



From Victimhood to Victory: Unpacking Celie's Empowered Self in The Novel of Alice Walker, The Color Purple

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Abstract: Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*, is a celebrated masterpiece in Afro-American literature. Through her writing, Walker gives voice to marginalized communities, capturing their struggles, culture, and resilience. With vivid storytelling, she weaves together the experiences, traditions, and emotions of Afro-Americans, creating a powerful narrative that resonate globally. Walker has always championed the right to live freely and fearlessly, as she says, "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women." (ISMG 250,-51) This paper explores how Alice Walker portrays Celie's transformative journey in "*The Color Purple*", from being a powerless victim of societal oppression to achieving empowerment. Through Celie's story, Walker illustrates the path from self-denial to self-discovery, highlighting the resilience and strength of a marginalized black woman in a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Racism, Sexism, Exploitation, Discrimination, Transformation, self-celebration

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INTRODUCTION

They call her ugly, they call her worthless
She believes them, she thinks they are correct
She walks with her head swung low and her eyes cut toward the floor
Too ashamed to laugh, too scared to be happy
But there is one thing they can't take
It's her spirit, her willingness to survive
Her desire to be with her young, to be with her own
And this spirit will not be broken.

(<http://rothgretchen.wordpress.com/2010/03/05/american-poetry-theme-Resistance>) /

This poem about disapproval and survival amid the hellish conditions seems absolutely suitable about the character of Celie central character of Alice Walker's world classic novel *The Color Purple* and compels us to explore more about the journey of Celie from Victimhood to Victory. This character of Celie is a vehicle for Walker to represent her age and specially the life black. As in his critical work about Alice

Walker Bloom's Modern Critical Views (Alice Walker), published in 2007, great critic Harold Bloom remarks about Walker in its Introduction chapter: "A contemporary writer who calls herself 'author and medium' is by no means idiosyncratic, and Alice Walker certainly seems to me a wholly representative writer of and for our current era. The success of *The Color Purple* is deserved; Walker's sensibility is very close to the Spirit of the Age." (1)

The saga of pain and suffering in the life of an innocent girl only fourteen years old, starts from the very beginning of the novel when she was caught by her father to satisfy his physical hunger. She is repeatedly raped by 'Pa' who later turns out her step father, becomes pregnant twice but the babies are taken away from her. She tolerates each and every blow of her father mutely without sharing it even with her mother because of the threat of her father, "You'd better never tell nobody but God; it'd kill your Mammy".(1) The novel's opening highlights the pervasive theme of male oppression, which profoundly affects Celie's life. She suffers repeated instances of rape and brutality, leading to a disconnection from her own body and a sense of being controlled by her abusers. As Gabriele Griffin remarks, "the body constitutes the site of oppression and become the source of permanent anxiety. The body is a central theme in the novel, with the main character, Celie, having no autonomy over her own body. She's subjected to relentless abuse from a young age, rendering her a helpless object of exploitation. She alienates herself from others because no one is there to soothe her, to pacify her and to show her the rays of new sun after dark and stormy night, and here we find that ". . . how alone woman is, because of her body." *ISMG* (248)

Her 'Pa', to get rid of that black dumb Celie, trades her off to Mr. Albert, a widower with five children. Celie tolerates the humiliation of being looked upon as a ragistered property and the agony of the degradation hurled at her. Her father introduces her to Albert considering her as a cow. It feels really heart wrenching when he says; "She ugly. . . But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain'n't gonna make you feed it or clothe it" (9)

She accepts this proposal only to provide a shell for her beloved sister Nettie from the lustful gaze of Mr. Albert and was taken away by him only to nurture his uncivilized children and to maintain his house and his sexual hunger. This is the tragedy of Celie that the marriage which was a way for her to escape from the hellish behavior of Pa, has thrown her into another ditch of male domination in the form of the tyranny of her husband who thinks, "Wives is like children. You have let' em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating". (37) For him the definition of wife is a reflection of the chauvinistic behavior of male dominated society. According to his concept of wife, she should be submissive and blind follower of the males in the house always ready to satisfy them in every possible way. Celie turns herself into wood and bears every blow passively because she is not aware about to fight and hit back to protect her self esteem amid the dark sea of pain, sufferings, traumas and twice affliction of racism and sexism. Celie becomes quite insensitive to happiness and sorrow; she is just passing her days and nights without any hope, enthusiasm and celebration. For her only being alive is sufficient.

When kate, sister of her husband advises her, "You got to fight them, Celie,I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself." Here Celie opposes the validity of protest and explores a new way of

life, "I don't fight I stay where I am told. But I am alive." (22) Here what compels us to ponder is the transformation of Celie in to a tree, and in the words of famous critic Boade, it is a narrating example of "a black woman's proximity to the passive suffering and agony of nature". (Baode 38).

Initially she does not know the meaning of celebration, the meaning of self discovery and the meaning of resistance, but circumstances never remain same, as remarks P.B.Shelley in his famous poem *Ode to the west wind as a classic expression of optimistic approach, if winter comes, can spring be far behind?*"(Ode to the West Wind) And this spring, this celebration also enters the life of Celie and she launches her ship for her voyage towards self discovery. Other counterparts of Celie like Nettie, her dear sister, Sofia, the wife of her step son Harpo and Shug; the beloved of her husband, work like pillars to give support and strength to Celie. These women play a pivotal role in empowering her, transforming her from a timid and reserved individual to a confident and self-assured person who can express herself freely and take charge of her life.

Sofia's strength and independence inspire Celie, showing her that women can defy societal expectations and take control of their lives. Sofia's defiance against racism and sexism makes Celie realize that black women's struggles stem from systemic injustices, not inherent flaws, and that fighting back is essential to empowerment. When Celie disappointedly confesses to Sofia "This life soon be over; I say. Heaven last all ways"(47). Here Sofia suggests her "You ought to bash Mr. head open..... Think about heaven later." (47) Thus Sofia becomes her teacher to teach her to fight with the exploiters for achieving her proper place on this beautiful planet called earth. As Celie finds her voice and expresses her anger, she embarks on a journey of self-discovery. By writing, she begins to redefine herself, tapping into her creative potential and asserting her identity.

Celie's transformation from a voiceless and oppressed individual to a confident and self-aware woman is a gradual process, catalyzed by the support and solidarity of sisterhood. Celie turns most effectively towards self celebration with the arrival of a very strong character Shug Avery, who is a symbol of women's empowerment and who works like a pole star for Celie to enlighten her path amid the dark sea of racism and sexism. Shug's profound love for Celie, blossoms into a deep physical and emotional connection, empowering Celie to affirm her own worth and find joy in her existence. Shug Avery, a singer of blues, works to provide a will to protest to the voiceless people and power to the weak. It emerges as a great support for Celie to teach her that inspite of so many odds of life how precious it is, and how much need is there to protect it for its celebration. Shug's exploration of Celie's life from a new perspective leads to Celie's transfiguration from a defeated passive victim to a victorious confident warrior. From her Celie also gains guidance for a new vision of God as Shug says; "God love admiration. . . .Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."(203)

Till now Celie was avoiding color purple, means, all happiness in her life. She was unaware of every kind of celebration but now she is awoken from her sleep and is ready to find her new horizon, and to fly in her own sky. It is Shug who names a song after Celie, and this gesture is the first boost for her low self esteem. Shug assumes the role of Celie's Protector when she hears that Albert beats her as Celie says, "He beats me when you not here. . . .for being me not you." (78-79) Celie also discovers the wonders of her

body, the very body which was once a cause of her loneliness and helplessness, under the guidance of her dear friend Shug, whose love and protection becomes a soothing balm for the burning bosom of long suffering Celie, always deprived of love, support and compassion. This very love of a mother friend and beloved opens the door of self celebration, self empowerment and self elevation for Celie. Now she is aware of the beauty and the utility of her body, which gives her a lot of pleasure in the company of Shug.

Celie's affection for Shug is depicted as; "little like sleeping with mama, only I can't hardly remember ever sleeping with her. Little like sleeping with Nettie, only sleeping with Nettie never felt this good. It warm and cushion. . . . It feels like sleeping with Mr. ____ at all." (119)

She is not a slave now to anybody because she is aware of her worth and of the ways of hitting back against the tyranny of male supremacy in order to occupy proper place, based on equality. Revelation of her dear sister, her only relative Nettie's letters hidden by Mr. Albert, works like a fuel to give spark to the long suppressed anger in the deep corner of the heart of Celie. This trivial activity of her husband empowers her strength and her desire of taking revenge for every wound tolerated by her. Mr. Albert tries to pour down this frustration on Celie by his familiar tactics of disgusting humiliations, as he says to her, "You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam he say, you nothing at all." At this Celie more emphatically and powerfully register her reply: "I'm pore, I am black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'am here." (213-214)

Celie is not that dumb cow who used to tremble even on hearing the loud voice of her husband but now she is capable enough to turn into a symbol of women empowerment against male dominated society that thinks that the world exists only because of it. Her caliber to respond Mr. Albert is almost beyond the approach of an ordinary black woman, even Shug is shocked to hear her attack on Mr. Albert, when Celie says, "Untill you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail.... Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice.the jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot." (214)

Now empowered, Celie breaks free from her oppressive past and joins Shug to create a nurturing, female-led home filled with love and joy. She embarks on a path of self-sufficiency, leveraging her sewing skills to build a thriving business, "Folks pants unlimited", symbolizing her newfound independence. She achieves liberation by an artistic profession, a creative activity and thus establishes herself independent from every point of view and is able to come out of male made boundaries.

With her positive approach and firm determination Celie explores a path to enter into the cosmos of the Almighty lord without any discrimination of race and gender only as an adorable child of her creator. After achieving her own identity, her own place, she celebrates the beauty of life, beauty of self and the beauty of each and every particle of this Universe by loving it. Celie returns home a transformed person, no longer seen as a mere possession or object, but as a complete individual - wise, capable, compassionate, and vibrant, deserving of respect and dignity. Celie who was satisfied only to have "church going clothes in (her) chifferobe" now is eager to try various colourfull dresses and fabrics. "Then too I feel different. Look different Got on some dark blue pants and a white silk shirt that look righteous, little red flat heel sleepers, and flower in my hair." (224) Life affirmation and self-realization not only leads the path of Celie towards a new dawn but it also affects the life of that Mr. Albert who was once a brutal representative of male dominated society. Now he is forced to think from a new point of view, from a new aspect to give equal

place and respect for his female counterpart. So it is not only the celebration and journey of Celie but also of all those, who are related to her.

At last, to conclude this research paper we can say that *The Color Purple* is a triumphant tale of resilience and courage, celebrating the unbreakable spirit of Celie, a black woman who bravely resists societal constraints and forges her own path to self-discovery and empowerment. Harris writes, "The novel has become so popular that Alice Walker is almost universally recognized as a spokeswoman for black people, especially for black women and the novel is more and more touted as a work representative of black communities in this country." From this point of view the title of the novel in itself is very significant, as "a celebration of the beauty, the pleasures of living and how that celebration is at the centre of spiritual and personal growth"(CLCP,66) as this growth is resembled in the last letter of Celie in which she addresses every part of this universe, as the sky, the stars, the moon and the trees etc. in order to celebrate it and to be a part of it. To emphasis this empowered transformation of Celie, the reference of Mary Donnelly is absolutely authentic who states in the Introductory chapter of her critical work *Writers and Their Works, Alice Walker: The Color Purple and Other works*; "Walker's heroines nevertheless articulate clear visions not just of the wrongs they face, but also of the hope and strength that cannot be quenched within them. Not every Walker heroine works up the courage to say, as Celie in *The Color Purple* does to her abusive husband." (8)

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