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MANIFESTATION OF PURPLE BLOSSOMS IN THE BLACK PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY: A WOMANIST READING OF ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE* AND CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *THE PURPLE HIBISCUS*

Authors:

Mrs. VIMALA RAMANI*, Dr. Y. VIGILA JEBARUBY**

* Ph.D. Research Scholar and Assistant Professor, PG and Research Department of English, Rani Anna Government College for Women, Tirunelveli-8. Tamil Nadu, India.

** Research Supervisor & Associate Professor, PG and Research Department of English, Rani Anna Government College for Women, Tirunelveli-8. Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

Womanism as social theory emphasizes the importance of community and solidarity among women of color. It promotes a sense of sisterhood and support among women while acknowledging the importance of inclusiveness and diversity within this sisterhood. Celie, the protagonist of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* and the character Kambili in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *The Purple Hibiscus* rise up to empowerment amidst the tyranny of the Black Patriarchy. The paper focuses on the plight and strength of the doubly marginalized black women whose uniqueness is called 'Womanist'.

Key Words: Womanist, Doubly Marginalised, Black Patriarchy, Womanism, Color Purple.



Alice Walker is an acclaimed American author, poet, and civil Right Movement activist. She was born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia, USA. Walker is best known for her novel *The Color Purple*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983. *The Color Purple* is a powerful and poignant novel that explores themes of race, gender, sexuality, and abuse in the early 20th century South. The novel is about the story of Celie, a young African American woman who faces significant adversity right from her childhood from the men of her own community, but ultimately finds strength and empowerment through her relationships with other women.

Alice Walker is known for her writing that often addresses social and political issues, particularly those related to African American women. She is considered a prominent figure in the African American literary tradition and the spokesperson of the women of her own Afro-American community. Her work often delves into the experiences and struggles of black women in the United States, and she has been an advocate for civil rights and social justice.

In addition to her novels, Alice Walker has written poetry, essays, and short stories. Some of her other notable works include *Meridian*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and her most famous collection of essays called *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Walker's literary contributions have earned her numerous awards and honors, including the Pulitzer prize. She is not only celebrated for her writing but also for her activism in promoting civil rights, women's rights, and environmental issues.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a prolific Nigerian writer and feminist icon known for her novels, essays, and public speaking on issues of gender equality and social justice. Adichie's works often explore the complexities of Nigerian society, post-colonialism, and the experiences of women. Her writing is characterized by its vivid storytelling, rich character development, and sharp social commentary. Some of her most well-known works include: *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow* (2006), *Americanah* (2013). In her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie

narrates the story of Kambili, a young Nigerian girl from a wealthy and devoutly Catholic family background. Kambili navigates a life marked by religious extremism and domestic abuse by her own father.

This paper focuses on the oppression and empowerment of the protagonists of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus*. *The Color Purple* is told through a series of letters and diary entries. It begins with Celie, a poor and uneducated young girl, writing letters to God, expressing her thoughts and experiences. She is living in an abusive household, having given birth to two children fathered by her own stepfather. Celie is married to a man known as "Mister"---- or Albert. Albert is harsh and abusive towards Celie, treating her as a servant and subjecting her to physical and psychological abuse.

Celie's younger sister, Nettie, is her closest confidant. When Nettie is sent away by Mister, Celie is devastated, as Nettie was the only source of love and support in her life. The arrival of Shug Avery, a blues singer and former lover of Mister, brings a significant change in Celie's life. Shug and Celie form a close and intimate relationship, and Shug helps Celie discover her self-value and strength. Shug Avery's care and guidance makes Celie become a strong and independent woman. She empowers herself by becoming an economically independent woman and crafts her future . She also helps other women in her community find their voice and strength. The novel explores themes of racial and gender oppression, personal growth, and the power of female relationships. It has been celebrated for its portrayal of resilience and the capacity for change and self-discovery amidst adversity

The title *The Color Purple* in Alice Walker's novel carries profound significance throughout the story. The colour purple is used to symbolize the pain, suffering, and oppression experienced by many of the female characters in the novel, particularly the protagonist, Celie. It represents the bruising and trauma inflicted upon them, both physically and emotionally. The color purple also symbolizes the possibility of transformation and healing. Celie's journey is one of self-discovery, empowerment, and liberation. In the novel, *The color Purple*, Alice Walker

deliberates how an oppressed African-American girl rises above oppression and adversity to find her own voice and strength.

Purple is the color of Celie's pants, which she makes for herself, which signals a sense of independence and self-expression. Never before in the novel, Celie wears a dress in the colour purple. It also represents the strong bond of sisterhood between Celie and Shug, who help each other heal and grow. Walker uses the color purple and blue as a powerful metaphor for the experiences and resilience and empowerment of Celie. Walker writes, "I am making pants... one leg in purple, one leg be red (The Color Purple, 195). When Celie dresses up in blue she feels confident and proud. She feels, "Then too I feels different. Look different. Got on dark blue pants and a white silk shirt that look righteous (The Color Purple 196). Celie empowered herself by making vibrant, colourful pants. She starts dressing up in rich colours. This is the sign of breaking the subjugation and blossoming into liberation.

The title Purple Hibiscus in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel has several layers of significance. The colour purple often represents royalty, wealth, and spirituality freedom, self-expression, and personal growth that the main character, Kambili, experiences. It contrasts with the oppressive and violent atmosphere of her home, where her father is a strict religious extremist. The novel Purple Hibiscus explores the themes of family, religion, and political turmoil. The novel is narrated by Kambili, a 15-year-old girl who lives in Nigeria with her brother, Jaja, and their abusive and strict father, Eugene. Eugene is a wealthy and devout Catholic who is highly respected in the community but rules his household with an iron fist. Kambili's family lives in a state of constant fear and obedience due to Eugene's harsh religious and moral beliefs. He causes physical and emotional abuse on his wife, Beatrice, and on his children, believing it's for their own good.

Against the backdrop of the family's personal transformation, Nigeria is going through political and social upheaval. There is a military coup, and the country is in a state of turmoil. The novel takes a tragic turn when Eugene discovers that his children have been influenced by their more liberal relatives. Kambili, Jaja, and Beatrice face the consequences of defying him. At

the end Kambili and Jaja start to rebuild their lives after the tragedy. They have found their voices and are determined to live according to their own beliefs.

In the novel *Purple Hibiscus* Adichie depicts the transformation of a family and the growth of its young members, especially Kambili who frees her from the constraints of an oppressive patriarchal household and society. Elisabeth Torfs in her article aptly quotes Hooks words on black patriarchy that, "It is obvious that most Black men are not in positions that allow them to exert the kind of institutionalized patriarchal power and control over Black women's lives that privileged white men do in this society. But it is undeniable that they do exert a lot of power over Black women and children in everyday life" (Torfs 24).

The purple hibiscus flower is unique because hibiscus are usually red in colour . But in this novel it stands as a symbol of beauty, growth, and transformation. Throughout the novel, Kambili undergoes a significant transformation, finding her voice and inner strength. She finds a purple hibiscus at her aunt's home and is surprised. She takes a stalk from there and plants it at her home. From this moment a self -transformation starts. Adichie presents the essence of using the purple hibiscus in the novel in the following words:

Aunty Ifeoma's little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence. Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Aunty Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do. (*Purple Hibiscus* 16)

The purple hibiscus, in this context, represents her journey from a sheltered and silent existence to one where she can express herself and make her own choices. Adiche deals with the complex issue of Nigerian identity in the post-colonial era. The purple hibiscus symbolizes the struggle to define one's identity in a changing and often oppressive society. In essence, the title *Purple Hibiscus* encapsulates personal growth, and the quest for identity in a complex world.

Both novels have young female protagonists. Celie in the novel *The Color Purple* and Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus*, undergo significant personal growth and empowerment throughout their life. Both novels address issues of abuse and oppression. Celie in *The Color Purple* experiences abuse from her father and husband, while Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* suffers abuse from her father as well. These experiences play a central role in the development of the characters.

As a consequence of the patriarchal oppression, both Celie and Kambili undergo a coming-of-age journey as they discover their own voices, challenge oppressive systems, and find their inner strength. Both novels ultimately convey themes of resilience and empowerment, as the female protagonists find their own identities and voices despite the adversity they face. Alice Walker says that, black women are unique in nature and hence their uniqueness can be called 'womanist'. Alice Walker coined the word "Womanism" in her collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, published in 1983. At the beginning of the book she gives a definition of 'womanist' as, "feminist, Afrocentric, healing, embodied, and spiritual" (Alice Walker 100).

Alice Walker further gives multiple definitions of 'womanist'. She defines the unique qualities of womanist in the following words:

From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish", i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in great depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious. A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health.

Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.” Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden* xi-xii)

While the two novels are set in different cultural contexts: African-American in *The Color Purple* and Nigerian in *Purple Hibiscus*, they both provide insights into the experiences of women within their respective cultural and societal frameworks. Despite the predicaments in the given situation both Celie and Kambili reflect the ‘womanist’ qualities. They get themselves empowered by the support of the women of their own community, Celie from Shug and Kambili from her aunt Ifeoma. Resilience and resistance is their very basic qualities.

These similarities make both characters rich explorations of the black women’s experience and the journey to self-discovery and empowerment. The extremity of the oppression from the community within serves as tool for empowerment. Out of poverty, female subjugation and patriarchal tyranny, the rich and flourishing purple blossoms bloom. Both Celie and Kambili represent the strength of ‘womanist’ icons of the black female community.

Alice Walker deliberates the plight and predicament of black women in the United States of America. She takes pain to show the world how these women overcome the oppression, patriarchy and sexual abuse. Her female characters have gone through the painful experiences of slavery, domination, sexism, and racism of both white men and black men and hence they are doubly marginalised. Despite the suffering, they have learnt to fight for their rights in order to live a meaningful life. Adichie deals with the effects of political and religious oppression on a Nigerian family. It highlights the power of education and self-expression in overcoming oppression. Like Celie of *The color Purple*, Kambili repeatedly under goes the physical violence of her father as means of oppression. When her father finds out that Kambili

brings a picture of Papa Nnukwu to their home and trying to protect it from destruction. Eugen kicks her. Adiche describes it physical subjugation in order to establish the authority over the female, in the following words:

The kicking increased in tempo...The stinging was raw now, even more like bites, because the metal buckle on his slippers landed on open skin by my side, my back, my legs. Kicking, kicking, kicking. Perhaps it was a belt now because the metal buckle seemed too heavy..More stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet. (*Purple Hibiscus* 210-211)

On the whole, Celie and Kambili are both characters who experience significant personal growth and empowerment in their respective novels. While Celie's struggles are rooted in the racial and gender dynamics of the American South, Kambili's challenges are shaped by the post-colonial and religious context of Nigeria. Both characters, however, stand as icons of empowerment and self-awareness.

Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* plays an exemplary role in popularizing the concept of womanism and illustrating its principles. Adichie, as a spokesperson of Black Feminism in Nigeria echoes the plight and predicament of black women in her novel *Purple Hibiscus*. Walker and Adichie represent a distinct and uniqueness of 'Womanist' thought and address the experiences and struggles of Black women and women of colour and advocate for their liberation and empowerment.

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