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**ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE* AND LANGSTON HUGHES SELECT POEMS : A
COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

African-American male and female writers have dealt with the sufferings, slavery and freedom. Being Black male and female writers Langston Hughes and Alice Walker play an eminent role for the Black people's welfare. In the novel, *The Color Purple* author Alice Walker introduces Southern Black female characters not only faced slavery, but sexism, racism and oppression. Throughout the novel Walker not only describes the injustices against African-Americans but focuses to read an oppressed races and struggles underwent by Celie. *The Color Purple* is an extraordinary account of a Black women's plight as Celie strives towards acceptance, freedom and independence. Langston Hughes is Black American's most representative writer and a significant figure in world literature. Langston Hughes speaks in a voice familiar to all Blacks. Langston Hughes has portrayed the sufferings of Negroes. The Black people have been subjected to work under the scorching heat of the sun and forced to work in the night also. The Blacks under the slavery have not been allowed to sleep. Black people have been crushed and tormented by White masters. Singing has been the inborn trait of Blacks and they sing their songs even in a life situation full of sufferings and sorrows. Hughes in his poems has portrayed the Black's sufferings, slavery and also freedom.

Key words: Suffering, Racism, Sexism, Oppression and Freedom.

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INTRODUCTION

Enslavement was already there in European culture, tradition and habits of thought long before the Trans-Atlantic slavery took place. But at that time people of White and coloured skin was indiscriminately enslaved even before the colonization of America. Gradually the Negro group was debased as easily adapted into the system of slavery. The whites gradually saw and believed that the Blacks are more suitable for the status of slaves and thus the inhuman business of trading in black slaves was started the Portuguese in 1444 though it was introduced in the New World (America) for the first time in 1619 when a Dutch vessel sold 21 Negroes slaves to the colonists of Virginia for their tobacco growing purpose.

African-American woman writers have dealt with the sufferings, slavery and freedom. Being a Black and female writer Alice Walker plays a double-edged sword. In the novel *The Color Purple* Alice Walker introduces Southern Black female characters who not only faced slavery, but sexism, racism and oppression. In *The Color Purple* Celie the main character addressed God through a series of letters, and we travel through a span of thirty to forty years in the early nineteenth century. Throughout the novel, Walker not only describes the injustices against African-Americans but forces us to become a member of an oppressed race as we struggle to hear the rhythm and sway of Celie's mind.

The Color Purple is an extraordinary novel of Black women's plight as Celie strives towards acceptance, freedom and independence. The novel opens with an opening letter where we discover that Celie the main character was savagely raped by her step-father. Such a bold beginning lets us know that Celie's life is anything but ordinary. The sanctity of the family unit so important to the American way of life is destroyed. The shocking details of rape as Celie writes are sad but a factual everyday occurrence. Celie understands that as a Black woman she is seen as worthless having a meaningless existence. There is no other way of life. It is as if all Black women are enslaved to the typical hell of exploitation, bigotry, and abuse. The female characters are molded from pain and sacrifice. As the novel progresses, the reader gets to follow Celie who was offered to get married to a widower who has children. The widower first hesitates in getting married to Celie but after some encouragement by Celie's stepfather (Alphonso) 'She can take that cow she raise down there back of the crib' (*The Color Purple*.10) the widower agrees to marry her. The implication here is that women are nothing but cattle and worthless.

Celie a barely educated black woman is raped by her stepfather and then married off to Mr. Albert who needs a good worker in his farm. 'You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy' (*The Color Purple* .3) told by her stepfather that she had better tell no one but God about the rape Celie starts writing letters to God. The whole body of the novel's text consists of Celie's letters to God then to her sister Nettie, and of Nettie's letters to Celie. After Celie's children was taken away by her stepfather Celie's sister Nettie has been forced to leave the house (she leaves for Africa with a couple of missionaries), Celie is totally alone. Eventually Celie develops a community an extended family including Shug her husband's mistress who becomes her close friend. She overcomes oppression maintains her independence through creativity 'I sit in the dining room making pants after pants' (*The Color Purple* .191) and love that job. In the end Nettie and Celie's children come back home and celebrate their happy reunion.

The novel deals with the women's struggle both in America and in Africa, of women to gain recognition as individuals who deserve fair and equal treatment. Male dominance is normal in both countries. As Albert says **Men s' pose to wear the pants**. In the very first letter, Celie tells of the abuse she suffers at the hands of the man she believes for a long time is her father. Mary Agnes the singer is raped by the white uncle whom she approaches for help to get Harope's wife Sofia out of prison because she slaps the Mayor's wife Miss Millie and hence she was put in prison. Mr. Albert also tries to force Nettie to submit to him before she leaves the house after fighting him off. Celie's sexual encounters with her step father,

You better not ever tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy. Dear God ,I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me. Last spring [...] alone. A week go by the pulling on her arm again. She say now, I ain't gonna. (*The Color Purple*.3) husband, Mr- are sordid and unloving Just do his business, get off, go to sleep (*The Color Purple*.74).

As Shug Avery remarks, Celie 'make it sound like he going to the toilet on you'. (*The Color Purple*.74). Physical violence also seems to be a common occurrence, even in relationships which are quite loving, like that between Harpo and his wife Sofia. Harop beats Sofia because **the woman s 'pose to mind**. It is a respectable thing for a man to do to his wife in his view.

Women are exploited especially Celie, who is married off to Albert to look after his children and is expected to work on the farm and submit without objection to all of Albert's demands and those of his children. Celie accepts Albert's affair with Shug Avery which extends even to him sleeping with her under the

same roof. In fact fidelity is not seen as an important quality by men although the same behaviour in females is cause for comment.

The novel's message is that women must stand up against the unfair treatment they receive at the hands of men and that they must do this by helping one another. The women in the novel even those who have interests in the same men nevertheless bond together to support and sustain one another throughout the novel. The bond of sisterhood is important both literally in the persons of Nettie and Celie, Sofia and Odessa and metaphorically in the persons of Mary Agnes and Sofia, Albert's sister and Celie, Tashi and Olivia and ofcourse Shug Avery and Celie, who embody the twin roles of sisters and lovers in their relationship.

Some of the women in the novel have learnt to fight for themselves. Sofia is powerful and physically strong. She is not subservient and has great strength of character as well. Sofia does not fight for what she wants but of course her aggression results in her dreadful experience at the hands of the police after she dares to *talk back* to the White Mayor, and her subsequent sentence to drudgery as the Mayor's servant lasts for many years. The bond between Sofia and Mary Agnes is stronger than their mutual claim on Harpo's affections. Mary Agnes endures rape for Sofia's sake in order to get her released from prison and when Mary Agnes goes off to be a singer it is Sofia who looks after her child.

Shug Avery is the most liberated of the women in the novel although she also suffers verbal attack from the church elders because of her lifestyle. Shug Avery's career as a blues singer enables her to experience much more freedom than the other women whose lives are bound by home, work and child care. Shug is also much more sexually liberated than many other females having numerous affairs and enjoying her sexuality with no restraints or false guilt. She has a strong belief in God which is unfettered by convention and her relationship with Celie is the central theme of the novel. It is Shug Avery who liberates Celie in all aspects of her life guiding her into emotional, sexual and financial independence and combining the roles of sister, friend and lover. Shug possesses equality because of her own integrity as a person and she passes this on to Celie. It is no accident that the enterprise which gains Celie her independence is paradoxically, a **woman's job- sewing** - but the product is trousers for women to wear.

Dr. Meena Kumari says that

The pants represent liberation from the common view of women as just homemakers. Celie could make a business selling the pants. Also, in this point in history women were supposed to wear dresses while men wore the pants; however, Celie made pants for women too, so they were able to be equal to men in this regard. (page.90)

Masculine and feminine temperaments are also addressed in the novel. Shug is described by Albert as being *more manly than most men*, but as Celie rightly points out to him, those qualities of independence, honesty and integrity are equally valid as womanly qualities. What the novel asserts is that people are weak and strong and gender should not dictate perceptions of qualities which are essentially human.

Langston Hughes is Black American's most representative writer and a significant figure in world literature. Hughes speaks in a voice familiar to all Blacks. Langston Hughes addresses himself primarily to the problems of Black artist and artistic integrity-accepting one's race. Hughes became a writer not merely to amuse either the White or Black audience but under a strong inner urge to articulate the experience of being a member of black community in Africa.

In the poem, *Aunt Sue's stories*, Langston Hughes has portrayed the suffering of the Negroes. They have been subjected to work under the scorching heat of the sun and forced to work during the night also.

Black slaves

Working in the hot sun,

And black slaves

Walking in the dewy night, (*Aunt Sue's stories, Collected Poems.23*)

The Blacks under the slavery have not been allowed to sleep. They have been crushed and tormented by the White masters. Singing has been the inborn trait of the Blacks and they sing their songs even in a life situation full of suffering and sorrow.

Singing sorrows song on the blacks of a mighty river (Aunt Sue's stories *Collected Poems.23*)

They have been prevented from enjoying life and other things in the world completely. The White masters have no mind to know the sufferings of the Blacks under their hands. They have been to exploit both life and work of the Blacks. The Blacks have not been considered as humans but only as animals. The Blacks have been treated worse than animals. Both men and women have been made to work day and night constantly without any partiality. Hughes has shown the utter evil done to the Blacks in the slavery world in the poem **Aunt Sue's stories**. Aunt Sue has such tales of Blacks' suffering in full of her mind and heart.

Aunt Sue has head full of stories.

Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.(Aunt Sue's stories *Collected Poems. 23*)

These stories of the Blacks were born out of real experience of suffering both one's own and watching others' suffering. The realism in the stories of Aunt Sue's can be noted. They are not invented stories but real stories from the slavery life of Blacks. The following lines cited from the poem emphasize the realism in the poem.

And the dark-faced child, listening,
Knows that Aunt Sue's stories are real stories.

He knows that Aunt Sue never got her stories

Out of any book at all,

But that they came

Right out of her own life. (Aunt Sue's stories *Collected Poems.23*)

The Blacks have been kept as slaves for a long time through generations. They have been manipulated to do some menial jobs like cleaning the door-steps, polishing boots and such other low jobs. They have also been used to do great and hard works like constructing pyramids. So the Black slaves have had the prowess for doing skilled and intellectual works. But these talents of the Blacks have been exploited by the White masters skillfully. In spite of all their intelligence and talents the Blacks have been suppressed and oppressed. Blacks still wanted to achieve a state of fearlessness in their heart and mind.

I've been a slave

Ceasar told me to keep his door-steps clean.

I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker:

Under my hand the pyramids arose.

I made Mortal for the Woolworth Building. (Negro, *Collected Poems.24*)

The Blacks have been subjected to all sorts of injustices. Their hands legs and heads have been cut off in the public as a punishment for not obeying the White masters or for threatening the Blacks to obey the masters. There is no law to protect them and so the White masters could do any evil to them. All these ill-treatment and injustices meted out to them by the Whites and that too in a country which is considered an ideal democratic by White man. In the poem *Negros* Hughes has clearly pictured the state of Black men in the world of Whites. But the Blacks have never missed to carry with them the taste music which has inherited from their forefathers from Africa. Sorrows as well as hardships have failed to prevent the Blacks from going to music and songs. They have their own musics and songs which they have taken along with them through hard works and suffering.

Hughes in his poems not only portrayed the Black's sufferings and slavery but also freedom .The Blacks have suffered for many years as slaves. They have been without freedom for long time and years -by-years have been passing but no changes in the slavery life of the Blacks. They cannot get freedom by making any compromise with the Whites .So the Blacks come to the conclusion that they will not get freedom easily.

The Blacks claim that they have every right to live and to enjoy life as the White or any other people in the world. The Black people have been kept as slaves by the Whites and have been forbidden all rights and freedom for many centuries since they have been taken out from their own land. The Blacks have no right to live their own life, to be in their own family, to plough their own land and to stay in their own land.

I have as much right

As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And own land, (*Freedom, Collected Poems*, 289)

Blacks cannot now bear to hear that the course of time will bring changes to their slavery life and freedom to them. They cannot believe that tomorrow will be a different day with all liberty for them. The Blacks believed that they would get freedom the next day, but it was only a dream. Even if the Blacks get freedom in the far away future and the people contented that getting freedom after their death is useless. They do not want freedom after their death. It is of no use to give freedom after killing the people. People do not want to starve today hoping for tomorrow's food. Black people don't want to be a slave today hoping for tomorrow's freedom.

The Blacks now need freedom very badly in order to meet the fundamental rights of human beings to live. They did not get the passion for the freedom in an impulse, but it has been sowed in their minds and souls long back. The plant of passion for freedom, planted in the past, has sprouted out and has grown into a strong tree rooted firmly in Black minds, withstanding any sort of oppression against its firm wish of freedom.

Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need
I live here, too
I want freedom

Just as you (*Freedom, Collected Poems*, 289)

The White oppressors lynch or kill the Blacks in the public in order to threaten them not to rebel against for freedom. The evil act of lynching is popular in the world of Negroes and can be seen often enacted among them. The merciless act of killing, lynching, beating, raping etc in the South. The rope around his neck, the knife at his genitals, and the fire all over him are the evil course of action the Black man can readily expect. Even a meek and innocent Black boy's evil action is not spared by the White oppressors. There is no law to protect the Blacks against the injustice done to them. The White can kill the Blacks in the public and escape without any punishment for crime they commit.

Conclusion

From both the writers we are able to find out that as a female writer Walker sees the sufferings of the women and how they have been enslaved and treated by the White Americans. Even though they have suffered and ill-treated the women fought for their freedom. Walker gives the voice for the Black women through her novels. And Langston Hughes as a male writer Hughes also speaks about the suffering, slavery and the freedom for the Black people both male and female as a Black **The Color Purple** American male writer.

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