

Conversing with Self, Negotiating with the World—How Identity Empowers Celie’s Change in *The Color Purple*

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Abstract

The Color Purple is one of the best-known novels written by Alice Walker, an African American writer. The narrative portrays an African American woman Celie who suffered the tyranny of patriarchal and racial oppression, overcame the shadow of the past, and eventually enjoyed a life of freedom, independence, and respect. This paper discusses how Celie’s self-identity developed in a dynamic pattern in a long temporal process. Celie’s psychological evolution of self-identity is vital to the shape of ideology and independence as well as to the world around her. It concludes that conversing with oneself entails an ongoing investigation of one’s self-identity, which is embodied in one’s interactions with the world and efforts to influence one’s circumstances. Only by developing a positive self-identity and conversing with oneself can one find peace and reconcile with the physical world.

Keywords: *The Color Purple*, identity, African American

1. Introduction

The Color Purple, the laureate of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award for fiction, is one of the best-known novels by Alice Walker, an African American writer. Alice Walker took advantage of her acute observation and unique life experience as an African American woman, presenting the story with special perspectives. The novel centers around the life of a black woman named Celie, who, living in the tyranny of patriarchal and racial oppression, suffered great pain of sexual and

physical abuse at the beginning, but finally struggled to make the transformation into an independent identity with self-achievement. The novel was written in 1982. Though four decades passed, the theme of women’s independence, especially how the conceptualized identity empowers them to gain such independence, is still a point worthy of exploration. This paper attempts to discuss Celie’s sense of identity in various stages, which represents her ability to change herself and, as a result, empower her to change the

physical world.

2. Dynamic Development of Celie's Identity

The concept of identity mentioned in this paper equals to "core identity" which refers to "whatever continuous and relatively "fixed" sense of self" (Gee, 2011, p.41). One's identity basically pivots around two questions: the "being" question of "who am I?" and the "doing" question of "what can I do?" and they are inseparable from the "saying" questions of what language is used to represent the identity, both verbal and nonverbal.

The epistolary form of *The Color Purple* offers us a chance to explore the interactive influence between "saying" and "being", to relate words in the letter with the psychological change of Celie's identity development. The first-person perspective also allows us to enter the inner psyche world of the protagonist, to experience everything happening around her and sense the emotion as much as she could by herself. By and large, Celie's identity involves three phases of development:

2.1 Self-Negation Phase (Daughter, Self-Doubt, and Inferiority)

The initial phase is set in the period before Celie's leaving home and marriage to mister. In this phase, her identity building relied heavily on people and the circumstances around her, especially her parents, because they are the only source of her connection with the world, especially after she was forced to leave school. Her initial self-identity comes none other than from her family, who act as mirrors to reflect who she was. Unfortunately, the image they portrayed for her really tarnished her recognition of her positive self. According to Koepke and Denissen (2012), "identity development and separation-individuation in parent-child relationships are often discussed concerning psychosocial maturation, which describes the acquisition of capacities that enable individuals to function adequately on their own as well in interaction with others and within the broader context of society." (Koepke & Denissen, 2012, p.68) In her early life, Celie received neither physical caring nor mental satisfaction in the parental relationship, which accounts for her long struggle to attain self-recognition and self-independence.

Her mother was in a bad mental and physical condition and gave her neither protection nor

emotional support. Instead, she hurt Celie with a scornful attitude and curse words. She recalled later:

"My mama she fuss at me an look at me." (Walker, 2011, p.8¹)

"used to git mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me."

"My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me." (p.9)

The fragmented sentences and short messy repetition reflect her painful struggle and strong guilty. Her mother instilled in her a desire for love and protection, as well as a sense of inferiority and guilt.

Her savage Pa Alphonso, who later revealed to be her stepfather, was even more cruel, so brutal that he repeatedly raped her, asking her to act as her mother for his sexual substitute, to *get used to it* and keep the incest a secret (p.8). All these situations were more than a girl of thirteen could understand and handle and gave her strong physical and psychological trauma:

"It hurt me, you know, I say. I was just going on fourteen ... It scares me just to see it." ... I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all come back to me... How it stung while I finish trimming his hair. How the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stocking... It got to the place where every time I saw him coming with the scissors and the comb and the stool, I start to cry." (p.105)

According to Proudfit (1991), "the child victim of rape and incest often blames herself for her trauma; or, worse still, believes that this bad thing has happened to her because she is bad and therefore deserves it" (p.17). The agony can be too overwhelming for a girl to suffer. Lacking cognitive capacity, the only way for her to explain the inhuman act and relieve emotional tortures of rage and regression is to paralyze her senses:

"Couldn't stay mad at her [Celie's mother]. Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible says, Honor father and mother no matter what. Then after while every time I got mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick. Felt like throwing up. Terrible feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all" (p.47)

She also implied her inferiority and humiliation in the letter:

"Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me". (p.8)

These words show little Celie's grievance as well as her guilty. Her link of the identity as "a good girl" with "what is happening to me" implies that she was guilty, incorrectly attributed her misery to herself, and was caught in a self-doubt of being "a good girl", a sign of self-negation.

Her self-identity is also reflected in the addressee and author of her letters. First, the receiver as "Dear God" indicated her submissive to the threat that "not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (p.8) and her acceptance of the deprived right to voice out negated her basic human right. Second, she wrote letters with anonymity, indicating her confusion, her fear, her shame as well as her denial of her self-identity as a real person who enjoyed rights and respect. As Cheung (1988) claimed, "Name is also crucial to personal identity in *The Color Purple*. Celie advises Squeak to insist on being called Mary Agnes, her real name, and Celie herself, though she appears completely submissive, subversively leaves out Albert's name in her letters, thereby suggesting that her husband has no personality" (Cheung, 1988, p.173) A name is crucial to one's sense of being as it represents her in the world. Celie realized the significance a name represents, and thus expunged it intentionally:

"I [Nettie] remember one time you [Celie] said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God..." (p.119)

2.2 Transitional Phase (from a Numb Wife-Slave to a Self-Respect Individual)

The second phase begins with Celie's marriage to mister, when "she was treated as a mere commodity after being used by her father, transferred to Mr. ____" (Sattar, 2014, p.523). When her Pa introduced her to mister, he passed on his prejudice and patriarchal mentality to him:

"She ugly... But she isn't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she isn't gonna make you feed it or clothe it." (p.14)

With these psychological hints, her husband, a widower with four kids, treated her no better than Pa, viewing her as a slave, asking her to do the

farm work alone, beating her, and taking her as a tool for sexuality. His attitude mirrored back to her—she treated herself as insignificant, not human but a non-emotional object, like a tree:

"He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He says, 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." (p.47)

She felt desperate about life, more submissive and customary to physical violence, so much so that she even justifies such behavior and suggested her stepson beat his wife, Sophia.

But luckily, Celie was able to get "strength through a female network" who helped her "to command full articulation and attain positive identities as women through the influence of actual female figures... for Celie, they are Sofia, Shug, and Nettie." (Cheung, 1988, p.166) The first thing she got from them is recognition and a sense of value. Her sister Nettie conveyed to her that she was pretty and valuable:

"She just stick close to me. She tell me, Your skin. Your hair, Your teefs. He try to give her a compliment, she pass it on to me. After while I git to feeling pretty cute." (p.24)

The sisters of mister also appraised her as a "good housekeeper, good with children, good cook" (p.26). Positive words can nourish one's heart, and affirmation from others around enhances self-belief in self-value and self-recognition. When one of the sisters, Kate, helped Celie to buy her first dress, she was so moved that she stuttered appreciation and Kate reassured her that she did "deserve more than this" (p.26). Such recognition and appraisal help Celie regain self-recognition that she is worthy, and that she can live as an equal person.

Previously both Kate and Nettie had strongly suggested Celie fight for herself, but she just neglect it, for obedience has been long time principle for her to survive:

"I think bout Nettie, dead. She fights, she run away. What good it does? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive." (p.27)

Then, she witnessed and learned a profound lesson from her daughter-in-law, Sofia, who

"embodies the image of disobedience that stimulates Celie to defend herself to get her rights and to set herself free." (Asa'd AL Qaisi, 2016, p.62) She witnessed how Sophia fought against Harpo's attempt to rule over her. Though she loved Harpo, she resisted his attempt by fighting back like a man and eventually left him with their five children. She suggested to Celie "You ought to bash Mr. ____ head open, she says. Think about heaven later" (p.46). Celie was touched. Her resistance to male domination and her awareness of gender equality and women's rights were awakened, though like a seed in the soil, still await the sunshine and storms to nourish.

If mister is the storm, Shug is the sunshine to her. Shug is a truly independent female, who dares to define her happiness against traditional restrictions. She is Celie's protector, model, and life mentor who oriented Celie on the track to independence and self-autonomy. As Celie said:

"My life stops when I left home, I think. But then I think again. It stops with Mr. Albert maybe but start up again with Shug." (p.81)

As a reward for Celie's good care when she was severely ill, Shug created the "Miss Celie" song and devoted it to her in public, which gave Celie self-awareness and self-recognition as it was "first time somebody made something and name it after me [Celie]" (p.74). Shug also helped Celie to confront her anguished past. By verbalizing it, she finally broke the shackle of Pa's threats and imposed silence, which can be seen as a stride in the liberating of the oppressed self, in overcoming the pain and losses to construct a new identity. "Shug gives Celie different ways of understanding herself, her sexuality, her spirituality, and the world around her" (Donnelly, 2010, P.79). She guided Celie to appreciate herself, to love her body, and redefine the male conception of God, which leads back to believing and loving herself:

"God love everything you love—and a mess of stuff you don't." (p.180)

"You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like" (ibid)

"Shug's interpretation makes the protagonist realize that love, appreciation and enjoyment of beauty are the ultimate goals of life" (Asa'd AL Qaisi, 2016). With Shug's assistance, Celie

retrieved the letters from Nettie, who was the only kin to Celie. She helped her to settle down both physically and psychologically in the new environment and led her on the road to self-independence:

"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." (p.194.)

Another important source of Celie's growth is the letters from Nettie. The insertion of Nettie's letters is a consummate composition of the whole novel, which not only connected Celie's present with the history, telling her origin and their family tragedy, but also relates the present status of Afro-Americans with the history and roots of the African and the slave system. The news that her Pa is not her real father and so their children are not the sinner of incest and are alive with Nettie relieved her much pain and worries, injecting her with vitality. The larger background frame seems to be detached from the specific stories that happened around Celie. Rather, it draws a parallel line along the story. There are intersections and inter-references towards each, and Nettie's space and perspective give a complementary part to the perspective of Celie, making a full picture.

The family tragedy is an epitomized problem caused by the overall social system, just like the miserable life of the Olinka people is an epitomized example of the West's savage oppression and ransack over the African colony. These letters also related both Celie and Nettie's changing situation and their identity development, involving their old self, present self, and looking forward to the future self. By looking through the history and the present, by relating her personal problems to the lives of people in the world, Celie's understanding of self-independence will be broader and more comprehensive. Her thinking of humans and the fate of individuals will combine to shape her construction of a new self-identity: a self-respecting individual woman, who is worthy of happiness.

People like Nettie, Sophia, and Shug are the catalysts of mental development of Celie. They gradually empower her to "reject the role of passive victim and become an active agent in her own life." (Stuart, 1988, p.64)

2.3 Self-Actualization Phase (Self-Content and

Independent Individual)

The final phase of Celie's mental and identity development started at the point when she found the minister had hidden all Nettie's letters to her and her rage fueled her awareness of resistance into full awakening—she even tried to kill him with a razor. "I think I feel better if I kill him" (p.123) By then, she is no longer the previous Celie, who regressed her rage, obedient to injustice and tyranny. She became full-fledged in identifying herself as a self-respecting woman. Her leaving mister in Memphis is a farewell to the past and the new identity is in rapid development. When mister tried to degrade her, she defended herself:

"I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice says to everything listening. But I'm here." (p.190)

This is Celie's proclamation of independence, the point that the new Celie voiced her existence. When she moved to Memphis, she stayed in Shug's house with her entire freedom which gave into full play her talents in sewing and making pants. Her strong suits of creation got recognized and founded Folks Pants Unlimited with Shug's help. She began to gain independence economically as well as psychologically. By then, the self-negated Celie was extinct, and her self-appreciation and self-esteem came into revitalization.

The separation from Shug can be challenging for Celie, for it means her overcoming reliance on others as life and spiritual guidance, but she finally achieved it. Celie gained self-love and achieved real and full independence from her life mentor Shug when she finally accepted Shug's choice, "know I [Celie] can live content without Shug" (p.261). What's more, Celie's moving back to the house where she had to confront painful memories in which she suffered physical beating and repeated rape of Pa is as brave as that she finally forgave and developed a real friendship with mister. The courage to live with pain and to forgive with generosity is a gracious quality only belonging to those with high self-esteem and self-recognition, which Celie proved to have attained.

Her change in identity is also reflected in addressing in the later letters. The addressee changed with her dynamic development in

self-awareness and identity, from "THE GOD", "DEAR NETTIE, I don't write to God no more. I write to you" (p.176) to "DEAR GOD. DEAR STARS, DEAR TREES, DEAR SKY, DEAR PEOPLES. DEAR EVERYTHING. DEAR GOD" (p.263). —Everything and all people become valuable to her, which symbolized a true belief in self-identity who is equal to every creature in the world and respected and loved every being in the world, an attitude contrastive to the initial Celie's. In addition, the letters were not anonymous anymore—the guilty Celie who was shameful of herself disappeared. She signed her name with dignity:

"Your Sister,

Celie

Folks Pants, Unlimited.

Sugar Avery Drive

Memphis, Tennessee"

(p.196)

The truly transformed and self-actualized Celie came into being with her treating herself as a real human being who is valuable and worthy of entitled to a name to represent her. She eventually finalized the lengthy exploration of self in life with a successful business and possession of heritage from her real father.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, Celie's self-identity developed in a dynamic pattern in a long temporal process. Her psychological evolution of self-identity is vital to the shape of ideology and independence as well as to the world around her. Conversing with self means unremitting exploration of self-identity which is embodied in the negotiation with the world, and the skillful efforts to change the surroundings. Only when one can build up positive self-identity and converse with self can he/she find peace and reconcile with the physical world. As Shukla & Banerji (2012) describes, Celie's liberation can also be positive to other people as it also frees them from their evil. As a result, what benefits Celie is also helpful to her community and, in this way, she can "reconcile with her previously hostile environment".

Every one of us can draw a lesson from Celie. One's identity has a strong connection with the world around her. You become significant when

you realized you are. It is not until an individual develops favorable self-awareness and self-identity that he/she can truly achieve self-independence and enjoy human rights. The course of seeking the true identity of self is significant not only to the black and to the women who suffered patriarchy and colonization, but also to every one of us who are, more or less, unfairly subordinated to social stereotypes and prejudices that are decided by the dominated group, the higher hierarchy, and power.

It is every human being's primary task to identify the real valuable self so that she will not be affected by such stereotypes and prejudice so that one can achieve self-actualization and happiness in the real world. The only way to achieve self-realization is also suggested in the novel. Education and traveling are the beacon light that can guide us through the fog, to appreciate the diversity in the world. We are, like Nettie said, "ignorant" and what we knew about self and the world "wouldn't have filled a thimble!" (p.121). With education, people can be enlightened and avoid being misled. By traveling, one can gain a broader vision than the limited scope he/she is confined to, both of which help us to respect differences and eliminate prejudice towards people and things.

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¹ Hereafter lists the citation to *The Color Purple* only with Page numbers.