

A Modern Allegory of *The Color Purple*

ALLÉGORIE MODERNE DANS *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Guo Deyan¹

Abstract: Alice Walker became the first black woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1983 for *The Color Purple*. Even though it has been severely attacked by some people for its nasty language, lesbian relationship and domestic violence, *The Color Purple* is still hailed as a classic book in exploring the pathos of black women in social context. The strength of the book mainly derives from the regeneration of the multitude of characters with the protagonist Celie in the forefront.

Facing the overwhelmingly powerful patriarchal culture, Celie unresistingly places herself under the domination and authority of men, as revealed in her way of naming men, her fear of men and of God. While later through the wholesome influence of Sofia and mothering nurturing of Shug, Celie's sense of ego is gradually awakened. She finally enters the world of creation. In return, the arrogant Shug and Amazon-like Sofia become more compassionate and gentle. While the black women enjoy their close bond and dearly selfhood, the black men as exemplified by Mr. ____ and Harpo also go through the process of reexamination of their existence. They no longer view women as objects; instead they begin to acknowledge their equal status as human beings. So at the end of the book, both black men and women discover in themselves the ability to love and to be loved and learn to embrace the selfhood, sisterhood and brotherhood. In this sense, *The Color Purple* can be interpreted as a modern allegory in which the characters finally reach the state of self-fulfillment and the state of perfection through pains.

Key Words: Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, Patriarchy, Self-Negation, Self-Realization, Transformation, Allegory

Résumé: Alice Walker est devenue la première femme noire qui a obtenu le prix Pulitzer de fiction en 1983 pour son oeuvre *The Color Purple*. Quoique attaqué violemment pour sa langue vulgaire, le lesbianisme, et la violence conjugale, *The Color Purple* est tout de même considéré comme chef-d'oeuvre classique en raison de sa recherche sur la souffrance des femmes noires du point de vue sociologique. Le grand succès du roman réside dans la révélation de régénération spirituelle d'une multitude des héros avec le protagoniste Celie

En face d'une phallocratie puissante, Celie, n'ayant aucune conscience de s'y opposer, se laisse opprimer et dominer par l'autorité des hommes. Ce caractère se reflète pleinement dans ses appellations envers les hommes, son effroi de l'homme et de Dieu. Cependant, avec l'influence de Sophia et Shug, sa propre conscience se réveille petit à petit, enfin, elle se donne un monde tout nouveau. En même temps, Shug qui était arrogante, et Sophia, qui était amazonienne, toutes les deux sont devenues de plus en plus gentilles et témoignent plus de sympathies aux autres. Quand les femmes noires se solidarisent pour former une relation étroite dans le roman *The Color Purple*, les hommes noirs, ayant pour protagoniste Mr. ____ and Harpo, commencent à reconsidérer leurs propres vies. Ils ne pensent plus que les femmes leur appartiennent, mais au contraire, ils reconnaissent de plus en plus l'égalité entre l'homme et la femme. Donc, à la fin du roman, les hommes et les femmes noirs ont su comment s'aimer, se chérir. Une histoire allégorique classique atteint sa perfection après l'auto-réalisation, tout en traversant les difficultés et les vicissitudes.

¹ Tianjin Foreign Studies University, China.

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En quelque sorte, *The Color Purple* peut être considéré comme une histoire allégorique de version moderne.

Mots-clés: Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, phallocratie, auto-négation, auto-réalisation, transformation, allégorie

Since its publication in 1982, Alice Walker's third novel *The Color Purple* has confronted with both appreciation and denunciation. Despite the fact that this novel won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for fiction in 1983, the storm of attacks never ceased and culminated in October 2004 in the banning of this book from the shelf of school classrooms and libraries. The opposing voices particularly coming from the black community mainly direct at the nasty language with which the protagonist Celie narrates her story, at the lesbian relation between Celie and Shug Avery, at the exaggeration of domestic violence in black family and more harshly at the stereotypes of black men as brutal and immoral. Even so, many readers who sympathize with the pains black people especially black women have to suffer have not failed to see the power of this book in enhancing the close tie between black women, in celebrating the self-actualization of black women in the male-dominated society and in converting male violence into tenderness and humaneness.

Written in epistolary form, *The Color Purple* begins with Celie's confession of her having been repeatedly raped by her stepfather when she was 14 years old, and ends with the happy family union with her two grown-up children and with her sister Nettie. Throughout the book Celie goes through a hard but inspiring process of metamorphosis from self-negation to self-actualization, from a life without joy and hope to a life full of love. Besides Celie, many other characters such as Shug Avery, Albert, Harpo, Sofia and Mary Agnes all have more or less undergone a certain transformation. In the light of the growth of characters and the delightful ending of the book, *The Color Purple*, with Celie in the forefront, can be termed as a modern interpretation of the traditional allegory in which the characters finally reach the state of self-fulfillment and the state of perfection through pains.

As a poor, ugly black woman, Celie tastes the bitterness of life as her daily bread. At 14, she was raped by her stepfather when her mother was too weak to satisfy his sexual desire. The shameful act results in the birth of two children who are taken away from her soon after their delivery. Later a loveless marriage with Mr. _____ leads her to a more negative knowledge of her existence. Mr. _____ is persuaded into taking Celie as his wife only because of her dowry of a cow, his urgent need for a woman to take care of his house and his four children and his need for a working hand in the field. To Mr. _____, Celie is simply a tool for him to make whatever use he needs. When he first looks up and down at Celie, he seems to be selecting a cow. To top all these misfortunes is the forced leaving of her beloved younger sister Nettie, who is the only emotional tie she

could enjoy. With these unspeakable tribulations falling upon her one after another, Celie has never had a vague idea of fighting back. Even though Nettie constantly instills the concept of resistance into her mind, Celie who views herself as a silent tree just holds to her simple creed of life, "All I know how to do is stay alive" (Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* 16). So after Nettie is driven out by Mr. _____ since she rejects his seduction, the only way for Celie to retain the power of staying alive is to establish a communication with God in the form of letters. In this way, she could somewhat pour out her suppressed emotions on the one hand and keep those embarrassing days from being known on the other hand.

The self-negation of Celie is most distinctly revealed in her way of naming the men who practice power over her. In a male-dominated society, women's voice is silenced. Before her awareness of identity is awakened, Celie does not dare to speak out the names of those men who strongly command authority over her. Such is the case with her husband, her father-in-law, and her stepfather. To Celie, all these men become a Mr. _____ or a he so high above a she. For instance when her father-in-law comes for a visit when Shug Avery is staying with them for recovery, Celie writes, "Old Mr. _____ say to Mr. _____, Just what is it bout this Shug Avery, he say" (*Purple*, 54). Even for Samuel who is amiable to women, Celie addresses him as Reverend Mr. _____ because of his esteemed status as a pastor. Only Harpo, Mr. _____'s son; Tobias, Mr. _____'s brother; Jack, Sofia's brother-in-law; Grady, Shug's husband; and Germaine, Shug's young lover are given direct names throughout the whole journals simply for the reason that they could not preside over her.

While men tend to deny women's existence as equal beings, Celie gradually learns to appreciate her selfhood under the wholesome influence of strong female characters like Sofia and Shug. In the first place, Sofia's boldness in challenging Mr. _____'s refusal of her marriage with Harpo and her insistence on doing things in her own way instead of placing herself at Harpo's command arouse Celie's jealousy to such an extent that Celie unhesitatingly suggests Harpo beat Sofia when he does not know how to make her obedient, "I think about how every time I jump when Mr. _____ call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me. Beat her. I say" (*Purple*, 35). Once this thought escapes her tongue, Celie's uneasy jealousy is appeased for a short while. However, very soon she is tortured with the sense of sin and guilt on the part of Sofia. She could not sleep well for over a month. Later, she has to confess to Sofia, "I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't" (*Purple*, 38). Celie's weakness and helplessness remind Sofia of her dear mother who never says anything back to her father. Full

of sympathy for Celie, Sofia reconciles with her, and even encourages her to punch Mr. ____'s head open before she thinks about heaven. The sisterly communication begins to call Celie up from her inactivity. That night she sleeps like a baby. It seems that Celie has cast off her old self and is ready for the regeneration.

With Sofia, Celie realizes how powerless and subservient she is. While with Shug Avery, she finally recognizes the precious value of self, and she is able to hail her being. Shug's coming to Mr. ____'s house for recuperation is a turning point in Celie's life. Before that she has been infatuated with Shug's picture, " Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me" (*Purple*, 6). Since then, Celie has taken Shug as an idol to worship for her physical charm and confident smile. Unsurprisingly, when Shug, the third part in the triangle love, is taken home by Mr. ____, Celie does not feel a bit hurt. Instead, she is willing to serve Shug as her caretaker. When nobody wants to take in Shug who is supposed to be infected with some tuberculosis or some nasty woman disease, Celie's tender care brings her back from the hands of death.

In the meantime, Celie throws herself into the nourishing influence of Shug. When Shug discovers that Celie is still a virgin, she prompts her to look at her private parts in the mirror. For Celie, to be able to appreciate her own body is an initiation to acknowledging her own identity. As E. Ellen Barker comments this episode, "The mirror reflection of her own body opens the door for possibilities in herself, and with her newfound identity, Celie is able to 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" (E. Ellen Barker, "Creating Generations" 61). With Shug's guidance, Celie's vision is broadened beyond her own obsession with survival only. For the first time she thinks about the world. "What the world got to do with anything, I think. Then I see myself sitting there quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr. _____. Us three set together gainst Tobias and his fly speck box of chocolate. For the first time in my life, I feel just right" (*Purple*, 57).

To Celie, men are brutal oppressors. What she has got from them is neglect, mock, torment, and abuse. "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them" (*Purple*, 5). When men become an opposing power, women are the only source of love and courage she could turn to. From Shug, she not only obtains the awakened sexuality, but also acquires the ability to love herself and others, and the ability to construct her identity. Celie's awareness of her existence as an equal being starts with the song Shug makes in her name. "First time somebody made something and name it after me" (*Purple*, 72). This sense of selfhood is reinforced with Shug's declaring

that she would not leave Celie until she knows for sure that Albert will not beat Celie. Shug's protection consolidates Celie's belief that she is loved and treasured equally by someone after all. Celie's ultimate transformation occurs when she announces that she will leave for Memphis with Shug and curses Mr. ____ as a lowdown dog. "It is time to leave you and enter into the creation" (*Purple*, 195). As a hard-beaten bird, Celie is waiting for the feathers to fly, to breathe fresh air and to embrace new life. With Shug's nurturing, Celie evolves "into an independent self-actualized woman, no longer benignly accepting the emotionally crippling conditions that have enslaved her" (Barker, 55).

As Celie gradually draws herself out of the limited world of survival, her original vision of God is shattered as well. For a long time she has been seized with the fear toward God since she strongly believes that God is White and Male. This fear is later replaced by anger and depression when she finally realizes that God has never listened to her prayers. What God has given her is only pains upon pains: a lynched father, a crazy mother, a lowly stepfather and a sister whom she probably could not see again. So when Shug denies the manhood or womanhood of God by claiming that:

God ain't a he or she, but a It.

But what do it look like? I ast.

Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. 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 (Purple, 190).

Celie is inclined to accept a genderless God. This new understanding is fortified by Nettie's interpretation of God, which is in accordance with Shug's. Therefore in the latter section of her journals, Celie stops writing to God, but to Nettie. In the last letter, she addresses to everything, "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (*Purple*, 286), for she begins to accept the belief that God is in everything, and she finds in herself the ability to seek God directly.

Leaving everything old behind, old life, old notions and old self, Celie enters a world of creation. Her creation is substantialized by her newly acquired power of naming and the act of pant-making. According to Marc-A Christopher, "to name is to take possession, to project one's own perception on the other" (Christopher, "The Color Purple: An Existential Novel" 103). This explains why Celie can in no way pronounce Mr. ____'s name and why she wonders who is Albert when Shug naturally speaks out that name. Whereas, toward the end of the book Celie is able to address Mr. ____ as Albert since she has gained full control of her existence. In the middle of this process, she even suggests Squeak, Harpo's little girl friend, that she should be called by her real name Mary Agnes. At that time Celie has realized that naming represents the

capacity to defend one's selfhood. Likewise, pant-making signifies that Celie's spiritual rebirth is secured by economic independence. When Celie learns the fact that Mr. _____ has hidden all of Nettie's letters, she is so angry that she has the urge to kill Mr. _____. Luckily Shug dissuades her from murdering and motivates her to make some pants. By substituting the needle for the razor, Celie succeeds in entering the world of business and making a good living out of her skills. As Priscilla L. Walton puts it, "Celie literally sews her life back together when she begins to design pants" (Walton, "What She Got to Sing About?" 193). The diverse patterns of pants Celie designs herself reveal that she is already on the way of creating a wholly new life for herself.

Celie is finally able to articulate herself and realize that life is more than the matter of survival. Her self-realization can be also defined in her language which many people attack as vulgar and dirty. Walker justifies Celie's words herself, "She has not accepted an alien description of who she is, neither has she accepted completely an alien tongue to tell us about it. Her being is affirmed by the language in which she is revealed, and like everything about her it is characteristic, hard-won, and authentic" (Walker, *Living by the Word* 64). Even though the language Celie uses is far from being standard and is even somewhat nasty, language has become an inalienable part of her determination to assert her own identity, to tell people who she is.

The lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug has always been condemned since the book was released, but it is just their intimacy and affection for each other that propel Celie's spiritual journey to selfhood. Shug's influence on Celie has been viewed as "the mothering influence" by E. Ellen Barker. During their interaction, not only has Celie transcended her objectification and ultimately ascended to the status of subject, but also Shug Avery has become more compassionate and gentle. When she is first taken into Mr. _____'s house for care, Shug, whose eyes are "big, glossy. Feverish. And mean" (*Purple*, 44), looks Celie up from head to foot in a very arrogant manner and gives her a blunt comment, "You sure is ugly, she say, like she ain't believed it" (*Purple*, 44). She treats Celie as if Celie were her servant. Later she brings it to light that she behaves so all because Albert married Celie. In like manner, she has ever been so mean to Albert's first wife, Annie Julia, although she herself has never really intended to marry Albert. Haughty and unconquerable as she seems, Shug turns out to be more understanding and sympathetic as a result of the love and care Celie endows her and the great capacity for endurance Celie exhibits. As the intimacy between them grows, they are more likely to place themselves under the nurturing of each other and try to take advantage of the most valued qualities in the other and make them a part of their own being.

Celie and Shug take great delight in their transformations, so do Sofia and Mary Agnes. They two function as the mirror of Shug and Celie respectively.

As strong-willed and invincible as Shug, Sofia fights back in a manly way when Harpo tries to tame her. As the plot progresses, she turns to be mild as Shug does partly because of her painful experiences in the jail and partly because of her awareness that fist cannot solve the problem once for all. In contrast to Shug and Sofia, Celie and Mary Agnes represent the typical image of oppressed black women, silent and obedient. At the end of the book, Mary Agnes follows Celie's suit, leaving behind the old neglected life and braving a new promising life as a singer.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker aims at illustrating the truth that in the patriarchal culture, women can define themselves only through the kind of friendship and sympathy developed with other women. From the homosexual union of Shug and Celie, Barker notices that by collective power women "gain the strength to separate themselves from the bondage of their past and piece together a free and equal existence for themselves and for those they love" (Barker, 55). Around Celie is formed a tight and solid bond of sisterly love. Each of them endeavors to give whatever help they can to others. Apart from Shug, Sofia and Nettie, Celie also wins support from Kate, Mr. _____'s sister who encourages her to fight for herself. When the Amazon-like Sofia is imprisoned for rejecting to work for the mayor's family, Mary Agnes and Odessa---Sofia's sister look after her children until she is released. In return, Sofia offers to take care of Mary Agnes's child when she makes up her mind to embark on a musical career. With their mutual love, empathy and shared oppression, the black women give strength to each other, stand up for each other and succeed collectively in asserting their own identity in the male-dominated society.

Although *The Color Purple* basically focuses on women's search for selfhood, Alice Walker still presents a very impressive portrayal of black men exemplified by Mr. _____ and Harpo. Like the female characters who are no longer as what they were, male characters also go through the change from being brutal and domineering to being more humane and approachable. In the first part of the novel, both Mr. _____ and his son, Harpo, consider their wives a part of their possessions. They assume that they have the natural right to command and to control them. Walker excavates two underlying causes of black men's neglect and violence in their treatment of black women. One is the father-son relationship, the other is racism.

Since Old Mr. _____ prohibited Mr. _____'s marriage with Shug Avery, Mr. _____'s character has been totally changed. In Shug's memory, Albert used to be weak, funny and enjoy dancing. But years later when she sees him again, she is surprised to find that "How come he ain't funny no more? She ast. How come he never hardly laugh? How come he don't dance? she say. Good God, Celie, she say, What happen to the man I love?" (*Purple*, 118) The principal reason for such a big change in Albert is that he cannot marry Shug Avery whom he loves, always has and always will, because of Old

Mr. ___'s ill judgment on Shug's family and her morality. Old Mr. ___ makes it very clear that his children should not behave against his will since he sustains their life. "Well, this my house. This my land. Your boy Harpo in one of my houses, on my land. Weeds come upon my land, I chop'em up. Trash blow over it I burn it" (*Purple*, 55). Weak Albert has to yield to his father's power and marry the lady he does not care at all. Erna Kelly in her analysis of the male characters in Walker's fiction states that "Albert's father is, in part, the reason Albert acts as he does" (Kelly, "A Matter of Focus" 172). When Albert himself becomes a father, he just inherits the tradition of father ruling the son. He orders Harpo and Celie to work in the field, while he sits on the porch, drinking and watching. When Harpo musters his courage to protest, Mr. ___ replies that "No reason for me to. His daddy say. You here, ain't you? He say this nasty. Harpos feeling be hurt" (*Purple*, 27). What's more, Mr. ___ strongly disapproves of Harpo's marriage with Sofia in the same way as his father has done to him. Fortunately due to Harpo's insistence and Sofia's audacity, they are united in marriage. It is uncertain whether Harpo will pass down the family tradition of father's interference in children's marriage, but there is no doubt that Harpo sets his father as a model in treating women as an object. He hopes to dominate Sofia and wants her to do as what he says. However, Harpo's efforts are fruitless since Sofia's spirits will not allow her to be as servile as Celie. She deserts Harpo and leaves with the children.

As the other cause of black men's brutality, racism is not the major concern of *The Color Purple* even if it haunts black people for centuries. Since the book mainly deals with domestic violence in the black community, there are few descriptions about the black's contact with the white world except for Sofia's encounter with the mayor's family, Mary Agnes's meeting with the sheriff and the death of Celie's real father incurred by the jealousy of white businessmen. Yet through these simple sketches and especially later through Nettie's account of the sufferings of Olinka people in Africa where their life is threatened by the British industrialists, it is not difficult to catch the glimpse that the black still bear the scar of oppression by the white world. Under the destructive power of racism, black men feel "the need to recapture his masculinity through the oppression of the female" (Christopher, 102). They abuse and dominate their wives and children so that they could discharge their own oppressed and offended emotions.

In consideration of these dual pressures from father and the white world, black men are also the victims of

social injustice. Like black women, they have to reexamine their current state of existence so as to achieve a full and true knowledge of self. Luckily, both Mr. ___ and Harpo ultimately overcome their limitations and welcome the new change in their life. At the end of the book, Mr. ___ humbles to make shirts to match Celie's pants and he even proposes marriage to Celie again. For the first time in his life, he feels that he lives on earth as a natural man. Alice Walker, in her book *Living by the Word*, admits that Albert "went deeply enough into himself to find the courage to change. To grow" (Walker, *Living by the Word* 80). The delightful change is also seen in Harpo. He gives up his attempts to make Sofia mind. Rather he prefers to stay at home, taking care of the children when Sofia goes out to work in Celie's store.

After years' struggle with the overwhelmingly powerful patriarchal culture, both black men and women bring themselves to a redefinition of self in the family and in the society. They discover in themselves the ability to love and to be loved and learn to embrace the selfhood, sisterhood and brotherhood. The last few lines of Celie's journal underline this dominating theme of regeneration in the characters whose experiences embody a modern version of tradition allegory:

I feel a little peculiar round the children. For one thing, they grown. And I see they think me and Nettie and Shug and Albert and Samuel and Harpo and Sofia and Jack and Odessa real old and don't know much what going on. But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt. (Purple, 289)

With the final scene of blissful family union and the enhanced network of black community, *The Color Purple* conveys an inspiring message that "it is possible to heal from the hurts and humiliations of the past" (Evelyn C. White, *Alice Walker a Life* 338). The transformation of the multitude in the book endows the reader faith in the possibilities of changing everything, even ourselves. This is the very reason why Walker on April 18, 1983 became the first black woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *The Color Purple*. As the Pulitzer fiction jury judges:

The narrative's exceptional strength derives from its guarded optimism about the possibility of becoming fully human under the most appalling circumstances. Writing with pathos, but without a hint of sentimentality, Walker shows a young woman gaining control of her life....Love redeems, meanness kills---that is this novel's principal theme, as it has been the theme of most of the world's great fiction. (White, 338).

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THE AUTHOR

Guo Deyan, School of English Studies, Tianjin Foreign Studies University. Tianjin, 300204, P. R. China.