

Analysis on the Awakening of Black Women in *The Color Purple*

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Abstract—The *Color Purple* is a significant movie because it reflects both the social and historical problems of that time profoundly. Specifically, through telling the gradually awakening of a African American girl — Celie Harris who is originally a victim of racial and gender discrimination, but at last achieves a wonderful “purple” life of success and makes achievement with other people’s help such as her younger sister Nettie and her friend Shug Avery, the movie aims to inspire other black women to gain the consciousness and manipulation over their own lives and achieve independence.

Keywords—discrimination; womanism; sorority; symbolic meaning of “purple”

I. INTRODUCTION

This movie is adapted from the well-known novel of the same title written by Alice Walker whose works mainly focus on different aspects of African American women’s life, especially their awakening of their own individuality. This film generally takes place in the Southern United States during the early-to-mid 1900s, this movie tells the life of a poor African American girl — Celie Harris who is originally a victim of racial and gender discrimination, but at last achieves a wonderful “purple” life of success and achievement with other people’s help such as her younger sister Nettie and her friend Shug Avery. From this movie we can get much more instructive and stimulating information.

II. DISCRIMINATION OUTSIDE AND INSIDE

This movie is adapted by Steven Spielberg in 1985, 120 years after the end of American Civil War which commonly represents the elimination of slavery in America. From then on, the African Americans are supposed to “officially enjoy” freedom but the truth is that they are still discriminated by the white and experienced lack of confidence about themselves and unequal treatment from government. Here, we take Sofia’s experience as an example.

Apparently, Sofia is one of the strong personalities in the story. One day, she runs into the mayor and his wife — Miss Millie, who considers herself as being very liberal, tolerant and humanitarian. So when Miss Millie finds Sofia’s children very “clean”, her first reflection is to “warmly” ask Sofia to work for her. She asks Sofia to be her maid because she naturally thinks she is superior to the black. Sofia feels

shocked and seriously refuses her requirement in a loud voice. The white mayor, offended by this, slaps her. Sofia hits back but cursed by a mob of whites. She feels so helpless at that moment and asks help from a white policeman. However, the purpose of the white policeman is only to beat her down and sent her to jail for 8 years, which almost breaks her spirit. Moreover, later the white mayor’s wife “kindly saves” Sofia from prison and forces her to be a maid. One day, the mayor’s wife is very delighted because she thinks she masters the skills of driving. Therefore she decides to drive herself back home after dropping Sofia off for her first holiday visit with her family in years. The mayor’s wife does a “great favor” to Sofia to “stay home all day” during Christmas Day. However, the fact is that she overestimates her talent in driving the car. Due to her losing control of the car, Sofia’s family members, most of whom are black men, warmly and heartfelt try hard to help her to avoid crashing into the house and hurting herself. Nevertheless, with the ineradicable discrimination against the black, while facing the help of the black men, the mayor’s wife is overwhelmed with panic and her instinct is to shout assuming that the black men are trying to “attack” her and also refuses to allow any black man, even Sofia’s family members, to drive her home alone. She insists that Sofia should be the one to accompany her home which means Sofia doesn’t have the time to stay with her family at all.

In spite of the white woman’s best efforts to be open-minded and progressive, actually she is still a hypocrite. This scene ironically mirrors the white people’s hypocrisy and their deep-rooted discrimination against the black people. It is just like many current white people’ thinking that they would like to admit the liberation of the black but will never prefer to live or work with them.

Besides, the black women tolerate far more because as African American women, they not only had to bear the humiliation from outside, such as the story about Sofia mentioned above, but also to endure insult inside, that is, from their own race and their so-called husbands. Here we take the heroine Celie Harris as an example. Her miserable life begins when she is young. By the time she is fourteen, she has already had two children by her father (later discovered to be her stepfather), who takes them away from her at childbirth and forces Celie to marry a local widower,

named Albert Johnson, whom she calls “Mister”. Albert treats Celie like a slave, making her clean up his disorderly household and take care of his unruly children. Albert beats her often, intimidating her into silence and submission. Nettie comes to live with them, and there is a brief period of happiness as the sisters spend time together and Nettie begins to teach Celie how to read. However, after Nettie refuses Albert’s predatory affections once too often, she is forced to leave which means Celie has to separate with her only relative and the only person who loves her in the world.

This movie violently attacks and satirizes this kind of social reality of unequal treatment and discrimination. At that moment, the whole society controlled by the white whose ruthlessness, ignorance and selfish make black people lack of the feeling of security. As a result, the black men’s hearts might be twisted so that they tended to manipulate male chauvinism in their families. Therefore, the black women’s situation is even more desperate and critical owing to the interrelated race and gender problems. To sum up, it is very difficult for them to gain the real freedom and real equality.

III. WOMANISM

Where there is oppression, there is resistance. Celie begins to fight back when she gains her self-consciousness. Through the description of the heroine’s insistence and perseverance in fighting her freedom and equality against white racial culture as well as patriarchal black culture, the film conveys a principle to women, especially to black women that if one woman is eager to be independent, she must be self-reliant, self-confident and self-respect. Alice Walker once named this principle as “womanism”. Womanism is not the same as feminism because the former mainly advocates women to love other women and be able to appreciate female’s culture. Moreover, it encourages the harmony and equality between women and men and not radically just to urge women to overthrow or subvert the patriarchy.

According to this movie, the real liberation and equality must be established on the basis of harmonious coexistence and respect. The idea of “womanism” is particularly reflected in the ending of the film: Celie Harris regains her independence and rights through her friends’ help. At the same time her success and independence forces her ex-husband to examine himself and respect Celie again. So he helps Celie’s sister, Nettie, come back to the United States and watches their reunion from a distance, noticed only by Shug. Therefore everything ends happily and harmoniously with the awakening of self-reliant, self-confident and self-respect in the black women’s hearts.

IV. SORORITY

Another dominant theme of this movie is the power of women uniting together. Undoubtedly, Celie’s success cannot achieve without the influence of her female friend Sophia, Shug and Nettie. Celie and Sofia have a friendly relationship with each other because Celie was Sofia’s stepmother in law, and they mutually support each other

because the men in their life treat them harshly and acidulously. Sofia teaches the heroine to fight back against men’s unequal treatment.

The relationship between Shug and Celie is more complicated. Shug directs Celie to realize her beauty and how to struggle against inequality. She tells Celie to regain man’s respect through self-respect, self-consciousness and self-independence. For the first time she makes Celie experience love and sharing and appreciation in any way related to her sexual life. Besides, Shug points out to Celie that people have to enjoy life. For example, in the movie, when they are in a field full of purple flowers, Shug asks Celie to observe the flowers and appreciate and enjoy their beauty like everybody else.

Celie and Nettie provide the sisterly relationship in the film. Nettie is Celie’s hope and faith for life. According to Celie’s word, “she is the only somebody who loves her in the world.” They constantly encourage each other throughout the film to stay true to God, and they believe that they will meet again one day. After reading Nettie’s letters, the heroine gain the courage to get rid of the fetters forged by her “husband”. Therefore we can say it is Nettie’s letters that give her the final encouragement to live her own life.

V. THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF PURPLE

In this movie, the color of purple penetrates the whole film. Traditionally, in people’s mind, the color of “purple” usually refers to materials or articles used by men. “Purple” means royalty, wealth, mystery and nobility. From the Gospel of Luke, we know that only the rich people could wear clothes in the color of purple. But purple here is described to express the anti-traditional desire of the heroine. For example, at first, the heroine dares not to dream to wear clothes in that color and also shocked by other women who dress purple. As time goes by, finally she realizes her power, ability and individuality, so she begins to take “purple” not as seriously as before and even paints her house with purple. Here, purple represents the characteristics changing of the heroine, Celie, who turns from a “slave” to be an independent individual.

In addition, the entire heroine’s happiest time has something to do with the color purple. Firstly at the very beginning of the movie, she and her sister Nettie play happily together. Then in the middle, Celie finds her peace with god. Lastly, the heroine has the reunion with her sister and her own son and daughter. Without exception, all these scenes happen in the background of color purple. Therefore, purple has another symbolic meaning — happiness, in this film.

VI. CONCLUSION

All in all, this movie is a great success. It shows us the unforgettable contrast between the oppressor and sufferer, the strong will of the devastated character to overcome the abuse and exploitation, and the deified positive outcome. The analysis shows that the purpose of *The Color Purple* is to call for the return of the legacy, language and speech

freedom of the black women, and to cry for those women who are absorbed in their own world and have the same suffering as in the film. The conclusion is to inspire modern women to gain the consciousness and manipulation over their own lives and achieve independence gradually.

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