

Emancipation and Progression through the Spiritual in Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'

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Abstract:

“Some periods of growth are so confusing we don't even recognize that growth is happening. We may feel hostile or angry or weepy and hysterical, or we may feel depressed. It would never occur to us, unless we stumbled on a book or person who explained to us, that we were in fact in the process of change, of actually becoming larger, spiritually, than we were before. The Womanist writer Alice Walker wrote these words in her book 'Living by the Word: Selected Writings, 1973-1987'. These periods of growth are so dull and monotonous that people feel they are slowly fading away from existence. This is a sacred phase and every soul is built up for their journey ahead in this episode of gloom. These

stages of nothingness can make or break a person and it depends on that person to learn and unlearn what they should. The choices they make during this step are crucial for the subsequent stride. The women in Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple' had to go through this rough patch of survival and to top it all they had the worst of experiences in life. They endured every hardship by the help of 'the Spiritual' and they came out through this battle of tedium with success like a butterfly from its cocoon.

Keywords: Women, Spirituality, God, Liberation, Transformation

Introduction:

In the preface written by Alice Walker for the tenth anniversary edition of the book 'The Color Purple' are the words, "No one is exempt from the possibility of a conscious connection to All That Is. Not the poor. Not the suffering. Not the writer sitting in the open field. This is the book in which I was able to express a new spiritual awareness, a rebirth into strong feelings of oneness I realized I had experienced and had taken for granted as a child; a chance for me as well as the main character, Celie, to encounter That Which Is Beyond Understanding But Not Beyond Loving and to say: I see and hear you clearly, Great Mystery, now that I expect to see and hear you everywhere I am, which is the right place." The women in this novel go through a great change, men too. The transformation is slow yet steady, moving from bad to good and then better to best. Every small step ahead takes few to a good place and others just fall to another new low until they head back on the right track and start all the way from the beginning. The readers can feel every physical and mental struggle faced by these characters in their bodies and mind; that is how vivid Walker's writing is. But this about the new found spiritual, the kind of spiritual that once was objective but had gradually turned subjective somewhere down the years. The kind of spiritual that once had to be imagined but now could be felt. All the major women in this novel found 'the spiritual'; and from then on these women progressed steadily until they became spiritually stronger and shattered their fetters of oppression. Their physical and mental wounds were healed by the spiritual and they were liberated at last.

The Journey to Liberation by the Guidance of the Unseen and Ever-present:

The very first sentence in the epistolary novel 'The Color Purple', are the words spoken by Celie's abusive stepfather Alphonso, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy." (*The Color Purple*, p.3). This very sentence directed the entire novel to flow smoothly on letters written to G-O-D. The unseen yet ever-present feeling of God makes it easy to depend on; this is what led Celie to take her stepfather's advice mixed with threat and unburden her soul by writing letters to the unseen. The main character Celie is fourteen year old African-American girl. She started writing letters to God from the time she was raped by Alphonso, her stepfather. She was going through a great deal of changes in her body but because of her pregnancy, a result of rape but she has no one to look up to. She cannot face it all on her own, so she chooses pour out her heart to God.

In the beginning, Celie addresses her letters to the white male God portrayed in churches. The African-American society was predominantly patriarchal and the sermons were mostly one-sided. They did not teach the Bible in its wholesome form but used selective teaching; wives should honour their husbands was taken into account but the next part that says, that husbands ought to love their wives was omitted. In the similar way, the whites used it for their own gain when it came down to slavery. The ones who suffered the backlash of everyone were black women. Black men were ill-treated by white men and white women, so they dumped all their frustrations on black women; while black women bore the brunt of everyone; white men, white women and black men. These women had no one to unburden their misery to. Celie

being a fourteen year old found the right way to unburden herself. She never fought back because she put her faith in the manipulative sermons given in her church. Although the church denied her the Biblical truth, she found God while baring her raw and broken spirit to Him.

Celie is an extremely passive woman; she tolerates everything to the point of death. In her thirteenth letter to God Celie writes, "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 say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man." (*The Color Purple*, p.23) She suppresses her voice by waking her mind and imagining she was a piece of wood; a tree made no noise and by convincing herself she was a tree she endures his strikes.

Celie is jealous of her stepson's wife Sophia, because unlike Celie, Sophia is a fighter. She always stood-up for herself and never let anyone look down on her. She always fought hard and made sure she was heard; if not she kept going until she was. When her husband Harpo tried the follow the footsteps of his father, Sophia beats him black and blue. Celie is stunned by Sophia's dealings with her husband and out of Jealousy asks him show who the boss is by beating her up. When Sophia confronts Celie about her advice to Harpo, Celie confesses that she did it out of Jealousy. These are Celie's words to Sophia, "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 can't. What that? she say. Fight. I say." (*The Color Purple*, p.39) Sophia then reveals a part of her past to Celie. She says, "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house... I loves Harpo. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me." (*The Color Purple*, p.39) This conversation becomes a turning point in Celie and Sophia's relationship. They resolve their conflicts there and become good friends. Watching Sophia push her way through for her rights gives Celie the boldness to fight for hers too.

Shug Avery, Mr_____ 's lover treats him like a slave; and that is when Celie discovers that her husband was not worth her fears. Shug Avery is all Celie wished she was. Celie wants to look like her, act like her, talk, walk, smoke and sing like her. Shug has a great influence in Celie's life. After Sophia, Shug is introduced into Celie's being and alters her perception on God and life. She teaches Celie to be independent and unapologetically true to herself. Shug also proves to Celie that Mr_____ or Albert (Shug calls him by his name) is just a man with low self-esteem and he abuses Celie to feel great about himself. When Celie sees Albert waiting on Shug like he was her driver; all her fears crumble. He is not as daunting as he was. After Celie discovered Nettie's letters hidden by Mr_____, she is quite angry with God and questions His wisdom. From then on she starts addressing her letters to Nettie and seeing this change Shug persuades Celie to change her perceptions of God; she asks her to broaden her beliefs on God and not confine Him in the image and ideology of the Church. From then on Celie is

liberated from the shackles of the compressed belief of the representation of God.

Nettie, Celie's long lost sister is back on track again; after thirty years of disjunction, she finds out that Nettie is married to Samuel a missionary, is the mother of Celie's two kids Adam and Olivia, and is doing well with her life in Africa. She is overjoyed by this news and she lets go of all her doubts and becomes more positive to existence. Celie journey of liberation starts by studying her stepdaughter-in-law, Sophia and then Celie's beliefs and confidence is upgraded when she is around her glamorous new friend turned lover, Shug Avery and by the time she's reunited with her dear missionary sister, Nettie, she's already in a better place. All these women root for her freedom in the physical, mental and Spiritual domain until Celie finally joins them and puts her foot in too. As the sixteenth century proverb goes, "You can lead a horse to the water, but you can't make him drink." Celie studied them, took their advice, had to put her effort in to take her binds off and only then slowly experienced different forms of liberty as the years went by.

Celie's view on religion broadens as she converses with Shug. "Although Shug is not typically religious, she strongly believes that God wants people to be happy, and that God, too, wants to be loved, just as people do." Celie's spiritual journey starts with writing letters to God. While leaving for her husband's house her sister Nettie says. "I sure hate to leave you with these rotten children. Not to mention Mr_____. It's like seeing you buried." To this Celie replies, "It's worse than that, I think. If I was buried, I wouldn't have to work. But I just say, Never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-O-D I got somebody along." (*The Color Purple*, p.19) Even with her conventional view of God, Celie is quite comfortable sharing inner toils. Nettie is the only happiness in life and now she has to depart from her as well. Nettie is Celie's little sister who played the role of a friend, sister, teacher, advisor and at times mother. She was the only one in the physical world who cared for Celie; she was like an oasis in Celie's life. Leaving her sister was like exhaling the last bit of oxygen left in her lungs. Celie is always degraded by Albert; he constantly puts her down when she is already feeling low herself. Albert tells her, "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman... You are nothing." He fixes a stigma to all these mentioned qualities insinuating that Celie is a less important because of those qualities.

Celie's life is dull and tedious before Shug's arrival; the only one she had before that was God but the conversation is just one-sided. She cannot see Him, hear or feel Him. She is the only one talking and there is no assurance in that. Celie admits that her image of God is a man who is big, old, tall, white-robed, white-bearded, bare-footed and white. "Although the church is placed in a black community, the teachings of the church are derived from teachings of white people. Celie discovers throughout the novel that she, like Shug, cannot find God in this kind of church that is based on patriarchal religion but searches for Him elsewhere. Walker's personal concept of spirituality is pantheism, an idea that God is in all living things within nature including people." (Raju Chandra) While conversing with Shug, Celie learns

that God is in her and that she can yield more from the divinity within her than from the organized belief system within her commune. By the end of this epistolary novel, Celie recalls all the people who assisted her through her tedious journey of life and concludes the final letter with an abundantly contented ending, 'Amen'.

Conclusion:

The 'God' Alice Walker endorses in her book 'The Color Purple' is not just an embodiment of flesh as the churches bind this being to be. According to Walker God is not male or female, white or black. This being cannot be bound to trivial things like sex or colour and it has no semblance to the Western images of God as a white-skinned, blue-eyed

patriarch. She terminates all her forced beliefs and concludes by addressing God as 'Everything'. Now Walker's new definition of God is that it a divine being that is present in all living things and it represents the vital theology of the universe and therefore it cannot bound by any organised belief system or church structure. The very first words written by Celie are, "Dear God" and by the last letter Celie addresses the letter with the salutation, "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God." (*The Color Purple*, p.259). This shows the progression in her belief and independence from the structured chains of religion. All though Celie had the worst of beginnings, her journeys end was far better than any fairy tale. No one could be more content than Celie was at the end. Amen to that!

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