

Black Women in the Black Patrimony: Self Discovery in Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*

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Abstract

The Color Purple, Alice Walker's third novel, won the American Book Award for Fiction and the Pulitzer Prize. This paper analyses this novel that is centred on black women and written in an epistolary form. The whole novel is written in a sequence of letters that becomes the genesis of intimation and revelation of the story of the principal character Celie. These letters evinces the inner psychological and emotional conflict, implicit distress, suppression of spirit of Celie. It also manifests Celie's intensifying inner vehemence and her ultimate triumph. The novel is a saga of a woman's battle against patriarchy, racism, sexism, and social determinism. The novel also probes the man-woman relationship and the suppression, subjugation and sexual exploitation of the black women in their relationship with black men. The novel somehow asserts the requisite for sisterhood that appears a prospect for black women liberation. *The Color Purple* accentuates the universal exploitation and persecution of black women through the character of Celie. It is concerned with sexual-politics and attacks on male dominance, predominantly the brutal assault of black women by black men.

Keywords- *Lesbianism, Letters, Oppression, Patriarchy, Racism, Sexuality, Subjugation*

Introduction

The Color Purple unfolds with a threat to Celie from her stepfather that petrifies her to express herself to anyone except God: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.” (TCP 1). She had no other choice rather than God and writes her letters to God expressing her terror, concern, apprehension, and aspiration in lucid shattered language. The coarseness and vogue of the language of her letters registers her disturbed and despondent disposition of mind. Celie's correspondence with God through her letters affirms her extant asserting that there is no happiness and contentment in her life - she is just alive and writing letters just to bear the pain and survive. She has been raped and impregnated by her stepfather whom she thought was her real father and feels ashamed to tell her mother about the act of incest that her father was doing with her. Her mother dies. She gives birth to the babies who were in fact the biological children of her father and the babies were snatched away from her by him. Gradually she starts hating herself and her body which was experiencing and forcibly tolerating the incessant abuse. She mentions in her first letter to God:

DEAR GOD,

I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.... First he put his thing up gainst 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 git used to it. But I don't never git used to it. And now I feel sick every time. My mama....too sick to last long.... My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God's. I don't know no other man or what else to say. He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can. He took my other little baby, a boy this time. But I don't think he kilt it. I think he sold it to a man an his wife over Monticello. (TCP 1)

Her step father kept telling her that she is ugly and she finally accepts it. She doesnot even have any physical or moral more strength left on her to have an opinion of her own. Later on, she was forced to marry Mr. Albert by her Father. He projects his own wrong intention and a bad image of Celie when Mr.____ asks for marriage: “Fact is, he say, I got to git rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. And she a bad influence on my other girls. And another thing — She tell lies” (TCP 9). She is persistently imposed of her ugliness and raped that causes her discern herself subservient, repressed and powerless. Celie marries Mr.____ who is a widower and a father of four children. He ill treats Celie and beats her. She modifies herself into a non-living thing. Walker writes:

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. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man. (TCP 23).

Celie depersonalizes herself where she feels a sense of alienation from the real self and eventually grows to become a sufferer of 'soul murder'. This alienation is the consequence of her ignorance and neglect of herself and the people around her and also because of the suppression, exploitation and harassment of her father and her husband towards her. She remained a silent sufferer to the torment. She was deprived of love and affection since childhood. She was deprived of good clothing also. When Albert's sister Kate asks him to purchase good clothes for Celie, his reply was horrendous and disgusting: "Buy Celie some clothes. She say to Mr. She need clothes? he ast. He look at me. It like he looking at the earth. It need somethin? his eyes say" (TCP 21). Despite all the frightful and gruesome occurrences she encounters, she never protested against his actions. She was too scared to contest or resist even when advised by people around her:

You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself. She replies: 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. Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr. Say. Cause she my wife.... Remind me of Pa." (TCP 22).

She just wanted to survive under any circumstances. Silence, sufferance and forbearance were her weapons to fight against the injustice done towards her. Initially it was her father who exploited and abused her and now it was her husband. Albeit she had the thought to extricate herself from the grasp of male domination and exploitation, she was too conditioned to adduce her black womanhood. She leads a submissive life not realising or acknowledging her hidden talent and ability. She entailed the arbitration of someone to persistently revive her of her distinctive worth.

A significant woman character that gets connected to Celie was Shug Avery, her husband's lover and the blues singer, who contributes remarkably in bringing transformation in her life. Celie lost her mother in her childhood days and particularly at a time when she was going through the traumatic phase of her life and identity crisis. At this stage, Shug befits as a good mother for Celie and nurtures an abode for her to liberate her real, suppressed and aching feelings and to institute a firm and independent personality. Albert brings Shug o his home without even informing Celie still Celie accepts her pleasingly with concern, tenderness and acclamation. She takes care of her to bring her back to health. She writes: "I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short" (TCP 51). Initially, Shug despised and repudiated Celie, but gradually started loving her and

took the position of Nettie and helps Celie to achieve transcendence by imparting the eminence and self confidence of Celie. Shug's little gesture of affection and care made Celie realise her value. Shug in fact named one of her songs as Miss Celie's song. Celie writes:

Shug saying Celie. She say my name again . She say this song I'm bout to sing is call Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick....I hum along a little with the tune. First time somebody made something and name it after me. (TCP 77).

The novel now progresses towards the theme of lesbian relationship and its vindication. Walker projects and emphasizes this relationship that was necessitated at this stage to restore freedom and fondness in Celie. It is evident that Celie had developed a sense of abhorrence towards the male since childhood because of the injustice being done to her by her father and then her husband. Hence, she could only open up with Shug. Shug was the first person to love Celie who teaches Celie to love herself and her feminine body. Infact, through Shug's guidance she uncovers the loveliness of her own body and learns the allure of love making. Actually, Shug awakens and kindles Celie's subliminal inclinations for identity- physical, social and psychological. She showers her motherly feelings on Celie and arouses Celie from her suppressed and unascertained feminine desires. They then advance into a lesbian relationship. She writes:

She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. *Um*, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say, *um*, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other. I don't know nothing bout it, I say to Shug. I don't know much, she say. Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too. (TCP 118)

Through Celie's lesbianism Walker sabotages the masculine racial chronicle of feminity. She assesses Black lesbian relationship as intrinsic and accentuates the gravity and value of female bonding in black community. The discrete structure of persecution that works in Celie's life indicates the operations of patriarchal authority and domination. She is challenged with her status as subject and her sexuality being ruled and commanded by men and her sexual submission imposed and executed through violence. In her petrified tolerance to such conspicuous male cruelty, Celie symbolically reflects Everywoman. Celie and Shug nurtures and nurses each other and prefers to be in woman-woman relationship. By violating the social taboo, Celie escapes from patriarchal law and retreats the stereotypical account of female sexuality and renounces the status assigned to her within the symptomatic system. Implicit here is an escape from patriarchal law. Shug discloses her personal

way of identifying God and proffers Celie a genderless God. Her counselling enables Celie to perceive God in herself and everybody else. She writes:

Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. 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. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. (TCP 202)

Celie embraces this pristine notion of God which Shug proposes. She writes: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (TCP 292). This displays her afresh and accepted perspective about God. Her sister Nettie who was very dear to her but stays far away from her finds a different God. She writes to Celie:

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 or Christ — but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us. And perhaps Samuel and I will found a new church in our community that has no idols in it whatsoever, in which each person's spirit is encouraged to seek God directly, his belief that this is possible strengthened by us as people who also believe. (TCP 264)

Literacy performs a significant part in the lives of black people, especially women. Although compelled to quit school because of her pregnancy yet she keeps her interest in books. Her route to escape from her stepfather's advances was literacy. She writes: "Us both be hitting Nettie's schoolbooks pretty hard, cause us know we got to be smart to git away" (TCP 10). When Celie discovers the letters sent to her by Nettie but stolen and hidden by Albert she starts writing to Nettie instead of God. Writing letters plays a key role in the existence of the two sisters, Celie and Nettie. When Celie was threatened by her stepfather to talk to anyone, she adopts to the written form of communicating herself. She writes letters to God, the only means through which she expresses herself and that gives her solace and an escape from agony and anxiety. The only means that could unite these sisters was writing. While leaving, Celie tells Nettie to be in touch: "I say, Write. She say, What? I say, Write. She say, Nothing but death can keep me from it" (TCP 19). Albert attempts to break the bond between them and hides Nettie's letter. Although Nettie knew that her letters will not reach Celie yet she never ceased writing to her. Nettie writes: It has been a long time since i had time to write. But always, no matter what i am doing, i am writing to you. And I imagine that you really do get my letters and that you are writing me back: Dear Nettie, this is what life is like for me" (TCP 161). These letters helps in preserving and exposing the history of the African-Americans. It stands as an analogy for the edifice of the black feminist literary heritage. It explores the gender oppression,

racism, brutal patriarchal authority, sexual abuse and child molestation, women harassment, and on the top oppression of Black women in Africa. It also reveals the strength of these black women to reconstruct their identity and space in the society. Shug represents the embodiment of feminist existential freedom by defying the rigid black patriarchal authority to settle down for a life of domesticity and determines her career as a blues singer. She grows powerful and independent by being true to her own experience. As Celie writes: “What I love best bout Shug is what she been through, I say. When you look in Shug’s eyes you know she been where she been, seen what she seen, did what she did. And now she know” (*TCP* 276). Shug’s personality in fact transforms Celie.

Celie’s antagonistic attitude is refined in the evolution of her personal conformation of art and that was sewing. She embraces a conventional feminine kind of art to consummate her severance from the hostile masculine society. Quilting signifies female bonding and reflects Celie’s approval and admiration for black women cultural heritage. Through this art Celie could stitch her tattered life and confidence. On Albert’s patriarchal refusal to Celie’s going to Memphis along with Shug, Celie ripostes her confidence and boldly contends:

“You a lowdown dog is what’s wrong, I say. It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need.... Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail.... You took my sister Nettie away from me, I say. And she was the only person love me in the world.... But Nettie and my children coming home soon, I say. And when she do, all us together gon whup your ass.... I got children, I say. Being brought up in Africa. Good schools, lots of fresh air and exercise. Turning out a heap better than the fools you didn't even try to raise....The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say.” (*TCP* 207).

Celie’s affirmation forms a protest and demand for her personal space inside the home and the outer society rejects the black patriarchal attempt to designate specific roles, patterns, grade and guidelines for Black women. Albert constantly rebukes and reminds her that she is black and ugly which leads Celie to believe and contrite on her blackness. She says:

My skin dark. My nose just a nose. My lips just lips. My body just any woman’s body going through the changes of age. Nothing special here for nobody to love. No honey colored curly hair, no cuteness. Nothing young and fresh. My heart must be young and fresh though, it feel like it blooming blood. (*TCP* 266)

Walker expresses remorse that blackness is not much respected and appraised. She despises those ignorant people who discriminate themselves from their forebears and abhor their origin and living because of their dark skin and she says that such people will certainly culminate in self-extermination. She emphasizes the fact: “the black woman is our essential mother — the blacker she

is the more us she is — and to see the hatred that is turned on her is enough to make me despair, almost entirely, of our future as a people” (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 291). Celie goes to Memphis along with Shug where Shug regards her as equivalent and a friend. She did not even appreciate when Celie worked for her. Celie writes: “... she say. You not my maid. I didn't bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet” (*TCP* 218). Celie creates a new identity in the feminine realm by discarding dependence upon others and left to challenge the world that makes her dismiss all the fear of encumbrance of her husband. Her confidence and self-esteem heightens and intensifies after she comes to know that Nettie is alive. In *The Color Purple* the language that Walker applies is realistic as well as symbolic as Celie's linguistic exercises mirrors her battle to establish a self. She denies to perforate the linguistic base of white patriarchy. She comments: “only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feels peculiar to your mind” (*TCP* 223). And thus preserves a discourse that is considered subversive.

Walker believes that the vicious character and frailty of the black men is the consequence of their having pursued their forebears. Their hegemony and subjugating nature is the outcome of their socially determined gender role. They attempt to preserve their masculinity by beating and commanding their wives and women and confining them only to fixed jobs. However, Men in *TCP* experience certain reforms and accomplish their redemption. They consider and evaluate their entity to flourish a satisfactory and healthy relationship with their women. After coming back home, Celie is amazed to discern an immense transformation in Albert. Rejection by Celie and his isolation changes Albert's inclination towards Celie. We get to realize this behaviour change in him through Sofia when she says: “Right after that he start to improve. You know meanness kill, she say” (*TCP* 231). Celie and Albert overcome their socially distinguished gender discrimination that empowers them to prosper toward harmonious entity. Albert tells Celie: “I'm satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feel like a new experience” (*TCP* 267). Celie writes: “Took me long enough to notice you such good company, he say. And he laugh” (*TCP* 283).

Conclusion

In the title of *TCP*, the colour 'purple' symbolizes the invincible female psyche. Celie epitomizes the suffering of the women. She ultimately attempts to accommodate and create a space for herself in the male-dominated society. She keeps fighting silently throughout her life, with her own people and in her own house. Celie's battle for a relevant existence exhibits her powerful determination and drive to excel the racist and patriarchal male dominated society. She strives for self respect and status. Celie, the used and abused woman finally emerges as a self-reliant and creative woman. She passes and progresses from the phase of being beaten and assaulted by people around her to start her own business. She journeys through the back room of her step father's house where she

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was raped, used and abused to her husband's house where again she was beaten and exploited to her lesbian lover's big house in Memphis returning to a house and a store of her own. She passes through being Albert's servant and sex object to receive his respect and love. Celie's life therefore undergoes a succession of changes. She represents the whole black women community surviving under the same oppressive situations. They struggle and come out as winners at the end. The novel though begins with a despairing hopeless mood but ends up in a pessimistic, promising and hopeful spirit. Celie is the marginalized black lesbian heroine of the novel being trapped within the black men patriarchal authority and oppression, who challenges the social system of female subjugation and sexuality and liberates herself.

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