



## Alice Walker's the Colour Purple: an Allegory of Self-Acceptance and Self-Definition

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### ABSTRACT

*Facing the overwhelmingly powerful patriarchal culture, Celie unresistingly places herself under the domination and authority of men, as revealed in her way of naming men, her fear of men and of God. While later through the wholesome influence of Sofia and mothering nurturing of Shug, Celie's sense of ego is gradually awakened. She finally enters the world of creation. In return, the arrogant Shug and Amazon-like Sofia become more compassionate and gentle. While the black women enjoy their close bond and dearly selfhood, the black men as exemplified by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Harpo also go through the process of reexamination of their existence. They no longer view women as objects; instead they begin to acknowledge their equal status as human beings. So at the end of the book, both black men and women discover in themselves the ability to love and to be loved and learn to embrace the selfhood, sisterhood and brotherhood. In this sense, The Color Purple can be interpreted as a modern allegory in which the characters finally reach the state of self-fulfillment and the state of perfection through pains.*

**KEYWORDS :** Patriarchy, Self-Acceptance, Self- Definition, Transformation, Allegory

### INTRODUCTION

**Alice Malsenior Walker**, born in February 9, 1944, has been one of the most popular and celebrated American novelists, short story writers, poets, and activists in contemporary literature since 1970s. Walker was born to Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Lou Tallulah Grant. Her father, whose miserable condition was, explained in her words, "wonderful at math but a terrible farmer," had meager annual income from sharecropping and dairy farming. Her mother helped the family financially by working as a maid for nearly half of a day to help pay for Alice to attend college. Walker states that her early education had been "misery". She went to a "shabby segregated school that was once the state prison and that had, on the second floor, the large circular print of the electric chair that had stood there".

### ALLEGORICAL OVERTONES

Written in epistolary form, **The Color Purple** begins with Celie's confession of her having been repeatedly raped by her stepfather when she was 14 years old, and ends with the happy family union with her two grown-up children and with her sister Nettie. Throughout the book Celie goes through a hard but inspiring process of metamorphosis from self-acceptance to self-definition, from a life without joy and hope to a life full of love. Besides Celie, many other characters such as Shug Avery, Albert, Harpo, Sofia and Mary Agnes all have more or less undergone a certain transformation. In the light of the growth of characters and the delightful ending of the book, **The Color Purple**, with Celie in the forefront, can be termed as a modern interpretation of the traditional allegory in which the characters finally reach the state of self-fulfillment and the state of perfection through pains.

As a poor, ugly black woman, Celie tastes the bitterness of life as her daily bread. At 14, she was raped by her stepfather when her mother was too weak to satisfy his sexual desire. The shameful act results in the birth of two children who are taken away from her soon after their delivery. Later a loveless marriage with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ leads her to a more negative knowledge of her existence. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is persuaded into taking Celie as his wife only because of her dowry of a cow, his urgent need for a woman to take care of his house and his four children and his need for a working hand in the field. To Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Celie is simply a tool for him to make whatever use he needs. When he first looks up and down at Celie, he seems to be selecting a cow. To top all these misfortunes is the forced leaving of her beloved younger sister Nettie, who is the only emotional tie she could enjoy. With these unspeakable tribulations falling upon her one after another, Celie has never had a vague idea of fighting back. Even though Nettie constantly instills the concept of resistance into her mind, Celie who views herself as a silent tree just holds to her simple creed of life, "All I know how to do is stay alive" (Walker, 16). So after Nettie is driven out by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ since she rejects his seduction, the only way for Celie to retain the power of staying alive is to establish a communication with God in the form of letters. In this way, she could somewhat pour out her suppressed emotions on the one hand and keep those embarrassing days from being known on the other hand.

The self-negation of Celie is most distinctly revealed in her way of naming the men who practice power over her. In a male-dominated society, women's voice is silenced. Before her awareness of identity is awakened, Celie does not dare to speak out the names of those men who strongly command authority over her. Such is the case with her husband, her father-in-law, and her stepfather. To Celie, all these men become a Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ or a he so high above a she. For instance when her father-in-law comes for a visit when Shug Avery is staying with them for recovery, Celie writes, "Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ say to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Just what is it about this Shug Avery, he say" (Walker, 54). Even for Samuel who is amiable to women, Celie addresses him as Reverend Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ because of his esteemed status as a pastor. Only Harpo, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s son; Tobias, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s brother; Jack, Sofia's brother-in-law; Grady, Shug's husband; and Germaine, Shug's young lover are given direct names throughout the whole journals simply for the reason that they could not preside over her.

### CELIE'S SELF-REALISATION

While men tend to deny women's existence as equal beings, Celie gradually learns to appreciate her selfhood under the wholesome influence of strong female characters like Sofia and Shug. In the first place, Sofia's boldness in challenging Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s refusal of her marriage with Harpo and her insistence on doing things in her own way instead of placing herself at Harpo's command arouse Celie's jealousy to such an extent that Celie unhesitatingly suggests Harpo beat Sofia when he does not know how to make her obedient, "I think about how every time I jump when Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me. Beat her. I say" (Walker, 35). Once this thought escapes her tongue, Celie's uneasy jealousy is appeased for a short while. However, very soon she is tortured with the sense of sin and guilt on the part of Sofia. She could not sleep well for over a month. Later, she has to confess to Sofia, "I say it because I'm a fool, I say, I say it because I'm jealous of you. I say it because you do what I can't" (Walker, 38). Celie's weakness and helplessness remind Sofia of her dear mother who never says anything back to her father of sympathy for Celie, Sofia reconciles with her, and even encourages her to punch Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s head open before she thinks about heaven. The sisterly communication begins to call Celie up from her inactivity. That night she sleeps like a baby. It seems that Celie has cast off her old self and is ready for the regeneration.

With Sofia, Celie realizes how powerless and subservient she is. While with Shug Avery, she finally recognizes the precious value of self, and she is able to hail her being. Shug's coming to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s house for recuperation is a turning point in Celie's life. Before that she has been infatuated with Shug's picture, "Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my mama. She about ten thousand times more prettier than me" (Walker, 6). Since then, Celie has taken Shug as an idol to worship for her physical charm and confident smile. Unsurprisingly, when Shug, the third part in the triangle love, is taken home by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Celie does not feel a bit hurt. Instead, she is willing to serve Shug as her caretaker. When

nobody wants to take in Shug who is supposed to be infected with some tuberculosis or some nasty woman disease, Celie's tender care brings her back from the hands of death.

In the meantime, Celie throws herself into the nourishing influence of Shug. When Shug discovers that Celie is still a virgin, she prompts her to look at her private parts in the mirror. For Celie, to be able to appreciate her own body is an initiation to acknowledging her own identity. As E. Ellen Barker comments this episode:

"The mirror reflection of her own body opens the door for possibilities in herself, and with her newfound identity, Celie is able to break free from male domination and join a community of women for support, and she begins to establish an identification through a network of female relationships with Shug" (Barker, 61).

With Shug's guidance, Celie's vision is broadened beyond her own obsession with survival only. For the first time she thinks about the world. "What the world got to do with anything, I think. Then I see myself sitting there quilting between Shug Avery and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Us three set together against Tobias and his fly speck box of chocolate. For the first time in my life, I feel just right" (Walker, 57).

To Celie, men are brutal oppressors. What she has got from them is neglect, mock, torment, and abuse. "I don't even look at men. That's the truth. I look at women, though, because I'm not scared of them" (Walker, 5). When men become an opposing power, women are the only source of love and courage she could turn to. From Shug, she not only obtains the awakened sexuality, but also acquires the ability to love herself and others, and the ability to construct her identity. Celie's awareness of her existence as an equal being starts with the song Shug makes in her name. "First time somebody made something and named it after me." (Walker, 72) As a hard-beaten bird, Celie is waiting for the feathers to fly, to breathe fresh air and to embrace new life. With Shug's nurturing, Celie evolves "into an independent self-actualized woman, no longer benignly accepting the emotionally crippling conditions that has enslaved her" (Barker, 55).

### A MODE OF TRANSFORMATION

As Celie gradually draws herself out of the limited world of survival, her original vision of God is shattered as well. For a long time she has been seized with the fear toward God since she strongly believes that God is White and Male. This fear is later replaced by anger and depression when she finally realizes that God has never listened to her prayers. What God has given her is only pains upon pains: a lynched father, a crazy mother, a lowly stepfather and a sister whom she probably could not see again

Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug... And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it (Walker, 190).

Celie is inclined to accept a genderless God. This new understanding is fortified by Nettie's interpretation of God, which is in accordance with Shug's. Therefore in the latter section of her journals, Celie stops writing to God, but to Nettie. In the last letter, she addresses to everything, "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (Walker, 286), for she begins to accept the belief that God is in everything, and she finds in herself the ability to seek God directly.

Leaving everything old behind, old life, old notions and old self, Celie enters a world of creation. Her creation is substantiated by her newly acquired power of naming and the act of pant-making. "To name is to take possession, to project one's own perception on the other" (Christopher, 103). This explains why Celie can in no way pronounce Mr. \_\_\_\_'s name and why she wonders who is Albert when Shug naturally speaks out that name. Whereas, toward the end of the book Celie is able to address Mr. \_\_\_\_ as Albert since she has gained full control of her existence.

Likewise, pant-making signifies that Celie's spiritual rebirth is secured by economic independence. When Celie learns the fact that Mr. \_\_\_\_ has hidden all of Nettie's letters, she is so angry that she has the urge to kill Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Luckily Shug dissuades her from murdering and

motivates her to make some pants. By substituting the needle for the razor, Celie succeeds in entering the world of business and making a good living out of her skills. "Celie literally sews her life back together when she begins to design pants" (Walton, 193). The diverse patterns of pants Celie designs herself reveal that she is already on the way of creating a wholly new life for herself.

Celie is finally able to articulate herself and realize that life is more than the matter of survival. Her self-realization can be also defined in her language which many people attack as vulgar and dirty. Walker justifies Celie's words herself, "She has not accepted an alien description of who she is, neither has she accepted completely an alien tongue to tell us about it. Her being is affirmed by the language in which she is revealed, and like everything about her it is characteristic, hard-won, and authentic" (Walker, 64). Even though the language Celie uses is far from being standard and is even somewhat nasty, language has become an inalienable part of her determination to assert her own identity, to tell people who she is.

The lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug has always been condemned since the book was released, but it is just their intimacy and affection for each other that propel Celie's spiritual journey to selfhood. Shug's influence on Celie has been viewed as "the mothering influence" (Barker, 22). During their interaction, not only has Celie transcended her objectification and ultimately ascended to the status of subject, but also Shug Avery has become more compassionate and gentle. When she is first taken into Mr. \_\_\_\_'s house for care, Shug, whose eyes are "big, glossy? Feverish. And mean" (Walker, 44), looks Celie up from head to foot in a very arrogant manner and gives her a blunt comment, "You sure is ugly, she say, like she ain't believed it" (Walker, 44). She treats Celie as if Celie were her servant. Later she brings it to light that she behaves so all because Albert married Celie. In like manner, she has ever been so mean to Albert's first wife, Annie Julia, although she herself has never really intended to marry Albert. Haughty and unconquerable as she seems, Shug turns out to be more understanding and sympathetic as a result of the love and care Celie endows her and the great capacity for endurance Celie exhibits. As the intimacy between them grows, they are more likely to place themselves under the nurturing of each other and try to take advantage of the most valued qualities in the other and make them a part of their own being.

Celie and Shug take great delight in their transformations, so do Sofia and Mary Agnes. They two function as the mirror of Shug and Celie respectively. As strong-willed and invincible as Shug, Sofia fights back in a manly way when Harpo tries to tame her. As the plot progresses, she turns to be mild as Shug does partly because of her painful experiences in the jail and partly because of her awareness that fist cannot solve the problem once for all. In contrast to Shug and Sofia, Celie and Mary Agnes represent the typical image of oppressed black women, silent and obedient. At the end of the book, Mary Agnes follows Celie's suit, leaving behind the old neglected life and braving a new promising life as a singer.

### RACIST CONCERNS

As the other cause of black men's brutality, racism is not the major concern of *The Color Purple* even if it haunts black people for centuries. Since the book mainly deals with domestic violence in the black community, there are few descriptions about the black's contact with the white world except for Sofia's encounter with the mayor's family, Mary Agnes's meeting with the sheriff and the death of Celie's real father incurred by the jealousy of white businessmen. Yet through these simple sketches and especially later through Nettie's account of the sufferings of Olinka people in Africa where their life is threatened by the British industrialists, it is not difficult to catch the glimpse that the black still bear the scar of oppression by the white world. Under the destructive power of racism, black men feel "the need to recapture his masculinity through the oppression of the female" (Christopher, 102). They abuse and dominate their wives and children so that they could discharge their own oppressed and offended emotions.

In consideration of these dual pressures from father and the white world, black men are also the victims of social injustice. Like black women, they have to reexamine their current state of existence so as to achieve a full and true knowledge of self. Luckily, both Mr. \_\_\_\_ and

Harpo ultimately overcome their limitations and welcome the new change in their life. At the end of the book, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ humbles to make shirts to match Celie's pants and he even proposes marriage to Celie again. For the first time in his life, he feels that he lives on earth as a natural man. Alice Walker, in her book *Living by the Word*, admits that Albert "went deeply enough into himself to find the courage to change. To grow" (Walker, 80). The delightful change is also seen in Harpo. He gives up his attempts to make Sofia mind. Rather he prefers to stay at home, taking care of the children when Sofia goes out to work in Celie's store.

After years' struggle with the overwhelmingly powerful patriarchal culture, both black men and women bring themselves to a redefinition of self in the family and in the society. They discover in themselves the ability to love and to be loved and learn to embrace the selfhood, sisterhood and brotherhood. The last few lines of Celie's journal underline this dominating theme of regeneration in the characters whose experiences embody a modern version of tradition allegory:

I feel a little peculiar round the children. For one thing, they grew. And I see they think me and Nettie and Shug and Albert and Samuel and Harpo and Sofia and Jack and Odessa real old and don't know much what going on. But I don't think us feel old at all, and us so happy. (Walker, 289)

## CONCLUSION

Celie's personal transformation is amazing. It took a long time and much effort. Linda Tate asserts that the key to her self-transformation "lies in the ability to take control over defining oneself, naming oneself". Indeed, at the early stages of her story Celie is devoid of identity; she is "nobody", as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ puts it: "Who you think you is? You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. God damn, he say, you nothing at all" (Walker: 100). Celie is totally incapable of defining herself. She sees herself, both physically and emotionally, "as living in irreconcilable fragments". She begins her narrative by writing, "I am" which she then negates by crossing out, indicating her lack of self-confidence and self-acceptance. "Celie has been fragmented into pieces which are given away to others" (Walker: 125). All her life is a series of sacrifices - to Pa's desires, to Nettie's safety, to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s brutality. She has been "torn" into pieces - torn from childhood by Pa's rapes, torn from her children, torn from Nettie. She can identify nothing of her own self; she does not feel she belongs in this world.

Through the narrative Celie must move toward her own self-acceptance and self-definition. This begins on the day she announces that she will leave Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ to live with Shug in Memphis. She states, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook But I'm here". Later, in a letter to Nettie from Memphis, Celie clearly articulates a new and more positive vision of herself: "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. And although Celie has never signed her letters before, she does so now emphatically, defining her new identity through her family relationships, her business, her love, her new place in the world.

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