Celie in The Color Purple: Tracing Her Journey to Emancipation and Selfhood

Nisha Gangan
Assistant Professor
Department of English
SV’s Sridora Caculo College of Commerce and Management Studies
Mapusa, Goa.

Abstract:

Pulitzer Prize winning author Alice Walker’s famed novel The Color Purple traces the life of a poor Black American woman, Celie, as she traverses her remarkable odyssey from subservience and abuse to freedom and self discovery. In her quest for emancipation and fulfillment she is aided by some remarkable, yet ordinary women like Nettie, her sister, daughter–in-law Sofia and mentor Shug Avery. The sisterhood that she forges with these women changes her outlook towards women’s place in home and society. This paper analyses her transformation from an abused and victimized docile young girl to an emotionally and economically independent woman who reasserts control over her body, achieves spiritual and emotional independence leading to a meaningful existence with self-respect and dignity.

Keywords: Color Purple, Walker, Celie, Black American Women, emancipation, transformation, selfhood.

Alice Walker’s celebrated classic The Color Purple,(1982) set in 1930’s rural Georgia, chronicles the journey to emancipation and selfhood, of a southern black woman, Celie, who is extremely docile and who submits herself uncomplainingly to every form of violence and trauma. Her only motive is to survive somehow, however degrading her existence might be. Exploited sexually and emotionally by some of her closest male relatives, she is a symbol of the mindless violence and sexism that black men and society unleash on their helpless women. Written in epistolary style, the story unfolds through a series of letters that Celie writes - first to God and then to her sister Nettie.

At the very beginning of the novel The Color Purple one is informed that the major concern of the novelist is the question of female subjugation. At the tender age of fourteen Celie, the protagonist, falls victim to both incest and child molestation. In fact, the very first letter that Celie writes to God indicates the miserable way she becomes a prey to the sexual advances and atrocities of her cruel stepfather. She is born to a large but poor black family. Besides the abusive stepfather, Celie has many younger siblings whom she has to look after. Celie’s helpless mother is sick from all the children she has had. Her husband then turns his attention to Celie. Consequently he makes brutal attacks on her and warns , “You better shut up and get used to it” (2) As a result of her stepfather’s rape she becomes pregnant. But he warns her against revealing it to anybody. He orders “you better not tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy (1). Thus silenced she takes his advice and tells “nobody but God” by writing the letters that provide the form for the novel.

As Trudier Harris (1986) puts it, “Her initial victimization at fourteen is only the beginning of a series of ugliness that characterize Celie’s life and that shows that she shares much with the women who have gone before her”. The female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, and here the sexual violation of Celie’s body “amounts to an
obvious lack of control over the most personal, private parts of herself. And she shares with countless women the subservience to men. To her stepfather, who might as well be a descendant of plantation owners and other historical and literary males who view women as “chattel”, Celie has little value as a human being and, beyond the sexual, none as a woman”.

Motherhood to Celie is a burden. While she is pregnant she has to do all the household chores all by herself. Her mother is too ill to help and her siblings are too young to be of any help. Celie manages to do everything as good as she can, but finds it hard to cope. “I’m big. I can’t move fast enough. By time I get the tray ready the food be cold. By time I get back from the well, the water be warm. By time I get all the children ready for school it be dinner time” (3). Even after enduring all the hardship Celie is not allowed to love and nurse her kids as her stepfather takes them away and sells them.

After abusing Celie, Alfonso, her stepfather ominously begins to eye her favourite sister Nettie. But Celie observes this: “I see him looking at my little sister. She scared” (4). Clearly a girl child isn’t safe anywhere and no woman is inviolable. Celie reassures the frightened sister saying “I’ll take care of you” (4). But frankly she doesn’t know how she can do that. She herself is a helpless victim of his lust and so is hardly in a position to influences anyone let alone her own tormentor. She can only turn to God for help.

Celie is soon removed from school, which she loves very much, to become the wife of Albert, and the mother of his children by an earlier wife. Her stepfather presents her as less than a whole woman to her future husband, convincing him to marry her because as he puts it “You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it” (9). Celie’s wedding day is desolate. She is attacked by one of her husband’s children who is unhappy with another woman taking his mother’s place. She writes to God: “I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve. His mamma died in his arms and he don’t want to her nothing about no new one. He pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breasts” (13).

Celie calls her husband Mr.—till the very end of the novel for she apparently cannot bring herself to write his name. Marriage for Celie is only an extension of her unhappy home life. Mr.—treats her with contempt and brutality. Celie is repeatedly beaten. She writes about her trauma:

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” (23).

The fact that Celie, in moments of extreme physical pain transforms herself into a tree, is a telling example of a black woman’s proximity to the passive and suffering agony of nature. Celie never defends herself against the attacks of her husband, expect in the end when she gains independence and plans to leave him to move to her ancestral house. She submits to his sexual advances though she has no feelings for him. It is also true that she has a deep rooted fear of Albert. He symbolizes to her power of men which she is perennially afraid of. The fear that she would lose her husband and become homeless, shelter less also disturbs her. Celie’s life is more a death-in-life, a life without hope, joy, or any indication of improvement. Nettie comments on this before she leaves her home. “I sure hate to leave you here with these rotten children... Not to mention with Mr.—. It’s like seeing you buried she say (18). Celie doesn’t dispute this observation. She says, “It’s worse than that, I think. If I was buried. I wouldn’t have to work” (18).
However, in her own estimation Celie is a survivor and those around her do not dispute this assessment of herself. As Harris puts it “But how she overcomes victimization to survive is the problem. Anyone can use her, or say anything to her, or commit any violence on her, and she will placidly say something to the effect that she is still there”. One example of this occurs when Celie’s sister Nettie visits the newly married Celie. To Nettie’s insistence that Celie resist her husband and children, that she should fight back, Celie can only respond: “but I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (18).

And initially “Celia survives by being a victim, by recognizing that fighting back causes one more problem”(Harris). After Nettie has been forced to leave Celie’s house because of her unwillingness to submit herself to Celie’s husband, she thinks that Nettie is dead. At the same time Kate and Carrie, Albert’s sisters suggest that Celie should fight her husband as well as his children. But Celie here is reminded of Nettie’s experience. In response she thinks: 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 (18). Her passivity is unrivaled and Celie is prepared to endure any ill-treatment and abuse to both her body and mind if she is allowed to merely live. The emphasis is on “allowed” because Celie continues to believe that others are responsible for her destiny, and that she can have only as much spaces they will grant.”(Harris)

Though Celie doesn’t know how to fight, she knows how to work. She excels in “woman’s work” and she is appreciated for her ability to work. When Albert’s sisters Kate and Carrie visit him they see that she is a “good housekeeper, a good cook and good with children” unlike Annie Julia, Albert’s first wife. In another instance when Tobias, Albert’s brother comes visiting he finds Celie quilting, and comments:”Always busy, always busy, he say. I wish Margaret was more like you. Save me a bundle of money”( 58).

Alice Walker here attacks the prescriptions in the family that perpetuates the notion of male and female roles. The male role dictates that the man performs “manly works, such as field work and carpentry which in the novel are done by Mr--- and occasionally by Harpo. The female role demands that women be domestic: she must clean her house, cook, and take care of the children. Society recognizes this division and it is not thought proper for men and women to trade these positions, and, if they do, they are subject to criticism and mockery. This is the reason why Celie is appreciated by everyone for, even under trying circumstances she doesn’t neglect the “woman’s work”. And this is the reason why the same society makes fun of Albert, a man, when he helps his mother in sewing. Marriage, which begins on this restrictive basis, merely perpetuates the stereotyped roles that its members are expected to play and again does not allow for deviation from them. Both the family and marriage are shown to operate on the assumption of feminine inferiority.

Alice walker does not spare religion and the established religious order in her analysis of black woman’s suffering. The church is shown to be an institution which is indifferent to the sufferings of women. Celie has always been a regular at the church even during both of her pregnancies, so she continues that tradition after her marriage with Albert also. Even though no solace comes her way her attitude towards religion is very clear. She accepts her step-father’s abuse and says “nothing at all because the Bible teaches that one should honor father and mother no matter what” (42). She also never tries to fight Albert’s misuse of her because “he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways” (43). On her role in the church, Celie comments:
I keep my head up, best I can. I do a right smart for the preacher. Clean the floor and the windows, make the wine, wash the alter linen. Make sure there’s wood for the stove in wintertime. He call me sister Celie, he says, you faithful as the day is long then he talk to the other ladies and they mens. I scurry bout, doing this, doing that. Mr.—sit back by the door gazing here and there. The womans smile in his direction every chance they git. He never look at me or even notice (45).

But the preacher does not seem to be concerned about the welfare of his “faithful Sister Celie” when she was twice pregnant before her marriage. He did not care to inquire about what had happened to the obviously deeply religious person.

But when Albert’s lover and blues singer Shug Avery comes to town the scene is different. Shug Avery is someone who refuses to accept the limitations that society imposes on a woman’s life. Naturally she becomes the target of attack:

Even the preacher got his mouth on Shug Avery, now she down. He take her condition for this text. He don’t call no name, but he don’t have to Everybody know who he mean. He talk out a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and street cleaner (46)

Not surprisingly, however, Celie does not hold with the virtues preached from the pulpit and repudiates conventional social behaviour as prescribed by Mr.-- ‘s father. Independently, she rejects the virtues which society applauds, and takes the ill Shug in to nurse. Mr.--’s father is furious at this behaviour. Astutely noticing his refusal to acknowledge her as a person even when he addresses her, Celie discounts Mr--’s father’s words and offer of sympathy

In fact Celie indentifies herself with the rebellious Shug from the very beginning of the novel, when she finds her photograph and begins to idolize the blues singer. Shug provides an ideal for Celie, since, unlike, the other women in Celie’s life, she is not broken through years of abuse. Pretty and different, she offers an alternative lifestyle:

Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somthin tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody moto car. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some…. An all night long I stare at it. And now when I dream I dream of Shug Avery. She be dress to kill, whirling and laughing (7).

But their relationship is not very smooth. Shug initially mistreats Celie and scorns her. But after treating Celie so harshly she is forced to admire the quiet resignation Celie has in responding to such treatment. Shug gradually comes to view Celie as the survivor that she is-- in spite of Albert and the rest of the world---- and she comes to believe that there must be something special about Celie even respectfully calls her Miss Celie. She feels valued and honored as reciprocates in kind. “So often treated as an object, Celie is put into the position of responding favorably to the first person other than her sister who treats her with the humanity she deserves”(Harris).

Shug’s deep-seated love and admiration for Celie results in a relationship that is both physical and emotional. As a result Shug inspires Celie to celebrate her existence and consequentially undergoes a transformation which encompasses her sexual awakening.
Daniel W. Ross (1988) has described this point very effectively by stating that “one of the primary objects of feminism is to restore women’s bodies, appropriated long ago by a patriarchal culture, to them”. In the same way Adrienne Rich (1976) feels that women must overcome the negative attitude towards their body if they are to achieve intellectual progress. She writes:

But fear and hatred of our bodies has often crippled our brains. Some of the most brilliant women of our time are still trying to think from somewhere outside their female bodies---- hence they are still merely reproducing old forms of intellection.

Of course, “coming to terms with the body can be a painful experience for women. Consequently, women often think of their bodies as torn or fragmented, a pattern evident in Walker’s Celie. To confront not only an individual’s abuse but also the abuse of women’s bodies throughout history. This abuse represents for women a reminder of their degradation and her consignment to an inferior status. Celie too has no desire to get to know her body because it is the source of her exploitation. However, Shug’s presence generates an erotic stirring and creates a spiritual bond between them”.( Hudson).

Also, Shug awakens Celie’s desire for identity most explicitly when she sings a song she’s just written for Celie. A Celie gratefully notes, “First time somebody made something and name it after me “(77). The act of naming something after Celie assures the integrity of Celie herself; she must be somebody to be the subject of a song. However, Shug not only becomes a model for Celie, but also a mother she never had. She protects Celie from Albert, unites her with her lost sister. Nettie and Nettie’s letters from the custody of Albert and also makes her financially independent.

Another woman who influences Celie in her search for selfhood is her step daughter-in-law Sofia, an Amazon who refuses to be dominated by her husband Harpo. But an independent woman has a more difficult time than one who meekly accepts her meager lot in life.Unlike Celie, Sofia does not succumb to submissiveness. She remains her own person, stands up to her husband refusing to be dictated to by the traditional roles of the woman both physically and emotionally. Celie is aware that Sofia is different from her. “ She don’t act like me at all. If she talking when Harpo and Mr—come in to room. She keep right on. If they askt her where something at, she say she don’t know. Keep talking” (36)

But Harpo, her husband, wants Sofia to behave like the submissive Celie: “ I want her to do what I say, like you do for Pa…. But not Sofia. She do what she want. I try to beat her, she black my eyes.” (66).Even though he loves Sofia, Harpo’s marriage is troubled because society has taught him that this is not the way a woman should behave. In fact his father too offers him advice on how to treat his wife. When he complains to him about Sofia’s behavior, he says: “Wives is like children you have to let them know who got the upper hand. Nothing can d that better than a good sound beating” (37).

But most surprisingly, when he asks Celie for advice she tells him “Beat her”. It is disturbing that years of abuse from men have not made her sensitive to the sufferings of a follow woman. She herself becomes an instrument of the patriarchal social order. “Celie is so indoctrinated and victimized by sexism that even she herself participates in its perpetuation” (Hudson –Weems 1989). It is pertinent to note that Celie cannot envision a place beyond home for women like her and Sofia. As she tells Sofia” He ..your husband…Got to stay with him, else,what you gonna do?” (37)
But Celie comes to realize her mistake soon. And when Sofia confronts her, Celie admits that she is jealous of Sofia’s ability to do what she is not capable of – “Fight” (42). At this, Sofia opens her heart to Celie. Her story: “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 uncles. A girl child ain’t safe in a family of men” (42).

This conversation is a new beginning for Celie. Both women bond over a moment of togetherness. The pronoun "us" is formally used: "I laugh. She laugh. Then us both laugh so hard us flop down on the step." Sofia then confesses to Celie that Celie reminds her of her submissive mother back home. She endured the same sufferings as Celie. Sofia reveals: “She under my daddy’s feet. Anything he say, goes. She never say nothing back. She never stand up for herself. Try to make a little half stand sometimes for the children but that always backfire. More she stand up for us, the harder time he gave her” (42).

But she is adamant that she would not repeat her mother’s mistakes. She warns Celie against any more advice to Harpo and says that she loves her husband “But I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me. Now it you want a dead son-in-law you just keep on advising him like you doing.” (43) In fact, she is ultimately forced, physically and verbally, to protect herself against her husband’s physical domination. After a physical confrontation in which she beats Harpo and he cries. She reveals: “He don’t want a wife, he want a dog” (69).

Consequently she walks out on him. But, she doesn’t change at all. Later when her mother dies, she and her two sisters, alongside their three brothers, serve as nontraditional pall bearers. Bewildered, Harpo responds: “Whoever heard of women pall bearers… I know she your mother… but still… what is gona look like?... Three big stout women pall bearers look like they ought to e home frying chicken… people use men to do this sort of this. Women weaker… people think they weaker, say they weaker, anyhow. Women spose to take it easy. Cry if you want to. Not try to take over “(197). Sofia’s strength and sense of selfhood, like that of Shug Avery, has a very positive effect on Celie in that Sofia helps her to redefine her personhood, elements of retaliation against sexual subjugation.

Alice Walker, in fact, in The Color Purple underlines the importance of co-operation and bonding between women in order to fight sexism in society. But at least, for the first portion of the novel, the women are mostly at one another’s throats; often because of jealousy, Celie is jealous of Sofia’s strength. When Shug Avery visits Celie at first she joins Albert in mocking Celie’s ugliness. Shug later come to acknowledge that she and Mr--- terribly mistreated his first wife by flaunting their relationship and that, they drove her to death. Later when Sofia leaves Harpo and he takes us with a girl named Squeak, a fight occurs between the two women over him. So, Walker presents numerous instances of women in competition with one another, frequently because of men, but more importantly because they have accepted the predominating social codes affirming that women define themselves by their relationship with the men in their lives.

Interestingly as a consequence of her growth, Celie becomes an artist of sorts, just as Shug is. She discovers and develops an ability to design and make pants, initially for women but ultimately for both sexes. She thus becomes one of those women Walker describes so movingly in her essay, In Search of our Mother’s Gardens (1988). In this essay Walker talks about black women who were essentially artists but those gifts were so stifled and whose opportunities were so limited that they are never heard of by the outside world. Walker praises, for example, quilt makers and especially her mother, who made a garden wherever she went to live. These women found an outlet for their creatively where they could, and
similarly Celie, when freed from the oppressiveness of her early environment develops a way to express her personality in art.

“Celie’s pant-making is an appropriate and effective symbol. When she wore the first pair of pants it was a sign that she was breaking out of the role that the men in her life had assigned to her. Albert thought that it was scandalous for his wife to wear pants; Celie defied him and destroyed the power of his attitude over her, since men have been her most cruel oppressors, it is ironically appropriate that she take something traditionally assigned to them in shaking off the power they have over her. And not only does she shake off that power, she turns it against them by getting them to like the pants she sews. Therefore they can no longer object to what she wears or how she makes a living.” (Harris)

The novel progresses through the progression in Celie’s character...from an abused woman she becomes an independent entrepreneur, from a beaten docile who is treated as good as a mule she achieves economic and spiritual independence. She moves to a house of her own and reunites with her family. Her transformation changes her whole attitude towards life. It is not just Celie, in fact all these women have gone through their share of hardships in life, but all of them have survived the violence and oppression that they face to create a voice and independence out of adversity.

Works Cited:


