

## **A Comparative Study of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting* with Bildungsroman Theory**

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### **Abstract**

Anita Desai and Alice Walker are extensively acclaimed novelists to emerge in the literary horizon of twentieth century. These two writers have the common trait in their novels, though they hail from different continents. All the protagonists grow psychologically in the novels and in their lives. In the beginning, the women characters are innocent, psychologically weak and immature. Though they hail from different geographical regions an Indian, and an African American, they are interested in women and have focused on major female characters in their novels. In a broad sense, gender inequality is a complex issue. The question of how women and men and in between genders are constructed is a matter of much dispute. In the present paper, it is an attempt made to study the gender and women issues as focus on the gender bias which has become a part of our life.

Anita Desai is often considered to be the representative Indian Woman Novelist in English, who has made a considerable patriarchal society. Alice Walker, the most notable female writer in the world of African American literature today discuss different issues like racism, sexism, classism and child abuse etc. She delineates the humiliation, exploitation and marginalization of the blacks in general and black women in particular.

The present paper investigates into the theme of sexual overtones and gender inequality in Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Later on, we could note the growth in these characters when the novel progresses by undergoing many sufferings in their life. Environment, situations, problems and oppression all these elements make them strong psychologically which are related to the theory of Bildungsroman. The main characteristic of bildungsroman is to shape the person intellectually, spiritually through the experiences of the world.

I propose to make a comparative study here on two women writers of feministic views who focus on class, gender, sex, alienation and women psyche. When we try to find out origin of gender inequality and women's oppression, we must understand that gender and sex are two different concepts. However, when we go through various data available about gender equality

and discrimination, we will find that women are far behind than men in various fields of life. On the other hand, women are exploited, degraded, violated and discriminated in their homes and outside world. This type of discrimination is easily seen in Indian and African American society.

**Keywords:** Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, Anita Desai, *Fasting Feasting*, Bildungsroman Theory, Gender Inequality, Discrimination, Patriarchal Society, Sexual Overtones, Women Oppression.

## Introduction

The theory of Bildungsroman represents women protagonists in their novels. The Bildungsroman is identified in the works of two women novelists of two continents. This theory builds up a character from adolescence to a sensible matured being. Self enduring, self-sacrificing women change themselves into a matured personality based on the situations and complications of their sufferings. The main characteristic of bildungsroman is to shape the person intellectually, spiritually through the experiences of the world.

The Harlem Renaissance denoted a defining point for African American literature. Before this time, books by African Americans were essentially pursued by other Black people. With the Renaissance, though, African American literature as well as black fine art and a performance art began to absorb into mainstream American culture. Major Harlemites of the period are Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Rasheed Clark, Ishmael Reed, Jamaica Kincaid, John Edgar Wideman, David Antony Durham, Tayari Jones, Mat Johnson and Colson Whitehead. Theoretically African literature comprehends the interconnectedness of race, class, sex, oppression. Subsequently it understands that there are White men and women, and definitely Black people who try to topple structures of their societies.

## Alice Walker As A Feministic Writer

Alice Malsenior Walker, African American writer, poet, feminist, and activist born on 9 February 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia. It was a tradition in those years that black people are not supposed to get their education, they are supposed to work in farms with their parents. Growing up with an old tradition, listening to stories to her grandfather is a major inspiration for Alice to start writing at the age of eight.

Stephanie Fitzgerald in her book *Alice Walker: Author and Social Activist* portrays about the life of Alice Walker in her young age,

From the time she was young, Alice knew that the world was a different place for a black child in the South than it was for a white child anywhere. All she had to do was look around her. White people lived in the nicest houses. Black people lived in shacks, and they did not even own those. (Fitzgerald, 22)

In all her works, Alice Walker has expressed with graceful and devastating clarity, the point of liberty Black Women have in her community. Alice Walker celebrates the survival of Black people. All her works confronts the pain and struggle of Black people's history. She has found that creativity of Black Women is a measure of the health of the entire society. Alice Walker's main concept is sharpened by her use of the history of Black people in America especially in the south where they were most brutally enslaved and marginalized.

In a book *Alice Walker* by Maria Lauret explains that "In the bracketed reference to 'girliness' Walker appeals to a notion prevalent in black feminism of the 1970s that white women's sense of their own oppression was like to cry of a spoiled child" (Lauret, 19). This sets the epithets for the womanist women which invokes the black femininity with the white femininity.

*The Color Purple*, Alice Walker's masterpiece work published in 1982 is taken for the study of Bildungsroman. During the first half of the twentieth century, the novel shows the struggle of Black women in Georgia. It starts with an African American girl of fourteen years, protagonist, Celie a timid girl writes a letter to God expressing her agony that she suffers by her stepfather Alphonso. Later that had become a habit to Celie to write letters to God often to express her sufferings and an unspoken pain. Alice Walker states clearly about the diffident nature of an uneducated girl Celie's foolishness in the beginning of the novel. Celie, the protagonist had faith in God that her letters reaches to God and thinks that her difficulties of life every day to day would be solved. She deliberates innocently to look for help from the God and need to survive in the world by overcoming her spiritual, emotional and physical abuses by her father. Instead of telling it to other people, Celie shares her sufferings to God shows her immature nature when the novel opens. Celie is helpless when her just born babies are taken away by her stepfather Alphonso. She does not even know where her children are growing, and her ignorance makes to write letters about all her struggles to God and talks to Him by imagining as though the other person is sitting beside her. Though Celie faces many emotional and physical abuses by her stepfather, she fails to fight against him boldly when she is exploited and subjected to rape even. The awareness of handling the situations are unimaginable to Celie in the beginning of the novel, when is young and timid.

Her father Alphonso stops her from telling anybody except to God about her abuses. The moment she becomes pregnant she writes a letter to God "I'm big. I can't move fast enough. By time I git back from the well, the water been warm. By time I git the tray ready the food be cold. By time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time" (Walker, 3). Whereas, motherhood becomes burden to Celie when she is not allowed to love her own kids as they are taken away from her by her stepfather and a man named Albert who is a widower with four children marries Celie out of a compulsion by her father. Celie refers to him initially, as Mr. but he too exploits her and treats her with contempt and brutality. Slowly the evolution of maturity develops in Celie's thoughts which comes from her experiences and the struggles that she has faced by many cruel men in her family and in the surroundings where she lives. She realizes the vainness of her attempts to communicate with an abstract God. Slowly she

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A Comparative Study of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting* with Bildungsroman Theory 214

begins to communicate with her sister. She writes letters to Nettie “I don’t write to God no more I write to you” (199). Under Shug A Very’s influence, Celie leaves her husband Albert who victimizes her. Albert is shocked to the words spoken by Celie. “It’s time to leave you and enter into the creation” (Walker, 207).

Celie learns from Shug A Very to be bold, courageous and reclines herself slowly to transform herself from a wounded, beaten woman to a strong independent loving individual. Through tough experiences many lessons were learnt by Celie. At the end of the novel, Celie gains the strength of the human spirit and turns to fight for Shug A Very on her behalf. She develops an ability to design and make pants for both genders and becomes a business lady.

Dr. Prasanta Kumar Padhi, International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention says:

Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* is a novel that wonderfully portrays the gradual forming of a new black woman, Celie, who evolves from patriarchal oppression to an independent self-awaken. She a black poor, uneducated African American girl able to change her life gives the symbol of hope and courage to the suffering women of same kind impresses the readers with her strength, faith and courage.

Alice walker is deeply by the evils done to the Black Americans, and her bitter experiences and feelings are revealed in her writings. The harsh environment of her vision is visualised from her first novel. She is certainly affected by the pervasiveness of the violent racist system of the south and an impact has on Black families. There were many Africa American writers who already written lots of works on the relationship between sexism and racism. Those writers were insulted, ignored and maligned. Walker knows that she too would face the same situation. Those writers expressed their views contrary to the accepted American world view. And they were criticized. And so Walker was also criticized and ignored by her own community.

Walker’s non-stop inscribe is chiefly about their degeneration and regeneration. She identifies herself with the oppressed Black women. This provides her more pleasure that she is sharing in their peculiar oppression. Walker deals with the external realities of poverty and exploitation suffered by Black Americans and Black Women. In 1982, Walker published her novel *The Color Purple* which showcased her as a best-known novelist. Walker’s concern for the African American family is evident in *The Color Purple* where she examines the meaning of relationships. She exposes the evil practices perpetrated by men in the man-woman equation and makes a strong case for the fumigation of all forms of hypocrisy in familial relationships. Through Celie, she examines the magnitude of the psychological trauma as a fall out of relationship that are founded on brutal and merciless exploitation. It is compelling to see how patterns of womanist relationship that provides the long-awaited release from all forms of

bondage. The novel is about a young black woman sufferer fighting her way through not only racist white culture but also patriarchal black culture; it was a resounding commercial success. The book become a big hit and was made into a movie. The contact that Alice Walker establishes with Africa.

Maryemma Graham's in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* discusses about the narratives styles "When African Americans made the move from the writings of narratives to the writings of the novels, they are stepping across the void on matter how close the last narratives to the first novels" (Graham, 18). African American writers are extremely recreate and restructure in their writings. Likewise in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* the writing is unique and portrays from an emerging of identity struggle.

*The Color Purple* is widened into a conceptual space to accommodate more complex characters, an almost complete span and sense of time, a wrestle with the constituting elements of History, and separation of civilizations with tabulations on how the White man become distinct from the Black man causing in the bargains, the emergence of separate consciousness.

### **Major Role of Alice Walker in Her Work *The Color Purple***

Alice Walker slowly develops the persona of Celie in this novel. As the time passes on, Celie realizes the real meaning of life and proves herself that she can stand independently in the society. Celie's journey from a dumb, illiterate, ignorant ugly black girl turned into the awakened and self-conscious woman. Walker has structured the novel *The Color Purple* in such a way that it remains a guiding star to Black women who have been entangled in various degrees of obscurity. Alice Walker with excessive struggle, appeals them out of conceivable obliteration and rinses them. She clothes them with a new fabric, called self-esteem and self-sufficiency by eradicating the old and dirty one. Walker is very particular, and she never permits her women to go empty-handed, losing everything. Sofia has inherent fighting spirit that she fights within the home as well as outside. Though she is punished severely with a twelve-year imprisonment or while being reduced to enslavement in Millie's, White woman home, after twelve years she is reunited with her family and survives as a victorious being. Nettie, Celie's sister, also possesses the quality of fighting to the end. Albert, Celie's husband, has a desire for Nettie who is very pretty and cleverer than Celie. He asks her stepfather's permission to marry her, but he refuses.

Walker restructures her female protagonist begins after a long suffering. One may marvel at Walker's transforming the disloyalty into richness at the extraordinary end of their life when they achieve old age and they nearly become an exhausted being losing their vitality in the long run of endurance. Walker wants to prove that age is not the matter of fact for Black women to fight on their battle. She is of the firm belief that experiences alone can guide her people to just direction, not the age. So, she lets her women to gain experiences centring them in difficult environments and wants them to come out as perfect beings. Survival to the maximum for Black women is the main objective of Walker and all other aspects seem

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secondary to her. She with utmost effort struggle to liberate her women from the dark cell where they are locked so as not to see the reality. Walker magnanimously, gives them many options with the sole intention of bringing them out from the dormant we band she initiates a new bond lesbianism that she hopes will release the Black women from the violent sexuality of Black men.

Critics have raised numerous objections regarding to her strong indignation over heterosexual bond that pleasures Black men however torments Black women. Black women's vulnerability in sex is highly oppressed by men and they are exposed to torment during every moment in sexual intercourse. The agony inflicted on them in sex compels them to be indignant on heterosexuality. It does not mean that Walker supports homosexuality but she, in order to save Black women from the pain caused by heterosexual bond, opens a new avenue for Black women with the prime aim of releasing them from humiliation, finding no other option.

Finally, Walker successfully turns the Celie as a respectable woman. The isolated Celie is surrounded by a group of women who assist her to raise her position. The full empowerment of Celie arrives in full force when Nettie returns her and she has Shug by her side. Her children Adam and Olivia return to her. Celie is now with a large group of people whom she loves. For her, this is the greatest moment of her life and then she remarks that she feels younger than she has ever felt before. Finally having a family return and to be loved by other people are equivalent to starting a new life for Celie. Thus, the ending is really the beginning of Celie. She excitedly manifests her present delightful moments. "But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think the youngest us ever felt" (Walker, 244). Walker transforms Celie as a complete woman providing her a contented life. Celie was erased by men, but through own realization she reaches the highest degree of glory fighting back her oppressors and she manages to survive an amazing woman.

Anita Desai is renowned as the Indian author writing in English who mainly addresses about the condition of women in India and focused seriously on the feminist themes. Unlike Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandeya, an example of few Indian writers who respond primarily to the external social and political circumstances of their female characters, Desai focuses on the survey of the psychological condition of the oppressed women who, at first, are entirely passive. In *Fasting, Feasting* (2000), Desai's main concern is about the condition of women in India and is related to women in general. She relates the culture based oppression of women in contemporary Indian society to psychological suffering of women in American society and concludes that women are being considered as domesticated secondary beings with little scope to open up themselves in society as well as in family, based on the portrayal of the characters Uma, Melanie and her mother, Mrs, Patton resulting in ideology condition signifying how patriarchy is all encompassing irrespective of culture or place.

In a book *A Critical Study of the Novels of Anita Desai*, N. Raj Gopal explains about the women characters in Anita Desai's works as, "Anita Desai is no exception insofar as she

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A Comparative Study of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting* with Bildungsroman Theory 217

has written by and large about women characters and no wonder if most of her novels move around women characters in her novels.” (Gopal, 18) In Anita Desai’s works the women characters are pre-occupied with the theme incompatible martial couples across different kinds of characters.

Uma is the central character of the novel which similarly features of bildungsroman. Uma, the protagonist of the novel is exposed as school going child who always has a desire towards education, and she makes herself busy in doing homework, drawing and doing all the household work in the beginning of the novel. Suddenly, Uma is forced to leave the school education and look after her newborn younger brother Arun. Intentionally, Uma is enforced to give up her convent education by finding fault with the silly reason that she has failed to get good marks and stops her from going to school. Even though, Uma goes to the convent to request her convent sisters that she would continue her studies which becomes a wild goose chase. When she grows up, she is forced to marry to an elderly person who has already a wife and a child by her parents Mama Papa. “Uma’s unmarried state was not only an embarrassment but an obstruction” (Desai, 87).

In a book *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Critical Study* edited by Manmohan Krishna Bhatnagar, Mittapalli Rajeshwar discusses about the husband and wife relationship in Anita Desai’s works as, “One of the aims of Anita Desai in her novels is to display how this characteristic spirit of the age has loosened the bond of husband-wife relationship.” (Ed. Bhatnagar, Rajeshwar 33). Anita Desai’s novel portrays about the identity crisis as a result of husband and wife polarity as a predominant theme in her novels.

### **Comparative Study with the Theory and the Novel**

One of the characteristics bildungsroman is that the Protagonist undergoes a lot of suffering for some period of time. The Protagonist, Uma suffers a lot who is married and divorced within a short period of time. Against her parents will she neither questions nor raises her voice. She fears to reject in some extreme situations. At the point when Uma is divorced, her parents feel like an affront for them which gives an extension to their neighbour’s who gossips about the unsuccessful marriage instead of her happiness. “Uma was considered ill-fated by all and no more attempts were made to marry her off” (Desai, 98). Like this Uma faces many struggles in her life one after the other. Uma’s parents show little concern on her and leaves her life towards her fate without the second thought of her future.

Uma starts her routine life in her parents’ house i.e., look after them, arranging each and everything. Without raising her voice, Uma does all the demanded household works all the time. She even trembles with her mother’s fear for a simple thing which she expresses very clearly when her sister Aruna, asks her to cut her hair instead of making a pigtail or plait. Then Uma immediately responds that “Mama will kill me” (Desai, 107).

Uma's parents discard Uma to attend the coffee party invited by Mrs. O Henry. Uma wants to attend the party, when her parents oppose it Uma raises her voice against her parents. To her Mama Papa for the first time she shows her anger to attend the party and too to enjoy the party. Uma's life starts after this situation when she questions her parents especially when they want to stop her from going to the Mrs. O'Henry's party, this states the clear transition period in Uma's behaviour. "She is giving a party, a coffee party, not a tea party and she has invited some ladies, and me." Why? What is wrong? (Desai, 115). Uma even replies her Papa when he instructs her to sit at home and do the work. Uma then replies, "I do my work all the time, every day" Why can't I go out sometimes? (Desai, 117).

Nevertheless, Uma joins the party and is exposed to all other women for the first time in her life. When Mrs. O. Henry talks about her entire experiences related to Christmas cards, fair and about the people all over the places, Uma listens passionately towards her speech and then enquires Mrs. O. Henry innocently whether she has made all the Christmas cards by herself. This thought of exposing to herself in the new environment is not seen in the beginning of her behaviour. One of the characteristics of bildungsroman is getting change in the characters through sufferings. Later on, Uma meets Mr. Joshi for the very first time and requested him to accept her for better projections in her career and wants to be independent in her life for the first time. "A career, leaving home, Living alone" (Desai, 34).

### **Cultural Analysis of Female Condition**

When we analyse the novel from Indian cultural point of view, the essence and significance of both Uma's and Arun's pilgrimage(s) and also, we have to complete first the list of elements of which the landscape of their respective journey is composed. Uma's pilgrimage begins shortly after the birth of her brother Arun when she is in her early teens. Her brother is more important to Uma's parents because he is a boy, at her house a 'son' is heard everywhere in the house; when they pronounce it, it can be a confusion with the sound of 'sun.' The atmosphere of the household is changing, Mama is proud to have fulfilled her life role by giving birth to a son, Papa is proud to have been able to produce, finally, a male offspring and lets Mama into the realm of patriarchal structures, although only as an instrument. Mama Papa do not allow Uma, who has previously been sent to a Catholic convent school, to continue her education and she, although not a good student, is an eager one and opposes fervently her parents' decision. Now that there is a son in the family, to waste money and education as such on girls which will be necessary to spend on the boy. Subsequently, Uma feels she needs to get away but she does not know yet exactly what for. It is the mystery chambers of the inward world what Uma treasures, for the external world is horrid and dark.

Uma is continuously brought into the inner world of Hindu legends and tales by Miramasi, an enthusiastic worshipper of Shiva. Miramasi's stories show the dual character of the woman's fate. One of the heroines is a victim, dies after having been abandoned by her husband; the other is a poetess, independent, struggling for recognition; in the meantime, she is considered a madwoman (allusion to Mira Bai, a legendary sixteenth-century's poetess and

a Krishna's devotee known for her rebellious attitudes). With Miramasi, Uma feels that she is "admitted into some sanctuary that had been previously closed to her" (Desai, 42). But there is then some progress for Uma; she realizes that it is necessary to search for a different reality than that defined by her parents, yet she does not know where to turn. In the company of Miramasi she has a feeling that at least she receives a certain attention and recognition as a person. The inner world of contemplation of existence is open to her. The inner structures of her culture are revealed to her so that she can better understand how they work. Further on, in another escapist action she undertakes with Miramasi when they go to an ashramas pilgrims, she is free enough to think. While Miramasi carries on her worship duties, Uma wanders around, feeling she is caught between two forces pulling in different directions, the power of patriarchal education and tradition, and the urge to get free of it. There is a river but is not easy to approach during the day because the sand is burning from the sun. But towards the evenings Uma can walk along the river and she becomes sure that she cannot turn to Miramasi any more for guidance. Uma stays unmarried but this does not mean that she is spared efforts to be married off, according to the custom of arranged marriages. She has to go a long and painful journey through this suntrap of the valley of marriage arrangements.

To look at it more closely it will be useful first to follow how Desai compares Uma with the other two of her girl relatives. If Uma's sister Aruna is dismissed out of the sphere of patriarchal influence soon after the birth of Arun as "having started a lifetime of bridling, of determined self-assertion" (Desai 17), then everything in her life including her marriage she carries on with "a kind of steely determination, a dogged ambitiousness, that seemed to be born of a desperation" (Desai 67). Maria Mies in her book *Indian Women and Patriarchy: Conflicts and Dilemmas of Students and Working Women* discusses about the role of a men and women after marriage,

Hindu marriage is a sacrament -- for the husband one among many, but for the wife the only one through which she can acquire spiritual gains. ... If a grownup woman dies without this sacrament she roams about after her death as an evil spirit (Mies, 50).

### **Sense of Ignorance in Families about Women**

Uma's thoughts are to be ambitious of being independent, a successful job and identity. Desai defines Uma's character of being avoided by people around her, a helpless divorcee, she was rejected twice by perspective grooms for her incorrigible provincial outlook, organizes all the household work effectively given to her by Mama Papa without hesitation has changed her thought to grow independently. Struggles dexterities Uma to think herself of being liberated and identified in the society. Through the portrait of Uma, Desai wants to give a new perspective to women gender which has formed the core conception in women studies. With the example of Uma, Desai reveals the pathetic conditions of women's lives during and after independence in India.

## Conclusion

Thus, the two women novelists endow their women characters with an intension to help them by giving the power of knowledge. With this power, they would cross the roads of empowerment and make themselves free from the outranked conditions. The prophetic vision of women writers is to empower the powerless women by making them psychologically strong to overcome all the segregations in the society especially which are based on social and political issues.

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