

VIOLENCE AND SUFFERING IN ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE

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Abstract

Violence and suffering in *The Color Purple* are characteristically depicted as part of a greater cycle of tragedy taking place both on the family level and on a broader communal scale. Alice Malsenior Walker is an African-American author and a feminist. *The Color Purple*, novel by Alice Walker was published in 1982 which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1983. It is a feminist work about an battered and uneducated African American woman's struggle for empowerment. *The Color Purple* documents the traumas and gradual triumph of the protagonist Celie, an African American teenager raised in rural isolation in Georgia, as she comes to resist the paralyzing self-concept forced on her by others. Celie narrates her life through painful honest letters to God. *The Color Purple* was celebrated for the depth of its female characters and for its eloquent use of Black English Vernacular. Her works focus on the role of women of color in culture and history. Female characters such as Celie, Shug, Nettie and Sofia in *The Color Purple* are dominated both emotionally and physically. Celie is treated like a property and like a servant handed from one domineering black male to the other. Celie, the subjugated, tarnished, despised, battered, is transformed into an independent and liberated woman at the end of the novel. She is not a slave in the literal sense, but she is still very much dominated by the men in her life, not able to make her own decisions.

Key Words: Feminist, empowerment, trauma, triumph, vernacular

Alice Walker, was born on February 9, 1944, Eatonton, Georgia. She is 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), focus particularly on violence and suffering of women. Celie the central character is raped by her stepfather and beaten for many years by her husband, only to have Shug Avery intervene on her behalf. She bears one child who later turns up missing. When her mother asks where it is, Celie replies: I say God took it. He took it while I was sleeping (CP 99). Daniel Ross has stated that "To confront the body is to confront not only an individual's abuse but also the abuse of women's bodies throughout history; as the external symbol of women's enslavement, this abuse represents for woman a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status." (Ross 70). Sofia is nearly beaten to death by white police officers after pushing a white family; she nearly dies in prison. Nettie is almost raped by her stepfather and by Mr. __, and must run away in order to protect herself. Harpo tries, unsuccessfully, to beat and control Sofia, his first wife, and he beats Squeak until she leaves him for Grady. Walker writes of Celie, "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."(64) These cycles of violence are repeated across the South: Celie's biological father and uncles were lynched by whites jealous of their business success, and there is always the threat that, if black people agitate too much for their rights, they will be struck down by the white people who control the local and state government.

In Africa, too, this violence occurs within the local culture and in the relation between whites and blacks. In Memphis, Celie, for the first time, gives expression to her dormant potentialities and creativity. In a letter, written to Nettie, from Memphis, Celie communicates a new and 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. With our children Furthermore, Celie, for the first time at the close of this letter, signs emphatically, there by revealing her new sense of self that she, has acquired through her

relationships and her business. ‘your sister, Celie, Shug Avery Drive Memphis, Tennessee’ (CP 212). Men in the Olinka village have absolute control over their wives, and a scarring ritual takes place for all women going through permanently, leaving their faces permanently marked.

Celie also has to deal with the fact that she is forced by her stepfather to leave school when she first becomes pregnant, which shows how controlling her stepfather is. ‘ Kill it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can’ (CP 12). When Celie is forced into marriage with Albert, Celie is treated more or less like a slave in a slave auction. First, her stepfather has convinced Albert to marry her by telling him that Celie works hard and will obey him. Subsequently, Albert “looks her over like a head of livestock and marries her in desperation because he needs someone to cook and clean for him and take care of his four children” (Winchell 86). Celie is treated like property and like a servant here, handed from one domineering black male to the other. She is not a slave in the literal sense, but she is still very much dominated by the men in her life, not able to make her own decisions. In the end, Celie gains enough confidence to leave Albert, when she has learnt that there is a definition of God that even loves poor, ugly black women, because that is how she feels herself to be. The white British rubber dealers who take over the Olinka land end up killing a great many in the village, without concern for the humanity or customs of the Olinka, who have lived there for many years. At the end of the novel, Nettie and Celie’s children also return to the sustaining south. Celie’s experiencing extreme joy and fulfillment after reunion with her long separated family marks the final step in her quest for identity Alice Walker has been criticized for the unrealistic, fairy late ending of the novel. The ending of the novel “creates a utopia vision of new southern community” (Prekins 127).

But despite all this violence and suffering, there is a core of hope in the novel: the hope that Celie and Nettie might be reunited. The novel unfolds itself in “the process of Celie’s writing herself into being and consciousness, of her growing power and control as a writer” (Bloom 185). The novel’s narrative structure is closely linked to the theme of search for identity and history. It is this hope that, eventually, stops the cycle of violence, at least within Celie's family, and enables the reunion of many of the family members in Georgia at the novel's end. “sister’s choice” is the pattern of the quilt Celie and Sofia create together. The quilt becomes a symbol of the “female bonding that restores the woman to a sense of completeness and independence” (Inge 320)

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. Celie does little to fight back against her stepfather, Alphonso.

Celie’s evolution of self is unhurried and gradual, Her journey to self-realization is a long and laborious one. Linda Tate contends that Celie’s transformation stems from her “ability to take control over defining oneself naming oneself”(204). In the beginning, Celie is mere “nothing”. Mr. Johnson rebukes her “who you think you is?..... You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam you nothing at all” (IkennaDieke 164). At this stage Celie accepts Mr. Johnson’s contention that she is a mere “nothing”. She lives a desolate existence. She cannot even begin her narrative stating, “I am” due to lack of self-confidence and self-acceptance. As a result, Celie suffers silently and passively. As a result of her silence in the face of oppression, “Celie has been fragmented into pieces which are given away to others” (IkennaDieke 164).

Later in life, when her husband, Mr. __, abuses her, she reacts in a similarly passive manner. However, Celie latches on to Shug Avery, a beautiful and apparently empowered woman, as a role model. After Shug moves into Celie and Mr. __’s home, Celie has the opportunity to befriend the woman whom she loves and to learn, at last, how to fight back. Shug’s maternal prodding 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 also opens Celie’s eyes to new ideas about religion, empowering Celie to believe in a nontraditional, non-patriarchal version of God.

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 results 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 contented, 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 vent for creative self-expression and a profitable business. Moreover, the epistolary style of this novel. Enables isolated women to connect with one another within a patriarchal structure. Since the protagonist's energy is directed inward, letters give the reader the opportunity to access the characters private thoughts, emotional real and their psychological development. Walker effectively uses letter writing to convey her female protagonists' desire to break with the oppressive situations. In this context, too, isolation provides the appropriate space for Celie to voice her ordeal. (Lare-Assogba 51)

Alice walker shows how little black women have overcome the subjugation, patriarchy and sexual abuse. Her female characters have learnt from the painful experiences of slavery, domination, sexism, and racism of black men unseated of the domination of whites how to struggle to unchain their submission and suffering and be independent and strong women to live a purposeful life (O'brain 73). After being voiceless for so many years, she is finally content, satisfied, and self-sufficient. When Nettie, Olivia, and Adam return to Georgia from Africa, Celie's circle of friends and family is finally reunited. Though Celie has endured many years of hardship, she says, "[D]on't think us feel old at all. . . . Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt." (CP 111) *The Color Purple* movingly depicts the growing up and self-realization of Celie, who overcomes oppression and abuse to find fulfillment and independence.

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