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## **Resistance as a Secret of Joy in Alice Walker's Novel: The Color Purple**

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**Abstract:**

*Resistance is the quality of not yielding to force or external pressure; that power of a body which acts in opposition to the impulse or pressure of another, or which prevents the effect of another power; as, the resistance of the air to a body passing through it. But here in the world famous Pulitzer prize winning novel of well known Afro-American author Alice Walker The Color Purple, this air is the polluted air of racial and sexual affliction, the germs of which are polluting and spoiling the lives of poor Afro-American people. So in the novels of Walker, resistance is not an ordinary term but a key to unfold the path of liberation, self-existence and above all of a beautiful planet established on democratic principles. It is a tool used by the victims of fair color and powerful sex to save them and in true sense we can say, to make them and their coming generations free from the long time bounded shackles of slavery and exploitation.*

**Keywords:** Racism, sexism, resistance, self affirmation, exploitation, empowerment

They call her ugly, they call her worthless  
She believes them, she thinks they are correct  
She walks with her head swung low and her eyes cut toward the floor  
Too ashamed to laugh, too scared to be happy  
But there is one thing they can't take  
It's her spirit, her willingness to survive  
Her desire to be with her young, to be with her own  
And this spirit will not be broken.

*(<http://rothgretchen.wordpress.com/2010/03/05/american-poetry-theme-Resistance/>) /*

If we talk about resistance and protest in the fiction of Alice Walker, this poem seems quite authentic and applicable to all those women characters of Walker who resisted every blow, trauma and humiliation hurled upon them by racist and sexist society in a powerful manner. Walker basically uses resistance in her novels as a voice of protest and revolt or in true sense a means of self-empowerment. As a black woman writer Walker is fully aware of the wrongs, the blacks suffered, especially their women folk, during the days of slavery. It is a past, very few African-Americans can forget. Blind submission of women to men was always considered a virtue in male dominated Afro- American society. About the traumatic condition of Black woman; Gerda Lerner in her book "*Black Women in White America*" says:

- "Belonging as they do to two groups, which have traditionally been treated as inferiors by American society-blacks and women- they have been doubly invisible. Their records lie buried, unread, infrequently noticed and even more seldom interpreted. Victimization" (167).

In her works Walker has explored the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society. In the center of her complex and multi layered narratives is the unique cultural inheritance of African-Americans. And thus Walker achieved success in incorporating spirituality, hope, and the will to survive hard times, making her novels thought provoking and inspiring. About the wretched and painful condition of black woman a great Nobel Prize winner black author Toni Morrison in her article "What the Black Woman thinks about women's Liberty", says: "She (the black woman) has nothing to fall back on, not maleness, not whiteness, not lady hood, not anything"(167).

But with the passage of time and with the experience of pain and suffering caused by these wounds of racial and sexual discriminations on their bodies these Afro-American women have learnt that submission to wrong is itself wrong, and resistance to wrong is virtue alike in women as in men. And with this awareness they begin to resist every evil attack of their exploiters. These brave warriors **of the novels of Walker know that** despair and frustration cannot shake their belief because they have the tool of resistance with them and that is the only way of their liberation and self empowerment. Walker in a very artistic manner has used resistance as a voice of protest of the downtrodden and the *African gods of small things*. The black characters of Walker know the fact that without resisting their enemy, they can't uproot him from their land and life. Walker has used their anger, protest and resistance as a key to their salvation. She doesn't want to show them as the biggest loser of this key by not resisting. Once Robert F. Kennedy

explained the power and capacity of resistance and said that each time we stand up for an ideal, or act to improve the lot of others, or strike out against injustice, we send forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and colonization.

Although Walker has used many colors of resistance, yet the most effective and powerful is the self empowerment. Like Walker her creations, are also aware about this fact that when life descend in to the pit they must become their own candle willingly burning themselves to light up the darkness around them. They know that once they will empower themselves and determine to go ahead with powerful steps towards freedom, nothing in the world can stop them from reaching their goals. Now they do not suppress their fear but try to understand it and face it by coming directly in contact with it. Most of the characters of Walker use their artistic or creative potentialities to resist the hazardous situations. They know that all art has the power to heal because it helps us see who we are, and what we resist. The struggle of these characters with the opposite circumstances prove the fact that resistance is the real secret of joy and they possess this secret; their only treasure. Although whites have snatched each and everything from these Afro- American people but they could not snatch this spirit of resistance that is leading them into a new world of *agape*.

In her novel *The Color Purple* Walker explores the resistance, struggle and development of black woman through the story of its heroine, Celie, who leads her life from the ditch of racism and sexism to the peak of self-celebration. The process of struggle for change is revealed through Celie's complex relationships with her stepfather Alphonso, God, Mr. Albert, Harpoe, Sofia, Nettie and above all Shug Avery. In feeling the pride of being black women who do not submit to oppression, Sofia and Shug offer her the strength of self-definition, and resistance while again Shug and later Nettie provide her with self-knowledge and a sense of self-empowerment. Thus, re-connecting with her owns self and with God through the female network system, Celie learns to become her own person. Celie resists her depression and loneliness from the very beginning of the novel by addressing God or by sharing her pain, sufferings and oppression with God. It is her intense desire to be friend with someone. She needs someone who can be a listener of the painful saga of her life because in her real life nobody is there to share her pain.

Celie resists the evil intention of her Pa of using Nettie by sacrificing her own life for the sake of Nettie. She fixes herself in place of Nettie by wearing the horsehair, feathers and a pair of her new mammy's shoes so that she can divert the mind of her step pa from Nettie. This was one of the many colors of resistance that Celie used to secure the future of her dear sister. In her further life after her marriage to Albert she resists every abuse, misfortune and attack of her husband on her soul and body by keeping mum like Alice the female protagonist of James Osborn's play *Look Back in Anger*. She resists the anarchy of her husband by turning herself into wood, and only by staying alive in the mud of emotional, physical and sexual exploitation. Sometimes not to give up the hope of new light even in the impenetrable forest of despair turns into a kind of resistance.

On the revelation of the letters of Nettie hidden by Albert to take revenge and to maintain the assumption in the mind of Celie about the death of her dear sister, Celie's long restrained anger becomes boundless and begins to reflect in her revolting speeches not only against her main exploiter Albert but also against God whom she was considering her true supporter and torchbearer. As for the very first time she makes a protest against God, with whom up till now she was sharing each and everything. At this transformation of Celie we become surprised when she pours down her deep hidden restricting anger: "I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other men I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown. .... If he ever listened to poor colored women, the world would be a different place" (173).

At this stage of her life God is not different from any other males. Now the image of God is totally changed in her eyes from a supporter to an exploiter and as the representative of whites as well as of males. Celie's resistance basically begins with the support of three strong women of black community: Shug, Nettie and Sophia. These three teach her the lesson of resistance and self-celebration. Sofia acts as a catalyst for Celie's transformation. Despite all odds, she refuses to succumb to Harpoe's beating. In fact, she stands alone to pay him back. Celie the weak woman cannot but admire her and it is from her daughter-in-law that she learns the language of revolt and successful resistance. This is Sofia who instructs her "to bash Mr.\_head open..." (44).

Sofia presents the best example of resistance and protest by hitting back the white Mayor. When the Mayor's wife asks her: "Sofia, would you like to work for me, be my maid?" Sofia declines the offer: "Hell no" (96). For every white man, every black woman is a girl and his woman is a lady. When the Mayor listens to the way Sofia replies, he slaps her. As Sofia is a spirited lady, she promptly retaliates. The Mayor however takes revenge by ordering the police to use third degree methods to torture and mutilate Sofia. No doubt the Mayor and his men defeat Sofia, but she represents the black woman who has enough courage to fight for her dignity. Sofia's struggle is for dignity as an individual who is both black and female. Though her struggle is not always successful, it provides her an opportunity to display her fortitude and ability to transcend her racist and sexist circumstances. Here with the plight of Sofia in revolt against the ill intention of the white mayor, Walker reveals the fact that the path chosen by these black warriors is not a bed of roses. Sofia represents all those black women who have fought all through their life, right from their childhood to death or until they got victory. In the end Sofia even resists her feeling of hatred for the whites; a weakness of her character by bringing up the white girl Eleanor Jane with love and affection and teaches others a lesson of love, peace and integration.

If Sophia provides Celie a spark of protest against every evil attack and inspire her to rewrite her story it is Shug Avery who finally teaches her to become psychologically and financially independent. Here Walker suggests clearly that a woman should learn to respect the self before she can demand respect from others or we can say that before launching a voyage towards her struggle with the external enemies she should resist her own weaknesses. Gradually Celie has recognized her life, achieved economic liberty, and gathered the knowledge of meaningful things and relationships to create a new Celie. Walker depicts Celie as a daring woman and a warrior who struggles throughout her life to regenerate into an empowered woman. Even when she has accepted her meaningless existence with Albert and his children: she never misses any opportunity to demonstrate her dislike for him: "I say, and men look like frogs to me. No matter how you kiss'em, as far as I'm concern, frogs is what they stay" (224). She gradually liberates herself from the

fear, pressure and imposition of her husband Albert. When Albert tries to prevent Celie from moving to Memphis along with Shug, Celie explodes and reveals that she is no more the old cow like Celie and roars: “you a lowdown dog is what’s wrong, I say. It’s time to leave you and enter in to the creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need” (207). Thus Celie a poor, black ugly and asexually abused girl, moves from her helplessness towards the state of complete independence and establishes her own world which is full with black womanish consciousness.

Another character Mary Agnes second wife of Harpoe, represents the example of sacrifice that is essential to establish a bond of sisterhood among all the suffering women, in order to make a united protest against this male dominated society. In her effort to save Sofia from the imprisonment she is gets raped by her own uncle. She, the victim of sexism emerges from this encounter with a new power over men in general. Though she comes with a limp, her dress torn, a heel from her shoe missing, she repudiates her derogatory name and demands that she be called by her real name. Not only does Mary Agnes no longer “Squeak” but she also begins to sing. Although Celie reports that “She got the kind of voice you never think of trying to sing a song” (103). Like other victims of sexism, she also learns to fight, hit back and to meditate about her self-existence after facing the cruel face of male domination. Now she begins to contemplate about her empowerment by making singing her career so that she can resist every blow and attack in a powerful way.

Walker emphasizes the imprisonment of black women, the interior colonization they suffer from because of their dependence on men for everything. But at the point when they recognize the strength of womanism and sisterhood they no longer need men. Now they resist their colonizers by empowering them and making them free from the dependency of men. They struggle not only for physical liberty but also for economic and mental freedom from the shackles of racial and sexual discriminations. As the heroine of this novel Celie establishes herself as a professional seamstress who designs pants; the symbol of her accepting and being accepted as the economic power and moving up on the higher step of class hierarchy. While Celie resists the evil intention of her step Pa of having an evil eye on her dear sister. Nettie resists her adverse circumstances and the hellish matrix of color and gender by becoming her own torchbearer in the dark forest of colonization. She has an inner desire and determination to transcend her hostile surroundings, and that’s why in order to make her intellectually powerful, “All day she read, she study, she practice her handwriting and try to git us to think” (17).

At last to conclude this chapter we can say that, the characters of Walker are the mouthpieces of their creator and reveal the deep suppressed layers of resistance and protest of the heart of Walker. The thinking of the writer behind writing the novels like *The Color Purple* is to register her protest against the long prevailing discriminations of racism and sexism which are spoiling black beauty, culture and spirit. And because of this spirit of resistance Walker has dedicated this novel to the spirits of all those martyrs who have sacrificed their life in the effort to save their African land, spirit, culture and tradition; these are the spirits without whose assistance, neither this book nor others that she has written would have been written.

Here, Walker celebrates the strength of black women to resist and revolt against the heavy odds of racism, sexism and classicism. Walker’s development of the women characters in this novel parallels the way in which most black women writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison and Paul Marshall combine their concern for feminism and ethnicity. Though her women characters do not have a societal support system that pays them well or appreciates their beauty and the dual role as house maker and provider they assume in their families, they keep their vision and their energies focused on that which is worthwhile and sustaining. Walker’s emphasis on their selflessness and their strength is not to romanticize their limited opportunity for adventure or fulfillment outside the boundaries of their own communities. Instead it is to show the value and the difficulty of the role that they play. Walker observed to highlight the sustaining power of the blacks, to recognize and rescue those qualities of resistance, excellence and integrity. These black women of Walker adopt resistance to preserve their self-esteem and dignity. As Claudia Tate, stresses this factor in her work *Alice Walker: Black Woman writer at Work* by saying: that “women must assume responsibility for strengthen their self esteem by learning to love and appreciate themselves- in short to celebrate their womanhood” (23).

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