-encompassing ideology that underpins the significant role of women in any transformation. She says that:

"Stiwa" means 'Social Transformation' including Women of Africa! I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It's not about warring with the men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994:547).

It would seem that Ogundipe-Leslie tries to develop an appropriate theoretical ideology that helps to examine texts in an African context. Similarly, Steady (1981) states that African feminist discourse takes care to delineate those concerns that are peculiar to the African context and history.

On a basic and simple level, Steady (1981) posits that African feminism concerns itself with "the liberty of all African people" and adds that it centralises those concerns that are peculiar to the African philosophy of life. As such, Steady concurs with African-feminists' claims that in the African cosmology there are strong connections between men and women. Central to their argument is the establishment of a harmonious existence between men and women. In applying African-feminism, this paper will refer to Pinkie Mekgwe's essay "Theorising African Feminism(s): the 'Colonial' *Question* which posits that "African feminism is not antagonistic to men but challenges them to be aware of those aspects of women's subjugation which differ from the generalised oppression of all African people." This observation is useful to endeavours in this paper, as it foregrounds the inter-relatedness of humans, in particular women and men. According to Carole Boyce Davies (1986:583):

African feminism recognises a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women's subjugation which differ from the generalised oppression of all African peoples.

It is from this same perspective that Chidi Maduka (2009) asserts that African-feminism "takes into account the African philosophy of life which stresses marriage as a social institution. However, it condemns all forms of patriarchy which dehumanises woman and portrays her as a second-class citizen. Rooted in African historical and cultural experiences it advances the view of the complementarity between man and woman..."



Thus, using the African-feminism lens, this paper endeavours to show that though African-American women are burdened with layers of oppression, the involvement of men is of paramount significance for an all-inclusive social transformation.

In *The color purple*, Walker condemns all forms of patriarchy which denigrate and dehumanise women. Instead she "advances the view of the complementarity between man and woman" (Maduka, 2009) and focuses on the recovery of marginalised voices. As such, Walker rejects violence as a solution to the dilemma faced by the black American woman. The rationale is that the black community cannot expect to successfully fight for equal opportunities against a racist system if in itself it cannot afford equal opportunities to its black women. The central point that Walker seems to be making is that men like Albert and Brownfield should change their attitudes towards women. The concern in the two novels is that attitudes can exert a negative influence on social relations, and until we get rid of these social inhibitions, there will be no racial harmony. Walker's message is clearly illustrated through Grange's metamorphosis in the *Third life* from a life filled with hatred to a selfless and heroic life. The change in Albert in *The color purple* also makes him become very human and likable. Although it is clear that Brownfield's behaviour was caused by the trapped reality of his existence as a black man, Walker refuses to excuse Brownfield's behaviour with the injustices imposed by whites. In her essay, "Coretta King: Revisited," she cites the example of Martin Luther King, Jr. who also was "affected by the system, as a black man, but in spite of everything he always came through as a man, a person of dignity" (Walker, 1984:152). He was always harassed and oppressed by the white world, but was always gentle with his wife and children. Through men like him and Grange Copeland, Walker gives a message of hope to us all. Grange reclaims his life and that of his granddaughter Ruth.

This is the kind of literature that Walker believes would be of assistance to the black Americans, because it would build in them a spirit of confidence to continue fighting for their rights. This type of literature would also help them see what they are capable of. However, the problem is that black men in Alice Walker's fiction and poetry seem capable of goodness only when they become old, like Grange Copeland in *The third life*, or feminised like Albert in *The color purple*. The latter takes up traditional female roles of house-keeping that is, he cleans the house, cooks, washes the dishes and even works in the fields. One therefore wonders how effective and practical the transformation espoused by Walker is.

An interesting relationship in *The color purple* is the Harpo-Sofia relationship which is

an inversion of the Celie-Albert relationship. Sofia fights and refuses to be brutalised at the hands of any man. She says to Celie, "All my life I had to fight ... 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, 1983:38). Sofia is making a valid statement, that the only way a woman can survive in a male dominated society is to assert herself and fight her way out of her problems. She says, "I love Harpo...God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me" (Walker, 1983:38). However, Walker rejects both the Harpo-Sofia relationship and the Celie-Albert relationship which promote violence and inequalities between men and women. Although Walker emphasises the significance of activism for the black American woman, she strongly disapproves of violence. Using the Harpo-Sofia relationship, she seems to intimate that victimising the man in a relationship is not the solution, since it does not promote a better understanding of humanity. What emerges therefore is that Alice Walker rejects violence as a solution to the black woman's dilemma in America. Violence is seen as counter-productive. In this regard, she adopts an African-feminist stance by recognising men as partners in both the Harpo-Sofia and Celie-Albert relationships.

### **Economic independence**

According to Carole Boyce Davies (1986:154), one of the tenets of African-feminism is that "it respects African women's self-reliance and ... the fact that African women are seldom financially dependent but instead accept income generating work as a fact of life". Walker exudes this African-feminist view in her narratives and essays. Hence, to challenge both the patriarchal and colonial systems, Walker argues that one needs to be independent economically.

In *The third life* and *The color purple*, both Mem and Sofia respectively do not have what Frantz Fanon calls the "dependency complex." They both challenge the system; Sofia by refusing to work for the mayor's wife and Mem by refusing to move to Mr J.L.'s plantation house. Although we see the black woman fighting to re-define herself as an individual, woman and a mother, there is something fragile about Sofia and Mem; they are as poor as any black man in Africa. Frantz Fanon (1967:45) points out that, "In a colonial situation blackness is synonymous with being poor because resources are distributed on and along colour lines thereby favouring the white community".

This being the case, perhaps what the black woman needs is economic power in addition to physical and spiritual power. Walker admits that for a woman to be liberated there is



also need for an economic base. Supporting this view, Virginia Woolf states *In a Room of Her Own* that a woman needs an economic base in order to be free and control her own destiny. For example, in her essay, "Zora Neal Hurston," Walker says we must learn that, "Without money of one's own in a capitalist society, there is no such thing as independence" (Walker, 1984:62). In *The third life*, Mem leads a more peaceful life at the new house when she and Brownfield are working at the factory. The new house has a feeling of progress, with the toilets, baths and electric lights. Shug Avery in *The color purple* and Josie in *The third life* are both economically stable, hence they are able to control their lives. As such, Alice Walker seems to intimate that Celie attains selfhood because she is economically stable. She inherits a house and a store from her mother. She is economically empowered by selling the pants she makes. She is able to become independent because she has control over her life and is no longer dependent on men. Hence, Walker in *The color purple* and *The third life*, seems to assert that for a black woman to attain self realisation she has to be economically empowered. Celie says in one of her letters to Nettie, "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, friends, time..." (Walker, 1983:183). Similarly, Mem asserts her self-hood and becomes visible when she says, "I done get sick and tired of being dragged around from dump to dump provided by white folks like I'm a piece of machinery" (Walker, 1970:86). Significantly, Mem's life gets better when she is in control, has money and the new house. At the new house, Brownfield no longer struck her; he began to notice and respect her.

However, the proposal of economic independence has its own weaknesses. One might argue that it does not elevate Shug or Celie's standing in the white community. The two remain black and therefore subject to denigration. This is a national dilemma of the black women, as shown by the Olinka people in Africa. By going back to Africa, Walker seems to be saying that, wherever there is a system of oppression, black women fare the worst. The second problem with this proposal is that, in her (Walker's) attempt to assert self-realisation of the black woman, the men are described too harshly and seem to be mean. Let me point out that the men in the most part of the novels *The color purple* and *The third life* are not explored fully and are cruel and unnaturally uncaring. The problem with this portrayal is that Walker tries to elevate the black woman at the expense of the black man. For instance, for Celie and Mem's status to be elevated, Albert and Brownfield have to be presented in a brutal manner. Again, her female characters triumph over adversity, but they seem to do so at the expense of their marriages. By implication, if Shug Avery is to be the torch of freedom, it means marriage has to be abolished or its laws revised. Hurston echoes similar sentiments; Janie in *Their eyes were watching God* has to attain self-hood without Tea Cake or any other men in her life. In view of these weaknesses,

the question is how predictable is an economic base as a solution to the dilemma of the Afro-American woman and how authentic are the models set by Walker in her novels? What perhaps should be advocated is an all inclusive transformation that accommodates men, women, children and the environment, hence, African-feminism.

Unsurprisingly, though the black women suffer a lot of abuse from their black counterparts, Walker refuses to depict them as defeated and downtrodden beings. Instead, she concentrates more on how women rise above these obstructions. To Walker, this is what literature is about, that is, building a sense of purpose and pride in the black women for transcending the difficulties and at the same time mobilising them to fight their oppressors. For example, in her essay, "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," Southern women refused to succumb to any form of humiliation. Walker shows how her mother and Aunt Mandy Aikens managed to keep their families with food throughout winter despite the vindictiveness of the white people. Again, Coretta King and Myrlie Evers lost their husbands in painful circumstances, but the two women still continued to survive with dignity. Walker believes that it is through such stories that blacks would realise that they are not a defeated people. She strongly believes that they are a proud people with an illustrious history of survival and resourcefulness. Walker therefore celebrates resilience of the black women within their socio-economic realities and within their "traditional African knowledge base" (Kalu, 2000). She is relentless in her assertion that "resilience, at any cost, is the secret of joy, the road to liberation" (Reviewer, 2001). This resilient nature of the black American woman is also illustrated through her creativity and innovativeness.

### Creativity

In her novels, *The color purple* and *The third life*, Walker depicts black women as resilient and resourceful. In *The color purple* for instance, Sofia is a strong minded woman who is not afraid to fight the system. Celie becomes self-reliant and self-sufficient through her industry of sewing pants. She becomes the individual she deserves to be, an independent, confident and resilient woman. Mem in *The third life* is able to work and fight for a better and decent life for the family. She says, "we might be poor and black, but we ain't dumb...At least I ain't" (Walker, 1970:86). Similarly, in her essay, "*In search of our mother's garden*," Walker highlights the survival and resilience of black women. The garden is a symbol of life creativity. The mother is the fountain that nurtures the family. Alice's mother puts up a garden whilst working hard to keep her family going. She redefines herself through the creation of the garden. It is only when her mother is in her



garden that she is:

Radiant, almost to the point of being invisible – except as Creator: her face as she prepares the Art that is her gift is a legacy of respect she leaves to me... Guided by her heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength – in search of my mother's garden I found my own (Walker, 1984:239).

Hence, Walker searches for the secret of “what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited” (Walker, 1984:239).

In the outlets of black women's creativity that Walker finds are quilts and gardens. Although the materials of these art works are valueless rags and plants, black women like Walker's mother managed to find time to express their creativity while taking care of children, cooking, and sewing clothes. It is this creativity of the black woman that Walker is celebrating in her novels. For example, the quilt which hangs in the Smithsonian, despite its simplicity, portrays the story of the Crucifixion. It is made of rags, but it is still invaluable. The quilter, an Afro-American woman from Alabama, sets the example of the potential that black women have. Walker celebrates the imagination of the creator, which is obviously quite powerful. She is actually celebrating the renewal of the black community. This creativity is also shown through Celie when she makes pants and Mary Agnes, when she sings. Thus, according to Alice Walker, the black woman can redefine herself through her creativity and innovativeness.

### **Creating a “web of significance”**

Walker assumes that the black women are one collectivity or sisterhood. However, the notion of sisterhood is a complex one. According to Davies (1986:566) sisterhood is an aspect of African feminism. He adds that unlike Western feminism which perceives sisterhood as individualistic philosophy, African feminism “openly speaks of ‘sisterhood’ and the need for women to advance in society to be on at least an equal level with men for the society's overall good.” However, scholars such as Oyewumi (2001) ascribe the notion of ‘sisterhood’ to Western culture and believe that it is alien to African and African-American cultures. In my view, this approach, unfortunately, underpins a notion of ‘sisterhood’ that is rooted in the West and uses American and British literature. Hence, I find this inscription rather limiting as it interprets ‘sisterhood’ through reference to one overarching principle of explanation; the Anglo-American framework. This paper will adopt a more inclusive view of ‘sisterhood’ which is not a single and homogenous

entity and will advocate for a more diverse and all embracing vision that includes black women writers as well. Arguably, my view is that Walker ascribes to the African feminism notion of sisterhood. Not only is this view of 'sisterhood' an all-inclusive one which does not negate African men, but challenges them to be aware of certain salient features of women's subjugation.

For instance, in *The color purple*, it is not only Celie who is transformed, but Albert changes and becomes more humane. Similarly, Grange in *The third life*, also changes; Ruth is his second chance and he attempts to make up for his mistakes. He sums up this change:

I know the danger of putting the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life ...You gits ...the feeling of doing nothing to yourself ...and begins to destroy everybody around you, and you blame it on the crackers (Walker,1970:288).

Thus, in Walker's narratives, men are also welcome in the "new" community of sisterhood when they accept and respect the liberated woman whom they regard at equal terms. Clearly, the African-feminism's notion of sisterhood is not about retaliating against males; rather it is about empowering women. For instance, Shug Avery liberates Mary Agnes by offering to "bring her before the crowd" at Harpo's. Celie too, is emancipated from the depressive life she leads in the company of Albert by Shug. Celie hires Sofia to work as a salesperson in the general store she inherits. Eleanor Jane starts to work for Sofia and takes care of Henrietta for her during the day. This common bond between women is something present in the Olinka people as well. Thus, in both *The colour purple* and *The third life*, Walker seems to be celebrating the renewal and reshaping of the black community. This implies that relationships between individuals and between the individual and the community are important in the development of black female self-hood. In *The colour purple*, Albert, Shug and Celie now all exist together in harmonious, egalitarian terms; all sit at the front porch. Harpo and Sofia are together again. With such a romantic ending, which is fairytale like, Walker might be asserting that after such brutal racial and sexist oppression of black women, if the resources are made possible, black men and black women can live harmoniously together and even work together. The black community can come together and even work together and resolve its differences. Thus, Walker's works are narratives of possibilities which believe in change and redemption.

Some critics have also argued that lesbianism is one such possibility of 'sisterhood' that



Alice Walker explores in a bid to address the black women's problem(s) in America. The alleged lesbian sexuality of Celie and Shug can be interpreted as an expression of love; a fulfilling experience between the two beings who happen to be women. In my view, looking at Celie's relationship with Shug as sexual movement is an over-simplification of the issue of lesbianism. A more important dimension of lesbianism is a view that it is a social movement of ideas. As evidenced in *Celie*, it provides knowledge that has been confined to domestic circles. We are presented with a new image of a woman who responds in a very confident and determined way in her fight against oppression. Lesbianism is, therefore, functional. I believe it affords Celie an opportunity to experience love without trauma, hence we see spiritual or psychological openings in the life of Celie. Walker seems to be celebrating the birth of a more critical consciousness that Celie did not have. Celie says, when she leaves Mr Albert, "you low down dog is what's wrong ... it's time to leave you and enter into a new creation" (Walker, 1983:185). Celie is very much content with her identity as a self-defined woman; a whole woman who has undergone both economic and sexual liberation. Shug, also, re-affirms her heterosexual preferences, with her marriage to Grady and her affair with nineteen year-old Germaine.

However, I hazard that all these are experimental relationships aimed at liberating the Afro-American woman. For Walker, lesbianism could be one of the possible ways to try and evoke a communion of feeling among the black women. Walker seems to suggest a collective approach on the part of the women to counter sex domination in the home. The solution is not for a woman to do whatever she wants with her body. Rather, the solution lies in the changing of the capitalist system that has deformed humanity. In addition, Ogun-dipe-Leslie, quoted in Davies (1986:562), makes it clear that "the most important challenge to the African woman is *her own self-perceptions* [my own emphasis] since it is she who will have to define her own freedom." Thus, in *The colour purple*, lesbianism enables black women to come together as a community with a single purpose of defining capitalism and also male authority. Walker seems to intimate that there seems to be a need to create this human web and to evaluate social relationships for the betterment of the lives of the Afro-American community.

### **The voice of the muted subjects**

Walker's predominant idea is to secure the voice of the muted subjects. She identifies herself with the cause of subalterns by giving them a voice. In her essays she articulates the need for black people to break away from the stereotypes handed down to them by the slave master, such as womanhood. Barbara Smith, quoted in *Reconstructing*

*Womanhood* by Hazel Carby, says that the image of a 'true' woman according to white masters was that of fragility. However, Walker insists the black women were never submissive, and literature which fails to show their fighting spirit is a misrepresentation of black womanhood.

In *The colour purple* and *The third life*, Walker depicts women as fighters. Celie, despite the psychologically bruising sexual abuse from her stepfather and Albert, fights back and triumphs in the end. Sofia fights Harpo and even beats up the Mayor, because she cannot take abuse from anyone. Like Silla in *Browngirl, Brownstones* and also Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes were watching God*, Mem challenges the capitalist system; she refuses to be treated like a mule. In Walker's opinion, the 'true' black woman has always fought against all odds to survive and this is a reality that the black female writer should reveal in her writings. Thus, according to Walker, black women were not passive to their fate of oppression. She asserts that womanhood does not mean submissiveness, but means fighting for one's rights. In her essay, "Breaking chains and encouraging life," Walker's argument is that unless female writers break out of these stereotypical moulds created for them by society, then they can never be truly free. She is echoed by Hazel Carby who says:

[the black woman] has to define a discourse of black womanhood which would not only address their exclusion from the ideology of true womanhood, but as a consequence of this exclusion would also rescue their bodies from a persistent association with illicit sexuality (Carby, 1987).

In conclusion, one may point out that Alice Walker is steadfast in her rejection of the subjugation of women by the patriarchy and also unwavering in her denunciation of racial oppression. Hence, she is genuinely seeking ways which can ensure freedom, personal fulfilment and self-realisation for her characters. Though some of the strategies are problematic, Walker's central point is that blacks who are victims of slavery and racism possess spiritual resources to turn their violence on each other into a creative process that will mould new values which negate those of the slave driver. Walker is actually celebrating the renewal of the black community; she shows how her black women who have attained self-realisation are able to form new relationships with their former male oppressors and with society, thus creating mutual dependence. Thus, as a writer Walker "traces and reconstructs history from the angle of the downtrodden or the underdogs" of the society and is "interested in recovering the subaltern voices because only that can change the unequal power relations in the black American community and the American society as a whole" (Punjab, 2013).



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