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EXPLORING THE ELEMENTS OF LITERARY MODERNISM IN ALICE WALKER'S NOVEL THE COLOR PURPLE

Abstract

Alice Walker's The Colour Purple (1982) represents the journey of Celie's life from oppression to self-discovery. From 1982 to 2017, the novel has been studied several times from several different perspectives excluding modernism in the novel. Rather, the intensive reading of the text shows that the novel embodies some literary aspects/elements of modernism too. To fulfil this gap, this study provides a modernist reading of the novel. Keeping up with the theoretical principles of literary modernism together with text-based method of analysis, this study explores the element of fragmented narration and fragmented characterization in the novel. Herein, Walker takes a shift from conventionalism to modernity by converting the conventional epistolary technique to the stream of consciousness technique. Further, the use of ungrammatical dialectical language, a cycle of problems in Celie's life and the portrayal of immoral society are a few other elements of modernism under lying in the novel.

Keywords: *Alice Walker, The Colour Purple; Modernism.*

Introduction

The Black feminist and socialist, Alice Walker (1944-) is an Afro- American writer. In most of her writings, she speaks for the rights of Black women. *The Colour Purple (1982)* is one of the works in which she represents the evils of African culture. This story centres on the sufferings of naïve Celie, the protagonist, due to her patriarchal family systems. The text also discusses the themes of incest, subjugation of women, mysticism, lesbianism, and socio-cultural limitations etc. Here, Walker attempts to break the silence of the suppressed woman, Celie, and aims to bring her

emancipation from traditionalism.

Based on these themes, *The Color Purple* has studied from multiple perspectives including Black feminism (Harris, 1984; Tucker, 1988; Saunders, 1988; Darmawanti, 2012), eco feminism (Bhuvaneswari and Jacob, 2012), eco critical reading (Arikan, 2015), and African cultural model (Lei, 2017) etc. Moreover, some emerging scholars are further analysing this text in the light of motivational theoretical perspectives but the text yet rarely ever analysed on the grounds of its modern literary elements or characteristics. To fill up this research gap, the paper implements the theory of literary modernism on the novel. This theory is selected to provide a new learning of the novel to its readers. The paper answers the following question:

Which modernist literary characteristics are embodied in *The Color Purple*?

The following section reviews the theory of modernism which is further conferred in the section on data analysis. Finally, the paper discusses several modern literary elements underlying in the target text including experimental narration, time distortion, fragmented characters, and cycle of problems etc.

Review of Literature

Modernism is an umbrella term which covers various artistic and literary movements namely Dadaism, surrealism, expressionism, impressionism, symbolism, and imagism, etc. (Ousby, 1996). All these movements altogether make the theory (modernism) ambiguous. In literature, it is usually defined as a twentieth century movement which challenges the old literary trends. According to Levenson (2002), it is a “creative violence” which deviates from old established literary conventions (cited by Hooti and Omrani, 2011). Due to this characteristic, Cuddon (1979) states that modernism is an anti-traditional and anti-conventional movement. By claiming modernism as an anti-traditional movement, Cuddon (1979) clarifies that literary modernism is the theory of liberation: i.e., liberation from old customs, conventions, and trends of narration, and characterization etc.

Rahn (2011) further states that modernism is a revolt against nineteenth century literature. Nineteenth century literature’ was marked by naturalism and realism. These two dominant features

were considered the touchstone to measure validity of literature (Hooti and Ormani, 2011). All the writers (poets, dramatist, and novelist) of that period (i.e., 19th century) either fantasized reality (naturalism) or portrayed the life as it is (realism). On the contrary, modernists challenge these old literary cannons by focusing on new experiments.

Modernists prefer to portray inner reality rather than outer or surface reality. By this, there arises the concept of experimentalism in the theory of modernism. Moreover, Barth (2002) argues that modernists also hesitate to bring consistency and relevancy in their writings which were some other characteristics of nineteenth century literature. Instead of constructing linear plot, and portraying round characters, modernist writers celebrate fragmentation. This theme is further explored in the target novel.

However, concerning modernist fiction, Bradbury and McFarlane (1991) specify four major characteristics including complexity in form, representation of inner consciousness, and a clash between surface and inner reality. All these characteristics are evident in the works of Woolf (1925 & 1927), Joyce (1916), and other modernist writers etc. Their novels follow new techniques and style by which they create ambiguous literature.

Regarding the complexity in form, modernist novelists prefer stream of consciousness technique as the suitable narrative style for modernist fiction. In *Principle of Psychology* (1890), James coins the term “stream of consciousness” which refers to the representation of inner flow of thought. By using this technique, modern writers represent the innermost thoughts of characters without any interruption or interference of chronological sequence of events. Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) are the examples of modern narrative styles. These writers focus on the inner reality or the representation of inner mind of their characters rather than the representation of their outer reality (Barry, 2002).

With the stream of consciousness technique, modernist novelists also prefer first person point of view rather than third person point of view of narration. Third person narration was usually celebrated by the writers of nineteenth century. Further, modernist deals with the themes of fragmentation. Fragmentation is seen in narrative, characterization, and in the development of

themes etc. All these elements together with some more in-depth aspects and characteristics of modernist fiction are elaborated and explored below in the section of analysis.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study is based on text-based analysis which is done by close reading. Close reading is a systematic or thoughtful way of reading a text to understand its hidden messages (Brummett, 2010). During close reading, the investigator looks attentively into the textual words, phrases, sentences, tone, style, and point of view of the author (Lentriccia and Dubois, 2003; Mashori and Zaib, 2015) to unveil the underlying ideas. Following the theoretical framework of literary modernism, we followed certain steps to analyse this text.

First, to make the sense of the text we read the novel carefully. After several readings, we looked forward for coding the underlying textual elements. We focused on the style of narration, the tone of narrator, characterization, and some other literary techniques of the text. Then, corresponding to the theory of modernism we divided the target text into several segments. Finally, the analysed data is presented in the paper in the following section.

Discussion

Experimental Narration

Barry (2002) states that modern writer rejects the traditional narration style. They urge for experiments in old forms. This feature is evident in *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982) in which Walker breaks the traditional style of epistolary narration. In *Empire, Woman, and Narration* (2011), Berg cites Altman (1982) who says that twentieth century novelist (modern novelist) used the epistolary genre for various experiments. They used this technique to probe into the mind of a character. Further, Campbell (1995) and Salsini (2001) mention that twentieth century modern female novelist took epistolary style for their purposes. This argument clarifies the concept that modernists use epistolary technique for some new inventions in this form.

Berg (2011) highlights this experimental feature in *The Colour Purple* (Walker, 1982) which abandons the simple narration through letters. In consensus with Berg (2011), this study

adds that instead of selecting a single character for narrating his/her feelings in letters (as Richardson portrays the character of Pamela to write the letters in *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* published in 1740), Walker selects two different female characters (i.e., Celie and Nettie) to convey their feelings through letters. Further, Walker writes ninety letters that address to the three different characters (i.e., God, Celie, and Nettie). In almost eighty letters, Celie addresses to God. Then, she writes to Nettie and Nettie writes to Celie.

Writing to God is a personal matter. It is a unique idea by which Walker breaks the traditional style of epistolary technique (in which characters write letters to other human characters). This innovative technique can be called as a modernist element of the novel. Further, Ping (2009) argues that according to narratological perspective, *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982) belongs to a modern canon of great epistolary novels. Ping analyses the novel in the light of focalization theory of Gerard Genette and then claims the modernity of its narrative technique which is further proved by the following feature of the novel.

Stream of Consciousness Technique

Modern writers use stream of consciousness technique to represent the inner consciousness of characters. In *Epistolary novel: Representation of consciousness* (2003), Joe argues that epistolary novel somehow represents the consciousness of man. Further, Day (1966) states that epistolary novel is an advantageous form for modern writers to represent the inner mind. He argues:

The author may let his characters think on paper, he may try to show the actual notions of the mind, its veerings and incoherences, the shape which thoughts take before they are arranged for formal presentation: inchoate ideas, when the mind is tugged this way and the form is intended course by emotions and small happenings, or is wholly carried away on a new track in spite of itself. This method now removed from the less "realistic" convention of the letter is called interior monologue or stream of consciousness technique. (cited by Joe, 1966).

Following their arguments (Day, 1966; Joe, 2003), it is explored that Walker's use of epistolary form is indeed the use of

stream of consciousness technique by which she represents the mind of her characters. Herein, Celie's letters bring before the readers her inner thoughts and inner reality. She continuously writes to God as she talks aloud in her room. She collects her thoughts in an incoherent style which confounds past with present. For example, she says:

My mama dead. She dies screaming and cussing. She screams at me. She cusses at me. I'm big. I can't move fast enough. By time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By time I git tray ready the food be cold. By time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time. He don't say nothing (Walker, 1982)

These lines show that Celie is thinking on the paper. She is trying to represent the actual notion of her mind. Further, the repetition of the phrase "by time I git" represent the inner stream of Celie's mind without any former arrangement of words. Celie further writes:

She asks me about the first one. Whose it is? I say God's. I don't know no other man or what else to say. When I start to hurt and then my stomach start moving and then that little baby come out my pussy chewing on it first you could have knock me over with a feather. (Walker, 1982)

These lines mention that Celie is psychologically disturbed. There is a clash between her outer personality and inner personality. Her answer, "I say God's" to her mother about the question of the paternity of her first-born child shows that her mind is puzzled with thoughts due to which she seems to live under superstitions. Then, her narration turns towards the thoughts of the delivery of her second child as "when I start to hurt....little baby came out my pussy...." This representation of inner mind of Celie seems very close to stream of consciousness technique.

Tanklet (2009) states that Walker can never be explained Celie's thoughts in third person point of view. Walker's selected narration is unique and peculiar for explaining the inner feelings of Celie. Walker, here, gives preference to present the psychological reality of the world and characters instead of the direct representation of social realism.

Fragmented Time of Narration

Modernists break the conventional concept of chronology. They abandon the accurate representation of past and present events. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's broken English breaks the chronological representation of time. She uses present and past tenses abruptly. The technique makes the reader confuse about the distinction of past and present events. Celie's first letter starts as "Dear God,/ I'm fourteen years old" (Walker, 1982). The line demonstrates that the narrator is talking about the present condition. The narrator is of fourteen at the time of the narration. But as the story progresses the reader realizes that it was the past of Celie. Then she narrates the conversation of her mother and father as, "he was pulling on her arm. She say It too soon, Fonso, I ain't well.". The sentence that "he was pulling..." clarifies that Celie is talking about past happenings. But the other sentence that "she say it too soon" make the reader confuse that whether Celie is talking about past or about present. There is no clear demarcation of time.

Celie further writes,

He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got something in my eye but I didn't wink. I don't even look at men. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them. Maybe cause my mama cuss me you think I kept made at her. But I ain't. I felt sorry for mama. Trying to believe his story kilt her. (Walker, 1982)

Celie here writes about her beating by Pa due to her winking at the boy in church. His beating reminds her to write down the reason of her winking. She then writes that perhaps she winked at church due to some dust particle in her eyes. She did not wink at the boy. Then the thought to see man compels her to speak the truth that she never looks at men. She scares them. Then the turn of her narration towards her mama's cursing is questionable for the readers.

Celie's all the letters are narrated in fragmented way. There is distortion of time. The narrator jumps from present to past, past to present without any announcement for the reader. Here, she blurs past with present.

Improper Grammatical Language

Modernist writers often use dialectical language to break the rules of conventional writing style. This characteristic is evident in *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982). All the letters of Celie are written in an improper rather they are grammatically incorrect. Most of the critics interpret that Walker uses this language to bring reality (need reference) in her writing whereas the technique can be interpreted as a modernistic literary element.

The first letter of Celie starts with errors. The story opens with the letter of Celie to God, as:

Dear God,

I'm fourteen years old. I'm I have always been a good girl.
(Walker, 1982)

The removal of I'm and its grammatical correction shows that the author aims to write the novel in Standard English. Then, in the second para of the same page, she (Walker) ignores such mistakes. Celie writes about her mother as "She say Naw, I ain'tgonna" (Walker, 1982, p. 3). Here, the verb "say" shows another grammatical mistake. Then, the use of "Naw" and "gonna" makes the sentence informal. Further, the short form of verb "ain't" gives double meaning. At first, the writer uses "ain't" at the place of "am not". Secondly, the author, might, uses it as a Black English.

Celie further speaks incorrect sentence as "but I don't never git used to it" (Walker, 1982). Here, the word "git" for "get" is used as the dialectical language. This use of broken language is one of the modernist elements of the text. It is a way to break syntax in the novel to show destruction.

Language and Reality: Fragmented Characters

According to Lye (1997), modernists use non-transparent language which is complex, thick, and unreal. Language is a ground to see the reality. Here, in Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) the language of the text invites the readers to see the reality. Specially, through Celie's broken language the readers understand the development of her character. In her first letter to God she writes that "I am I have always been a good girl." Here, Celie removes "I am," the present simple phrase, and uses "I have been", the present perfect continuous phrase, to reflect her inner conflict. The reader realizes that though Celie writes that she has always been a good girl but she is not sure about her goodness. Her

removal of the phrase “I am” shows that in the present condition she is perhaps not good or she removes it for she is not a virgin now. Her tussle shows that she is defending herself through her language. She tactfully ignores the present indefinite phrase to claim herself a de-moral girl. Then, she claims that her Pa, Alphonso, destroys her chastity. By this, she clarifies that her “self” / her identity has damaged due to incest.

Celie, further, writes destructive as well as constructive language. She writes as “He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can” (Walker, 1982). In these lines, Celie first uses the word “Kilt” and then corrects it as “Kill”. The use of the words “Kilt” and “Kill” seem to the reader as Celie’s broken and constructed “self”. Here, the reader understands that Celie’s mind is flowing up and down where she is struggling to restore herself. She aims to attain some stability in her life. Through the language of the text, the reader sees the reality which is one of the characteristics of modernism.

Surface and Depth: Reality

Modern writers follow modern philosophies in their writings. In *Deconstruction of Reality*, Sanes (2004) states that modernism follow the philosophy of mysticism. Here, whatever appears is just an appearance. The real truth lies behind the surface. Modern world, its matters, life, society, and cultural creations etc. are not real. There seems something hidden behind the apparent reality. In *The Color Purple*, Walker follows this modern philosophy. To present the modern world with its modern philosophy, she first creates a surface world and then deconstructs it by revealing the underlying reality.

The protagonist of the novel, Celie innocently believes on the world of appearances. She considers that Alphonso is her real father. He compels Celie to commit incest. Alphonso says to her that “you gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t.” He, further, advises her to “... better shut up and git used to it.” Moreover, he warns her that “you better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy.” (Walker, 1982). Celie never considers about the depth of all these cruelties. She gives birth two of his illegitimate children. He (the Pa of Celie) takes both of the children just after their birth, one by one. She perceives that he has killed them. The letters of Nettie disclose the underlying reality of all these happenings. Samuel narrates a story to Nettie about Alphonso that

proves that he is the step father of Celie and Nettie. Then, Celie's suspicion that her children are dead, further proves wrong. Alphonso does not kill them while he sells out these children to Samuel. Moreover, the children are alive and they are named as Adam and Olivia.

These children look like Nettie. Samuel's wife, Corrine believes that Nettie is the real mother and Samuel is the real father of these children. Corrine asks Nettie that "why do my children (Olivia and Adam) look like you?" (Walker, 1982). Nettie simply replies that "maybe just living together, loving people makes them look like you". Corrine does not believe in Nettie's words. She further asks, "When did you first meet with my husband (Samuel)?" Nettie replies as "I met Samuel the same day I met you". Corrine dies having consideration that Nettie is the real mother of the children whereas the children are the children of Celie.

Nettie further says that "Samuel thought the children were mine too! That is why he urged me to come to Africa with them." (Walker, 1982). When she (Nettie) first visits Samuel's home for work so he considers that she is following her children. Here the apparent reality or belief of Samuel that Nettie is the mother of Adam and Alive proves wrong. The grounded or inner reality is something different. Nettie refuses to have any maternal relation with children.

Keeping this concept, Samuel asks her "if they are not yours... whose are they?" (Walker, 1982). Nettie asks him "where did you get them". Then, Samuel narrates the story of Alphonso. The story shows that Samuel took the children from Alphonso. His (Alphonso's) wife was not well enough to foster up the children. Therefore, he sold these two children to Samuel, one by one. Samuel adopted the children for Corrine because they were childless. Samuel thought that "God had answered his and Corrine's prayers". The story deconstructs the reality that Samuel thinks that the children are bought to her due to the illness of his wife. He was unaware about the fact that the children are illegitimate. Their real parents are not Alphonso and his lawful wife but Alphonso and Celie.

The ambiguity between surface and depth of reality is a modernist element which is present in the target novel.

Cycle of Problems

Cycle of problems is one of the thematic characteristic found in modern writings. This characteristic is also embodied in *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982). Here, Celie's life is the representation of modern life where dreams get break. She continuously falls in difficulties. First, she experiences an abusive childhood. Then, two times becomes the victim of the lusty desire of her Stepfather, Alphonso (Pa). Her Pa does not merely destroy her virginity but also damages her health. He makes her a psycho patient and keeps her children away from her. She lives a destructed life at her home and becomes the centre of cursing of her mother as she (Celie) speaks about her mother that "She (mammy) die screaming and cussing" (Walker, 1983) and asking, "Who it is" and "where it is? In fear of her father's anger, she could never share her grieves with her mammy.

After the cruelties of her father, she becomes the slave of her husband, Mr. _____. Her dream to live a happy marital life disperses into shadows. Mr.----- comes to Alphonso in hope to marry Nettie, the sister of Celie, but Alphonso offers him Celie. He says: "...I can let you have Celie... She ain't fresh tho... She spoiled. Twice. But you dn't need a fresh woman." (Walker, 1982). Here, Fonso clarifies that he is offering Celie, the spoiled daughter, for Mr. _____ is himself a widow. Then he further says that "fact is... I got to rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. And she a bad influence on my other girls". These remarks show the arrogance of Alphonso for Celie.

Mr. Albert does not like Celie but marries her to take care of his children and his home. Celie lives a miserable life with him. Her heaven (her home) becomes hell for her. At the first day of her marriage the son of Mr. _____ breaks the head of Celie by throwing a big stone. Moreover, Mr. _____ beats her daily.

Therefore, Celie leaves her husband's home and decides to live with Shug. She believes that it is her good decision but soon she disappoints when she finds that Shug is interested in someone else. This dream of happy life soon encounters with disillusionment. Her thought, that an independent individual will triumph, proves wrong.

Moral Degradation

Modern literature celebrates the theme of downfall of culture, civilization where traditional values, society, and social being seem

hollow (Lye, 1997). In *The Color Purple* (1982) Walker represents Afro-America as a waste land. Its inhabitants are represented as images, without life. Waste-landers are morally degrading. Incest is the common evil of the novel. Celie gives birth to two illegitimate babies. Alphonso is shown in the story as a modern man with the only desire of physical pleasure. When her wife refuses to provide him sexual pleasures, he turns towards her step-daughter, Celie. Then he wishes to destroy her another little daughter Nettie. Finally, he marries to a young girl, young enough as his daughter, just for lust. Celie speaks about her new young mother as “she be of my age... he be on her all the time. She walk round like she don’t know what hit her. I think she thought she love him. But he got so many of us” (Walker, 1982). This is an example of degradation of society where morality of people has destroyed.

Moreover, Mr _____ marries Celie without love but to fulfil his desires. Soon after this marriage, he announces to marry Shug Avery. Shug Avery already has three illegitimate children. Furthermore, Wardboy who is shown as the step uncle of Squack rapes her (Squack). The society, that Walker portrays here, has morally died as it has become a wasteland. There is an excess of sex and modernity.

Shug is a well-known singer who sings in clubs in the crowds of men and women. Mr. Albert, Harpo, Shug, and Squeak etc., all of them attend these superficial parties. Shug and Celie become modern in their conversation about sexuality. These are a few examples of modern broken world.

Conclusion

Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* has been an interesting novel for worldly scholars since its publication in 1982. The scholars have analysed it from multiple perspectives yet rarely did they ever discuss it against modernism. To fill this gap and to provide the readers a new learning of this novel, this study explores several thematic and philosophical modern literary elements underlying in the novel. At first, the paper finds that Walker challenges the conventionalism of epistolary narration to shift her narration from letter writings to the technique of stream of consciousness. With the letters of Celie to God, the superhuman being, Walker gives a unique style to her novel. This technique

helps Celie to represent her innermost thoughts without any chronological order.

Further, the use of broken or dialectical language of the characters breaks the boundaries of time. Celie's words sway to-and-fro between her past and present which break the chronological timeline of her narration. This technique appears as a characteristic of modernist fiction in which novelists do not develop linear or chronological plot. Rather they focus on the mind of the character to represent the reality. Celie's broken language also represents her broken or disturbed personality.

This target novel also follows modern philosophy as whatever appears at the surface is just an illusion. Like modernist, Walker first creates an outer surface to present the outer reality of her characters, their life, and their social affairs, etc. Then, she deconstructs this outer surface by presenting the inner reality of the characters and their relation. Moreover, there is a cycle of problems in the lives of the characters. It is Celie who first falls in this cycle and loses her 'self and identity'. Walker also celebrates the theme of moral degradation where people are shown the waste landers _____ who have nothing in their minds except lust. Finally, this paper proves that the target novel possesses several modernist characteristics.

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