

MA English – 4th Semester American Literature by Samir Kumar Sharma, Associate professor of English Patna University

Alice Walker (A Biological Sketch)

Alice Walker, born on 9th February 1944 at Eatonton (a rural farming town southern of Georgia) to Willie Lee and Minnie Grant Walker who were sharecroppers (tenant farmers), was the youngest of eight children. She was sent to a school named East Putnam Consolidated at the age of four. When she was eight, she was hit by a copper B.B. pellet in her right eye and was blinded permanently in that eye. This traumatic accident changed her from a brassy, enthusiast, self-confident child to a shy, solemn and solitary girl. Her emotional and psychological state of mind can be understood from the fact that she started feeling 'old' and 'retreated into solitude'.

It is said that sometimes curses also bring boons. Due to this injury she was given scholarship and was admitted to a prestigious Spelman College (for black women) in Atlanta, Georgia in 1961. In 1963 she was transferred to Sarah College (a prestigious college exclusively for women) New York. But she was not satisfied with the teaching done there because professors focused attention only on the white writers ignoring the black writers. She developed a literary taste by reading and writing poems. She graduated in 1965 and in 1968 her collection of poems was published.

Walker passed through various types of traumatic experiences. While at Sarah College she became pregnant. She wanted to commit suicide. She got aborted. In 1968 she was married to a human rights lawyer Mel Leventhal. Her marriage was first interracial marriage. In 1976 she was divorced.

The traumatic experiences right from her childhood could not make her weak and miserable rather she became stronger. She started her career with holding an editorial position at *Ms. Journal*. Her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Cape Land* was published in 1970. Her second novel *Meridian* dealing with the story of a woman fighting for civil rights in the American South was published in 1976. Her third novel *The Color Purple* was published in 1982 for which she was awarded the most prestigious American literary award called Pulitzer Prize. After that she published a lot of essays, poems, children's books and non-fiction work. She received a lot of awards and honorary degree for her contributions to the literature and society.

While working as a teacher at Wellesley College and the University of Massachusetts, Boston she engaged herself in various activities apart from teaching and writing.

Walker came in contact with Martin Luther King Jr in 1960s and became a civil rights activist in the American South. She participated in the 1963 March on Washington. She also volunteered to register black voters in Georgia. She was arrested in 2003 for participating in International Women's Day (8th March) on the eve of the Iraq War.

Walker condemned Israel as 'apartheid'. She supports Palestine and also supports the boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns against Israel. Her contempt for Israel is evident from the fact that she refused to authorize a Hebrew translation of *The Color Purple* in 2012.

Walker is one of those writers who have presented the darkest side of the black women. The black people in general were the sufferers, devoid of all human rights but the black women were the most sufferers as they were not considered even as human beings. Their sufferings on the basis of race, sex, class and slavery have found space in Walker's writings. The themes of oppression, suppression and alienation have been vividly dealt with. It is due to some of the writers including Walker that African-American literature which was considered unimportant and irrelevant, became so important that they were awarded with several prizes including the Nobel Prize, which indicates that the margin has now acquired the central position. Walker has made literature a tool for social activism and a way to promote political and cultural liberation of the black women.

It is said that while Walker was leaving for school, her mother gave her a suitcase, a typewriter and a sewing machine that are symbolic of permission to travel, writing and self-sufficiency respectively. They also symbolize liberation, creation and financial self-dependence that are most desired by women to end age-long suffering at the hands of the patriarchal order of the society.

Walker did not like to be called a feminist but describes her work and herself as 'womanist'. She defines this term as "a woman who loves woman, appreciates and prefers woman's culture, woman's emotional flexibility and woman's strength, loves the spirit, loves herself." She states that 'womanism' gives a word of our own. This word is the thread that unites woman of colour and feminist movement and gives feminism a broader perspective. 'Womanism' also gives black women a discourse in which the issues they confront in the society are discussed.

The Color Purple is among the most important contemporary American novels. It made Walker a popular literary celebrity. It has been written in an epistolary style. It tells us the story of thirty years in the life of Celie, a poor Southern black woman who is victimized physically and emotionally by both her stepfather and her husband. While in her teens, Celie is repeatedly raped by her stepfather whom she calls Pa and thinks that is her father. Pa sells her two children who are born as a result of rape by him. After sometime Celie is forced to marry Albert,

a widower whom she addresses as Mr. -. Mr. - beats her and torments her psychologically. Celie writes letters describing her ordeal to God and to her sister Nettie, who escapes a similar fate by serving as a missionary in Africa. Celie eventually finds solace through her friendship and love for Shug Avery, Albert's mistress and a charismatic blues singer who gives her courage to leave her marriage. At the end of the novel Celie is reunited with her children and with Nettie.

Three words need proper understanding in order to grasp the ideas of the novel – Race, Class and Slavery. Race – At its broadest race refers to a family, a tribe, people or nation sharing a set of common of interests, beliefs, habits or characteristics. Henry Louis Gates says that to speak of different 'races' such as 'black' or 'Jewish' is to 'speak in biological misnomers and more generally, metaphors'. Despite this error, such usage persists in both everyday language and in literary texts. Hertson defines racism as a man-made trend, as "the learned behavior and emotions on the part of a group towards another group whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the former group; behavior and emotions that compel one group to ---- to treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone as if it did not belong to the human race".

The basic myth of racism is that white skin brings with it cultural superiority; that the white are more intelligent and virtuous than the black by the mere fact of being white. It also upholds the view that white people are just people whereas other colours are something else. Colour becomes a visible sign of apparent racial identity. Racial attitudes of this kind are crude articulation of ethnocentrism. Colours like black, white, yellow, red and brown are not just dark strokes that comprise works of art or help determine fashions of the season. They are shades that define race and identity and have, for ages, formed the foundation of loathing and hostility, maltreatment and prejudice, supremacy and suppression. The white people generally treat their darker brothers as savages. This oppression is Racism.

Racism started in America when white masters of the land brought Africans in their chains and used their labour to enrich their coffers. As a result, black people soon ceased to exist as human beings in the white world. The white master first reduced the human self of his black slave to the body and then the body to a thing. He dehumanized his slave.

Classism – It stands for the biased discrimination of people based on their material wealth. Usually people are divided into three groups – the rich, the middle class and the poor. The rich have been enjoying high privilege in the society whereas the poor are treated unfairly. These are four basic types of classism – 1) Individual classism, which denotes an individual's thoughts or behaviours that lead to bias based on social class. For example, a woman presumes that people from a particular neighbourhood are harmful and so does not allow her kids mingle with anyone from that area even though they go to school. This discrimination is biased generalisation towards a group of people called individual classism.

Institutional Classism – In some of the countries the laws and the practices that prevail within a community is known as institutional classism. For example, in the U.S. the concept is that the poor have little access to quality healthcare. Although they are in need of healthcare services healthcare organisations frequently do not open up in a poorer neighbourhood so they (the poor) are forced to use emergency rooms as their only means of getting healthcare.

Cultural Classism – It denotes negative attitudes and beliefs towards a social group promoted by the society. The Disney movie Aladdin is a perfect example of this kind.

Internalized Classism takes place when an individual living in poverty or as part of a lower social class internalizes beliefs about his/her social class. In return, this belief not only impacts his/her future but also affects his/her self-esteem.

Slavery – Slavery is a system in which the powerful people enslave the weak/powerless people and engage them in every kind of desired work. It can be traced back with the birth of civilization. Sumer Civilization had this system. Wars like Ottoman and Byzantine Ottoman took Christian slaves. The Dutch, French, Portuguese, Arabs—all established kingdoms encouraged this system. It has given birth to racism.

Modern slavery is the by-product of capitalism. Karl Marx's view is that capitalism and slavery are the adverse effect of Colonialism.

So far as African slavery is concerned, due to great demand of labourers to work in plantations, slave trade began. Africans were tortured physically and were compelled to work for eighteen hours a day. They worked in plantation. Basic rights were denied to them. Powerful laws were laid to control their activities. They were not permitted to carry weapons, marry without their master's permission and devoid of family system. They were not allowed to own property. Only cattle rearing and farming was allowed. They were given religious sermons because their masters wanted to work as Christian slaves. Their conversation had nothing to do with equality. They had neither political right nor right to vote.