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TRANSFORMATION OF CELIE FROM AN OLD NEGRO TO A NEW NEGRO WOMAN: A CRITICAL STUDY OF ALICE WALKER'S "THE COLOR PURPLE" FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE NEW NEGRO MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the New Negro can be defined as the rise of a new self-confidence and active refusal within the black community following the First World War to abide by the stereotypes they had been locked within by the colonisers. The task had not been easy for the black community and more so for the black women, because the latter had to cut through the twin webs of racial and patriarchal domination. In our paper, we would analyse the transformation of such a colored woman---Celie, the protagonist of Alice Walker's "*The Color Purple*" ---from a life of physical and sexual slavery where she had been repeatedly raped and married off against her will to an abusive husband who treated her as a mere sperm depository to a New Negro Woman who can take pride in her own being and can confidently claim---"I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly....But I'm here."⁴(p.187)

Keywords: Celie, New Woman, black, lesbianism

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The "new Negro" was a concept that emerged in the second half of the 19th century, after the Civil War, when African-Americans attempted to represent themselves in new, progressive ways, be it politically or culturally. The movement actually signified a transition from the old Negro — that is, the plantation slave — to the new Negro---African-Americans who were considered more refined, educated, sophisticated, and involved in the political process. The "New Negro," of course, was only a metaphor which camouflaged a concern with time, antecedents, and heritage, on the one hand, with a concern for a cleared space, the public face of the race, on the other. It was an exercise of self-negation--- a turning away from the "Old Negro" and the labyrinthine memory of black enslavement toward the "New

Negro," an identity free of stereotypes---an irresistible, spontaneously generated black and sufficient self. It is a bold and audacious act of language, signifying the will to power, to dare to recreate a race by renaming it, despite the dubiousness of the venture.

The task itself was not an easy one and more so for the women-folk, because as Spivak points out, a coloured woman is doubly marginalised--- firstly because of her colour and secondly because of her sex. She is fully conscious of the fact that what is left of chivalry is not directed towards her. She realizes that the ideals of beauty, built up in the fine arts, have excluded her almost entirely. Instead, the grotesque Aunt Jemimas of the streetcar advertisements proclaim only an ability to serve, without the grace of loveliness. Even her fine

spirit is never appreciated by society, because the white as well as patriarchal stereotypes, in order to exploit her, require her to be sexually and spiritually dead. She is most often used to provoke the mirthless laugh of ridicule; or to portray feminine viciousness or vulgarity not peculiar to Negroes. This is the dark shadow which continuously engulfs her every second. It cannot be denied that these are potent and detrimental influences, though not generally recognized because they are in the realm of the mental and spiritual. More apparent were the economic handicaps which had followed the colored woman's recent entrance into industry. It is conceded that she has special difficulties because of the poor working conditions in which she is made to work and the low wages offered to her because of her race and her sex. Yet black women have quite successfully attempted to break out of layers of patriarchal and racial domination and cultural and social marginalization and dehumanisation to redefine the concept of the New Negro Woman. It emerged as a combination of two umbrella concepts-the New Negro and the New Woman. It is indeed true that the concept of the New Negro, after all, was not only that of a gendered male, because The New Negro Woman played an undeniable part, in not only challenging the pervasive color line but in calling increased attention to the depths of African-American experience that the whites had, for ages attempted to suppress. For example, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson considers the idea of the New Negro Woman as an icon in the art and literature of the Harlem Renaissance.²(p.524) While many writers, artists, critics, and social commentators of the time may have understood a woman of mixed or uncertain race as a "proper upper-middle-class club woman or a sultry temptress," Sherrard-Johnson rejects these simple interpretations in favour of an icon that is able to transgress boundaries of race, class, and gender and represent a more complex variety of meanings and defines with precision what was referred to as the New Negro Woman by examining representations of the figure in the works of many authors (including Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, and Jean Toomer), painters (Archibald J. Motley, Jr., Faith Ringgold, William H. Johnson, and others), photographers, and

filmmakers. Keeping this concept in mind, in my paper I would discuss the transformation of Celie, the protagonist of Alice Walker's *"The Color Purple"* from an Old Negro Woman, who, in the face of tremendous torture due to her colour and her sex, had entertained thoughts of self-erasure, to a New Woman who can finally think for herself and take pride in her own being---"I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook. But I'm here"⁴(p.187) and the factors that had contributed to her gradual transformation.

In the beginning of the novel, Celie, the fourteen year old protagonist is locked within a cultural text that defines her merely as an object. She is raped, beaten and silenced, her formal education is terminated by her step-father against her will and she is sold into marital slavery by him and this causes Celie to, at a certain point in the novel, begin doubting her own humanity and as her debasement continues in the hands of her husband Mr. _____, who treats her as a sexual slave, she herself attempts to give her own self an inanimate quality: "He beat me like he beat the children...I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how I know trees fear man."⁴(p.23) Rendered non-human by patriarchal law, Celie is deprived even of the self-protective mechanism of anger, a right every human being exercises in the event of an assault of his/her personhood---"I can't remember the last time I felt mad....Then after a while every time I got mad or start to feel mad, I got sick. Felt like throwing up...Then I start to feel nothing at all."⁴ (p.18)

Embedded within this cultural text, however, is a subtext that reveals Celie as patently human and female and proves beyond doubt, that the New Negro Woman she is soon to become, was already lurking somewhere within her, but had simply been repressed by patriarchal law. Her act of writing letters to God is both an act of obedience and subversion. Although she abides by her step-father's edict not to tell anyone of his sexual violation of her, subconsciously camouflaged within her letters is a keen awareness that all is not right in her world. Far from being "dumb", as her Pa had labelled her, Celie is intelligent, perceptive and creative. For instance, even though she was too

young to understand the full implications of her rape by Pa, she knows enough to steer her sister Nettie away from a similar fate. Her inner strength is also indicated by three actions: her decision to use herself as a diversion so that Pa will not abuse her sister Nettie as he abused her; her desire to take Nettie and run away to protect her from the gangrenous life that she herself could not escape; and her clandestine learning sessions with Nettie, during which Nettie used to teach her everything that she had learnt at school. Further, during an accidental encounter with Olivia, her infant daughter to whom she had given birth as a result of her rape by her step-father and whom he had given away immediately after the baby's birth, Celie's innate intelligence allows her to immediately recognize her own child. Celie's gift for words is evident throughout the text. Her letters bear the imprint of a keen, perceptive mind, one that is capable of interpreting (not just documenting) reality. Also, contrary to the predominating cultural text, Celie is sexually alive. As a victim of extended rape--first by Pa and then by Mr. _____, who "go[es] to the toilet on [her]"⁴(p.77) ---she is expected to be drained of any sexual desire of her own. Indeed, her premature menopause at the tender age of twenty, probably induced by the trauma of sexual abuse, is supposed to be read as a symbol proof her de-sexing. In the minds of her step-father and Mr. _____, Celie is neither a man nor, devoid of her periods, a woman. Therefore, for Pa she is a beast of burden that is auctioned off to the first bidder and for Mr. _____, who purchases her, she is nothing more than a sperm repository. But far from being sexually inert, Celie is ripe with desire to be spent, not on a man ("I don't even look at mens", she confesses), but on Shug Avery ("The most beautiful woman I ever saw"). Shug's very picture excites her and Shug herself proves to be a big determinant in bringing Celie out of her "tree" like emotionless existence and transforming her into an emotionally and sexually active New Negro woman. Celie's experiences have so long been limited to the trauma that she had been forced to suffer at the hands of the men in her life, and she is unable, at this point, to imagine any other possibilities for herself. Nettie and Mr. _____'s sister,

Kate, had no doubt inspired her to "fight", but at that time Celie's first priority had been survival and she focused chiefly on it; she states: 'I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is to stay alive'⁴(17). Before Celie can fight, she actually needs to understand more fully what she is fighting against, and what she is ultimately fighting for. This is no small feat, given her circumstances. It is this lesson and a cause for fight that Shug Avery gives her and after that there had been no looking back for Celie.

Shug's body excites her and she almost loses control while bathing Shug's sick but tantalizing body:

"First time I got full sight of Shug Avery long black body with its black plum nipples, look like her mouth, thought I had turned into a man."⁴(p.49)

Since the dawn of humankind, men have not only feared women's sexuality, they have also, to a surprising extent, measured their power in terms of how effectively they could suppress the rights of women on a variety of fronts. More so, women's sexual desire for women has always been held as a taboo and down the history, lesbianism has, more often than not, been equated with a disease of some kind. Celie, in her subconscious desire for Shug, had somewhere already started cutting out of the net of sexual slavery within which she had been trapped, at least psychologically, and had taken her first step in moving towards the concept of a New Negro Woman. That Celie's sexuality, like her humanity, can remain intact under a prolonged male siege is evidence that contradicts and invalidates her dominant image as a pathological victim and makes the novel one of the foremost pillars of womanism.

Linda Abbandonato, in her essay "Rewriting the Heroine's story in 'The Color Purple'" has remarked that Walker's womanism is clearly influenced by Adrienne Rich's concept of a "lesbian continuum". The lesbian continuum spans the whole spectrum of women's friendships and sisterly solidarity. Walker does not use the paradigm of a heterosexual love-story with marriage to suggest Celie's transformation into the New Negro Woman. Celie grows and heals as Walker deliberately privileges the "eroticism of women's love for women"¹ over any other support system. Walker

uses the story of a fourteen year old girl living in the south around 1903 to document the myth of the New Negro Women.

In the textual configuration of sexual politics, Celie's transformation had been brought about by certain catalytic forces--- the influence of Sofia and Shug Avery both of whom had begun their journey towards becoming a New Negro Woman--- characterised by independence and self sufficiency long before Celie. Both of these women, armed with a self definition that defies male-determined social categorization, claim the centre as the space to enact their humanity, vigorously resisting any attempt to be pulled into the margins. It is Sofia who teaches Celie to resist anyone, anywhere who dared to humiliate or oppress her. Having cut her way through layers of male intransigence, Sofia, for instance believes she has earned her place in the centre: "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men." Shug Avery is equally indomitable, in her case no one has dared pin her down to a preconceived idea of her identity because in word and deed she is determined to remain unshackled. She embodies the truth contained in her advice to Celie: "You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a' tall." Shug does not compartmentalize reality. Rather, she sees it as a continuum that in its capaciousness allows her to love (sexually) man and woman, victim and victimizer (Celie and Mr. _____) and to conceive of God as "everything...that is ever was or ever will be."

Indeed, it is Celie's lesbian relationship with Shug, a blues singer, that proves to be a major determinant factor in Celie's acquiring the status of the New Negro woman. As Barbara Christian, while studying the trends of Black women's writing during the 1980s had remarked in her essay "*Trajectories of Self-definition*":

"One radical change in the fiction of the 1980s is the overt exploration of lesbian relationships among Black women and how these relationships are viewed by Black communities. This new development may have a profound effect on present-day attitudes about the relationship

between sex and race and about the nature of women."

In the novel, lesbianism for Celie does not only prove to be natural, self-fulfilling and creative, the sensual ecstasy of its love-making becomes a key to Celie's self-understanding and growth and the community around them accepts it without censure or criticism. It is this homosexual relationship with Shug which brings about Celie's sexual and spiritual awakening and puts her on the road to economic prosperity---qualities that essentially define a New Negro Woman. It is Shug who leads Celie to explore and take pleasure in her own sexuality. She feels the first stirrings of sexuality (which numerous forced sexual encounters with her step-father and her husband had not been able to raise within her) while bathing Shug and she raises physical desire to the level of the spiritual: "I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath stop short." The fact is that though in the patriarchal sexual economy Pa can describe Celie as no longer "fresh", according to Shug, she is "still a virgin" and making love to Shug is tantamount to her first sexual act. She did not, before Shug came into her life, know anything about her button of a clitoris and is naturally very confused when Shug helps her send shivering, hot pulsing waves of sexual excitement within herself. What Shug teaches Celie is actually to masturbate---a clinical verb with ugly connotations. But it is a fact that one of the determining characters of a New Negro woman is love and respect for all living beings and one can never love another person or another body unless one has learnt to love oneself and one's own body.

Even as Shug and Celie enjoy their lesbian relationship together, Celie's phrase "us sleep like sisters, me and Shug"⁴(p.124) reveals their homosexual relationship is much more than a sordid sex fling. It is the symbol of one coloured woman's extreme love for one another---a concept that epitomises sisterhood and women's empowerment, both of which serve as pillars of the myth of the New Negro Woman. Shug sings "Miss Celie's song", thereby giving her an identity and she is the one who announces that Celie too would accompany her and thereby gives Celie the voice every New Negro Woman needs. It is then that Celie begins to

discover that she too has value—to herself and to Shug Avery and this truth, though initially more than she can believe, sparks off the independent and freedom loving woman that had been lurking within her. All her earlier life had simply been a tale of oppression and can also be interpreted as an allegory of slavery. The passage about the meeting of Mr. _____ and Celie resemble a scene in a slave market more than a traditional arranged marriage: “Pa call me. Celie, he say. Mr. _____ want another look at you. I go closer to the steps, but not too close cause I’m a little scared of his horse. Turn round, Pa say. I turn round.”⁴(p.10-11) Her rape by her stepfather is reminiscent of the slavery experience of the ownership of one's body by someone else; the "theft" of Celie's children is closely related with the habit of selling children off from their mother during slavery; Celie's marriage resembles the scene of the slave auction; and her hard work and constant abuse arouse the memories of slavery; Celie and Nettie's attempts at literacy parallel connection between literacy and freedom common during slavery. It is Shug who enables her to become financially independent for financial autonomy was a radical goal for the New Negro women to aspire to because as both Virginia Woolf and Simon de Beauvoir point out in “*A Room of One's Own*” and “*The Second Sex*” respectively, it has been a part of the stereotypical patriarchal construct of the idea of a woman that she must be always legally and economically dependent, either on their fathers, husband, relatives, or on social and charitable institutions when the actual fact remains that unless economic independence is achieved by a woman, social, mental and sexual independence shall remain nothing more than an illusion.

For many, this homosexual relationship between Shug and Celie, unnoticed by the other characters in the novel, epitomises the height of silly pornographic romanticism, and yet Walker as well as we, as readers cannot but accept the intensity and importance of this relationship as a healing force characterised by love and trust. When Shug picks up an old horse shoe and says “us each others’ people’s now.”⁴(p.189) The suggestion is that Celie and Shug are now eternally together in spirit, almost metaphorically in marital union with the symbol of

the horse-shoe being synonymous with marriage. Celie and Shug almost live in a conjugal relationship as they move to their new house in Tennessee; their experiences there are almost Eden-like, with a fountain in front of their houses, symbolising their new lives in each others’ arms. As they look through the newspapers, their peace with each other is contrasted with a world full of disharmony, hatred and violence. Not when Shug proclaims that she was in love with a nineteen year old boy in Germaine, Celie does not object to her leaving, in spite of knowing that there is a possibility of her lapsing into depression again with the end of this relationship. But by then, her transformation into the New Negro Woman was complete and with her learning of the lesson of her independence, she had also learnt to appreciate the freedom and independence of others, and especially Shug, to whom she owed her entire transformation from almost an inanimate object to a human being, who things and feels. Herein lies the success of the lesbian relationship between the two women because apart from causing the rebirth and regeneration of Celie, it transcends all the other so called “normal” man-woman relationships in the novel. It is this relationship that had taught Celie that jealousy is mere self-indulgence and that “Shug got a right to live too.”⁴(p.236) After all, the greatest pleasure of love lies in sacrificing simply for the sake of the one a person loves and that is exactly what Celie does.

Shug helps Celie identify herself first as a creature, second as a human being, and at last as a New Negro Woman, which is the most remarkable. . More than that, Walker transforms Celie's individual story into an allegory of the struggle of a black southern woman for spiritual liberation. Celie's personal transformation into the New Negro Woman who can feel and think for herself is indeed amazing. It took a long time and much effort, because the path was not beset with roses.. Linda Tate asserts that the key to her self-transformation “lies in the ability to take control over defining oneself, naming oneself”³(p.131). But, with Shug's help she succeeds in moving beyond the early stages of her story when she had been devoid of identity, she had been a “nobody”, as Mr. _____ puts it: “Who you think you is? You black, you pore, you ugly, you

a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all"⁴(p.31). Celie had totally been incapable of defining herself. She sees herself, both physically and emotionally, as living in irreconcilable fragments. She begins her narrative by writing, "I am" which she then negates by crossing out, indicating her lack of self-confidence and self-acceptance because she had been fragmented into pieces which are given away to others. All her life had been a series of sacrifices - to Pa's desires, to Nettie's safety, to Mr.____'s brutality. She has been "torn" into pieces - torn from childhood by Pa's rapes, torn from her children, torn from Nettie. She could identify nothing of her own self and never had any sense of belonging in the world.

Through the narrative Celie must move toward her own self-acceptance and self- definition. This begins on the day she announces that she will leave Mr.____ to live with Shug in Memphis. Later, in a letter to Nettie from Memphis, Celie clearly articulates a new and more positive vision of herself: "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children"⁴(p.218). And although Celie has never signed her letters before, she does so now emphatically, defining her new identity through her family relationships, her business, her love, her new place in the world:

"Your sister, Celie
Folkpants, Unlimited
Sugar Avery Drive,
Memphis, Tennessee"⁴(p.218)

Getting out of the rural South to Memphis opens up a totally new world for Celie: she meets new people, succeeds in business, and in general has increased access to the larger world. Not accidentally, Memphis is chosen as Celie's and Shug's destination where they, as two New Negro women, can express their creativity to the fullest (among other things, Memphis is known as one of the blues capitals of the United States). When Celie comes visit Sofia and Harpo, she herself feels amazed by the New Negro woman she had been transformed into: "I feels different. Look different"(p.195) After all, her transformation had encompassed a completely new level of self-awareness and self-acceptance. Significantly, when she passes her one time

tormentor Mr.____ sitting on his porch, even he does not recognize this new Celie: "I pass Mr____ house and him sitting on the porch and he didn't even know who I was"(p.195). In depicting Celie's gradual transformation from a mere creature, who could not even give her own self the basic respect due to a human being, into the New Negro woman Walker simultaneously challenges both racial and gender boundaries throughout the novel as well. In Walker's evolutionary treatment of black women, we see the movement from women "totally victimized by society and by the men" ("*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*", "*In Love and Trouble*"), to the growing developing New Negro Women whose consciousness allows them to gain control over their lives ("*Meridian*", "*The Color Purple*"). It is this transformation of Celie and her assuming the larger than life status that makes Alice Walker's "*The Color Purple*" much more than any ordinary womanist text --- it becomes a saga of human life which touches us and burns us.

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