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Configuration, Articulation and Evolution of Culture in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Camilla Diana B. H.

Assistant Professor, St. Xavier's College for Women, Aluva, Kerala, India

Abstract:

This research explores the various aspects of culture portrayed in Alice Walker's The Color Purple. Culture forms an integral part of every society. Culture is a common practice followed by a group of people living in a society at a particular point in time. African culture whether on the continent or the diaspora, has an essence and purity that are far removed from the interpretations put forward by the whites. They have their indigenous language, religious beliefs, art forms, etc. This research is an attempt to analyze the ways in which Walker endeavours to establish that while on the surface African culture has undergone assimilation and change, the core values of the culture remain.

Keywords: Culture, slavery, African American

1. Introduction

Alice Malsenior Walker an African American writer has made numerous contributions to the world of English literature. She is often referred as a feminist and a womanist. Race, gender, culture especially African culture, womanhood etc forms the sensitive topics dealt by Alice Walker. Her fame is greatly contributed by her work *The Color Purple*. The title *The Color Purple* is symbolic, which proclaims the royalty and represent the vast capabilities and potentialities in African people. It also projects the matter that if they are given a chance they can come up as independent and empowered individuals. In *The Color Purple* author deals with the multifarious aspects of African culture.

Culture is the matrix of every society. Culture is a common practice followed by a group of people living in a common society at a particular point in time. Culture may vary from society to society. The concept of culture is never static; it is an ever evolving process. As time moves forward and changes occur in the life style of the people the culture also tend to change. No culture belong to an individual it belong to the society.

2. Culture in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Alice Walker's work *The Color Purple*, an epistolary novel indirectly discusses about the African Culture and its transition. *The Color Purple* chronicles the life of a African American girl called Celie, in Georgia. The novel is divided into three parts. In the first part Celie is writing letters to God, Nettie's letters forms the foundation of second part, the third part deals with the letters written between Celie and Nettie. As the novel moves forward various aspects of culture gets manifested in the form of art, rituals, religion, language, family system etc.

The Color Purple shows a patriarchal culture, where men use their power to subordinate women; there the relation is not only social but also political. Mr. ____ to whom Celie is married is a typical representative of patriarchal culture. He treats her in the same way as Alonso treated Celie's mother. He even advises his son Harpo to be strict with Sophia as he says "Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (37).

The worse form of andro centric culture is portrayed as Celie is forced to a loveless marriage with Mr _____. She had to endure all the sexual abuses and had to shut her eyes against Mr ____'s relationship with Shug Avery. In the first part of the novel through the letters of Celie the reader travels through forty years and gets a clear picture about the African predicament. The element of patriarchy is also portrayed through the section of Olinka Tribes, There they practiced polygamy. The men are allowed to have more than one wife. They lived in a common house hold. The duty of a wife was purely nurturing. Nettie says in one of her letter "But many of the women rarely spend time with their husbands. Some of them are promised to old or middle-aged men at birth. Their lives always center around work and their children and other women" (172). Thashi's father openly says that "Our women are respected here. We would never let them tramp the world as American women do. There is always someone to look after the Olinka Woman. A father. An uncle. A brother or nephew" (167), which in turn highlights the dominance of men.

Sex is a biological drive in a human being. It forms the basis of a society. In this novel the companionship developed between Shrug and Celie is having lesbian trait. By referring to the topic Walker is actually throwing light on the role played by lesbians, bisexuals in 'Harlem Renaissance' and 'Jazz age', a cultural revitalization.

Language is another element of culture. In this novel the author employs a variation of African American vernacular in Celie's letters to make the novel more authentic. Celie uses a kind of folk language where she gives importance to spoken sounds. As she is illiterate she deviates from accepted language structure. For example she says "The boys be alright, she say. They can stay out his way. When they git big they gon fight him. Maybe kill, I say. How is it with you and Mr. ____? she ast. But she got eyes." (17)

Another important aspect of culture depicted by Walker is that women gaining power by channelizing their creative energy and through companionship. Sewing is a form of creative expression where women folk find solace and companionship. *The Color Purple* witness this creative channelizing of energy between Celie and Sofia working on scraps to make quilts and toward the end of the novel Celie engages herself in pant making business with the help of Shrug, which flourishes and makes her popular. Walker picture sewing in much positive light and considers it as an important aspect of African tradition.

Walker considers religion as an important feature of culture. She portrays religion as a hope and a light house to the African Americans. Thus in this novel we can see that Celie is always in communion with God, Nettie working as a Christian missionary, Olinka tribes giving importance to nature and admiring 'roof leaves'. But with the advent of time we can see that all this believes changes. Celie who felt God as omnipotent and authoritative began to gain new epiphany regarding God. She gains a new knowledge that God is "not as a she or a he but a It" (202). Likewise Olinka Tribes also lost their true belief regarding 'roof leaf'. The clutches of colonization uprooted their traditional believes and practices. Though new revelation had come to the society regarding religion, Africans still gives much importance to God and religion in their life.

Rituals and practices an important element of culture gives more meaning to the social activities. Much of African rituals are portrayed through the section of Olinka Tribes. There the women are forbidden to speak about private matters even among women. Scarification is another aspect of culture. Here the old generation is very much in supporting the practice but the new generation tries to abstain from it. The change in the trends regarding the scarification is shown through the character of Tashi. Thus rituals and practices which have become outdated were wiped out of the society; those reminiscences are still hidden in the African consciousness.

Walker never forgets to speak on the impact of Colonization. She portrays it with a tint of sadness, at the same time she never forgets to articulate the change created by it. Masks are a facet of culture. It has spiritual and emotional connotations. It is a part of rituals of the native African Americans. But after colonization when these masks were literally pulled out of their adorning places and when placed inside museums they lost their cultural nuances. Thus Nettie sees masks of her ancestor in the museum which she visited and she says

From Africa they have *thousands* of vases, jars, masks, bowls, baskets, statues-and they are all so beautiful it is hard to imagine that the people who made them don't still exist. And yet the English assure us they do not. Although Africans once had a better civilization than the European [...] for several centuries they have fallen on hard times. (145)

Olinka Tribes also tasted the fruits of colonization. In the case of Olinka tribes they lost their ancestral land to which they had spiritual adherence. At the same time the women began to know more about the outer world and began to come out of their cocoon. Thus Walker finds colonization as an important tool which interfered to restructure the established culture of African Americans.

Walker renders a touching portrayal of slavery on African American culture. The very structure of the work, the epistolary form, muses on slavery. Mr.____, by his ill treatment strained Celie into silence. But she vocalized her silence in the form of letters to God resembling the slaves who was silenced by their white masters voiced through the oral culture. Sofia's predicament as she refused to work as a nanny showcases the dilemma of the Africans who had to face racial discrimination. The African American predicament is also shown through the character of Nettie. She is seen as an outsider in Africa nor accepted in America. Walker strongly believes that slavery is a significant force which killed the energy of Africans then, but now its memories binds the Africans emotionally who are geographically separated. Towards the final section of the novel Walker provides an optimist perspective of the culture which was entering a new dawn.

3. Conclusion

Walker has undertaken much pain to revive her ancestral culture. In *The Color Purple* she strives to revive the Afro centric element of African American culture. She strongly believes that one should know the past to understand the essence of one's culture. Thus through *The Color Purple* she takes the reader down the memory line and brings out the fact that on the surface African culture has under gone much assimilation and change but its core value remain.

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