



“THE COLOR PURPLE”: SELF-REALIZATION AND SELFHOOD

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ABSTRACT

Alice Malsenior Walker was the first major writer to make a full-fledged attack on patriarchal domination within the black community itself. Her revolutionary writing emerged as unique decolonization of traditional love. Her novel *The Color Purple* is one of such highly acclaimed novels.

In the novel *The Color Purple*, Walker emphasizes the predicament of the black women through the portrayal of the protagonist and narrator Celie. Celie, a fourteen year old girl is introduced to reader as a slave. She is oppressed for two reasons, one for her being a woman and another for being black.

The Color Purple is written in an epistolary form. The main aim of the letter form in a novel is to create some sort of everyday-life feeling. When they are published the letters become open for everyone to read. They have personal feelings that are so distinctive to letters only intended for a certain person. The approach taken in the novel constitutes a confidence and an intimacy between the reader and Celie.

With the letters she creates an invisible bubble, which no one can penetrate. But the letters do not only hide Celie from the outside world they also strengthen her position and stimulate her to develop a strong character in contrast to the vague character she represents outwardly. So with the letters she divides herself into two characters, namely: one within the public sphere and another within her own private sphere

The present paper focuses on the journey of black women's life from powerlessness to the state of empowerment and self realization and self recognition.

Key Words: black community, patriarchal domination, self realization and self recognition

KY PUBLICATIONS

Black women writers around the globe have been relentlessly struggling against racism, exploitation, gender oppression, and other human rights violations. The black intellectual consciousness has been widened with the emergence of women writers in the 70's. As a consequence of which the male dominated black

focusing on racial and political oppression controlled marginalized gender issues. The female plot presents the inner drive to assert selfhood and a quest for personal freedom within the cultural inheritance of the Black community.

Alice Malsenior Walker was the first major writer to make a full-fledged attack on patriarchal

domination within the black community itself. Her revolutionary writing emerged as unique decolonization of traditional love. Her novel *The Color Purple* is one of such highly acclaimed novels. In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker attempts to convey what has been one of the greatest absences in American history: the Black voice. Forty years after emancipation, Du Bois was able to write about double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk*: He writes that the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world after the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian. According to him American world is a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. This double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity is a peculiar sensation. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The concept of duality for the black Americans is seen in his words.

Black women, centered novel *The Color Purple* which begins in the early 1900's and ends in the mid 1940's celebrates the unflagging spirit of womanhood. A reader can examine the form of the novel, its characters, its fable-like and mythic qualities, its philosophical stance, its humour, its politics, its intricacies of plot and its symbolism. *The Color Purple* is classic because it covers so much territory and resonates on so many levels.

The main purpose of Alice Walker is to give voice and representation to women who have been silenced for ages and suffered from sexism as well as from racism. Her novels deal with the life of African Americans with a special emphasis on the black women's life. The black women's life is a journey from powerlessness to the state of empowerment and self realization and self recognition. In the novel *The Color Purple*, Walker emphasizes the predicament of the black women through the portrayal of the protagonist and narrator Celie. Celie, a fourteen year old girl is introduced to reader

as a slave. She is oppressed for two reasons, one for her being a woman and another for being black. Women in general are conditioned to a timid diffidence in their behavior and being black intensifies it. She has to cook, clean and look after the other children. Her stepfather even denies her to go to school. According to him, she is too dumb to go to school. "You too dumb to keep going to school" (9). Celie lives with her younger sister Nettie, half-brothers and sisters. She lives a life of abuse. Her mother has become sick because of numerous pregnancies. Alphonso is the man whom she believes to be her father. Later on, she realizes that Alphonso is her stepfather. She is made to suffer by the man who she had for long believed to be her father.

After the death of Celie's mother, she is repeatedly raped by her father and becomes pregnant twice. Celie becomes a mother of two children born of incestuous union but they are sold by Alphonso for monetary benefit. Celie's life is the representation of the female slaves whose children were forcefully taken away by the slave masters who enjoyed the financial gain by selling her children. Even when her children were taken from her, she had to remain silent. When her mother asked her about her first child she said that it was God's and was taken away by him. "She ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God's... Finally she ast Where it is? I say God took it" (2). Her father who should be responsible for her welfare assaults her. So she addresses her letters to God and mentions her thoughts and aspirations in a simple broken language.

The Color Purple is written in an epistolary form. The choice made by Alice Walker to write the novel in letters creates it to portray realism and authenticity. Reading letters help readers to create a relationship with the author. While reading, readers can enjoy the pleasure and pain of the writer.

The main aim of the letter form in a novel is to create some sort of everyday-life feeling. When they are published the letters become open for everyone to read. They have personal feelings that are so distinctive to letters only intended for a certain person. The approach taken in the novel

constitutes a confidence and an intimacy between the reader and Celie.

Celie writes series of letters throughout the novel. These letters reflect her internal conflict, silent agony and the impact of oppression on her spirit. They also reveal her growing internal strength and her final victory in achieving her identity. The novel revolves around sexual violence and rape. Charles L. Proudfoot says: "Walker enables the readers to enter into the private thoughts and emotional state of Celie's traumatized, guilt and shame-ridden, and depressed fourteen year protagonist, who became a victim of rape and incest" (17).

Celie's world was one of fear, despair, insecurity and loneliness, unspoken and unspeakable suffering, colorless dark and with no ray of hope or sunshine. Celie is almost completely voiceless but her letters enable her to break secretly the silence that is normally imposed on her. "Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (1). What is happening to her is that she is pregnant after Pa's raping her. But she is ignorant about the changes her body is undergoing and why. As a result, the birth of her first child comes as a complete surprise to her. "When I start to hurt and then my stomach start moving and then that little baby...with a feather" (2). Sexual exploitation and oppression are thus introduced as the most relevant factors shaping Celie's life and muzzled personality. Her sexual abuse becomes endemic after Celie's two successive pregnancies and deliveries.

Celie strikes the words "I am" and replaces it with "I have" also because the child victim of rape and incest often blames herself for her trauma and believes that this bad thing has happened to her because she is bad and therefore deserves it. She is so unsure about her own existence that she erases "I am" and instead writes "I have". She is insecure about the present and the future and therefore she writes about the past. In the beginning she is oppressed that she is ready to erase herself but the letters save her from total disappearance.

Celie requests for guidance because she does not understand what is happening to her. Only fourteen, but she is pregnant with her second child. As her

children were sold by Alphonso, her breasts filled with milk for no one.

Celie is able to escape from her tragic situation by means of writing letters to God. Celie's sister Nettie teaches her to read and write. The letters act as an outlet of her inescapable condition by a positive sense of self. Wall opines "Writing becomes a means for Celie to define herself against patriarchy" (83). Celie expresses in letter eleven that writing is an instrument to stay alive and, therefore, it is as important to her as breathing. "Long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along" (17). It is the outburst of her feelings and her "self".

With the letters she creates an invisible bubble, which no one can penetrate. But the letters do not only hide Celie from the outside world they also strengthen her position and stimulate her to develop a strong character in contrast to the vague character she represents outwardly. So with the letters she divides herself into two characters, namely: one within the public sphere and another within her own private sphere (Wall, 85). And in the end these two characters are finally united. The fact that she writes everything down helps her preventing a rebellion, which would cause her to be beaten (85).

Despite the abuses Celie endures, she has little consciousness of injustice and shows little or no anger which a reader comes to notice in the forthcoming letters. Walker's use of Celie's own voice however underdeveloped allows her to tell the history of black women in the rural South in a sympathetic and realistic way. Her letters offer a powerful first-person account of the institutions of racism and sexism. Her language reveals both pain and detached numbness. "My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me" (2).

When Celie became mother of two children, her father loses interest in her and start bothering her younger sister Nettie. Celie is determined to protect Nettie from her own fate. Celie accepts that she is ugly because her step father stresses on this. "She ugly. Don't even look like she kin to Nettie" (8). Celie hates herself and she is not interested to know about her body which has been a constant source of exploitation until the arrival of

her husband's lover, Shug Avery. She neither controls nor possesses her own body.

Being the uglier of the two sisters, Celie is literally sold to a widower Mr. _ who desperately needs a woman to look after his two children and the household. This man, whom Celie does not even know his name, is actually interested in Nettie. Alphonso offers Celie instead. Male dominance is always considered as a norm in such a society where Celie is abused. Her father's words to widower, "She ain't fresh tho, but I spects you know that. She spoiled. Twice..." (7), shocks the readers. "The forced separation of both her daughter and her son from her and the auction block scene when Pa makes Celie turn around in front of Albert as he ponder whether to take or not reverberates with echoes of the slavery era" says Ana Maria Fraile-Macro (120).

Celie considers this marriage as an avenue of escape. Widower's name is revealed to her as Mr. Albert by Shug Avery as the novel proceeds further. Mr. Albert and Alphonso are the same natured men. Walker shows a little difference between the circumstances of an abused daughter and an abused wife by merely shifting her protagonist setting.

Celie becomes a sexual servant to Albert and a step mother to his children: 'an occasional sexual convenience' (Watkins 16). Nettie runs away from Alphonso because of his sexual desires and stays with Celie and Mr. __. "Nettie here with us. She run away from home. She say she hate to leave our stepma, but she had to git out, maybe fine some help for the other little ones. The boys be alright, she say. They can stay out his way. When they git big they gon fight him" (16). Though Celie is considered as ugly and dull outwardly, she has an inner strength which allows her to protect her sister from evils that she has experienced.

Nettie tries her best to educate Celie, as well as to raise her self-confidence and self-esteem. But Nettie is forced to leave by Mr. _ as she refuses his sexual advances. The thought of leaving her helpless sister at the mercy of Mr. __ troubles her deeply. They do not want anybody to break their relationship. They decide to communicate through letters. "When I don't write to you (Nettie) I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up I myself and

choking on my own heart. I am lonely, Celie" (130). Celie initially writes letters to God because she is ashamed of what happened to her and then to Nettie, when she knows that her sister is alive. This change comprises the recognition and assertion of the existence and value of one's individual self.

Celie sends Nettie to the minister Samuel, the only person she thinks would be able to help Nettie. The minister's wife, Corinne whom she had met once in town and seen her accompanied by a little girl, whom Celie instinctively knows to be her own child, Olivia. " I call her *o/e* Livia" (15). It is rather confirmed that Celie's own children Olivia and Adam are soon given to a couple who later become African missionaries. Walker shows the romantic switch of the story when the reader learns that the missionary couple also take Nettie along to Africa as a member of their household.

Celie's life continues to be miserable. She is beaten, abused, exploited, and humiliated by her husband Mr. _ . When Mr. __'s oldest son Harpo asks him why he beats Celie, he says simply. "Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn" (22). Celie accepts the abuse and describes how he treats her: "He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. All I can do is not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man" (22). Though ill-treated by her step father and husband she always wished to be cared and loved. Her words, "I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him" (12). She is beaten, cursed and humiliated simply because she is a woman. She silently suffers ever, patriarchal society marginalizes women for the sake of being alive. Celie lives in a cocoon, surrendering to the male supremacy. Still she wants to analyse the reason for her suffering. Mr. _'s sisters' effort to help her is not successful, mainly because Celie cannot do what the sisters tell her to do. The novel is the representation of the Black women to become conscious of the oppression they experience in their relationship with Black men.

When Mr. _'s sister Kate, asks Harpo (Mr. _'s eldest son) to help Celie, he answers, that women

has to work. "Women work. I'm a man" (21). It reflects the power of oppression of men and Harpo thinks it is the duty of women to work and not of men. Kate advises Celie to fight for herself. "You got to fight them, Celie,...I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself" (21). But Celie does not want to fight. She writes: "I don't say nothing. I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" (21).

Despite Kate's advice, Celie bears the ruthless behaviour of her husband because she is unaware of any other form of behaviour and she does not have any other purpose in her life. She has lost the sense of her individuality. She is portrayed as a victim of oppression in the novel and she is not treated as human and her husband does not even look at to her face: "He look at me. It like he looking at the earth" (20).

Harpo tells Celie that he has fallen in love with a healthy and courageous young girl named Sofia. After their marriage, Sofia demands Harpo help with the chores and disobeys her husband and father-in-law. Celie in her nineteenth letter says: "Harpo want to know what to do to make Sofia mind. He sit out on the porch with Mr._____. He say, I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always back talk" (35).

Frustrated with her behaviour Harpo seeks advice of Celie and Mr._. They advise him to beat his wife. Mr._states: "Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating"(35). Celie's advice "Beat her. I say" (36) that Harpo beat Sofia seems out of her character, but it is seen as a result of the cyclical nature of abuse and oppression. Celie feels that she has got a rare opportunity to participate in the control and abuse of a woman other than herself. But she realizes that it represents sin against Sofia spirit and also admits that she is jealous that Sofia knows how to fight back against abuse. Walker shows the sharing of tremendous loyalty and love among the Black women. Celie is literally unable to sleep until she explains and apologizes to Sofia, thereby opening the way for their friendship.

Celie is amazed with Sofia's defiance of the customs of patriarchy. Sofia's response to Celie that she has tight-knit relationships with her five strong sisters implies that deep ties among women are essential means to combat sexism and abuse. Walker argues that mastering one's own story and finding someone to listen and respond to it are also crucial steps toward self-empowerment and autonomy.

Celie's other significant emotional tie is to her sister, Nettie. Although they are separated for thirty years, neither of them loses faith that the other is alive and that one day they will see each other again. The sisters' love provides them with a framework for surviving. Each of them imagines the other's reaction to whatever she is currently experiencing.

Nettie writes: "Dear Celie, It has been a long time since I had time to write. But always, no matter what I'm doing, I am writing to you. Dear Celie, I say in my head in the middle of Vespers, the middle of the night, while cooking, Dear, dear Celie. And I imagine that you really do get my letters and that you are writing me back: Dear Nettie that is what life is like for me" (155).

Shug Avery is the Celie's constant friend, hope and companion throughout the novel. Shug Avery is a successful blues singer who first appears as Mr._ mistress. She befriends Bessie Smith. Shug's style, sharp tongue and wild looks make her appear jaded, but she is actually warm and compassionate at heart. She also cares deeply about women.

Shug and Mr._ have been lovers for many years. When she becomes so sick due to a sexually transmitted disease no one in the town will take her in. Mr._, much to Celie's delight, brings Shug home for Celie to tend to. Celie compares Shug to her mother. Unlike her mother, who was oppressed by traditional gender roles, Shug refuses to allow herself to be dominated by anyone. At first Shug does not pay much attention to Celie, but soon they share confidences, become good friends and eventually lifetime lovers.

Initially, Celie is seen completely powerless. She is an object of others who is very passive in her interactions, especially those with men. Celie's lack of voice becomes more obvious when Nettie says that she is buried. "Seeing you (Celie) buried" (17).

Nettie is the first of several women who tell Celie to fight back. Celie is reluctant to resist because she lacks a sense of self and an ability to create and express her own story. Nettie tries to build Celie's sense of self by passing along to Celie Mr._'s compliments, which Celie admits boost her self-image.

Kate tells Mr._ that Celie needs new clothes, Celie is aware that Mr._ thinks of her as little more than dirt, saying that when he looks at her, it is like he is looking at the earth, trying to determine if it needs anything. "She needs clothes? he ast...It like he looking at the earth. It need something? His eyes say" (20). Kate realizes that this is the first time that he is getting new clothes for Celie. Celie begins her first efforts at self-expression when she tries to thank Kate for buying her a new dress. Walker develops the idea that people can attain power by strengthening their own voices.

When Shug arrives and needs care, Celie feels ecstatic but she says nothing because she does not know anything and because she feels it is not her place to speak. Celie has been silenced for so long that she has become accustomed to having no voice. Her natural reaction is to say nothing. Celie begins to understand that her perception of herself differs from the way others perceive her. She writes "I might as well be under the table, for all they care. I hate the way I look, I hate the way I'm dress" (73). This beginning of self awareness represents a foundational first step toward Celie's empowerment.

With the declaration 'Celie a virgin', Shug gives Celie a new identity in both figurative and literal sense. Shug gives her a new name Miss Celie. Giving a new name and identity are important to Celie's empowerment to tell her new story and to her sense of self. Mary Agnes renames herself to show her refusal to let the man in her life gain interpretive control over her. "Harpo say, I love you, Squeak. He kneel down and try to put his arms round her waist. She stand up. My name Mary Agnes, she say" (97). The prison warden raped Squeak, when she made an attempt to release Sofia. She returns home battered and torn. However, Squeak is not defeated, and she makes an important act of resistance when she decides to reject the

belittling nickname, Squeak, that Harpo has given her. She insists on being called by her given name, Mary Agnes. By renaming herself, Mary Agnes resists the patriarchal words and symbols that Harpo has imposed upon her. Walker repeatedly stresses the importance of language and storytelling as ways of controlling situations and as the first steps toward liberation.

The concept of economically successful and independent blacks is new to Southern Blacks. Nettie and Celie are accustomed only to denigration, denial, and subservience at the hands of both whites and black men. But later Nettie encounters with independent blacks. Nettie's descriptions of Harlem empower Celie and helps in her economic independence. The concept of black prosperity and independence is yet another submerged or suppressed narrative that is now emerging into the foreground of Celie's consciousness.

Alice Walker makes it clear that story telling and communication are also sine quo non for self understanding. Samuel tells the story of his children to Nettie, and Celie confirms this story with Alphonso, learning the truth of her own family history help them in understanding each other.

As a close parallel to the victimized black women the land too is cultivated to the extreme in order to take maximum resources out of it. Economical exploitation of the indigenous people is evident with the act of the road builders. The felling of trees, like ancient giant mahogany trees and the destruction of the forest reveal how the land was forced to barren. "The ancient, giant mahogany trees, all the trees, the game, everything of the forest was being destroyed, and the land was forced to lie flat, he said, and bare as the palm of his hand" (169). Man values nature or land only so far he can benefit out of it. So is the case with woman. Celie is defenseless and threatened and not in a position to share her feelings and trauma to another one other than God. The Olinka own their land and are forced to pay for rent and water and pay tax. This is the only area which supplies fresh water and they force Olinka's people to go to an arid region which does not produce crops.

With this discussion of the barrier separating the Olinka from the English, Walker emphasizes

that, though narrative can be a powerful force, some differences cannot be overcome. Cultural complexities and gulfs of foreignness sometimes render communication futile. This provides a sobering counterexample to Celie's success at finding her voice and using it as the key to her discovery of self-worth. Walker admits that some cultural differences are so great that there is little hope for communication. Unfortunately, she suggests no solution to this problem.

Nettie observes self-centeredness and sexism in native Africans. Walker complicates her depiction of race and identity by highlighting self-centeredness and subordination of women in Olinka community. The internal oppression coupled with what Walker portrays as the self-centeredness of the Olinka people and their indifference toward African-American slavery, complicates the seemingly straightforward categories of oppressor and oppressed.

Walker presents personal religious belief as an important component of a strong sense of self. Celie has always imagined God as a white man "big and old and tall and graybearded and white" (194) and opines he behaves like the other men she knows and who do not listen to colored women. Shug's spiritual concept of God contradicts Celie's concrete and materialistic conception of God. Shug's interpretation of God is much more personalized and empowering. Shug believes that each individual manifests God in his or her own way. God exists in everybody and one needs to search for it. "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it... God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (195).

Celie recalls for Nettie this conversation with Shug. "Well, us talk and talk about God, but I'm still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?) Not the little wildflowers. Nothing" (197).

Celie has told Shug that she has stopped writing to God altogether. In response, Shug tries to help Celie develop a new understanding of God, which involves sidelining Celie's notion of a God who

is white and male and with whom she feels she has nothing in common.

Shug suggests that instead of being mad at God for his injustice, Celie should reimagine God as a figure or entity with which she can more closely connect. Just because Celie's image of an archetypal old, bearded white man will no longer do, Shug argues, Celie does not need to reject God altogether. Shug urges Celie to be creative and to see the presence of God in everything and everyone, as a sort of disembodied "it" with no race or gender. Shug's lesson is a part of a greater lesson that argues for reimagining one's oppressors rather than rejecting them. Shug shows Celie that she does not need to reject men altogether. She explains that Celie can have men as friends and that her life does not need to revolve around men exclusively. Instead of dismissing men and God, Shug changes the power dynamic by reimagining them.

Not only does Celie redefine her experience for herself through Shug's help, she also uses Nettie's letters to help. Nettie, on a missionary trip to Africa, says in a letter:

God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone – a roofleaf [an entity of worship for the Olinka, an indigenous tribe in Africa] or Christ- but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us. (256)

Nettie's correspondence enlightens Celie's situation. It also serves as device that brings about Celie's dismissal of the God, she writes, "You must be sleep" (177). Celie is still in conflict over worshipping a God that seems not to care about her. In her next letter, Celie no longer writes to a God she cannot identify with. Instead, she addresses her letters to Nettie.

Celie validates herself when she decides to address her letters to her sister, Nettie in Africa rather than to God who gave her, a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister (she) probably won't ever see again. "My daddy lynch, My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother, Pa not pa" (177).

Celie's recognition that she has control over her concept of God and does not have to accept the religious viewpoints that are handed to her is an important step in her quest for autonomy and self-respect. Celie writes to Nettie: "What God do for me?" Last (192) Shug shares what God means to her with Celie. Shug believes that God is omnipresent. "I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It" (195).

At the end of the novel Celie acts as a voice not only for herself, but also for all the characters of her age. In the first letter, Celie relates events without really attempting to understand them. Celie begins to make keen observations of others, articulates analyzes her own feelings gradually. In her final letters, Celie not only analyzes her own feelings but also has the confidence and insight to articulate the feelings and motives of others. Final letters show the development of her character throughout the novel. Celie has chased her patriarchal God away and come up with a new concept of God, she writes in her last letter: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (285). Her return to God and her new vision of God are both based on self-love and validation, not the fear and self-loathing she articulated in her earlier letters. This reimagining of God on her own terms symbolizes her move from an object of someone else's care to an independent woman. It also indicates that her voice is now empowered to create her own narrative.

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