

**An Allegory of Self-realisation in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*****Pavitra Poorna S R**Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Deshbandhu College, University of Delhi  
Kalkaji New Delhi**ABSTRACT**

In the face of patriarchal culture's dominance, Celie submits herself to male dominance and authority through her dread of men and God and how she names men. Celie eventually awakens her sense of ego with the help of Sofia's positive influence and Shug's soothing motherly style. The realm of creation is explored at last. As a result, Sofia and the haughty Shug become softer, more caring personalities. While Black women relish in their solid bonds and beloved selves, Black men, like Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Harpo, undergo a process of self-reflection. They have recognised women for who they are as human beings rather than objects. In conclusion, Black men and women have learned to love and be loved, and they have also learned to embrace their own identities. The paper examines *The Color Purple* as a contemporary allegory of self-realisation.

**KEYWORDS:** Allegory, Patriarchy, Self-realisation, Walker, Racism.

*The Color Purple* starts with Celie confessing that he raped her multiple times by her stepfather when she was fourteen and concludes with the joyous union of her sister Nettie, her two grown-up children, and herself. Celie undergoes a problematic but ultimately inspirational metamorphosis from a life devoid of hope and joy to one characterised by love. Inevitably, many other characters have also changed, including Mary Agnes, Shug Avery, Albert, Harpo, and Sofia. With Celie at the centre, *The Color Purple* offers a contemporary take on the classic allegory of self-fulfilment attained amidst adversity. The paper "An Allegory of Self-realisation in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" traces and probes this transformation within the parameters of racism within which the novel is set.

Celie, a black poor and unattractive woman, gets a taste of life's harshness daily. Her stepfather assaulted her when she was fourteen since her mother was too feeble to satiate his sexual urges. As soon as her two babies are born, the perpetrators of the heinous act take them away from her. In retrospect, she realises her existence in a less favourable light after her loveless marriage to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. The dowry of a cow, together with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s immediate need for a woman to tend to his home and four children, as well as his need for a helping hand in the fields, convince him to accept Celie as his wife. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ views Celie as nothing more than an instrument he may use to his advantage. Initially glancing at her, he appears to be choosing a cow from Celie's height. The loss of her one emotional connection, her younger sister Nettie, who she adored, was the cherry on top of all these tragedies. Despite the relentless barrage of horrible tragedies, Celie has never considered standing up for herself. "All I know how to do is stay alive" (Walker 16) remains Celie's simple life philosophy, despite Nettie's persistent efforts to teach the idea of resistance in her mind. Following Nettie's expulsion from Mr. \_\_\_\_'s presence due to her refusal to give in to his seduction, Celie's sole means of survival becomes a correspondence with God. She could let out some of her pent-up feelings in this way while protecting herself from those days' shame.

Celie's method of identifying men who exert influence over her reveals her self-deprivation. Celie is afraid to reveal the identities of men who exert solid control over her until she becomes self-aware. Her stepfather, father-in-law, and husband are alike. Samuel is friendly toward women, although Celie still calls him "Reverend Mr. \_\_\_\_" due to his illustrious position as a pastor. Because they were unable to preside over Germaine, the only people named directly are Harpo, Mr. \_\_\_\_'s son; Tobias, Mr. \_\_\_\_'s brother; Jack, Sofia's brother-in-law; Grady, Shug's husband; and Germaine, Shug's young girlfriend.

Despite men's tendency to disregard women as equals, Celie values her identity because of the positive, strong women role models like Sofia and Shug. First of all, Celie is so envious of Sofia for acting so fearlessly in defying Mr. \_\_\_\_'s rejection of her marriage to Harpo and for insisting on doing things her way rather than submitting to Harpo's command that she suggests, without hesitation, that Harpo physically punish

Sofia when he is at a loss for how to get her to obey him: "I think about how every time I jump when Mr. \_\_\_\_ calls me, she looks surprised. As if she felt sorry for me. Outdo her, I declare" (Walker 35). Celie's tense envy subsides momentarily as this idea leaves her mouth. A feeling of sin and remorse that Sofia experiences quickly begins to torment her. It was more than a month before she finally got some rest.

Seeing Celie's frailty and helplessness makes Sofia think of her loving mother, who never expresses sympathy for Celie to her father; Sofia makes amends with her and even suggests that Celie punch Mr. \_\_\_\_'s head open before contemplating paradise. The sisterly conversation starts to rouse Celie from her slumber. She slumbers soundly that night. Seemingly prepared for regeneration, Celie has almost shed her former persona.

Celie learns from her experience with Sofia that she has been helpless and submissive. She learns to appreciate herself and celebrate her uniqueness during her time with Shug Avery. A watershed moment in Celie's life occurs when Shug seeks recovery at Mr. \_\_\_\_'s place. Before that, she was completely enamoured with the photo of Shug, a woman. I have never seen a more stunning woman. Her beauty surpasses that of my mother. According to Walker, she is "one thousandth as beautiful as I am" (6). Because of her striking looks and self-assured smile, Celie has admired Shug as an idol ever since. It should come as no surprise that Celie feels no pain when Mr. \_\_\_\_ takes Shug home, the third leg of the love triangle. She is more than happy to let Shug take care of her instead. When no one else is willing to take in Shug, who is supposedly sick with tuberculosis or some horrible woman's disease, Celie's gentle care saves her life.

Meanwhile, Celie immerses herself in Shug's nurturing presence. Shug encourages Celie to examine her privates in the mirror after learning that she is still a virgin. Recognising her identity begins with Celie appreciating her body. According to E. Ellen Barker's analysis of the show:

"The mirror reflection of her own body opens the door for possibilities in herself, and with her newfound identity, Celie can break free from male domination and

---

join a community of women for support, and she begins to establish an identification through a network of female relationships with Shug" (Barker 61).

Due to Shug, Celie can see beyond her narrow focus on survival. She feels now how men are violent tyrants. Their treatment of her has been one of complete disregard, ridicule, abuse, and neglect. When men pose a threat, women are the only ones they can rely on for support and strength. Awakened sexuality is just one of many gifts she receives from Shug; she also learns to love herself and others and finds the tools to build her own identity. With the song that Shug composes in her honour, Celie realises she has equal worth. According to Walker, the battered bird, Celie, patiently awaits the feathers to fall so she can soar into the air and experience the joy of rebirth (72). Celie grows "into an independent self-actualized woman, no longer benignly accepting the emotionally crippling conditions that have enslaved her" while under Shug's care (Barker 55).

Along with Celie's eventual emergence from the realm of survival, her first understanding of God is similarly shattered. Because of her deeply held belief that God is White and Male, she has suffered from a severe case of fear of God for quite some time. The realisation that God has ignored her prayers causes her to feel furious and depressed, supplanting her initial anxiety. God has only bestowed upon her anguish after anguish: a lynched father, a mad mother, a degraded stepfather, and a sister she may never see again. A genderless God seems more acceptable to Celie. The fact that Nettie's idea of God is based on Shug's strengthens this new perspective. As a result, Celie begins to address Nettie rather than God in the last portion of her diaries. She says "Dear God" in her final letter, which covers every possible topic. Greetings, celestial bodies, woodland creatures, celestial expanse, and mighty humans. She comes to terms with the idea that God is everywhere and discovers within herself the capacity to seek God directly, leading her to sing "Dear God" (Walker 286).

Entering a realm of creativity, Celie leaves behind everything old—old life, old ideals, and old personality. What she has just learned about pants-making and the power of names lend credence to her creation. Taking possession and projecting one's perception on another is what "to name" means (Christopher103). This clarifies Celie's

---

---

confusion over Albert's identity whenever Shug says the name and her inability to pronounce Mr. \_\_\_\_'s name. On the other hand, by the book's conclusion, Celie has taken complete control of her life and can, therefore, address Mr. \_\_\_\_ as Albert.

Making pants is a metaphor for Celie's journey to financial freedom, which she uses to symbolise her spiritual rebirth. Mr. \_\_\_\_'s decision to conceal all of Nettie's letters infuriates Celie to the point that she considers murdering him. Thankfully, Shug talks her out of killing and inspires her to sew pants. Celie gets into business and makes an excellent life by trading in the razor for a needle. As Walton puts it, "Celie stitches her life back together when she begins to design pants" (193). Celie is well on her way to starting over because of the various trouser patterns she develops.

At last, Celie finds the words to express herself and understands that there is more to life than just surviving. Her language, which many find offensive, is another manifestation of her coming-of-age. "She has not accepted an alien description of who she is, nor has she completely accepted an alien tongue to tell us about it," Walker explains in defence of Celie's statements. Her language affirms her existence; it is distinctive, earned, and genuine, just like everything else about her (Walker 64). Vocabulary is integral to Celie's resolve to express herself and tell people who she is, even though her vocabulary is unconventional and harsh.

Ever since the novel came out, people have been criticising the lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie. Their closeness and love for one another drive Celie further on her path to spiritual self-discovery. "The mother-inginfluence" (Barker 22) describes Shug's impact on Celie. Not only has Celie risen above her objectification and become the topic throughout their time together, but Shug Avery has also softened and grown more sympathetic. At the initial assessment at Mr. \_\_\_\_'s residence, Shug, whose eyes are "large, glossy? Show signs of fever. In a haughty tone, she looks Celie over from head to toe and exclaims, "You sure is ugly, she says, like she am not believed it" (Walker 44). She acts towards Celie as if she were her slave. She comes clean later about her behaviour, saying it is all because Albert wed Ce-lie.

Similarly, she has never meant to marry Albert, but she has never been so cruel to Annie Julia, his first wife. Even though Celie gives Shug an air of superiority and

---

stubbornness, the love and care she receives from Celie and her incredible endurance make her a more compassionate and understanding person. As their relationship deepens, they are more inclined to rely on each other for support and to seek ways to incorporate the other's best traits into their own identity.

Not only do Celie and Shug revel in their metamorphoses, but so do Mary Agnes and Sofia, who serve as Celie and Shug's reflections. Sofia, who is just as fierce and unstoppable as Shug, retaliates in a masculine fashion when Harpo attempts to subdue her. She becomes as kind as Shug as the story develops, in part because of her traumatic experiences while incarcerated and in part because she realises that there is no one-and-done solution to the situation. Silent and submissive, Celie and Mary Agnes exemplify the stereotypical repressed Black woman, in contrast to the outspoken Shug and Sofia. Mary Agnes follows in Celie's footsteps at the book's conclusion, abandoning her shabby past and embracing a bright future as a singer.

Even though racism has plagued Black people for generations, it is secondary to other factors in the savagery of black men in *The Color Purple*. White businesspeople's jealousy led to the death of Celie's birth father, Mary Agnes met with the sheriff, and Sofia had an encounter with the mayor's family. Still, other than that, the book primarily focuses on domestic violence within the Black community. It is easy to see how the black community is still scarred by white supremacists' tyranny in these crude drawings and, more specifically, in Nettie's description of the plight of the Olinka people in Africa, targeted by British capitalists. According to Christopher (102), Black men have "the need to recapture their masculinity through the oppression of the female" as a result of the harmful effects of racism. As a means of releasing their own repressed and hurt feelings, these men mistreat and dominate their families.

Black men face societal injustice on top of the pressures they face from both their fathers and white society. Like for Black women, a complete and accurate understanding of oneself requires reevaluating one's existence. The good news is that Mr. \_\_\_\_ and Harpo can get past their fears and embrace the change for the better. By the book's conclusion, Mr. \_\_\_\_ has humbly offered to sew Celie matching shirts and has even made another marriage proposal. For the first time, he feels at home on

Earth. Albert "went deeply enough into himself to find the courage to change," as Alice Walker acknowledges in *Living by the Word* (Walker 80). Harpo also exhibits a beautiful transformation. He stops trying to sway Sofia's decision. While Sofia is in Celie's store, he would rather be at home caring for the kids.

Black men and women finally achieve a societal and familial self-redefinition after years of fighting against the pervasive patriarchal culture. They learn to love one another and themselves and come to terms with the bonds of siblinghood and fraternity. In the final words of her notebook, Celie emphasises the overarching theme of rebirth in the characters whose stories represent a contemporary take on old allegory:

I feel a little peculiar around the children. For one thing, they grew. And I see they think me, Nettie, Shug, Albert, Samuel, Harpo, Sofia, Jack, and Odessa are old and don't know much about what is happening. But I don't think we feel old at all and so happy. (Walker 289)

What a remarkable change Celie has undergone. It was laborious and time-consuming. Linda Tate said, "The ability to control defining oneself, naming oneself" was crucial to her personal growth. As Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ puts it, Celie is "nobody" at the beginning of her story. He asks, "Who do you think you are?" You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. God damn, he say, you nothing at all" (Walker 100). Celie cannot even begin to describe who she is. "As living in irreconcilable fragments" describes how she feels about her physical and mental selves. She crosses out the words "I am" at the beginning of her story to show that she does not believe in herself or accept herself. "Celie has been fragmented into pieces which are given away to others" (Walker 125). For the sake of Pa's wishes, Nettie's protection, and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s cruelty, her entire life has been a succession of sacrifices. From her childhood onwards, she has been "torn" apart by Pa's rapes, her children, and Nettie. Nothing about her resonates with anyone; she has no sense of herself or her place in the world.

Celie must achieve self-acceptance and self-definition throughout the story. The story starts when she tells Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that she is leaving him to move in with Shug in Memphis. She states, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, But I'm here".

Later, in a letter to Nettie from Memphis, Celie clearly articulates a new and more positive vision of herself: "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you are alive and will be home soon. And although Celie has never signed her letters, she does so now emphatically, defining her new identity through her family relationships, business, love, and new place in the world."

### **Works Cited**

Barker, E Ellen. Creating Generations: The Relationship Between Celie and Shug in Alice Walker's The Color Purple. Critical Essays on Alice Walker. Ed. Ikenna Dieke. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Christopher, Marc A. The Color Purple: An Existential Novel. Critical Essays on Alice Walker. Ed. Ikenna Dieke. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Michael G. Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century, London: Yale University Press. 1984.

Walker, Alice. The Color Purple. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.

Walton, Priscilla L. 'What She Got to Sing About? Comedy and The Color Purple, Critical Essays on Alice Walker. Ed. Ikenna Dieke. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.