Celie’s Emancipation in the novel “The Color Purple”

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ABSTRACT

Alice Walker is one of the best-known contemporary African-American women writers. Her novel The Color Purple portrays the struggle of black women for their own identity, self-esteem and independence. The Color Purple is Alice Walker’s most famous work, which was published in 1982 and was awarded both the American Book Award for Fiction and the Pulitzer Prize. Steven Spielberg later made a movie from this novel with the same title. It is an epistolary novel told through the letters of the central character --- Celie. In the novel, Walker continues to explore the interrelationship of racism and sexism and their destructive effects on the black community, especially on black women. The Color Purple chronicles thirty years of Celie’s life from 1910s to 1940s in South America. The stories are revealed through 91 letters written by two sisters, Celie and Nettie. In The Color Purple, sisterhood plays an important role in Celie’s awakening: she gains spiritual encouragement from her sister Nettie, her stepdaughter-in-law Sofia and her husband’s love Shug.

Introduction

Sisterhood is the spiritual or material support or help among women. Walker always emphasizes the importance of “sisterhood” in black women’s emancipation. She “sees the possibility of empowerment for black women if they create a community of sisters that can alter the present-day unnatural definitions of woman and man.”(1) In The Color Purple, it is the sisterhood among Celie, Nettie, Shug and Sofia that contributes much to Celie’s emancipation. “The progress of The Color Purple can easily be seen as the process of Celie’s writing herself into being and consciousness, of her forming power and control as writer” (2). Celie and Nettie have depended on each other for survival since their
childhood because of their natural father’s death and their mother’s weak-mindedness. Due to the absence of parental protection, Celie actually plays the role of mother for Nettie. She vows to use her help to protect Nettie. She says: “I’ll take care of you. With God help.” (3) Moreover, Nettie is always the hope in Celie’s life. Celie regards Nettie as the perfect model of a girl. She describes her to Shug: “Smart as anything. Read the newspapers when she was little more than talking. Did figures like they was nothing. Talked real well too. And sweet. There never was a sweeter girl. Eyes just brimming over with it.”(4) With this excellent sister in heart, Celie senses a little comfort in this harsh world. Therefore, although Celie hasn’t heard from Nettie for years, she cherishes with the hope that Nettie is still alive and they can meet again some day.

The sisterhood between Celie and Nettie provides them hope of survival in the harshest living situation. And this spiritual strength sustains this pair of sisters to get out of the plight and establish their dignity. Lesbian relationship takes on a new form of black sisterhood. In *The Color Purple*, lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug appears not to be indecent but natural and affectionate. From the lesbian relationship with Shug, Celie becomes aware of her sexuality and finds her identity—a real woman with dignity. Celie first knows of Shug, the woman her husband truly loves, by a photograph. In her mind, Shug is the most beautiful woman she ever sees. Celie first sees her when Albert takes her home. Actually, at that time, Shug is nearly sick to death. Then Celie has devoted her attention to nursing Shug until she recovers. Shug is touched by her tenderness and care, hence creating a “Miss Celie’s song” to express her gratitude to Celie. For the first time Celie is aware of being respectable, “first time somebody made something and name it after me.”(5) This song also becomes a catalyst for the development of their lesbian relationship.

As Celie has been the object of repeating rapes and beating, she has no desire of her body and is impossible to experience sexual pleasure although she has had two children. Shug’s response to Celie’s ignorance of sex is: “Miss Celie you are still a virgin.”(6) Sex, to Shug, is pleasure, and if Celie is ignorant of it, then she is still a virgin in this sense. In order to help Celie grow as a woman, it is necessary for her to learn who she is—physically and emotionally. Shug guides Celie to sense and enjoy the beauty of her own body:

“She say, Here, take this mirror and go look at yourself down there, I bet you never seen it, have you?
Naw....
I stand there with the mirror.
She say, What, too shame even to go off and look at yourself?
And you look so cute too, she say, laughing....
You come with me while I look, I say.
And us rush off to my room like two little prankish girls.
You guard the door, I say.
She giggle. Okay, she say. Nobody coming. Coast clear.
I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass tween my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black.

Then inside look like a wet rose.” (7)

Shug also encourages Celie to touch herself and to learn that her body is for herself, not for men. When Celie views her own sexual organ for the first time, Celie assertively announces: “It mine.” (8) By discovering and then accepting her own body, Celie is able to initiate a desire of selfhood and opens the door for her breaking away from male domination. With the encouragement, help and love from Shug, Sofia and Nettie, Celie’s self-consciousness begins to be aroused gradually. She has realized her oppressed position and decided to fight back. She begins to call Mr. by his name Albert. She even has the impulse to kill him after she learns that it is he who has hidden Nettie’s letters for years. The confrontation between husband and wife becomes more and more tough. The climax of her fighting against the oppression is her announcement at the dinner table that she decides to leave with Shug for Memphis. On hearing this, Albert is so angry that he stands up to slap her, but Celie and other women don’t care about him anymore. They even laugh at him. Then Celie begins to curse him:

“I curse you, I say.
What that mean? He say.
I say, Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble.
He laugh. Who you think you is? You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all.
The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say.
I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here.” (9)

She realizes that she is not a subject or a tool any more, but a real woman. She also realizes that only spiritual and economic independence can liberate her from the patriarchal bondage thoroughly. Celie not only gains independence economically but also spiritually. From the beginning, Celie suffers from his stepfather’s sexual abuse and physical violence, but she is able to tell nobody about her affliction but to God, for God asks her to “honor father and mother no matter what.” (10) And, when her husband maltreats her, she thinks: “I have to talk to Old Maker.” (11) The obedience to her stepfather and husband is exactly the same as the soul of the patriarchal society, in which man is the center and the ruler, and is superior to woman. In this sense, religion reflects patriarchal oppression to woman in spirit. So Celie must get rid of this patriarchal God in her mind so as to achieve spiritual independence. With Shug’s help, Celie discovers Nettie’s letters, which have been burked by her husband for almost thirty years. Nettie tells Celie in her letters that their father now is not their natural father, who has been lynched by white men in their childhood. This shakes Celie’s belief in God, because she hasn’t gotten help from God. To Celie, God now acts just like all other ordinary men, “trifling, forgetful and lowdown.” (12)
The image of God in Celie’s mind is destroyed and she does not believe in him any more. Along with the collapse of God’s image in Celie’s mind, Shug restructures for Celie an absolutely new “God”: “God ain’t a he or she, but a It…I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be and when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you’ve found it.”(13) Shug’s concept of “God” makes Celie realize that the most important thing in life is love, admiration and enjoyment of the beauty and happiness in life. “Now that my eyes opening, I feels like a fool…..Still, it is like Shug say, you have to git man off your eyeball before you can see anything a’ tall.(14) Thus Celie casts away the patriarchal God and turns her spirit to love nature and life. In her last letter, Celie begins like this: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God.”(15) This listing reveals that the form of God in her mind has become plural and interchangeable. God in her mind has become an immanent power in the universe. The new conception that God is everything and everything is God opens her eyes to the outside world, and thus revives her. She realizes that the new God exists in her, as a spiritual power and an inner support to her.

Celie has emancipated herself from the patriarchal bondage. Economically independent and spiritually free, she wins her respect, love and dignity. This paper deals with how Celie’s self-consciousness begins to be aroused, with the encouragement, help and love from Shug, Sofia and Nettie. She escapes the degradation of the treatment by men and wins dignity at last. This paper concludes that Celie liberates herself from the patriarchal domination and obtains freedom and independence. Alice Walker’s true intention of writing this novel is to point out a bright way for the freedom and liberation of black women as well as the other oppressed women all over the world.

References:
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Ibid: p.65
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