

Existential Predicaments of Celie in the *Color Purple* of Alice Walker

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Abstract

The novel, “*The Color Purple*” is a triumphant story of Celie. The chief character Celie’s narrative begins with her victimization. She suffers the tyranny of the people and gradually overcomes her disadvantages and achieves a sense of self-worth. She begins to write letters to share her extreme depression and suppression. Her letters are addressed to God who is her usual addressee as she does not know to whom else she can write and share her inner conflict and silent suffering. This is because of her being raped repeatedly by her stepfather and also warned by him that it would be better for her not to communicate it anyone about this at least not anyone except to God. And also she convinces herself that she has been a constant source of exploitation and had no hope (or) desire to know her body. She shows a state of her degradation and fear of losing her life and shelter once for all.

Keywords: Predicaments, Struggle, Oppression.

Introduction

Alice Malsenior Walker is a distinguished American author, poet, and activist. Born on February 9, 1944, to sharecroppers Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Lou Tallulah Grant, she was the youngest of their eight children. Her parents resisted the expectations of landlords who required the children of black sharecroppers to labor in the fields from her childhood. In 1952, Walker became partially blind because of a gunshot accidentally done by one of her brothers. Her family was unable to take her to the hospital in time for quick medical care, because of their dire circumstances. As a result she was grappled with her vision impairment and feelings of alienation, she found to get out of the situations in reading and writing poetry. She began to start her writing career from the young age of eight years. Her first poetry collection was completed while she was a senior at

Sarah Lawrence College. Walker briefly paused her writing career while she was in Mississippi, where she contributed to the Civil Rights Movement. In 1982, she released her most renowned and critically acclaimed novel, *The Color Purple*, which achieved significant success. Critics considered *The Color Purple* as a landmark in her writings. Andrea Ford of the *Detroit Free Press* praised Walker for bringing out such a remarkable novel.

Celie’s Letters: Voice began from helpless Silence

The novel *The Color Purple* is powerful narrative centered on Celie, who is the protagonist. Celie’s journey begins with her bitter experiences in life which are result of her victimization. The narration endures the oppression inflicted by those who were around her. Over the time, she began to rise above her challenges and by this she discovers her self-worth. She began to express her profound feelings of despair and repression by writing letters that are primarily directed to God. She does so because she feels that there is no one else to her with whom she can confide her internal struggles and silent anguish. This sense of isolation is because of repeated abuse in the hands of her stepfather. Her supplications to God reminds us the depth of her helplessness and desperation.

The enormity of her circumstances weighs very heavy to her. For a long time, she kept the only option of having unwavering trust on God, firmly believing that He will shower blessings upon her eventually. In her letters one can see she pours her love and hope poured by her. They are whole-hearted expressions of her innermost thoughts. Throughout the novel she communicates solely with God unlike other characters which is the result of bitter experiences both emotional and physical isolation she had. At a later stage she feels abandoned by God and so she begins to turn to her sister Nettie to overcome the distress. Letters of her shows that they stood as unique expression of her true feelings besides deeply personal. These letters represent a distinct voice of her separating from others. She has no interest in sharing her letters with anyone, as they are intensely filled with her private emotions. Throughout her journey, one can observe her growing inner strength and eventual triumph. Through Celie, Walker illustrates the internal struggles that exist beneath the surface. Celie’s letters are born from a place of desperation and serve to safeguard the essence of her being. She shares that her father never had at least a kind word to say to her and rather warned her to do what her mammy didn’t.

Celie’s Sacrifices Filled Love and Protection

Throughout her actions, Celie demonstrates her readiness to defend those who she cares for. Though a victim of her father’s oppression, Celie selflessly offers herself to him to safeguard Nettie from being harmed and does not disturb her ailing mother, who has just given birth to a child. Similarly, she stands up for Shug against Mr. Father when he arrives to criticize. In a moment of silent rebellion, Celie spits into the man’s water. She endures her own suffering willingly to protect her mother and later Nettie from Fonso’s brutality. Additionally, she chooses to marry Albert to prevent her sister Nettie from being forced into a marriage. Celie sends Nettie away from the farm to protect her from Albert, being fully aware of the fact that she might face risk of losing her one and only family member who is also a friend. This clearly illustrates that Celie’s love for others surpasses her love for herself. Celie bears three children with her stepfather, but they are taken from her; the first is born and subsequently killed, leading her mother to inquire about the baby’s fate, to which Celie responds, “God took it,” indicating that her father disposed of the child to conceal his abuse. The second child, a boy named Adam, and the third, a girl named Olivia, are given to a local couple. Forced into a marriage with Albert, Celie endures severe mistreatment and abuse. She submits her body to him devoid of love or emotion, telling herself, “I make myself wood,” and reminding herself, “Celie, you a tree.”

She also persuades herself that she has been a perpetual victim of exploitation, lacking both the hope and desire to understand her own body. This reflects her state of degradation and fear of losing life along with security leads her to accept all the mistreatment. Celie's sense of alienation root causes from lack of self-awareness and the oppressive behavior of her husband. Harpo, one of the sons of Mr. ____, marries Sofia, who is a strong and physically formidable woman. When Harpo begins to mistreat her, Sofia stood up for herself, and this made Celie to captivate her defiance. Celie becomes intrigued and inspired by this liberated expression of femininity so she begins to draw near to Shug Avery, who is a vibrant and transcendent blues singer in the novel. Through friendship with Shug Avery, Celie understands her own worthiness of love and respect. It is through Shug Avery that Celie discovers Mr. ____ has been concealing letters from her sister Nettie, which detail Nettie's journey to Africa with a missionary couple. Celie also learns that Alphonso is not her biological father. As she befriends Shug Avery, Celie gains new insights and begins to model her life after Shug. She grows more independent by embracing Shug's perspectives. Celie admires Shug even before meeting her, envisioning her as the epitome of glamour and independence. "Celie sees a picture of Shug Avery and dreams about her. Shug is apparently gorgeous and fashionable" (letter 6).

Healing Through Love: Shug Avery and Celie's Bond

Shug Avery cares for Celie, leading Celie to develop feelings for both Shug Avery and Albert. When Shug Avery reciprocates her affection, Celie finds it very difficult to accept. Shug Avery, vibrant and dynamic character, understands the complexities of love. But her tendency to love multiple people at the same time complicates matters. Celie learns to recognize own worth and begins to believe in herself through her relationship with Shug Avery. The narrative emphasizes the predicament of Black women, who often find themselves as victims by Black men, who began to trap in detrimental cultural stereotypes surrounding masculinity. Celie's attachment with the fiercely independent Shug Avery promotes a sense of "Sisterhood". Through Shug Avery, Celie learns not only to gain self-respect but also develops a profound faith in an all-knowing God. This same faith is reflected in Alice Walker's own experiences, ultimately shaping her perspective.

An unwavering depiction of racial and sexual oppression intertwined with a sense of hopeful transcendence. Celie envisions the colors that Shug Avery should wear, suggesting "something purple, perhaps with a hint of red" (page 20). Celie remained largely submissive throughout her journey, with a belief that it would be safer for her to endure than to resist and risk her own survival. The life narrated in her letters was marked by a sense of bleakness. She tolerates the sexual abuse from Fonso, then the loss of her children, then the cruelty caused by Albert, then the separation from Nettie, and the uncertainty surrounded with Shug Avery's affection. These bitter experiences of oppression characterized her existence always to be filled with poverty, hardship and discrimination. Despite these challenges, Celie holds on with her faith. Celie's ability to withstand situations, thrive for unconditional love, and determined pursuit of truth are the central traits of her character. These outstanding qualities emerge from a belief in her, even when that same withers off. Her remarkable strength serves as a testament to humanity, as she finds it easy to love when she feels loved in return. Celie remains a compassionate and gentle spirit. She channels her suppressed anger towards Mr. ____ and ultimately leaves to join Shug, where she embarks on a successful venture in paint-making. Sofia serves as both a contrast and a reflection of Celie. Having endured an abusive childhood, both women confront the tyranny of those who presume a natural right to dominate Black women. Sofia embodies the most evident legacy of slavery within the narrative, yet she retaliates with twice the force of the abuse she receives. Celie admires this strength in herself. Sofia faces severe consequences for her defiance against white community, ultimately relegated to the role of a maid for a white woman, challenging the Mammy stereotype. Celie maintains a steadfast, platonic love for Sofia, which is evident in her visits to the jail to care

for Sofia's wounds during her imprisonment. Celie frequently visits her throughout the year of her confinement, noting, "She's supposed to be in jail for twelve years" (letter 38).

Celie provides encouragement and support to Sofia, empowering her in difficult times. Through her relationship with Sofia, Celie discovers the strength found within women's solidarity. Later it is brought to light that Mr. _____ has undergone a huge transformation besides Alfonso has passed away, leaving the estate. Celie's pursuit of truth stands out as one of the most remarkable qualities. Being poor, black and female forced her to be in the lowest social tier.

The social hierarchy in the southern region forced women to be in the vulnerable position. As a female, she has experienced sexual abuse forcibly by her stepfather and her husband which is a reflection of the patriarchal society where women were primarily considered as sexual objects. In her journey with quest to challenge this unjust system, she faced too many obstacles. Coming from a poor background, she lacks access to education and, as the eldest daughter, is expected to remain at home to care for her brother Fonso and manage household duties. Fortunately, Miss Beasley and Nettie provide her with private lessons, although her ability to learn is hindered by the physical and emotional trauma. Through her relationship with Shug Avery and the establishment of a business, Celie ultimately achieves independence which she thrived for. Celie joyfully reunites with her sister and children by the end of the novel. Celie's journey can be identified by her profound transformation. Initially, Celie is depicted as a victim of rape, violence and humiliation at the hands of men. But her instinct for survival lead her to accept all of her situations without resistance. Celie endures various forms of suffering as she was trapped by the dominant male figures in life. But by the end, she is depicted as a symbol of willingness, bearing the weight of her suffering with a blend of fear and hope for survival.

Conclusion

Celie's strong will to withstand all of her ugliest situations stood crucial for her survival. By the end of the novel, the characters gather to display a sense of communal harmony. Harpo highlights the importance of July 4th by noting that "white people are busy celebrating their independence from England... so most black folks don't have work, we can spend the day celebrating each other" (p. 243). Celie acknowledges her identity as a black woman and perceives herself as unattractive. However, Celie failed to understand that survival should not come at the loss of dignity. It is necessary to recognize that Celie's growth is very much influenced by the strong women in her life: Nettie, Sofia, and Shug Avery who stood as pivotal in her journey. Her love for her sister Nettie made her to understand her own worth.

Alice Walker, through Celie, brings out the central theme of self-esteem, a common aspect among the black writers. Walker expresses her apathy for those who divide the people based on the underrated attribute of black skin. She also emphasizes the significance of female attachment in the name of friendship and sisterhood within the black community. Walker defines Womanism as a more empowered variant of feminism, akin to how purple represents a stronger version of lavender.

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