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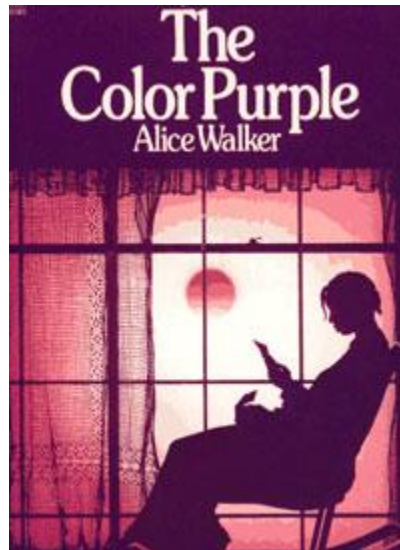
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## A Searing Journey: Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Divya Nair, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Research Scholar

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### Womanist Literature

Alice Walker's sustained explorations of the disparate worlds has created an intersecting space for her literature, scholarship, and activism- a space that was best described by fellow writer- activist Toni Cade Bambara as one of "cultural work".

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A Searing Journey: Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Among her many contributions, Walker introduced the term “womanist” into feminist vocabulary and has led fights against the sexual and genital abuse of women’s bodies. Her best-selling novel, *The Color Purple* (1983), is widely credited with founding a revolution in black women’s studies.

### **Problem of Black Women**

The problem of black women’s identity is further exacerbated by their sociological position, situated as they have been among members of other communities. Black women have been the victims of prejudice and discrimination, even while they preserved many of the main tenets of their culture. The interaction of blacks with whites, far from being productive, had tragic consequences. The encounter between blacks and whites used to lead to the former’s submergence of self.

### **Stereotypes of Black Women**

In folklore black women have been stereotyped as the “mules of the world”, because they are loaded with a burden which other people decline to carry. Alice Walker, rather than refuting the stereotype, expands this concept and adds color to it by posting that a mule in spite of its grotesqueness has an outstanding quality, namely, its capacity to survive.

### **Struggle against Racism and Sexism**

Walker’s *The Color Purple* is a triumphant journey of a woman who struggles against racism, sexism and social determinism, to finally bloom into the wholeness of her being. As the novel begins, Celie, the protagonist and narrator, is purely a victim. She is a fourteen year old black girl living in the South who has been oppressed by men her whole life. She is constantly subjected to abuse and told she is ugly. As an adolescent she is repeatedly beaten and raped by her stepfather and thereafter gives birth to two children who are taken away from her. Her father gives her away to be married to Mr. Johnson who wants a servant, not a wife. The only person she loves, and the only person who loves her, is her sister Nettie, who is later taken away from her. The desperate Celie writes all her letters to God and later to her sister Nettie. It is through Celie that the reader understands her sufferings and her bonding with Shug

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Avery, a blues singer. It is through Harpo, Mr. Johnson's son that Walker introduces gender conflict.

### **Gender Conflict**

Celie and her bright, pretty younger sister, Nettie, learn that a man known as Mr. Johnson wants to marry Nettie. Mr. Johnson has a mistress named Shug Avery, a sultry blues singer whose photograph fascinates Celie. Eventually it leads to a sexual relationship between Celie and Shug. Alphonso refuses to let Nettie marry, and instead offers Mr. Johnson Celie, "an ugly woman", as his bride. Mr. Johnson eventually accepts the offer, forcing Celie into a difficult and joyless married life. Nettie runs away from Alphonso and takes refuge at Celie's house. Mr. Johnson still desires Nettie, and when he advances on her, she flees. Never hearing from Nettie again, Celie assumes she is dead.

Albert obstructs Nettie's letters to Celie. Celie does not know about the whereabouts of her sister Nettie, once Nettie leaves for Africa with the missionaries. There is no response from Nettie for Celie's letters. She concludes that Nettie is dead and not absent because both sisters had made a bond with each other, that in order to assure the other of their ongoing life they should write to each other. Celie demands letters, "I say, write. She say, Nothing but death can keep me from it. She never write" (*Purple 19*). The presumption of Nettie's death allows Celie to continue her correspondence with God. Later from Shug, Celie learns that Albert has been hiding letters written to her from Africa by her sister Nettie, a missionary. As her letters show, Celie gradually gains the ability to synthesize her thoughts and feelings into a voice that is fully her own.

### **Self-actualization**

The self-actualization Celie achieves transforms her into a happy, successful, independent woman. It is Shug who frees Celie from Mr Johnson's bondage, first by loving her, then by helping her to start a sewing business. Shug tries hard to emancipate Celie. The dormant, passive Celie with the support of Shug's friendship emerges into a life of creativity. "A Christ figure for Celie, Shug raises her up from a

mock death; in her encouragement of Celie's creativity, Shug offers her, for the very first time, a source of hope in her life" (Dawson 80).

In *The Color Purple*, it is evident that the seeds of the residual extended family system remain with the two sisters and as the novel progresses, Celie and Nettie join with the other women-sister in law, significant others, "co-wives" and the men they live with to rebuild an extended family structure which allows them freedom to grow (Wilentz 68).

### **Victimization**

Celie's narrative actually begins as a result of her victimization. She confides all her struggles to God and for a very long time, God is the only being she has to talk to, as she is either emotionally, or physically isolated from most of the other characters in the novel. Celie, right from the beginning of the novel suffers under the cruelty of male dominance to the extent of the oppressor having control over her speech. The novel's first few words suggest that she is prohibited to speak: "you better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill you mammy" (*Purple* 1). Thus Celie addresses all her letters to God, an orthodox Christian God, who is another incarnation of the father. Celie exists throughout the text without an audience. Celie writes all her letters to an absent presence. She feels that as long as she knows to spell G-O-D, she has somebody to write to. However, very soon she understands that the God whom she addresses is a male God and that to create a selfhood of her own she should rewrite the male God in female terms. This paves the way to her search for identity.

### **Passive Nature**

For much of the novel, Celie is completely passive. She encounters other women who tell Celie that she should stand up for herself and fight, but Celie feels that it's better to survive than to fight and risk not surviving. However, there are certain triggers that lead Celie to stand up. Celie proves herself to be willing to fight for the people she loves. Even as a downtrodden victim of her Pa, Celie sacrifices

herself and offers herself to her father so that he keeps his hands off of Nettie. In a smaller way, Celie also fights for Shug. When Mr. Johnson's father comes and criticizes Shug, Celie silently rebels by spitting in the man's water. If there is anything that gets Celie riled, it is people mistreating her loved ones.

### **Mother's Impact**

Celie's mother segregates herself from the other women and this shapes Celie's perspectives towards other women. She feels that rebellious women should be punished and so encourages Harpo to beat his wife Sofia. It is not until Celie and Shug see themselves as sisters rather than competitors, that they are able to resist Albert's brutality. Thus they eventually discover pleasure and happiness in one another (**Christian, Black Feminist 190**).

### **Focus on Contemporary Themes**

*The Color Purple* explores many dominant themes of contemporary culture: racism, feminism, imperialism and relativism. The novel explores the interlocking structures of male dominance, class and race. Walker explores female identity in terms not only of biology, but also of certain cultural factors such as economic deprivation, domestic servitude and abject acceptance of male domination.

Attaining the courage to vocalize one's thoughts is a major theme of *Color Purple*. At the same time it is quite evident that the courage to voice one's feelings must be necessarily preceded by a discovery of self-identity. Thus importance must be given to those factors like the discovery of desire-for selfhood, for others, for community and for a meaningful place in the world, all of which lead one to take courage and voice what one wants to be or do. The course for the discovery of selfhood for Celie begins only when she comes into a right understanding of her own body, which was originally misused by men like her uncouth stepfather and then by her brutal husband Mr. Johnson. In the process Celie learns to love herself and to repossess her body. This in turn instigates her to seek selfhood and to assert selfhood through speech. Thus she stops writing letters to God- who has no body at all and instead starts writing to her bodied sister Nettie.

### **From External to Internal**

The progress in the world of Walker is from external to internal, from the male controlling female lives, to women controlling their own lives. This is successfully brought out in the depiction of Celie's character in the novel.

In entering into a close relationship with Shug, Celie subverts traditional expectations of the married woman who is required to sacrifice her creativity and self-realization on the altar of motherhood and domesticity. Shug and Celie discover the supportive and joyous aspects of a female relationship. The lesbian relationship is treated in the novel in terms not of mere eroticism, but of women bonding. In fact woman-identification can be said to be a dominant theme of the novel. The interest of the fiction itself can be traced to the minutely documented account of the circumstances which impel both Shug and Celie to leave off making men the centre of their lives, and instead, transfer their loyalty and love to each other. Though social conventions stipulate that they should relate to men, their personal experience of male exploitation, sexist treatment and their reciprocal relationship of co-operation and support strengthen their bond. Their growing love and mutual trust gradually directs them through involvement with one another. When Celie effectively cares for Shug through her illness, Shug finally realizes that, as compared to Albert who is motivated by self-interest, it is Celie who deserves her affection and responsibility. The relationship between Celie and Shug is a sisterly blend of domestic, erotic and social elements.

### **Celie and Shug**

Celie and Shug never had any love relationship with any other person. Their love for each other elevates their community as a whole, be it male or female. Celie describes Shug as a very stylish woman, one who is direct in her desires and in articulating her wants. Celie notices that Shug Avery talks and acts like a man sometimes. Instead of conversing like a woman about matters usually associated with women, Shug would often hug her and say that she looked like a good time-something that only a man would say (*Purple* 85).

Thus the bond between Celie and Shug is so intense that Shug expresses her desires with no inhibitions to Celie.

### **The Process of Bonding**

It has been suggested that the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug “represents the height of silly romanticisms” (Harris, *Stereotype* 157). Charles L. Proudfit bases his reading of the relationship between Celie and Shug on a mother-daughter bond that according to contemporary psycho-analytic theory originates in deep, primeval ties to the mother of infancy. It is a bond that must be reworked continually during a woman’s life time. Walker describes how Celie bonds first, with the biological mother of her infancy and later with appropriate mother surrogates. These descriptions are psychologically authentic and cover the range of female responses towards Celie, from that of Nettie to those of Kate and Sofia. They culminate in Shug’s stimulation of Celie towards a healthy emotional life:

This “female bonding” which occurs over an extended period of time, enables Celie - a depressed survivor-victim of parent loss, emotional and physical neglect, rape, incest, trauma and spousal abuse - to resume her arrested development and continue developmental processes that were thwarted in infancy and early adolescence (*Identity* 13).

### **Subjective Introspection and Bonding**

At the same time Celie’s own subjective introspection leads her to affirm her self-interpretation of herself and the situational contexts which shape her identity. However she arrives, “as invariably a Walker bearer of responsibility must, at her place in the spectrum of life, her relationship to others, and her own continuity (Davis 51).

For Celie the very appearance of Shug represents boldness and opportunity. Shug helps Celie to establish her own identity and attain fulfillment and contentment by introducing her to a business of making pants. The interaction with the people she meets in business gives her confidence. Thus Shug elevates Celie by transforming her

from a lonely, isolated and alienated person to a liberated and independent entrepreneur.

The bonding of Celie and Shug, provides the framework for Celie to re-examine certain religious ideas. This process of re-examination pivots around the aspects of God, man and church. Celie comes to an understanding of reality. Her true understanding of God frees her from psychological, emotional and sexual trauma. She experiences a thorough transformation and becomes a whole and a self-confident individual. She gains a better understanding of God and human relationships. Walker points out that Black women can be re-generated and liberated only through a new understanding of God.

### **Nettie and Celie**

By the end of the novel, Celie's newfound strength, as well as her ever-enduring love for Nettie, pays off. All through the years, she has kept the memory of Nettie alive, despite the fact that there was no proof that Nettie was alive. Nettie is not only alive, but she has helped raise Celie's two children, and when the novel ends, Celie and Nettie and Celie's two children, now grown, are reunited. Despite all the odds, Celie held on. She had learned to fight, to stand up for herself, and she was rewarded. She never gave up on her love for Nettie, nor did she give up on her love for God. Celie survived physically and spiritually, and she matured into a tough modern twentieth-century woman.

### **Platonic Love**

Celie also maintains a steadfast, platonic love for Sofia, Harpo's wife. When she is imprisoned, Celie goes to the jail and attends to her wounds. She also visits her often during the years of her confinement, encouraging her and giving her strength. After her initial mistake of advising Harpo to beat Sofia, Celie learns the power of women's solidarity through her bond with Sofia.

Shug has a significant influence on Celie and she begins to model herself after following her views and opinions leading her ultimately to a life of independence. Celie takes the act of sewing, which is traditionally thought as a mere chore for



women who are confined to a domestic role, and turns it into an outlet for creative self-expression and a profitable business. The transformation in Celie is best exemplified through the words of Shug: “you not my maid, I didn’t bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet” (218). After being voiceless for so many years, she is finally content, fulfilled and self-sufficient. Celie, a helpless and sexually abused girl, is thus transformed from her desperate state of helplessness to a confident, autonomous woman and establishes a position for herself in this world. The oppressed girl who suffered from self-scorn learns through her tortuous journey, to love herself and others of her community and expresses, in totality, her concern about the black community.

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