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The Role of Self-discovery in Alice Walker's The Color Purple

Arpita Sawhney
Dept. of English
Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra

Alice Walker was an American writer whose novels, short stories, and poems are noted for their insightful treatment of African American culture. Her novels, most notably *The Color Purple* (1982), are focused on the struggles of black people, particularly women, and their lives in a racist, sexist, and violent society. Walker's Pulitzer prize and American Book award-winning novel, *The Color Purple*, marks the apex of her career. It gained international prominence, as the writer did herself. Her novels, short stories, poetry and essays are all about a search for truth. *The Color Purple* is unique in its pre-occupation with spiritual survival and with exploring the oppressions, insanities and triumphs of black women.

The Color Purple is told through a series of letters written by the protagonist Celie to God. Written in epistolary form, "this novel chronicles thirty years in the life of Celie who moves from incest victim to lesbian love and entrepreneurship" (Watking 7). As a poor, half literate black woman with a sad personal history, Celie lacks the apparatus for success and happiness. Raped and impregnated by her father, Celie is forced to marry a man she doesn't love i.e. Mr._____, whose original name is Albert. Celie, a victim of incest, is forced to give up her two children. Sometime after Celie gets married, Nettie, her sister, runs away from home and goes to Celie's house. Mr. __, who initially wanted to marry Nettie, makes sexual advances towards her, which causes her to leave the house. Celie advises Nettie to find the woman she once met at a store. She doesn't know what happens to her sister after she leaves. She doesn't hear anything from Nettie and assumes that she is dead.

The black rural South community in which Walker sets the novel is extremely patriarchal. Most of the black male characters dominate women and do so in a violent and oppressive manner. They are not only physically violent but sexually and emotionally abusive, making the women with whom they live feel fearful, worthless and inferior. The novel depicts how black women are the victims of black men, themselves locked into the

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destructive myths concerning the nature of masculinity. Celie has many misconceptions of herself and her world. Due to her upbringing of pain and mistreatment, and her ignorance of a better world, Celie's image of herself and her own potential is very different from reality. In The Color Purple "the role of male domination in the frustration of black women's struggle for independence is clearly the focus" (Watkins 10). Women in the novel overcome their oppression through female solidarity which aids them in self-discovery. This leads to breaking of the shackles of gender and race.

Female ties take many forms—some are motherly or sisterly, some are in the form of mentor and pupil, some are sexual and some are simply friendships. These relationships among women form a refuge, providing reciprocal love in a world filled with male violence.

As a young girl, Celie is constantly subjected to abuse and told she is ugly. She decides therefore that she can best ensure her survival by making herself silent and invisible. Celie's letters to God are her only outlet and means of self-expression. To Celie, God is a distant figure, who she doubts cares about her concerns. A major impact in the protagonists self realization is Mr. _____'s mistress, a blues singer named Shug Avery. She plays a pivotal role in Celie's metamorphosis. She frees Celie from Alberts's bondage. "With the arrival of severely ill Shug Avery, a blue singer, Celie's process of self growth and development starts. This event which should break up any household proves oddly restorative; a bond between Celie and Shug develops, almost to the exclusion of the useless Albert" (Prescott 67-68). For the first time Walker's women achieve an affirmation of self which is the "re-appropriation of her body, the most exploited target of male aggression" (Ross 26). This is characterised by her struggles to liberate her body from mere object of sexual possession by man to a state wherein she learns to "love herself and value her body in her own right" (Ross 26).

From Shug, Celie learns that Albert has been hiding letters written to her from Africa by her sister Nettie, a missionary. After the revelation that Alphonso, who raped her throughout her childhood was only her stepfather and that Mr. ___ withheld Nettie's letters for all those years, God suddenly seems the representative of the two groups that abused and betrayed her all her life--men and white people. "The God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful, lowdown" (39).

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Shug's maternal prodding also helps spur Celie's development. Gradually, Celie recovers her own history, sexuality, spirituality, and voice. When Shug says Celie is "still a virgin" because she has never had a satisfying sex life, Shug demonstrates to Celie the renewing and empowering capacity of storytelling.

Shug's renaming of Celie flies in the face of traditional definitions of virginity. Shug redefines virginity in her own terms, saying it is not lost when a man penetrates a woman but rather when a woman chooses to have sex and finds it physically and emotionally pleasurable. By redefining virginity in her own terms, Shug encourages Celie to take similar control over her own situation by interpreting it in a new way. The fact that Shug can suddenly term a married woman with two children a virgin introduces the possibility that there is a submerged, untold story in Celie's life. Shug helps Celie realize that there are alternatives to the mainstream ways of thinking, perceiving, interpreting, and behaving that the dominant members of society impose upon her. Recognizing the existence of these alternatives gives Celie a sense of control and is an important step in her move toward independence.

Shug also opens Celie's eyes to new ideas about religion, empowering Celie to believe in a nontraditional, non-patriarchal version of God. Mr. _____'s sister, Kate, feels sorry for Celie and tells her to fight back against Mr._. Nettie's long-lost letters, which Celie discovers with Shug's help hidden in Mr. _____'s trunk, fortify Celie's sense of self by informing her of her personal history and of the fate of her children. As her letters show, Celie gradually gains the ability to synthesize her thoughts and feelings into a voice that is fully her own. Celie's process of finding her own voice culminates with her enraged explosion at Mr. _____, in which she curses him for his years of abuse and abasement. Mr. _____ responds in his characteristic insulting manner, but his put-downs have no power once Celie possesses the sense of self-worth she previously lacked.

The self-actualization Celie achieves transforms her into a happy, successful, independent woman. Celie takes the act of sewing, which is traditionally thought of as a mere chore for women who are confined to a domestic role, and turns it into an outlet for creative self-expression and a profitable business. After being voiceless for so many years, she is finally content, fulfilled, and self-sufficient.

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The Color Purple, above all else, is the story of Celie's growth and self-discovery, which she achieves through her own commitment to herself and through the help of Nettie and Shug.

Instead of telling a man to beat his wife, she starts advising women around her to defend themselves. She tells Squeak she must make Harpo call her by her real name i.e. Mary Agnes. Squeak renames herself to Harpo, rejecting the diminutive nickname he has given her in favor of her real name, Mary Agnes. Just as Celie's renaming is enabling her to reinterpret the world, Squeak's renaming opens up the gifts that have long been hidden inside her, and she starts to sing.

When Harpo's wife Sofia is arrested for slapping the mayor, Harpo's girlfriend Squeak tries to get her freed. Ms. Gloria Steinam finds much to praise in Walker's novels_ "The struggle to have work and minds of our own, vulnerability…friendships among the problem of loving men who regard us less than themelsves… are major themes" (133).

While men in the novel seem to have no part in the female community, they too are working out their salvation. The weakness of the men results from their having followed the dictates of their fathers rather than having followed their own desires. Mr.——, for example, wants to marry Shug, but in the face of his father's opposition, he marries another woman and makes her miserable because she is not Shug. Harpo tries to model his relationship with Sofia on the relationship between his father and Celie. Ultimately, both men find a kind of salvation because the women stand up to them and because the men accept their own gentler side. The men, by the end of the novel, become complete human beings just as the women do; therefore, the men are ready for relationships with women. Near the end of the novel, Mr.—— is content to sew trousers alongside Celie. By the end of the novel, Celie and Mr.——, whom she at last calls Albert, finds a companionship of some sorts. Harpo is content doing housework and caring for the children while Sofia works outside the home. Each individual becomes worthy in his or her own eyes—and in the eyes of others. The separation between men and women is shattered, and fulfilling human relationships can develop.

Upon its publication, The Color Purple unleashed a storm of controversy. It instigated heated debates about black cultural representation, as a number of male African-American

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critics complained that the novel reaffirmed old racist stereotypes about pathology in black communities and of black men in particular.

Nonetheless, *The Color Purple* also had its ardent supporters, especially among black women and others who praised the novel as a feminist fable. Richard Weasley wrote-" as an African American male, I found little that was offensive. As long as black men seek to imitate the power structure that crushes them… and as long as black women submit then the morbid relationship of Celie, the oppressed and Mr. ____ the oppressed oppressor, will continue to be played out in homes all across America."

The Color Purple is most clearly about the transforming power of love; Celie, Shug, and many of the other characters grow and change after being loved and learning to love in return. After Celie has left Albert, he is loved and cared for by his son Harpo. Albert reflects on the way in which he has treated Celie and the lessons that he has learned from watching Celie and Shug together; he becomes more thoughtful and considerate as a result. Thus, he goes a deep personal transformation and begins to reassess his life. Albert and Celie become friends in the end and sit on the porch together smoking pipes and talking; when Nettie and the children return, Celie introduces Albert, along with Shug, as "her people."

Albert lets Celie teach him to sew and helps her to make the clothes that she sells; he is no longer afraid that he will lose his masculinity.Harpo has also learned to accept his "feminine" traits and is content to stay home and take care of the house and the children while Sofia manages Celie's store. Sofia learns to control her desire to dominate everyone and everything and is able to accept help not only from Harpo but also from the mayor's daughter, Eleanor Jane, who assists Harpo in taking care of the children. Along with Celie, both Sofia and Mary Agnes teach powerful lessons in forgiveness. As these women grow in their ability to love and accept themselves and others, they also learn to forgive themselves and others.

Some critics saw only the abuse by Celie's stepfather and husband early in the novel, others objected to the changes in the men, saying that for Walker's men to be good, they must be feminized. Bernard W. Bell has pointed out that The Color Purple is " …more concerned with the politics of sex and self than with the politics of class and race… its unrelenting, severe attacks on male hegemony, especially the violent abuse of black women by black men,

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is offered as a revolutionary leap forward into a new social order based on sexual egalitarianism" (Bell 157). He calls Celie's awakening to love and independence a "paradigm of a liberated woman". But a part of the self Albert has to deal with, however, is undeniably racial. Walker's main point in the novel is her concern in all her works: the survival whole of the people, whatever their abilities. The power of self discovery and acceptance is also hidden in the title of the novel which is highly symbolic. "I think it pisses god if you walk by the color purple in a field somwhere and don't notice it" (134). Knowing the spiritual value of the material world, Shug urges Celie to take pleasures that God gives freely. In this way, Shug gently prods Celie away from her emotional paralysis.

This color purple is limitless and goes on to signify every beautiful creation of God, including humanity. One must acknowledge the fact that human beings are beautiful ideas of God, and thus every human self deserves to be celebrated in its own right, just like every other object of nature.

Thus, all characters of the novel, howsoever different they are, come to realize their own value and learn to live with it happily. They refuse to be defined and labelled by others and keep on exploring themselves. This results in the metamorphosis of characters as gross as Albert.

The novel begins in abject despair and ends in intense joy. To discover how this transformation occurs, it is important to examine three aspects of the novel: the relationships between men and women; the relationships among women; and the relationships among people, God, and nature. At the beginning of the novel, alienation and separation are evident in all of these relationships, but by the conclusion of the novel, an integration exists among all elements of life. In terms of the relationship between men and women, no personal contact between the sexes is possible at the beginning of the novel, since the male feels that he must dominate the female through brutality.

According to Betty J. Parker Smith, in *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker,

> elevates Black women to the height of sovereignty. They wear the royal robe of purple. In her early works, women used their fragile strength to love everybody and anybody except themselves. Now, robed in purple, they receive and accept the right to

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> love themselves and each other. Love of self energizes them to the point that they break their chains of enslavement, change their own words, time and Black men. They are prepared to fight – eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. And they remain women – cry when they need to, laugh when they want to, straighten their hair if they take a notion. They change their economic, political and moral status with love. (Smith 480)

Thus, we see how self-knowledge helps a person in accepting his situation and finding ways to improve his prospects. If one is well acquainted with one's drawbacks, that knowledge can work wonders in his metamorphosis into a better human being.

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