

Role of Patriarchy and Sisterhood in the Formation of Identity in Alice Walker's Novel *The Color Purple*

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Abstract

Alice Walker's novels mainly focus on the lives and problems of Black female characters and their hardships and struggle to achieve independent identities. Alice Walker's third novel, The Color Purple was written in 1982. The themes of patriarchy, male domination, the subordination of women, and violence are shown in the relationship between Celie and the men in her life. Education and economic independence are shown as a way to get oneself free from the clutches of male domination. The importance of sisterhood is shown as an important factor in shaping and forming the identity of one's own. This paper tries to look deeply at the difficulties, sufferings, and crises that are partly created by the female characters themselves and partly by the external factors. The relationship between Celie's development as a woman and her relationship with the women around her is analysed as she leads towards freedom because of the sisterhood and motivation provided by the other female characters.

Keywords: *Identity crisis, sisterhood, patriarchy, independence, freedom, education, violence*

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Introduction

The Color Purple is an epistolary novel written by African American writer Alice Walker. It is the story of an uneducated girl named Celie who lives with her mother, her sister, Nettie, and the stepfather whom she calls Pa and believes to be her real father. As Celie's mother cannot fulfil her husband's sexual desire due to her illness, Celie has to go through physical and sexual violence. The stepfather rapes Celie continually and impregnates her twice and takes away the children from her. As soon as Celie's mother dies, Celie is married forcefully to a widower, Albert whom Celie calls Mr. ---- -during the novel. At the new place also. Celie has to go through the violence and dominance of her husband. Things start to become better for her when Shug, Albert's mistress comes to live with them. Thereafter we see the growth and development of Celie as an individual and as an economically independent woman. So, we get to see two personalities of Celie. One is a less confident girl who struggles to create herself in a male-dominated patriarchal society and who has been the victim of patriarchy. Another Celie is an independent confident woman whose identity is created out of the shared efforts of sisterhood.

Celie: The Victim of Patriarchy

In *The Color Purple*, we can see that Celie is expected to be submissive, obedient, dutiful, and passive. She is exploited sexually, physically, and mentally by men causing intense suffering for her. At the very outset of the novel, we feel the depth of her suffering. She lost her father when she was two years old. Her mother got married to a black man named Alphonso. However, Celie assumes her stepfather as her real father and calls him Pa. When Celie's mother refuses to have sex with her stepfather due to poor health condition, her stepfather takes advantage and harasses Celie sexually. He demolishes Celie's identity when he rapes and impregnates the poor and helpless girl. He says very cruelly: "[Celie] You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't." (Walker 3)

Celie goes through mental and physical pain, but she does not have the courage to talk about her problems to anybody. We can feel her pain when she says:

"I cry and cry and cry...How it hurt and how much I was surprised. How it stung while I finish trimming his [stepfather's] hair. How the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stocking."(Walker 103)

Celie's stepfather threatens her and silences her. Instead of getting punished, he continues raping her because Celie does not dare to tell anybody out of threat. She does not even try to express her feelings when he says: *"You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy."(Walker3)*

Celie is so frightened of this threat that she does not consider her feelings or her pain and suffering. She submits herself to her stepfather which kills her sexual appetite for males forever. One of the important reasons for the cruel behaviour of the stepfather to Celie is that he, as a Black man, is not considered a worthy person in the White society. He is aware of the nature of oppression of Whites to the Blacks. So, as he is helpless to react against White people's oppression, he ill-treats and corrupts his wife and her daughter to reveal his hidden power.

Celie goes through a crisis in her mind because of the guilt and confusion regarding her relationship with her step-father. She does not think that she is a good girl. She says: *"I am I have always been a good girl."(Walker 3)*

Celie is destroyed totally and to find peace and solace, she writes a letter to God. Through the writing of letters to God, she tries to cure the horrible effects of frequent rapes. Wendy Wall states:

"Initially, she [Celie] writes to heal the rift that has ensued from her sexual violation, to create an identity from fragmentation.... Her writing is neither a pure channel of communication nor a duplicitous self-misrepresentation, but a complex means of restructuring herself, an active process

in which she moves toward self-realization through the mediation of language."(Wall 261-262)

Celie does not know about the fact that the person who rapes her is her stepfather, not her biological father. She is psychologically disturbed and haunted by the feeling of disgust and shame by the fact that her children are her siblings too. It is only after several years when he realizes the truth, she dizzily declares: *"My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa."*(Walker 160)

This statement indicates a great shock in her mind because the matter which had created a lot of mental troubles turns out to be untrue. But finally, she is free and released from the fact that she has not committed incest and her children are not her siblings too.

After the death of Celie's mother, her stepfather arranges Celie's marriage to a widower named Albert who is in love with Celie's sister Nettie. To convince Albert to marry Celie, the step-father offers a cow to Albert along with his daughter. This shows a commercial agreement between two men where Celie is considered a property, not a human being.

"The marriage negotiations take place entirely between the step-father and the husband: Celie is handed over like a beast of burden, identified with the cow that accompanies her. Physically and psychologically abused by stepfather and husband alike, Celie is denied status as a subject."
(Abbandonato 302)

Thus, Celie's individuality and identity are completely wiped out because of the frequent rapes of her step-father and because of her forceful marriage to a person who does not love her at all.

Celie is again locked in a patriarchal order at her husband's place. She is so much submissive that she cannot pronounce his name and she calls him as Mr. ----- . She is

treated poorly and becomes the victim of the cruelty of her husband as well as his elder son, Harpo. Her husband does not say anything to his son when Harpo attacks Celie. Her pain is felt in these lines. *"He picks up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breast. His daddy say Don't do that! But that's all he says."*(Walker 14)

According to Janet Saltzman Chafetz, because of the inequality which exists between men and women, men have more power over their wives and they will use their power to dominate women. At the same time, women are supposed to respect and surrender to the demands of men. They play the traditional role of being obedient and they only think about the advantages of their husbands. Bell Hooks defines such women as an object whose reality is defined by others and their identity is created by others. Celie is seen only as an object for her husband and is helpless to fight against her problems. It is during this helplessness that she tries to be someone whom her man desires without considering her desires. She does not even believe that she has a choice. So she becomes a submissive servant whom her husband likes.

Walker asserts: *"...black women are more loyal to black men than they are to themselves, a dangerous state of affairs that has its logical end in self-destructive behaviour."*
(Walker 318)

Celie depicts this loyalty of the Black women. She is so dimmed and confused by pain that she considers herself unworthy even of hope and gradually forgets her existence as a human being. She is a woman with no motivation, who is afraid to struggle for freedom and tries to perform her role as a good wife and mother. But one day she realizes that being only a wife and a surrogate mother cannot give her individuality.

Dr. Lalita Parihar states: *"High incidence of wife battering can be inferred from chronicles and descriptions of family life in the Roman empire, in the Middle Ages and modern times. The legally nineteenth-century wife was a non-entity."*

Marriage meant that her identity as an individual was suspended; she was merely a part of her husband's property. "(Parihar 35)

During slavery, if a black slave woman is submissive and obedient then she is highly valued by her employers. But Celie is not respected at all by her husband which makes her husband crueller than the white masters. Celie states: *"Most times I pretended I ain't there. He never knows the difference. Never ask me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep."* (Walker 74).

It is observed that Celie is haunted in two different worlds: her parental home in the past and her husband's home in the present. She is only given pain and suffering by the men in her life. She does not have any hope left. She cannot rebel against the men of her life and eventually she loses her self-worth and self-value.

The Element of Sisterhood

The strong sisterhood playing role in the freedom of black women is depicted in *The Color Purple*. In contrast to Celie who is less confident and weak to fight against the hardships of life, we have other female characters like Nettie, Kate, Sofia, and Shug who play a major part in the emancipation of Celie. Their relationship and influence on Celie are explained here.

Nettie and Celie

Nettie is Celie's sister with whom she has grown up together in the same place and under the same influence and same circumstances. However, there are many differences in their lives and their identities. The strong relationship of sisterhood that both the sisters share is the most effective in forming Celie's identity. Both the sisters live in a family that lacks love, care, and tenderness. However, they both come forward to protect each other in their male-dominated patriarchal family.

One of the major differences between the lives of the two sisters is education which has an immense role to play in the emancipation of women. Celie was forced to leave the school by her stepfather while Nettie was allowed schooling. Because of the formal education and the influence of her teacher, Nettie has learned to be independent and not submissive like Celie. Being a younger sister, Nettie tries to convince her stepfather to allow Celie also to go to school but she fails. Eventually, Celie is married forcefully to Albert. Nettie does not want the same fate as Celie and so she runs away to Celie's house to find a safe shelter. There Nettie realizes that her sister is trapped in another male-dominated place. She encourages Celie not to be subordinate to her husband and his children. She says, *"Don't let them run over you, Nettie says. You got to let them know who got the upper hand....You got to fight. You got to fight. But I [Celie] don't know how to fight. All I [Celie] know how to do is stay alive."* (Walker 18)

Yvonne Johnson states: *"While Celie is unable to fight 'Mr.---' verbally, the subversive, ironic humor and parody that she shares with Nettie are early indications of Celie's growing consciousness and voice. Celie and Nettie are acting in a 'womanist' manner because their humor is audacious and outrageous, and somewhat self-assured."* (Johnson 106)

Since Nettie is educated and believes education and learning to be a woman's strength, she teaches Celie how to read and write. She tries her best whatever she can do to educate her sister Celie. For example, she sticks different cards on the wall and writes different words on them so that Celie can learn them even during doing household work. It is because of Nettie's teaching Celie writing letters that Celie writes letters to God to find mental solace in Nettie's absence.

Nettie does not forget about Celie and her miserable life even when she is in Africa with the missionary couple named Reverend Samuel and Corrine. From Africa, she writes letters to Celie to make her aware of different facts. For example, she informs her about their paternal root, about the stepfather's reality, about the tribe, culture, and tradition

of Africa, about the existence of America, and so on. Among all these, the most satisfying news for Celie given by Nettie is that her children are alive, and they are living with Nettie. The missionary couple has adopted them, and they are receiving a good education, living a good life. This news gives her hope in the darkness of her life. It gives her the strength to struggle and fight against all odds of life.

Kate and Celie

Kate is Albert's sister who understands Celie's feelings as a woman. She knows that Celie deserves to be respected by all as she is a kind and good housekeeper. She even tells her brother to buy a new dress for Celie because she knows that Celie will never ask for anything. She has sympathy for Celie when she knows that Albert and Harpo make her life more miserable. We see her advising Celie to fight for herself. She says: *"You got to fight them [Harpo and Albert], Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself."* (Walker 22)

Though the relationship between Kate and Celie is not as strong as Nettie and Celie, we can see Kate appreciating Celie as a woman of worth and respect.

Sofia and Celie

Sofia is Harpo's wife who encourages Celie in every possible way. She is portrayed as a strong, confident girl who will never submit to men or anyone. She even tells Celie to fight against her husband. She has come out of oppression and subordination of men. When she became pregnant out of wedlock, her future father-in-law abuses her. She stands very strong and courageously against Albert. This makes Celie think of Sofia as 'army' and 'men'.

Even after marriage to Harpo, she does not allow her husband to subordinate her just for the sake of saving her marital life. Sofia and Celie live in the same place which makes Celie realize that Sofia is so much different from her. Sofia is so capable and strong that sometimes Celie feels jealous about it. That can be a reason that when Harpo talks to Celie regarding the behaviour of Sofia, Celie advises him to beat her.

Sofia is someone who believes in sisterhood so she won't accept a woman advising her husband against her. She confronts Celie and makes her realize her mistake. Celie apologizes and confesses that she did such an act out of jealousy for her. That time Sofia feels pity for Celie and compares the misery of her life with that of her mother who was enslaved by her father. That is the reason that Sofia can identify with Celie and her problems and that is why she tells her to fight against her husband and the power of unity. She says:

"...All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers; I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men." (Walker 39)

Finally, Sofia and Celie become friends and for the first time, Celie uses 'us' when she says that they both talked and laughed a lot together. The quilt that they both make together stands as a symbol of unity and sisterhood. This is the first step of the commencement of Celie's journey towards self-realization and freedom. Sofia plays the role of a mentor in this journey who teaches Celie to be independent and courageous to overcome humiliation.

Shug and Celie

Shug is Albert's mistress who plays the biggest role in the liberation of Celie. Nettie, Kate, and Sofia try their best to encourage Celie to fight against her problems but they cannot do anything in practice. Shug is an independent, outrageous, audacious, and courageous woman. When she meets Celie for the first time, she calls her ugly. However, she changes her mind getting affected by Celie's love and compassion. They both become not only friends but lovers too. Shug feels Celie's sufferings and tries to save her from Albert's clutches. She helps Celie in being a new woman with an identity. She encourages her to fight against Albert's cruelty, to love her body and soul, and to change her views in general.

Through Shug, Celie goes through a rebirth of self-realization and emancipation. Shug patiently listens to all Celie's problems and sufferings. She even orders Albert not to beat Celie anymore. The first action Shug did to show Celie as a worthy and respectful person was to dedicate a song named "Miss Celi's Song"(Walker 70) to Celie and that too in front of Albert who never considered Celie even as a human being. The best step is when Shug informs Celie about Nettie's letters that are hidden by Albert for several years. Shug tells Celie to ignore men in her life by saying:

"...You have to git man off your eyeball before you can see anything at all...Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He tries to make you think of him everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't."
(Walker 177)

Another important lesson Shug teaches Celie is to love her own body. Celie thinks that her body has always been under the control of men be it her stepfather or her husband. She feels that the main cause for her suffering is her body and so she does not love it. Shug tells her to find beauty and love and to value it. The relationship between Shug and Celie comes as a mark of rebel and fight against a male-dominated patriarchal society.

Celie waits for some miracle to happen and to save her from all the suffering. She has strong faith in God when she says,

"I used to get mad at my mammy because she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is. Couldn't stay mad at her. Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible says, Honor father and mother no matter what. Then after a while every time I got mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick. Felt like throwing up. Terrible feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all." (Walker 40)

Shug helps Celie to overcome Patriarchy and to love her body. Moreover, she also changes her views on Christianity and God. She says,

"I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it...she says. God loves all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves'em you enjoy'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like." (Walker 176)

Finally, Celie's attitudes and ideas are changed and she stands in front of men in her life. Instead of being an obedient submissive wife, she starts talking about her problems confidently. When Albert says, *"You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all...[Celie answers] I pore, I'm black, I may be ugly, and can't cook...But I'm here".*(Walker 187)

Her words 'I am here' shock Albert who is speechless by her courage. Everyone is surprised when she announces to leave her husband Albert.

When Celie lives in her own house with her family, she has no desire to dominate men even after being more powerful than her husband. She has got her financial independence and she allows her husband to befriend her. Bell Hooks Writes,

"Yet Celie's progression from an exploited black woman, a woman, as a sexual victim, is aided by her entrance into the economy as a property owner, manager of a small business, storekeeper—in the short capitalist entrepreneur. No attention is accorded aspect of this enterprise that might reinforce domination, attention is focused on how useful Celie's pants are for family and friends...Embedded in the construction of sexual difference as it is characterized in The

Color Purple is the implicit assumption that women are innately less inclined to oppress and dominate than men; that women are not easily corrupted.” (Hooks 53)

Conclusion

These women are bonded strongly, not only physically but spiritually and emotionally also. Nettie serves the role of a teacher to Celie. Kate shows her compassion towards Celie by appreciating her. Sofia shows Celie her struggles and encourages her to fight. Shug not only encourages but stays with her throughout her journey as a partner. Charles L. Proudfit states:

"This "female bonding," which occurs over an extended period, enables Celie---a depressed survivor-victim of parent loss, emotional and physical neglect, rape, incest, trauma, and spousal abuse—to resume her arrested development and continue developmental processes that were thwarted in infancy and early adolescence.” (Proudfit 90)

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