

# In Search of Self : Analysis of the Character Celie in the Color Purple

Dayana Mathew, Usha M, Nivedhitha.K.B, Kalaiarasi.M

*Abstract This article focuses on the theme of alienation in the novel Color Purple by Alice Walker. The main protagonist of the novel is Celie. Celie has been alienated from her family, husband, step children, society and also from herself. It is understandable of the colored people's situation in a white dominated society. Celie was not only ostracized in the society because of her race but because of her gender and physical appearances. The trauma that she had to undergone from her childhood causes her to change radically. Though she is alienated from everyone and did not receive love until she met with Shrug Avery, she never did lose her real self and at the end she finds her true self.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker's third novel, *The Color Purple*, has won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for Fiction. This novel is in epistolary form and also Black women-centered. The entire novel is written in a series of letters which form the source of information about Celie, the principal character. Celie's letters reflect her internal conflict, her silent sufferings, and the impact of oppression on her spirit as well as her growing internal strength, and final victory. *The Color Purple* is a song of joy and triumph. It is the triumph of a woman's struggle against racism, sexism, and social determinism ultimately leading to the wholeness of her being.

Walker emphasizes on the universal oppression of black women in the novel *Color Purple* through the character Celie. 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.

The theme of alienation could draw very well in the lives of the characters presented in the novel; especially Celie's. It is very evident from the social set up present in the novel that blacks are not treated well in the society. They are alienated from the white's society. These blacks are not only alienated from the Whites but among the Blacks itself they are treated differently according to their economic level. Alice Walker quotes about her protagonist Celie from the novel *Color Purple* as "Celie, the main character of The

*Color Purple*, is from an early age exposed to sexual abuse, violence and oppression first by a person she believed to be her father later by a man she is forced to marry" (Walker 3, 102).

### *Search for Self*

It is one thing to be treated indifferent and alienated from other communities and another to be ill-treated by one's own community. Women being the most suppressed among all are alienated even from themselves. "the woman is repressed as subject and desired as object,"(54) The main character Celie is sexually assaulted by her father but is not allowed to open her mouth about anything to anyone. "You better not never tell nobody but God"(CP1). She was threatened by her father that if she speak about anything that happened there, her father would leave their mother. Her father is supposed to take care of her; but he molests her for his pleasure and threatens her.

Celie's alienation starts from her own family when she was molested by her father and she was forced to keep quiet about that. Celie never knew what it is to express her OWN opinion or to stand against anyone. Fathers are supposed to be protective over his family and considered to be the best friend and role model of girl children. Here Celie's father is nothing alike this supposedly father figure and uses his children for his pleasure and benefit. Celie's mother, though know what is happening around, never really care about what happens to them. Celie is alienated from an atmosphere which is supposed to be cozy and compassionate but turns out to be nightmarish and make her forgotten in her own family.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Celie was even denied of the freedom to raise her child. Immediately she delivered the baby, the baby was taken away from her by her father. Though she bore a child of her own father it is the right for every mother to raise one's child on their own. She was even denied of that right of a mother as women, though she may not know what exactly motherhood is. Celie was not ashamed to have the baby. Yet her father sold her right to be a mother and married off her to another family.

This alienation which has started from her family continues to pursue her to her new family too. In reality Celie does not have a family in its true sense until she reunites with her sister. She was abused and regarded as nothing in her own family and consider to be servant and nanny without payment in her husband's house. Though Celie was never outspoken and endure everything as an

**Revised Manuscript Received on September 14, 2019.**

**Dayana Mathew**, M.A.,M.Phil.(Phd), Assistant Professor, Department of English, SKASC, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu, India.

**Usha M**, M.A.,(M.Phil)., Assistant Professor, Department of English, SKASC, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu, India.

**Nivedhitha.K.B**, II MA English Literature, SKASC, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu, India.

**Kalaiarasi.M**, II MA English Literature, SKASC, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu, India.

invisible person in that house; she was never received any love or care in the truest sense.

As a member of the household, Celie was provided with enough food and other substances in her Husband's house. Though she did not lack any physical comforts, she lived in such subordination that she did not even know her husband's name. This shows that Celie was not accepted in her husband's household and was alienated. Even her step children were cruel to her when she first arrived at the house.

Celie, denied of her own motherhood took care of someone else's offspring. She never showed any dislike to her new husband and his children. Though the children were not that receptive of her, she withstood everything and took care of the children with love and affection. She never discriminated them as someone else's children. There too Celie was alienated as a mother from the children. The children never considered Celie as their real mother and they abused her whenever it was possible.

Celie was moreover like a machine or another Thing among her husband's household articles; a nanny to kids, a cook to everyone, sweeper to the house, sex machine to her husband, and an overseer in the field. Her husband never spared her a second glance until he needs her for his pleasure. Though he was officially married to Celie he had tried to rape Celie's sister Nettie. Celie had to send her sister away from his house in order to save her from his mistreatment. This shows that he is a man of no integrity and has no compassion for his wife. He commits adultery without any shame.

He was not even ashamed to take his mistress to his house and asked Celie to take care of her. Celie too more than getting offended by her husband's action, took care of Shug very well even after treated like a vermin by her. After Shug came to his house, he never even considered Celie was living in his house and always spent his time taking care of Shug. He was like a whining puppy in front of Shug Avery and treated her like a queen.

Celie was very much attracted to Shug's confident nature. She was never worried about her husband's relationship with Shug or the way Shug treated her in the beginning. Celie was even amused by the way Shug looked down on her husband. Though Celie and Shug were not much close in the beginning later they both developed a friendship among them. Celie was never loved or recognized by anyone until she met with Shug Avery. Shug taught Celie to smile without covering her mouth, to love herself and her body, to have self-confidence, and to be uptight about her opinions.

Celie had never taken a single decision of her own or never had any opinion of her own until she met with Shug Avery. She believed that her life is to be ruled by others opinions. And she is to live a life of slave. But Shug Avery had changed Celie's notions about her life and other woman's life. Shug was epitome of confidence and very feminine in her features. She valued her life and believed that she is precious. Having seen Shug's attitude to men and to the society Celie had learned to value her and understood that he is not below anyone.

Shug made Celie to stand in front of a mirror and made her to smile without covering her mouth. Though Celie was a little reluctant in the beginning after trying sometime she

was able to gain some self-confidence. Shug also made her aware of her physical beauty. Celie thought that she was not beautiful like other women. Shug made her realize that Celie had a wonderful physique by caressing and touching her compassionately. That was the first time Celie ever experienced such a physical love from other person.

Celie never knew what real physical pleasure from her husband. She always used to simply lie under him so that he can do his "business". That was kind of an everyday ritual to her. She never liked her husband groping all over her body and it was a disgusting act for her. She was unfortunate to know her mother's caressing hand and only experienced the forceful alcoholic breath of her abusive father. Thus for Celie physical touch was something that is associated with awful memories.

### III. DISCUSSIONS & RESULTS

Shug made her forget all about her bitter experiences and Celie loved the way Shug caressed her. Through this Celie started to give some credit to her and understood that she is not someone others have to be messing around for their benefit. Shug also urged Celie to not to carry out all the orders by her husband like a slave and have an opinion of her own like Shug. Shug taught her to have respect for herself.

Though Celie was received so much love and affection from Shug which she never had received from anyone before, she could not change herself completely. Celie was more independent and free to Shug. But she could not control herself from running around like a slave to her husband. When Shug was not around she had gone back to her old life of being controlled by others.

More than anything Celie was alienated from herself. Celie has never received love or recognition from other people. She never knew how to appreciate herself and love herself. Since she does not give much value to herself, she believed that women have to be under the control of men. She believed that a woman who is not controlled by man is not a good one. Though she admired Shug Avery's outspoken and daring nature Celie could never change her inferior complex completely.

She even advise Harpo (elder son of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_) to beat his wife Sofia (who was a fiercely independent woman) to make her do what Harpo wanted her to do. Sofia is younger than Celie, which partially explains why she is unable to accept the confining role laid out by the system for the meek black maid and the dutiful black wife. Sofia was meant to rule, not to take orders. She fights back when Harpotries to rule her with an iron fist. She wants a partnership relationship in their marriage, not a master-servant relationship.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

If Celie would ever have known what love and affection in reality, she would never have suggested Harpo to beat Sofia in the first place. From this, it is proven that Celie has very less self-consideration. Celie did not advise Harpo to beat Sofia out of her jealousy but she believed that it is the way things have to be done. What made her think of the society that it should be abusive of women? This very idea is the offspring of her low self-esteem which was the result of alienation.

#### REFERENCE

1. Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Phoenix: The Women's Press, 2004. Print.
2. Tucker, Lindsey. "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: Emergent Women, Emergent Text."
3. *Black American Literature Forum* Spring 1988: 81-95. JSTOR.Web. 20 Sept. 2013.
4. Proudfit, Charles L. "Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*". *Contemporary Literature*. University of Wisconsin Press (Spring, 1991): 12-37. JSTOR.Web. 22 Oct. 2013.
7. Shahida, M. Chakranarayan. *The Color Purple: A Study*. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 2005.