

Writing as a Means of Female Resistance and Empowerment

Jyoti Bhatia

Associate Professor, English
Government College, Kishangarh, Rajasthan, India
Email: bhatiajyoti09@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how women use writing as a tool of rebellion, taking Alice Walker's brilliant and disturbing 1982 novel 'The Colour Purple' as an example. The use of deeply personal narratives to not only make peace with their own struggles but to also share these experiences and inspiring a slew of similar works, Walker and her contemporaries have created a space that openly challenges the blatant sexism that inhabits the literary field.

KEYWORDS

Women's Writing; Resistance; Empowerment; Identity; Marginality; Literary History.

For as long as writing has existed, women have continued to tell their stories, often in secret and at a great risk to themselves. The social conventions that determined women's lives forced many women writers to publish anonymously or under male pseudonyms. The names of George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), Currer Bell, Ellis Bell, Acton Bell (Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Anne Bronte), A.M. Barnard (Louisa May Alcott) come to our mind. (Ockerstrom.L) These and many other women writers adopted masculine names to conceal identity, to avoid discrimination, to ensure that their works were accepted by publishers or taken seriously by the public. Women's writing was seen as an interference in a supposedly masculine domain and therefore discouraged and criticized. Their writing was treated as concerned with women's issues, women's concerns and marital relationships.

In this paper, I propose to argue that when women tell or write their stories, they empower themselves. Writing is a kind of resistance – by voicing their silence, by telling their stories women are in a way resisting the patriarchal patterns that have tried to keep her silent, push her back, taught her conduct rules (rule of etiquette and behaviour), set limits to her learning, work and movement. By writing about the personal, women often take the risk of offending those who believe that a personal story should be kept private. Why should it offend if it heals, builds up camaraderie, informs and educates? In writing, women do not simply empower themselves but all who encounter their stories.

I propose to elucidate this premise with the help of Alice Walker's 'The Colour Purple'. The text is an acclaimed 1982 epistolary novel by black American author Alice Walker. It received the 1983 Pulitzer prize for fiction and the national book award. It was later adapted into a film and a musical of the same name. The novel is situated in rural Georgia and focuses on the lives of black women during the 1930's in the southern United States, addressing numerous issues including the exceedingly low position of women in American social culture. The story follows an uneducated black woman, Celie, during the 30 years of life through abuse, suffering, and finally her attempt to find love, happiness and fulfilment in life. It graphically presents the violence and sexual subjugation that many black women endured during the 20th century and as a result has been banned many times and has borne the brunt of many attempts at censoring.

The novel opens with a warning to Celie by her father (later revealed to be step-father), "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy"(11). Silence is imposed on a naive fourteen years old girl, abused and twice impregnated by a man whom she considers her 'Pa'. She feels too ashamed of what has happened, cannot voice her experience to anybody, she addresses her letters to God. It is this activity which offers Celie an escape from the multiple oppressions. By telling her story to God, she is unconsciously liberating herself. Writing is a way of thinking out loud, quietly and safely, a means of exploring her thoughts by expressing them

on paper and of reaching beyond her domestic life towards other's lives or connections.

Celie and her sister Nettie do not just write their own stories but the stories of all women.

"...Their needs for self-expression are obvious: they hang onto sanity by writing, they defend themselves with words; they discover their potential – sound themselves out – through articulation... They work their way from speechlessness to eloquence not only by covering the historical stages women writers have travelled – from suffering patriarchy, to rebelling against its conventions, to creating their own ethos' – but also by developing a style that emerges from their...cultures..." (Cheung, K)

Women have always and everywhere been in positions of marginality. Woman is all but absent from history, which is predominantly written by men. Her efforts treated as insignificant, trivial and dismissed. Even in the 20th century, Virginia Woolf was denied admission to the Oxbridge libraries because of her gender. This made her advice women in *Three Guineas* to become a community of outsiders and to tell their own stories using their own language. (Ockerstrom. L)

Alice Walker does just that. She takes the 18th century epistolary form which was traditionally used by men and uses it to voice the lives, experiences and struggles of women. Alice Walker, thus asserts her 'self', her identity and her right to authorship. In the novel, Celie and Nettie write their stories, using language to break out from the underclass imposed by patriarchy and racism. Words both written and spoken by them are means of empowerment. And it's through education, and the process of acquiring written language that Celie begins to raise herself from the position of the underclass to a more powerful position. The ability to master language is symbolic of Celie's understanding of herself, who she is, what she can do and what she wants to be.

"Celie, gratified by her newfound

rhetorical talent and her increasing mastery of language, evolves along with her writing-from a little girl baffled by what is happening to her to a self-aware and understanding woman, from a passive recorder of un-structured facts to a conscious artist. When she begins writing she merely jots down her immediate experience, noting the events around her with little introspection or analysis. ...Gradually, however, the facts she presents begin to generate questions and judgments." (Cheung, K)

And through these images, Alice Walker has succeeded in giving voice and representation to the women who have been silenced and confined by life and literature. "It's a book mostly about women, and what they're doing, and how they're carrying on no matter what the men are doing...I think that for many men at that time it was a shock that you could actually write a novel with women at the centre." (Interview)

There is a hunger for women driven narrative that is far from being fulfilled. Stories like 'The Colour Purple', that are unapologetic about their origins and deeply personal, give us a chance to look at women as women look at themselves. There is no artificiality to Celie's account. She lays bare all that happens, concealing nothing. The message that rings bright and clear throughout the narrative, aside from the obvious call to the conditions of women in a sexist and racist structure, is a warning against shame. The story is asking women to stop living in shame of their identities, their bodies and their stories. Just as Celie sees in her contemporaries, Sofia and Shug, woman should be proud of who she is. They should be loud, present and angry. It is the hiding, more than the abuse, that holds Celie down. Thus, when she writes, when she stops hiding and finds herself in her words, that is when she realises her own worth. "Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. "(Bell Hooks).

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Dr Jyoti Bhatia is an Associate Professor of English. She has been teaching English language and literature in different Government Colleges in Rajasthan for almost 25 years and is presently posted at Government College Kishangarh. Her area of research has been Women's Writing. She worked on The Female Comic Tradition from Fanny Burney to George Eliot for her Ph.D. She is an active member of ELTAI (English Language Teachers' Association of India) and also loves to give voice overs in Hindi and English.