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Re-examining Celie in Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*: A Fourth Wave Feminist Reading

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Abstract:

Apparently, Celie is presented as a submissive daughter, wife and overall, a woman in the novel *The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker. Studies related to the above-mentioned novel revealed many aspects of Celie's character. In particular, different scholars have shown that it is because of Celie's connection with Shug Avery and other African American women of the community that she was at least able to find her self-worth. This paper will examine Celie from a different perspective using a recent feminist book by Mona Eltahawy, *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls* (2019). Eltahawy frames this book around seven actions (That she calls "sins") and argues on the importance of those sins in a woman's life in fighting against patriarchy. So, an attempt has been made in this paper to analyze Celie's empowerment through the commitment of these seven necessary sins proposed by Mona Eltahawy.

Keywords: racist, feminist, sins, patriarchy, empowerment.

Introduction:

The Color Purple is a renowned work by Alice Walker and she wins several awards for this acclaimed work including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983. The novel is epistolary in form and we are aware of the sufferings of a poor, black, teenage girl through her letters addressed to God. The immense mental and physical suffering that Celie has to undergo in this novel is mainly because of two reasons, one being female and other being black in a racist, patriarchal society. The gender politics against woman becomes most oppressive when patriarchy demands total eradication and corrosion of the female self. This is very true in case of Celie. Celie, in the novel is a victim of patriarchal society, as she has grown up following the norms of that society, where she is made to believe that man is superior to woman in

every field. She even thinks that woman who violates the rules of patriarchy should be punished through beating. So, she advises Albert's son Harpo to beat his wife, Sophia when Sophia thinks of leaving Harpo. Her experience and the environment where she grows up, prompts her to take such decisions. Celie's notion of womanhood is as poor as the history of black woman in America. She stays in the home, (though ugly and unliveable) and finds comfort in offering services like sweeping and washing the wine glasses for the church. When we meet Celie for the first time, she has very little self-worth and self-esteem. Though she writes letters to God, stating her deplorable condition, she does not put her signature at the end. She cannot even think herself as a different identity. Celie's first letter to God reveals her sexual exploitation. Not only sexually, she is also exploited physically, emotionally and socially. Slowly, Celie attains maturity by gaining self-confidence. By the end of the novel, Celie learned to fight, to stand up for herself, and she was rewarded. Celie survived physically and spiritually, and she matured into a full, solid, modern twentieth century woman. This paper will examine Celie's transformation from the point of view of a global feminist writer, Mona Eltahawy. Eltahawy suggests that the only way to challenge patriarchy is to disobey the qualities that man considers necessary for a girl or woman to attain perfection. Only when one comes out from those set rules and regulations, then only one's self esteem is redeemed and we can have a better society. With this view in mind, the present paper will analyze the process of gaining self-esteem in terms of its main character, Celie.

Objectives:

- (i) To examine the various stages of Celie's transformation from submissiveness to assertiveness.
- (ii) To examine how Celie achieves her self –worth defying patriarchy in an unconventional way.

Methodology: This paper will draw from the feminist ideas proposed by a fourth-wave and global feminist writer Mona Eltahawy in her book *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls*. Before making an analysis of the said book, it is necessary to present a clear idea about fourth-wave feminism.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, "Although debated by some, many claim that a fourth wave of feminism began about 2012 with a focus on sexual harassment, body shaming and rape culture among other issues." (<https://www.britannica.com>). Like other waves of Feminism it is also, "characterized by a focus on the empowerment of women,

justice for women, opposition to sexual harassment, workplace discrimination, online petitioning, the use of internet tools and intersectionality.”(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth-wave_feminism) A key component was the use of social media to highlight and address these concerns. The fourth wave is the first feminist uprising of the technology age. Female activists and feminists associated in popularizing the fourth wave feminisms are Laura Bates (Everyday Sexism Project) Lucy – Ann Holmes (No More Page 3), Mona Eltahawy (Feminist Giant) to name a few. Among these, Mona Eltahawy is an award-winning columnist and international public speaker on Arab and Muslim issues and global feminism. Her Feminist Giant blog is a popular platform for global feminism.

Mona Eltahawy’s *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls* is a book that centres mainly on patriarchal oppression. It encourages women and girls how to defy, disrupt, and destroy the patriarchy by embracing the qualities they've been trained to avoid. Seizing upon the energy of the #MeToo movement, feminist activist Mona Eltahawy advocates a muscular, out-loud approach to teaching women and girls to harness their power through what she calls the "seven necessary sins" that women and girls are not supposed to commit: to be angry, ambitious, profane, violent, attention-seeking, lustful, and powerful. All the necessary "sins" that women and girls require erupting. Eltahawy’s observations made in this book are inspired by her true experiences of life. She has very frankly spoken about her horrid experiences starting from her sexual harassment during hajj at the age of fifteen till the age of fifty including numerous other injustices in the years between. Rather than teaching women and girls to survive the poisonous system they have found themselves in, Eltahawy arms them to dismantle it. In a nutshell, *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls* is a bold and energetic manifesto for all feminists in the fight against patriarchy.

Analysis:

As stated earlier, Celie in *The Color Purple* is a victim of patriarchal domination and racial discrimination. She was ignorant of what was happening to her as a teenager when her stepfather raped her. As she has been taken away from school due to her pregnancy, so the only means of emancipation through education remain closed for her. Again Celie was asked by her stepfather not to reveal anything in front of others and so she remained silent and accepted her fate. She followed all the rules of patriarchy and never disobeyed her parents including her stepfather (whom she thinks as her real father first). At first when we meet her, she is fourteen years old expressing her sufferings to God by means of sending letters. She

considers that it is the only place, where she could reveal her miseries without any fear. She shapes her according to the laws of patriarchy to become a so called good girl. She was doing all these out of ignorance. Once she discovers herself outside the barriers of patriarchy, through means of sisterhood, she realises her mistake. This paper is an attempt to see how Celie was able to recover her self worth and own identity by disobeying the patriarchal norms through means of the seven necessary sins as proposed by Mona Eltahawy in her book *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls*.

The Color Purple depicts the sad story of Celie, who was forced by her stepfather Alphonso to fulfil his sexual desires by means of rape as Celie's mother was unable to provide it due to her sickness resulting from frequent childbirth. Celie's first baby from her stepfather was killed by him in the woods. the second baby boy was sold to a family residing in Monticello. As per the choice of her stepfather, Celie married a black man Albert who was in search of a wife to take care of his home. From the beginning of this arranged marriage, Celie's identity remains as a subservient and subordinate wife who remains voiceless.

However, Celie gains her self- worth only when she could defy patriarchal authority by means of showing her anger fruitfully. The first step of protest is visible when Celie decides to go with Shug in search of some job and her husband(who is mentioned as Mr._) didn't allow her. According to him, Celie is neither good looking nor smart like Shug. In response to Mr. _ such negative comments, Celie this time becomes angry and boldly declares: "The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot." (Walker 187). Showing anger, Celie challenges patriarchal domination. According to Eltahawy:

Patriarchy worries when you talk about encouraging and nurturing anger in girls because it wants to deny girls a necessary response to injustice. Patriarchy knows that when we nurture anger in girls, they will hold patriarchy accountable and that those girls will grow up to be women who demand a reckoning. It does not want that reckoning, and we must demand it. (37)

Here Mr. _ worries that Celie will disobey patriarchy once she goes out from the house. So, he protested but Celie disobeyed. For Celie, the limitations that the patriarchal oppression has effected upon her are so strong that she compares it to a jail. Mr._ asks Celie the reason of her unhappiness and why she decides to go away from him. At this Celie replies with the same rage:

You a lowdown dog is what's wrong. Its time to leave you and enter into the creation...But Nettie and my children coming home soon, I say. And when she do, all us together gon whup your ass. (Walker 207)

By becoming angry in a constructive way, Celie takes the right decision to leave for Memphis. Here she finds love, money (by becoming independent), and happiness and above all she could discover her self-worth.

By commanding attention, Celie commits the next sin. Before meeting Shug, Celie was not concerned about her own individuality. She could not think about herself as a separate entity. It was Shug Avery, who made Celie think as an individual by giving proper attention. Not only on personal level, Shug gives importance to Celie in public also. Shug could understand Celie whole heartedly. Shug discovers the idiosyncrasies of Celie's mind. She could comprehend that Celie was unhappy from inside. She was neither happy nor satisfied with Albert. Celie was not aware of sexual pleasure unless Shug taught her. After all Shug's excessive attention towards Celie made her aware of the fact that she also can become an individual with all her longings and desires. Shug talks with Celie very sympathetically and as an individual. Earlier Celie hated herself: "I hate the way I look, I hate the way I'm dress." (Walker 69). But when a reknown singer like Shug dedicates a song to her, her happiness knew no bounds. Shug calls it "Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick." (Walker 70). Celie now becomes conscious of her own self: "First time somebody made something and name it after me." (Walker 70)

Such kind of importance, attention was a rare thing for Celie who gains only negligence earlier. This made her think that she had something within her that made Shug responsive towards Celie. Because of Shug's positive support Celie was able to declare in front of Albert that she wanted to go away from mhome to become independent and in a way powerful. She also cures herim for hiding Nettie's letters from her. Here comes the obstruction from patriarchy when her husband insults Celie calling her a "bitch" (Walker 181)). He even goes to the extent of calling her good for nothing.

Who you think you is? he say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all. (Walker 187).

Again, he expresses his willingness to lock her up so that she could not go out. He becomes furious and reaches out to slap her. Celie jab her as knife in his hand. All these happened because Celie commands power. Eltahawy rightly observes:

Attention is power. When you command attention, you command power, and so patriarchy has muddied the waters around attention with the word “whore.”(43)
Here whore can be replaced by each and every word that Mr. _ uses to refer Celie.

The third sin that is essential for Celie's growth is profanity. It is an essential tool in disrupting patriarchy and its rules. Eltahawy calls it “the verbal equivalent of civil disobedience” (65). She further states that, “civility, decorum, manners, and the like are used to uphold authority—patriarchy, whiteness, other forms of privilege—and that we are urged to acquiesce as a form of maintaining that authority.” (68).

In the patriarchal society, some set rules are there for women. Women need to be kind, compassionate, silent, submissive, nurturing etc. Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* defies this patriarchal convention and gives masculine roles to female characters like Sofia, Shug Avery etc. At first, Celie conforms to the traditional pattern of a black girl and woman. But unless and until she gathers enough courage to violate those roles, she was more trapped by such rules. When she deliberately breaks those set rules, then only she could realize the true meaning of freedom and self respect. In this regard, we have to acknowledge the helping hands of the community women like Sofia, Shug etc.

Celie gets the impetus for self-realisation from Sofia as she fights against Harpo's attempt to abuse her. Like Sofia, who left Harpo to lead an independent life, Celie also ultimately decides to leave her husband. She once tells Sofia that she envies her for being a courageous and self-defensive woman. In reply to Sophia's question why Celie advised Harpo to beat her Celie says: “I say it cause I'm a fool. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I an't.”(Walker 39)

Again, in a conversation with Nettie, she once says that she does not know how to fight. The desire for violating civil decorum was already in Celie's mind, due to ignorance she couldn't turn it into reality. But with the assistance from Shug Avery, she really made it happen. Out of ignorance, she believes that whoever wants to fight against the prejudices of man, they will live no more. She also has very low self-esteem as discussed earlier. It may be due to the influence of patriarchal convention that allows Alphonso to judge Celie in the following manner:

“She ugly. Don’t even look like she kin to Nettie. But she’ll make the better wife. She ain’t smart either...But she can work like a man.”(Walker 10)

Because of such attitudes regarding herself, Celie couldn’t even think of breaking patriarchal rules. But Shug Avery puts enough courage in Celie’s mind to fight against patriarchy.

She becomes brave enough to announce her relationship with Shug and also she can reveal the bitter truth of being raped by her stepfather in front of her husband. She also declares that she does not hate her husband because she loves Shug and Shug also loves him. Again Shug insists Celie to redefine God in a new way. Celie starts resisting the “big, old and tall gray bearded and white” (Walker 201), monotheistic God. She comes up with a distinctly non- Christian discovery of God and eventually gains liberation from patriarchy. Celie adopts nature God or the universal God which is non-sexist, unoppressive and unrepressive. Shug Avery teaches Celie that God is not “white” nor it is “He”. Instead, God is universal and natural. It is in everything including the “flowers, water, wind and a big rock” (Walker 204) and God is inside her and she is naturally connected to everything. This new philosophy of God positions Celie as “being part of everything, not separate at all” (Walker 203) fortifies her with self-acceptance and leads her to reject male mastery. This reimagining of God symbolizes Celie’s move from an object of somebody else’s care to an independent woman.

By being ambitious Celie committed the next sin. The novel can be called a bildungsroman as it shows the development of the central character Celie from ignorance to self knowledge. At first Celie was ignorant of the fact that religious teachings could be protested. She follows strictly the laws of the Bible which advises to honour parents irrespective of any situation. Therefore, Celie was silent as his father (step) warns her with an authoritarian voice: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy.” (Walker 3)

Being ignorant and having no other choices, Celie could not dream of coming out of the four walls of her subjugated life. Ultimately Celie’s stepfather Alphonso insists her to marry a black man Mr. __, who is seeking a wife to take care of his home. It is said that behind every successful woman, there is a progressive man but in case of Celie it was Shug Avery, Mr. __’s first wife who showed Celie the real path of freedom and self independence. Under the guidance of Shug, Celie becomes ambitious; she dares to leave her husband’s home to be self reliant. But the road to success was not so easy; Mr. __ discourages Celie by making some pessimistic remarks:

You'll be back, he say. Nothing up North for nobody like you. Shug got talent, he say. She can sing. She got spunk, he say. She can talk to anybody. Shug got looks, he say. She can stand up and be notice. But what you got? You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in Memphis is be Shug's maid. Take out her slop-jar and maybe cook her food. You not that good a cook either. And this house ain't been clean good since my first wife died. And nobody crazy or backward enough to want to marry you, neither. What you gon do? Hire yourself out to farm? He laugh." (Walker 186)

This quote illustrates how Patriarchy discourages women and girls from becoming self-independent and prefers indeed to remain inside the four walls of the house. In this connection, Eltahawy rightly observes:

Patriarchy is reluctant to allow women to be powerful outside the lines that patriarchy has drawn for them and independently of the roles it has assigned to them. Be without ambition, be without ego, be unselfish, and we will extend an unprecedented amount of power (for a girl) to you (118)

But Shug enters into Celie's life like a goddess, changes her former concept concerning God (White and Male) and everything around her. We see how Shug inspires and helps Celie at each and every moment. Celie first started her journey of being independent by making pants for people around her. She first experimented it with Shug, then Squeak, Jack, Odessa and so on. Shug inspire Celie calling her "a wonder to behold" (Walker 192). She even made arrangements for rooms so that Celie can turn it to a business.

"And let's just go ahead and give you this dining room for your factory and git you some more women in here to cut and sew, while you sit back and design. You making your living, Celie, she say. Girl, you on your way." (Walker 193)

The chapter of making pants sends with Celie's new found identity:

Folkspants , Unlimited/Sugar Avery Drive/Memphis, Tennessee. (Walker 191)

Celie is indeed a victim of both sexual and physical violence caused by patriarchal oppression and racial discrimination. The first half of the novel mostly talks about how Celie is sexually abused by her stepfather and later on frequently beaten by her husband Mr. __. Celie as an innocent, submissive woman could not protest but tolerates everything silently. She once mentions Harpo the way Mr. __ used to beat her:

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 make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man. (Walker 23)

This Celie was a victim, lacks proper guidance for fighting against the the abuser. Only when she becomes violent from the core of her heart against the oppressors, she finds her way to self discovery. Eltahawy, in this regard rightly observes:

Until and unless women are ready and able to use violence as a form of defense, as deterrence, as a weapon, patriarchy will never fear us. And patriarchal violence will continue unabated, every day, week, month, and year. (159)

Though there is no outward instance of Celie's committing violence in the novel, through her bold and fearless assertions we come to know about the inner turmoil of Celie's mind full of rage. As for example, we can mention about Celie's reaction violent after knowing the secret of Nettie's letter. She reveals her rage in front of Shug after knowing that Mr._has kept Nettie's letters: "How I'm gon from killing him...I think I feel better if I kill him." (Walker 151)

Being enlightened by the new vision of God, she curses her husband: "Until you do right by me everything you dream about will fail." (213). She even goes to the extent of revealing her murderous attitude in front of her husband. When Celie's husband asked her if she started a business of making pants, Celie replies with rage: "That's right, I say. But I really started it right here to keep from killing you." She also becomes brave enough to call Alphonso a bitch for all her sufferings.

The sixth necessary sin for Celie's self development was the knowledge of lust. Only when one becomes conscious of her own desires or longings, one acquires the ability to disobey or disrupt patriarchy. Being lustful in a positive way will encourage people to do the things according to their own choice. At first Celie was not concerned about her sexual needs. It was a very painful experience for her due to forced rape and immature age. It was Shug Avery who teaches Celie how to enjoy sex. When Celie becomes conscious of her own sexuality she discovers that she is attracted towards Shug Avery. So she feels jealous when Shug mixes up with someone else. Eltahawy rightly says:

Who we can desire, how we can express that desire, who has the right to desire, and our right to determine for ourselves whose desire we can and cannot accept or reject: all those go to the heart of defying, disobeying, and disrupting patriarchy (162)

This is very true in case of Celie. When she silently accepts the sexual abuse of her step father, that time she remains submissive. She thinks it a sin to protest against such abuses as she was not aware of sexual pleasure. But when Shug teaches her the basic things of sexuality she did not even care to cross the boundary of gender to satisfy her need. Celie openly declares in front of Harpo and Sophia about her relationship with Shug. This is a way of defying patriarchy in an unconventional way. To challenge patriarchy, Celie tries to gain sexual fulfillment through Shug. There are instances in the novel where both of them are seen having homosexual relationship to gain orgasm. By doing this, they challenge the heterosexual belief. As stated by Eltahawy: "Same-sex relationships have always existed across time and across the Globe". (161)

It is because of their such attraction that Celie follows the instructions of Shug and was able to lead a life totally different from the one that we come across when she was in her parent's home and later on her husband's.

The last necessary thing as stated by Eltahawy was being powerful. As Shug, Sophia and others were independent women so they were powerful. As Celie at first was neither independent nor learned, so she lacks power. But after becoming independent by means of committing all the other necessary sins as mentioned above; Celie at last becomes powerful enough to challenge and define patriarchy in a new way.

Conclusion:

Female characters portrayed in the novel challenged patriarchy within their racial, social boundaries and with the feeling of sisterhood they were able to identify their own self. In case of Celie she gains her self-worth by committing all the seven necessary sins i. e. being angry, seeking attention, profanity, becoming ambitious, exercising violence, being lustful and becoming powerful. She even goes to the extent of rejecting traditional views regarding man woman relationship and find fulfillment in the company of other women. Thus, she redefines female sexuality and also opposes the idea of Biblical monotheistic God.

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