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Search for Identity in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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The Color Purple is Alice Walker's great literary achievement. The novel unfolds a picture of the hard life of black people, especially that of black women and their quest for freedom. Walker tries to figure out a way for the realization of the — "survival whole" of black people through the novel. It vividly depicts the sufferings of African-American women from patriarchy, sexism and racism. Probing many facets of interrelationships of sexism and racism in the American society, she seeks to mobilize black women from a "suspended" state into an "emergent" one. Her protagonists try to seek self -identity and they emerge from a context of oppression to one of liberation and self-assertion. From the position of 'objects' the black women reach the level of 'subjects'. In fact, Alice Walker's true intention in writing this novel is not only to give voice to black women but also to provide them with a direction leading to emancipation, freedom and wholeness. Walker shows us the evolution of her major character, Celie, from being a sexually abused child to a passive wife and finally to an emancipated woman.

The Color Purple describes a fragmentary living world in which the heroine, Celie, writes to God and in the process tells of her misfortunes and the journey of herself which survives all odds against which it is pitted.

An epistolary novel, *The Color Purple* employs a narrative technique of the eighteenth century epistolary novels of sentiment, for example, Richardson's *Clarissa*. Alice Walker is the first African American writer to make use of this form. This epistolary form allows an uneducated Celie to speak for herself. Since the novel traces the changes that occur in Celie's life, the epistolary form is adequate; in fact, it allows the reader to see these changes in the character's life and mind through the transformations that occur in the style of writing. Writing letters becomes for Celie a means of structuring her identity, her sense of self and the process of writing herself into being and consciousness. The reader feels that Celie and her sister Nettie are real people, not characters in a book since the reader is reading intimate letters that are not supposed to be read. Celie's letters, her growing ability to express her thoughts and feelings show her spiritual development, her movement towards independence.

Celie is essentially an object, an entirely passive woman who has no power to assert herself through actions or words. In her book, *Ain't I A Woman: black women and feminism*, bell hooks explains that a slaver in order to make his product (a slave) saleable, had to ensure that his male or female slave would not react, "the proud, arrogant, and independent spirit of the African people had to be broken so that they would conform to the white colonizer's notion of proper slave demeanour" (1981: 20). Like her unfortunate ancestors, Celie is abused, brutalized and dehumanized by her male masters. She is forced into silence by a barbarous, violent and patriarchal world. However, Celie does not entirely give up since she decides to pour her sufferings onto paper.This act of writing in itself is a kind of reaction and resistance.

One may find it improbable that a black uneducated woman can write, yet it is not totally impossible. Even if Celie is not educated, since she was forced to abandon school, yet with the help of her sister, she has acquired a basic/ elementary education which helps her later in her letter writing.

Writing is a tool for expression and communication and becomes so for Celie too. Her letters are not written in an intricate style; they are full of mistakes and written in her own vernacular. This shows that the act of writing is more important for Celie and not the way it is done. Celie receives an order from her rapist-father never to tell anyone but God of the sexual abuses he has inflicted on her. Writing becomes an act of rebellion against her abuser who wanted to silence her. "*You better never tell anybody but God. I'd kill your mammy*" (Walker 1982:1). This sentence heads the first page and, by extension, the whole novel. It's precisely this threat that makes Celie silence her physical voice and look for a new voice through the written language. 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" (Winchell 1992: 887). *The Color Purple* is structured as a series of letters addressed, firstly to God and then to Celie's sister, Nettie. Letter writing as Wendy Wall observes, "act as a second memory, a projected body that holds [a] hidden self" (Gates Jr. and Appiah 1993: 262). Men in Celie's life constantly prevent her from speaking and the act of writing down her feelings is a way of expressing them. Writing for Celie is a means to stay alive and, therefore, it's as important to her as breathing: "Long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along" (Walker 1982: 18).

In all her works, as critics remark, Walker retells a mythic story of the movement from the South to the North as an ideal embodiment of freedom, and back to the South for reconciliation.

> Walker's South - North - South pattern grows out of a long-standing African American literary tradition of movement (where) the North epitomizes liberation…At the same time, however, the South often implicitly symbolizes home and a nurturing black community. (Tate 1994: 116)

The South-North-South movement in *The Color Purple* is reflected in the novel's structure. The initial portions of the novel parallel slavery. The novel's long middle section parallels the black community's "lengthy sojourn in the region imposed upon them by slave owners and continued in the twentieth century by oppressive institutions such as sharecropping" (Tate 1994: 118). Celie's eventual move to Memphis symbolically marks the black community's twentieth century migration to the North with emphasis on two things. Firstly, on the economic liberation the North provides like Celie's "folkpants" business. Celie begins to make pants after she gains her freedom from Mr.___. She is finally able to reach industrialized society after going away with Shug, and make pants instead of working in the outdoors all day. Celie is able to have a job and live the life many women longed for, especially African American women. With the help of Shug, Celie overturns the idea that sewing is a marginal and an unimportant women's labor, and turns it into a lucrative, empowering source of economic independence. The pants represent liberation from the common view of women as householders. Also, at this point in history women were supposed to wear dresses while men "wore the pants"; however, Celie made unisex pants, enabling women to be equal to men in this regard. Secondly, the threat it presents to black cultural identity, for e.g, attempts to change Celie's dialect. The change in her use of language reflects

the development in Celie's character. By learning to use language skilfully, she learns to use it as a powerful weapon that eventually serves to liberate her. Finally, Celie's return to the South through her successful business and attainment of a home represents Walker's argument for black reclamation of a Southern homeland.

Notably, the women characters in the novel - Celie, Nettie, Shug, Sofia, Mary Agnes – are bound together by a close sisterhood. In fact, Celie's development into a strong and independent person becomes possible because of this sisterhood. Walker portrays this network of women as being the core of African American racial survival. "Sister's choice" is the pattern of the quilt Celie and Sofia choose; and this quilt is a symbol of the "female bonding that restores the women (even brutalized Celie) to a sense of completeness and independence" (Gloria 1990: 320). Women's quilting functions as a way of creating female community in a world that represses female expression. Significantly, quilts being a most representative form of African American folk art, "embody the ideal of unity in diversity…The pieces of a quilt, like individuals in a pluralistic society, retain their original identities while functioning as parts of something else…" (Dieke 1999: 141). So, the process of quilting acquires a symbolic meaning. Celie overcomes passive victimization, as a consequence of her personal development, to build a pattern of her own choice out of the shattered fragments of her life. It is also significant that quilting techniques reflect a textile aesthetic which has been passed down for generations among women who are the descendents of Africans. Quilts, as Priscilla Leder has noted, "embody the ideal of unity in diversity which permeates Walker's writings" (Leder 1999: 141).

Celie's personal transformation is remarkable though it takes long time and lot of effort. Linda Tate asserts that the key to her self-transformation "lies in the ability to take control over defining oneself, naming oneself" (Tate 1994: 131). At the early stages of her story Celie is devoid of identity; totally incapable of defining herself. She sees herself, both physically and emotionally, "as living in irreconcilable fragments" (Dieke 1999: 164). She begins her tale 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" (Dieke 1999: 164). All her life has been a series of sacrifices – to Pa's desires, to Nettie's safety, to Mr.____'s brutality. "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 men"(Walker 1982: 23).Celie is a "perfect" wife, like her own mother used to be, or Sofia's mother is, or the majority of other women, "She never say nothing back. She never stand up for herself" (Walker 1982: 43).She has been "torn" into pieces - torn from childhood by Pa's rapes, torn from her children, torn from Nettie. She cannot claim her own self, she does not feel she belongs in this world. The narrative charts how she moves 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. 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. With our children" (Walker 1982:222). And although Celie has never signed her letters before, she does so now ardently, defining her new identity through her family relationships, her business, her love, her new place in the world:

Your sister, Celie
Folkpants, Unlimited.
Sugar Avery Drive
Memphis, Tennessee

(Walker 1982:221)

Celie's evolution becomes possible through affirmation of oneself and others. Celie's spiritual transformation from a "tree", a piece of wood, to a happy and independent person, occurs through creativity and love. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker wrote about generations of black women touched by the spirit of creativity, "These grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the spirits of creativity in them for which there was no release"(Walker 1983: 233). Unlike these women in Walker's essay, Celie and other women characters in *The Color Purple* find "release" for their creative spirit. All Walker's women are creators who realize their creativity through quilts, songs and gardens. Shug and Mary Agnes find themselves in music; Sofia and Celie in their quilts; Nettie in her teaching; and Celie, of course, in creation of her wonderful "folkpants" which are not just clothes but production of art and an expression of free spirit. Walker's motif of rebirth, "the regenerate self", and her total redefining of gender roles, results in vital changes even of Mr.____'s character. In the end he revises his attitude toward women, gender roles, and human beings in general. According to Walker nobody is beyond salvation. Mr.____'s early portrayal as an abusive patriarch is not absolute. His devoted love for Shug indicates that he can love and care for somebody else. In the end, in his new and healthy, non-sexual relationship with Celie, as a member of her extended family, her "peoples", he is transformed from anonymous Mr.____ into "Albert". His experience teaches him new wisdom that women's power can even change men. Celie's liberation is a positive one because it also means the liberation of other people. So, what is good for Celie is also good for her community and, therefore, she can reconcile with her earlier hostile environment. Celie's power, therefore, makes women more *man-like* (since they "wear pants"), men more *woman-like* (Mr.___ learns to sew) and, in doing so, it also makes both more complete, more human and whole. Celie writes of this new Albert:

> I mean when you talk to him now he really listen, and one time, out of nowhere in the conversation us was having, he said, Celie, I'm satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feel like a new experience. (Walker 1982: 267)

In Celie's story, the values of togetherness, pride, and power are visibly proclaimed. Like other African American writers (Jean Toomer in his *Cane*, or Zora Neale Hurston in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God)*, Walker too explores the modern search for wholeness and union of people in an age of fragmentation, alienation, and exploitation.

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