

A Study of Celie's Emancipation in Alice Walker's The Color Purple

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ABSTRACT: *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 awakening and independence. Celie a black poor and uneducated African American girl is able to change her situation. She is a symbol of hope that impresses the readers by her strength, faith and courage. In the present paper an attempt has been made to analyze Celie's process of emancipation and her struggle to gain her independence. In the early part of the novel, she faces the oppression and ignorance of the patriarchal society in which men are considered as the head of family matters. She has to be obedient to her abusive father and husband. She also faces discrimination from White because of being a Black woman. Both the oppression from the patriarchal family and White society led her being an independent woman. She succeeds being independent woman by having good relationship among women character namely Nettie, Sofia, and Shug Avery. Those women have reshaped Celie from the submissive woman who is usually oppressed by male characters especially her father and her husband into independent woman who is not dependent to men anymore.*

KEYWORDS: *Consciousness, dominated, empowered, gratification, independence*

I. INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker's most popular novel, *The Color Purple*, is one of the best literary works that vividly depict the sufferings of African-American women from patriarchy, sexism and racism. In this novel she not only manifests the humiliating condition of women but also shows her determination to raise their social status and position by instilling in them a strong sense of their right and their position in the society. *The Color Purple* does not only describe the pathetic condition of black women but even goes beyond that purpose. In fact, Alice Walker's true intention from writing this novel is not only to give voice to black women but also to provide them with a path to follow in order to emancipate and get their freedom. Walker shows us the evolution of her major character, Celie, from being a sexually abused child to a passive wife and finally to an emancipated woman. African-American women have many miseries in their life; they have to face double sufferings as Blacks and as women. Celie, as the main woman character in this novel is an African-American woman who suffers oppressions from her patriarchal family and discrimination from Whites. Basically, family is where people usually share love and care. The members of a family usually support each other. In this novel, however, Celie's family is more like a burden for its members, especially for Celie. She doesn't feel comfort in her own home and neither does her sister. In addition, Celie's family is patriarchal. It means that women are only more subordinated to men. Women are expected to do all the things what has been said by men while men are more superior who take the domination in their life. In this novel Celie is a very unlucky daughter because her step father has raped her twice although she is just fourteen years old. She is forced to get used to it as she can't resist it. She feels hurt. She can't do anything to save her life because she doesn't have any power to resist him. Even she can't tell anybody about her sufferings. Because she doesn't trust anybody, she can only tell her sufferings to her God. It's only to him she can share every single feeling in her heart and every single moment happened in her life. As she writes:

Dear God,

I'm fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.

Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing. He was pulling on her arm. She say it too soon, Fonso, I ain't well. Finally he leave her alone. A week go by, he pulling on her arm again. She say Naw, I ain't gonna. Can't you see I'm already half dead, an all ofthese children.

She went to visit her sister doctor over Macon. Left me to see after the others. He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do

what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and used to it.

But I don't never git used to it. And now I feel sick every time I be the one to cook. My mama she fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause she good to her now. But too sick to last long. (*The Color Purple*, p. 11)

Celie's narration is focused on her own private life without any reference to the outside world. Her family however is never the safe heaven that protects its members against the evils of society, but it is a male dominated world full of domestic violence. Not only Celie's initial sexual experience in the form of rape committed by her stepfather, but also sex continued to be a means of oppression in her marriage as well. After her marriage with Mr. __, she suffers more and more because she does not only takes care of her husband, but also of her husband's children. At the very beginning, however, Celie cannot make too much sense of her experiences. She is rather the passive victim of her environment: "But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (*The Color Purple*, p. 26), "I don't say anything. I stay where I'm told. But I am alive" (*The Color Purple*, p. 29). Moreover, it seems that she can bear all the sorrows inflicted upon her. When she talks to Nettie, before leaving from her husband's home, she says, "it worse than that, I think. If I was buried, I wouldn't have to work. But I just say, Never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along." (*The Color Purple*, p. 26). This mere act of addressing God suggests Celie's alienation, loneliness, and marginality.

At the very beginning, Mr. __ doesn't want to marry Celie, he wants to get married with Nettie whom he sees in the church, but her Pa doesn't let him to take her, because she is still young and too fresh for him, taking care of his household. Thus, he lets him to take Celie who is not virgin anymore. Besides, he wants Nettie for himself. Therefore, he lets him to take Celie by offering some cows to be with him. At first, Mr. __ takes more time, about three months to think of marrying Celie. Mr. __ marries Celie not because of her goodness: hard working, discipline, and caring attitude but he seems more interested in getting her cows if she takes Celie to be his wife:

....Well, He say, real slow, I can't let you have Nettie. She too young. Don't know nothing but what you tell her. Sides, I want her to git some more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her. But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain't fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don't need a fresh women no how. I got a fresh one in there myself and sick all the time. He spit, over the railing. The children git on h er nerve, she not much of a cook. And she big already...., (*The Color Purple*, p. 20)

From this statement it is evident that Celie's Pa wants to get advantage from his daughters. Meanwhile, he has spoiled his first daughter and he considers that everything runs well. Even, he offers Celie to be Mr. __'s wife. Before that, although Celie has had her own childbirth, she hasn't seen them growing up with her because Celie's own children are soon given to foster-parents by her Pa, to a couple who later become African missionaries. Besides, the black people were deprived education as the South tried to keep the blacks under privileged. Celie is not allowed to go to school yet she still received education by learning what her little sister was teaching her. It was believed that if the blacks were kept uneducated then they would be ignorant about their rights and would not fight for freedom. The letter that gives a proof that Celie is not permitted to go to school is:

The first time I got big Pa took me out of school. He never care. That I love it. Nettie stood there at the gate holding tight to my hand. I was all dress for first day. You too dumb to keep going to school, Pa say. Nettie the clever on in this bunch.

But Pa, Nettie say, crying, Celie smart too. Even Miss Beasley say so. Nettie dote on Miss Beasley. Think nobody like her in the world..., (*The Color Purple*, p. 19).

From the quotation above, it is implied that Celie is one of the examples of contemporary African American women who was not permitted to go to the school. As Olinkas stated, "A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something," (*The Color Purple*, p.144). So, it is evident that the condition of African American women at that time was hard. They are considered as animals which do not need to be

loved, to be given affection and care, "...You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it ..."

 (*The Color Purple*, p. 18). The main woman character in this novel, Celie, would get up to cook, clean, go out and work in the fields all day, then come back and cook and clean some more. And also Sofia would work in the fields, repair the roof, and take care of the children. Therefore, males just took the advantage of the male dominated society in which the women are only means to bear and rear children, carry out the domestic functions as cooking, and cleaning; giving birth to children and socializing them; providing sexual gratification, companionship, and emotional support to their husband, as stated by Staples:

...in the case of women, those roles have been defined traditionally as the carrying out of domestic functions as cooking, and cleaning; giving birth to children and socializing them; providing sexual gratification, companionship, and emotional support to their husbands. There is abundant evidence that Black women are willing and able to fulfill those roles... (p. 22)

Celie is very loyal to her family as she cares her younger sister and brothers after her beloved mother died. She also takes care about every single household in her husband's home and his children. Unfortunately, she is also bitten everyday by her Pa and her husband. Celie as a part of African-American society is not only depersonalized and dehumanized by black African-American men but also also by the Whites. The lynching of Celie's father, is a clear example of violation from Whites. Moreover, Celie's daughter-in-law, Sofia's imprisonment for twelve years for slapping the mayor is also a clear example of black women's discrimination by Whites. Nettie is Celie's younger and attractive sister. She is the cleverest girl of the family and is able to continue her education. Celie is inspired by her sister's independence, determination, and perseverance in living in Africa among foreign people whom Nettie cares about deeply. Celie saw the impact that a woman could have on others and felt empowered to overcome the abuse she experiences. Nettie is someone that Celie tries to protect from the physical and sexual abuse of their father. When Nettie runs away, Mr. ___ hides the letters sent to Celie thereby cutting off the sister's communication, which left them heartbroken. This leads to Celie's desire to live no longer in this universe. But, by the affection of her beloved sister, Nettie managed the situation well. Nettie is the only person who cherished the spirit in Celie to live. This showcases her unconditional love toward her sister. Even, a big house couldn't replace her love toward Nettie's being alive. "...big empty house..." (*The Color Purple*, p. 225) means that she stays in a big house without any affection from her husband and her step children, she feels lonely and useless living in the big house.

However, upon discovering Nettie's letters, Celie finds a new desire to live because her sister is still alive. "...Now I know Nettie alive I begin to strut a little bit. Think, when she come home us leave here. Her and me and our two children..." (*The Color Purple*, p.138). Nettie also serves as Celie's only link to her children. Nettie gives Celie pride in her children who were intelligent and prosperous in Africa, which gives Celie new found confidence. All her life, Nettie was the one who always supports and loves Celie, but when Celie does not receive her letters, she looks Sofia for her inspiration. Sofia is the wife of Harpo who serves as an example of independent woman. She is a strong woman who at first intimidated Celie but after getting to know each other they become friends and support each other in the course of the abuse they each suffer from. Sofia encourages herself by fighting back against men's domination. She doesn't want to be like her mother who lives under her father's feet, who never fought for herself. Sofia's physique and attitude becomes a shock to Celie when Mr. ___'s son, Harpo, brings her to the house to meet his father, Sofia look half her size. "But she still big strong girl. Arms got muscles. Legs, too. She swing that baby about like it nothing," (*The Color Purple*, p. 41). Later when Sofia does not listen to Harpo's request both Celie and Mr. ___ provoked him to beat his wife. When Harpo tries to beat her, Sofia fought back. When Sofia came and confronted Celie about what she has suggested to Harpo, Sofia revealed that she has pity on Celie and told her that she should fight back too. After that conversation, Celie and Sofia supported each other and became friends.

The years passed by, the mayor and his wife saw Sofia in town, they comment on how cute that woman looked. The mayor's wife asks Sofia if she would like to work for her as her maid, which upsets Sofia. When Sofia refuses, the mayor slaps her, but she knocks him back. As a result, Sofia is beaten to near death and put in the prison. When Sofia is out of prison she is sent to work for the mayor's wife as punishment. She is not allowed to see her family or any men but Celie still goes to visit her and as a result their bond became stronger. Meanwhile, the woman who inspired her to act on her own and become independent was Shug Avery. Shug is the hero of the story and Celie's best friend as well. More than anyone else, Shug teaches Celie how to be her own person and step upon her feet. She is someone Celie admires since she was young. Shug's enthusiasm and

charm are the qualities Celie never dreamt of having until Shug walks into her life. She also said that there are four strategies that can be followed by women. One of them is by having own job.

It can emphasize their status as an individual who actively derives their own dignity by having financial independence. This inspired Celie to be successful in business by making pants. It means that she can be regarded as an independence woman, in which it is influenced by Shug Avery. Upon her return to her home, she inherits her father's home. Thereby, she is completely separated from the man who held control over her. She can receive her sister's letters and make her own money. The people start to love and recognize her. Celie's finding her identity is rooted from her society. Firstly, she has to face a dreadful life; she lives in patriarchal family in which she must be obedient to the male members, especially her Pa and her husband. Secondly, in her struggle, unconsciously, she meets other women who influenced her to be a better woman and inspired her not to be obedient to men anymore. When she got her consciousness she realized that she has to fight back against male domination. Celie tries to free herself from the 'system' that binds her under the male dominance. She realizes that having an identity is very useful to live a contend life.

After regaining her identity, Celie encounters with Shug Avery. Shug Avery is a great woman who has a deep influence in celie's life. When Celie joins Shug's trip after leaving her husband's home, it proved to be a major experience that helped Celie in finding her identity, both as a woman and as a useful member of her community. Shug Avery, the lover of Celie's husband, is admired not only for her physical beauty, but also for her ability to earn a living as a singer. Her profession enables her to lead an independent life, the type of life that is accepted as a privilege only for the male members of the society. This relationship makes Celie self confident and develop her ability to appreciate her, and to discover whatever is valuable around her.

It is due to Shug Avery's influence that Celie leaves Mr. ____, her husband, and becomes an economically and socially empowered woman. "I am happy, I got love, I got work, I got money, friends, and time. And you alive and be home soon," (*The Color Purple*, p. 193). By the end of the novel at this point; it could be interpreted exclusively on the ground of feminist ideology in which, Celie can strongly fight back against her husband by saying, "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman...," (*The Color Purple*, p. 187) when she decides to go to Memphis. In this very moment Celie's consciousness starts growing, she remarks "I'm pore. I'm black; I may be ugly and can't cook. But I am here" (*The Color Purple*, p. 187). In Memphis she does her business of sewing pants. She is a very successful woman, enjoying her newly gained position as an independent wage earner in Memphis, far from her native community. Then finally, she returns to her family and she is able to change Mr. ____, 's perception, and establishes a normal human relationship with him.

When her consciousness as a woman develops, Celie finds her identity as a woman that she has to step up on her own feet. She should not depend on men because women are not inferior to men. At last, Celie gains her independence. In *The Color Purple*, Walker builds a way where man and woman establish ideal relationships. Her message is that women must stand up against the unfair treatment they receive at the hands of men and that they must do this by helping one another. The women in the novel, even those who have interests in the same men, nevertheless band together to support and sustain one another throughout the novel. People who used to suffer in their struggling ultimately succeed and win their happiness they deserve. Thus *The Color Purple* does not only exhort black women but all other oppressed women in the world that they are able to live an independent life both physically and economically. In order to be free from patriarchal domination and establish harmonious relationship with men, women should learn how to be independent with their efforts and keep on fighting against the prejudice and the patriarchal domination from men. In fact, Alice Walker's true intention from writing this novel is not only to give voice to black women but also to provide them with a path to follow in order to emancipate and get their freedom. Walker shows us the evolution of her major character, Celie, from being a sexually abused child to a passive wife and finally to an emancipated woman. Celie a black poor and uneducated African American girl is able to change her situation. She is a symbol of hope that impresses the readers by her strength, faith and courage.

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