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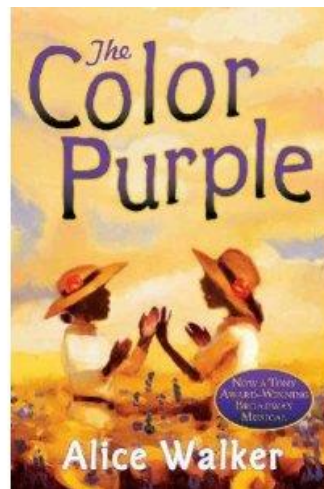
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Transformation from Existing to Living: A Study of Celie's Progress in *The Color Purple*

Suma Lalit Podnolanna



Abstract

This article makes the study of Celie's transformation from Existing to Living. Celie undergoes transformation at different levels in the novel. When the novel begins she is not even aware of what is happening with her. Slowly she understands things happening around, but is not able to react to them, because she is terrified and does not know how to fight. She just bears everything that comes her way, like a rock. Though she has met Sophia, a born fighter and also Albert's sisters who urge her to fight back, Shug in her life acts as a catalyst. Shug's entry into her life becomes the starting point of her transformation.

Key Words: Black Women, Female Oppression, Ignorance, Self-Awareness, Struggle, transformation.

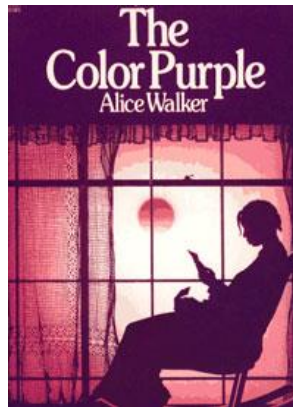
Alice Walker

Alice Walker has created her own image as a writer in the world of literature. Walker was born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton Georgia. Her award winning novel *The Color Purple*, becomes controversial for its representation of abusive and generally problematic relationship between black men and women. The novel contains the torturous journey of Celie, a rural black female adolescent towards womanhood and self-awareness.



Alice Walker
Courtesy: www.nndb.com

The change which is useful in life takes the people towards the path of success. *The Color Purple* features the transformation of individuals, cultures and worlds. The term ‘existing’ here means only being alive, whereas ‘living’ means enjoying life, being really alive. The protagonist Celie in the novel is seen as just existing at the beginning and slowly she undergoes a change and starts loving her life toward the end of the story.



A Feminist Novel

Many critics' view is that *The Color Purple* is a feminist novel. The African American women felt that they were not included in the Feminist movement of the whites. Unlike the whites, the black women faced racism in addition to the sexism in the community. They were fighting against racism equally along with their men, but at the same time were treated inhumanly by their own male dominated community. The women were abused verbally and physically which made them flimsy non-entities. They had to toil hard for the house-hold as well as for the white masters. They were not educated. The female body also made them frail with many unwanted pregnancies. Poverty and the absence of freedom made them more vulnerable. The white feminist theory did not consider the unique experiences of Black women and their oppression. It leads the African American Women writers to voice out their problems and fight in their own way for these women. Celie in *The Color Purple* is a symbolic woman who fights for her freedom. This novel does not show a path to follow; instead it is about finding one's own way and Celie shows it in action. More importantly, Celie's voice represents the experiences of a generation of black women and possibly certain other women of all nationalities.

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Narration through a Series of Letters from Celie

In *The Color Purple* story is told through a series of letters. The narrator, Celie, is a black woman who lives in the 1930s in the southern United States. Since most of the letters are Celie's, they are in broken English in the beginning and there is improvement in her language as she experiences more of life. Celie is a poor uneducated woman who, at fourteen, was repeatedly raped by a man she calls Pa and impregnated twice. The children were taken away from her and she was forced into marriage with a man who is equally abusive, whom she calls as Mr. _____. The only person she loves, her sister named Nettie, was separated from her. Later on the letters in the books are recorded from both Celie and Nettie, even though neither of them knew if the other would read it.

Nettie

Nettie happens to take shelter from Samuel who was sent as the Missionary to Africa. Samuel had taken the two children from Nettie's Pa earlier, Samuel, Corrine, Nettie and the children Adam and Olivia sail to Africa. Though Nettie keeps writing letters, Celie doesn't get to read them for many years. Her husband had hidden all the letters from Nettie until Shug Avery finds them. Shug helps Celie to retrieve the letters from him. Celie also gets inspired by Shug to fight for her life. From then on Celie begins to change; she grows and the growth is from nothingness to empowerment.

The Struggle and Fight

"But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive." (p. 26), this quote from *The Color Purple* opens the idea of the struggle and the fight throughout the story. This line also defines the meaning of life to Celie. She knows only to exist not to live for herself. She has been treated like an object from the beginning, is not allowed to talk, exploited all the while and abused physically and mentally right from childhood by her own stepfather whom she had

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thought her real father. The only character compassionate toward Celie in the beginning is her sister Nettie. Even after her marriage to Mr. Albert, (whose name she learns many years after her marriage!), she is bullied and made to work for him and his children without complaining. He never treated her like a human being. A woman, when she has no freedom to articulate her feelings, how will she fight? Celie is the best example of the heights of sexism done to any individual. She was used for all the domestic helps, had to shut her mouth all the time, and silently received her husband's beatings. She was treated this way just because she was a woman.

Victimized for Pleasure

Celie, narrates what happens in her life without even knowing how harshly she has been treated. She was barely fourteen, still a child when she was asked to perform the duty of her mother. She was seduced by her (as she thought at that time) own father. Without even knowing what it is she was victimized for his pleasures. She understood only the experience of pain. And then after giving birth to two children she was passed on to Mr. _____, at the time of giving, her Pa says " She ugly. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And God done fixed her you can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it" (18). She eventually becomes 'it' at the end of the speech as if she is a machine having no maintenance charges. Her pa gets rid of machine which he is tired of using, pushes it on to Mr._____. This inhuman treatment she bears without any protest because she did not know what she has to do or where else she can go to protect herself. She accepts anything done to her without a word because she was allowed to exist. She only knew how to exist or stay alive.

Husband's Domination

The notion of men towards women is that, just because a woman is a wife, the husband gets all the rights over her. He can use her in any way he likes. Woman's duty is only to obey her husband's orders. It's his wish if he wants to beat her or kick her. The woman had to receive everything silently. In Celie's words; "He beat me like beat the children. Cept he don't never

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hardly beat them. He say, Celie, get 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" (30). She was exactly how Pa had narrated about her. She was accepting everything without revolting, even the beatings without even crying. She hardens herself and bares everything as if she is a tree. But even the trees feel to an extent. They indicate the pain but she it seems that acts like a rock. Just because she bares all the beating he goes on doing it whenever he felt like hurting her.

Uneducated and Poor

Celie, as the novel begins, is an uneducated poor African American girl who lives in Georgia. She was so young and innocent that she could not recognize she was sexually exploited by her stepfather. But when her Pa terrorizes her she gets the alarm that there is danger not only for herself, but also for her beloved sister. The first act of thoughtfulness that Celie does is to warn her sister about the danger, and help her twice to escape from the clutches of abusive men. But for herself she thought that there was no hope of escape. She just kept herself alive; if ever she had a hope that was of seeing Nettie sometime again in her lifetime. But when she does not receive any letters from her for a long time, that hope also starts to fade.

Learning through Experience

As she grows in her life experiences, she learns many things. Her acquaintance with Sophia teaches her that there are strong women in the world, but it was a shock for her and a hard to believe fact. Sophia is the first woman she had seen who fought for their views. But she does not dare support her. It was Shug Avery who becomes the catalyst of change in her life. Shug teaches her to love herself, and from there begins her process of transformation. The woman who was obeying her rude husband without a word, starts answering back. As she comes to know that Nettie is alive, with Shug's help, and support she decides to leave her husband, and go to Memphis. This is the tremendous change which has been wrought in her life through the

new hopes she has gained with support from outside. And the newly transformed Celie dares to finally break free and she walks out of the jail house to build her own future.

Conclusion

Celie's hard work, Shug's assistance, her desire to achieve success and independence in life hands her the path of growth. The transformation is seen in her confidence, her attire, financial status, language and faith. She becomes confident enough to go back to her house and call her husband by his name. She changes her sense of dressing and chooses modern outfit. The poor Celie turns out to be a successful business person with enough money to spend. She improves her language with the help of girls who work along with her. Her faith in religion and God changes for the better, after the experiences and influences she has had in her life. Thus the woman who just knew to keep herself alive, starts celebrating her life by the end of the story. She is also blessed with the good fortune to receive the bonus of happiness in the form of the reunion with her family and the inheritance of family property.

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