

CHAPTER - IV
THE COLOR PURPLE : FROM POWERLESSNESS
TO EMPOWERMENT

Walker's third novel The Color Purple¹ (1982) won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for Fiction. It chronicles the life of a black girl Celie who despite poverty, near-illiteracy, physical and mental exploitation, transcends her plight through self-awareness, and attempts to scale the subtle and warm dimensions of womanist consciousness. Walker tells the story of Celie in the form of letters first written to God and later to her sister, Nettie. In this epistolary novel Celie writes to God to help her survive the spiritual, emotional and physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her father, Alphonso and her husband, Mr. ____ . Moreover, Celie's attitude about her own self-worth and her perception of God emerges in these letters, and the readers quickly recognize that Celie believes she is powerless and worthless. Thus she begins her journey from powerlessness to the state of full empowerment and from self abnegation to self-recognition.

Walker explains, to have Celie speak in the language of her oppressors would be to deny her the validity of her existence; to suppress her voice would be to murder her and to attack all those ancestors who spoke as she does. Her words, particularly the opening ones describing her rape by her stepfather, might shock, but they are the only words that she could have used. They are a part of the self that Celie is eventually able to accept. Walker writes of Celie, "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."² Or as Celie herself tells Albert, "we all have to start somewhere if us want to do better, and our own self is what us have to hand."³

Thus The Color Purple is about the oppressed life of the black women-Celie, Shug, Sofia, and the awareness among them about their self and their existence. Like Margaret, Mem, Josie, Celie and Shug are the victims of male dominated black American society. All the women folk in the novel have to suffer at the hands of men folk. In this way like other Walker novels, it describes the ill-treatment given to black women by their men. At the same time the novel highlights the awareness among the black women about their status and rights.

The character of Celie is further analysed in the context of the following set of characters.

Celie and her stepfather

The very first letter Celie, a girl of fourteen, writes to God indicates the miserable way she falls a victim to sexual advances and atrocities of her stepfather. Being born in a poor family she is forced to overhear her mother and father entering into forced sex :

Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing. He was pulling on her arm. She say it too soon, Fonso, I ain't well. Finally he leave her alone. A week go by, he pulling on her arm again. She say Naw, I ain't gonna. Can't you see I'm already half dead, an all of these children. ⁴

The father described in Celie's letters appears to be virile, tough and strong man who possesses Satyr like potency and who is like a walking phallus. He represents the oppressive half of the black community. When he finds that Celie's mother becomes too ill and too worn out from child bearing to satisfy his sexual appetite, he tries to find out a substitute. He rapes Celie repeatedly and then gives away the two children born of his sin. He warns her, " You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your Mammy."⁵ He doesn't allow her to protect against his doings. Whenever she tries to protest him he tells her, " You better shut up and git used to it."⁶

No doubt, her mother is relieved from her father's continuous sexual attacks. However, Celie is subjected to enforced rape. To add injury to insult he asks her not totell about this to anybody. Hence she writes about her plights to the almighty, God. The moment she becomes pregnant, she screams :

I'm big. I cann't move fast enough. By time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By time I git the tray ready the food be cold. BY time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time.⁷

Motherhood may be pleasure to some women but for Celie it is a burden. She is not allowed to love her own kids as they were taken away by her father. Celie is left wondering by him. She is left unable to have any more children. Thus she is mistreated by her father which grows in her mind disdain for men, and, later for the traditional God modeled in their image.

In the early part of the novel it becomes obvious that she feels little for men except fear. When her stepfather beats her for allegedly winking at a boy in Church, she writes, " I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them."^B In this way she hates the black men folk too.

Alphonso is worthless father as well as ruthless husband who even doesn't care for his ill wife. His negligence later is responsible for her death. After the death of Celie's mother, he marries another black woman, Daisy Mercilessly he marries Celie to Mr. _____, a widower. Thus Celie is passed like a piece of property from one cruel and dominating black male into the hands of another.

Moreover, Alphonso, Celie's stepfather doesn't inform Celie about the land, the house and the store her real father left for his daughters Celie and Nettie. Thus he is a greedy person. When Daisy, Alphonso's little wife, informs her about his death, she merely expresses her sympathy

to her. She says, "Well, you have my sympathy."⁹ This is the revengeful and outcrying reply given to her by Celie. She even doesn't shed tears for her departed father. Thus Alphonso represents ruthless, unworthy and oppressive black community. He is a savage who is always after his sexual desires who even doesn't spare his daughters.

Celie and Mr. Albert

After the death of Alphonso's first wife he marries Celie to a widower named Mr. ____ who looks her over like a head of livestock and treats her like a beast. Mr.____ marries her because he needs someone to cook and clean for him and take care of his four children. Moreover he beats her frequently.

Though Celie doesn't know how to fight, she knows how to work. When Albert's two sisters, Carrie and Kate, come home they appreciate Celie's ability to work. In their eyes she is a "good housekeeper, good with children and good with cook." However, after finding Celie in great trouble and mess Kate gives a new vision to Celie. It is at the request of Kate, Celie gets her own dress for the first time from Albert. When Harpo, an oldest boy, doesn't help Celie in her work believing that it is the duty of women to work and not of men, Kate orders him to help her and advises Celie, " You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I cann't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself."¹⁰ However, Celie questions the validity of

fighting and reveals her strategy of life : "I don't fight. I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive."¹¹ To her to survive is of supreme importance and she does survive through all odds. The rest of the novel is Celie's struggle to gain self-respect.

Celie also suffers a lot at the hands of Albert. For him to be wife means to be submissive, to be subordinate, to be obedient and to be a punch bag. Albert beats Celie as and when he likes. Celie describes the treatment meted out to her as follows :

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.¹²

The fact that Celie, in moments of extreme physical pain transforms herself into a tree, is a telling example of a black woman's proximity to the passive and suffering agony of nature. Death seems the only way out of a miserable existence, as Celie tells her daughter-in-law, Sofia: "well, sometime Mr.— git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways."¹³

Celie's ability eventually to stand up and to leave Mr.—is due to her discovering a definition of God that is large enough to encompass even

the poor, ugly black woman that she feels herself to be and in discovering within herself the ability to love and be loved.

Love is noticeably absent from much of Celie's early life. The only person who loves Celie is Nettie, her younger sister, is torn from her. Nettie is forced to leave her home by her stepfather's sexual advances and from Celie's home when she rejects Mr. —'s sexual advances. Thus the two sisters are separated from one another first by their stepfather and later by Celie's husband Mr —. More than this Mister hides Nettie's letters and thus steals their one hope of remaining united to one another. Ignorant of Nettie's whereabouts and unsure that she is even still alive, Celie turns to the only other audience. She can think of God only. Celie takes him at his word, and the book becomes Celie's growth from her initial passivity to self-affirmation as recorded in her letters to God.

However, Walker argues that what her critics have failed to see is that Mister, too, changes, that the novel is about the dis-ease that both Celie and Albert suffer from, an illness that derives from the experiences that early shaped their personalities and from their culturally derived sex roles. Walker writes, "They proceed to grow, to change, to become whole, that is well, by becoming more like each other, but stopping short of taking on each other's illness."¹⁴ She even admits in "In the closet of the soul" that she indeed loves Albert because he "went deeply enough

into himself to find the coverage to change. To grow."¹⁵ Celie too goes inside herself to find the courage to change and grow.

Mr. — holds no pleasure for her, as she tells Shug Avery, Albert's long-time lover :

Mr. — can tell you, I don't like it at all. What is it like? He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ask me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep.¹⁶

Shug calls Celie virgin because she has never found sexual fulfillment even though she has had two children and is married. Thus in Shug's sense of the term, Celie remains virgin until her sexual union with Shug. As Bernard Bell rightly acknowledges "rather than heterosexual love lesbianism is the rite of passage to selfhood, sisterhood and brotherhood for Celie."¹⁷

Celie's feelings toward men do not initially prevent her accepting without question a God created in the image of man, although a white man. At Shug's insistence, she describes what her God looks like : a "big and old and tall and graybearded white man in long white robes. When Shug laughs, Celie asks, why you laugh? What you expect him to look like, Mr. — ?" Celie is not able to redefine herself in any but a subservient

position until she replaces her fear of men with anger and, in the process, redefines God.

Celie is not in a literal sense a slave, but she certainly is sexually abused, whipped, the mother of children she could not want, lover of children she could not have. In her suffering, as hundreds of slave women before her she finds the twin self within. The letters in the first half of the novel are a one-way correspondence between the abused and lonely Celie and her own inner self-that part of herself that eventually makes her to fight. In writing God she is writing to the part of her personality growing progressively stranger until she is able to acknowledge the God within herself and demand the due respect for her.

First, she has to reject her traditional notions of divinity. This she does with the help of Shug Avery. Shug works as a transforming force in Celie's life. It is in Shug's company Celie feels more comfortable and relaxed. Shug is the only person after Nettie's departure whom she tells everything happened in her life. Celie is the woman who is badly in need of love and sympathy from Albert. As Celie tells Shug:

My mama die, ----- . My sister Nettie run away.
Mr____come git me to take care his rotten children.
He never ast me nothing about myself. He clam on
top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head
bandaged. Nobody even love me.¹⁸

However, Shug tries her best to please and encourage her. She names one of her songs after Celie and calls it Ms. Celie's song; teaches her to love herself and her body and also makes her financially independent. Shug also invites Celie to come to Memphis to live with her and to give her lessons in economic autonomy. She teaches her how to stitch pants. When Celie tries to work for Shug, she dislikes it and warns her. "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,"¹⁹ and leaves Celie so that she can become independent. While they remain friends, it is essential for her to know that she can be economically and psychologically independent.

To get Celie's mind off of killing Mister once she learns that he has been hiding Nettie's letters, Shug encourages her to make some pants. In fact she encourages her to wear pants because, as she tells Celie "you don't have a dress do nothing for you. You not made like no dress pattern, neighter."²⁰ Celie assumes that Mister will not permit his wife to wear pants, but she learns, to her surprise, that Shug used to put on Albert's pants when they were courting. In this way Shug tries her best to make Celie independent and self-reliant.

Celie's decision to leave her husband, Mr. ___ and go with Shug to Memphis shocks him. When Albert tries to prevent Celie from moving to

Memphis with Shug, Celie warns him saying that she is no more like a cow now and roars : "You a logdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into a Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need. "²¹ She further says that they have made her life a 'hell on earth'. Thus she is firm with her decision to leave Mr.—. She finds that she can make a living by practicing the traditionally feminine art of sewing, but the pants that she quickly becomes famous for are equally appropriate for men and women.

Mr.— doesn't care of Celie's going to Memphis. On the other hand, he says that she will be back soon because North is not an appropriate place for the ugly, skinny, funny and dumb black woman like Celie. He laughs scornfully hoping that Celie won't survive without him. She says that she is no more willing to stay in the jail he has planned for her. For the first time she becomes aware of her own existence. She becomes conscious of the 'I' in her. She cries : "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly, and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here." ²²

Walker has been accused of painting men in a favorable light only when they become too old to be a threat sexually. Celie's heart softens toward Harpo when she hears how he cared for Mister. The extent to which men become likable is directly proportional, then, not to their age, but rather to the extent to which they take on feminine characteristics.

The change in the heart of Albert is almost as hard to believe in as the change in the heart of Grange Copeland, but as Celie eventually has to admit, "If you know your heart sorry, I say, that man it not quite as spoilt as you think." ²³ Albert has indeed changed fully at the end.

At the end of novel Albert is working in his fields once again and keeping house for himself, even cooking. He appears late in the novel sewing with Celie on the porch of the house they once shared and actually designing shirts to go with Celie's pants. He recalls that as a child he liked to sew along with his mother until others ridiculed him. Celie tells him that in Africa, after all, men quilt and wear "dresses". She is the one now wearing the pants and smoking a pipe. Celie has never before been at such peace with Albert or with herself. They have shared the sorrow of having lost Shug to someone else. Now Celie knows that she can bear life with or without Shug : "If she come, I be happy. If she don't, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson, I was suppose to learn." ²⁴ She thanks God for bringing her sister Nettie and her children home. She is happy in the company of Albert, Harpo, Sofia, Nettie and her children.

Shug Avery and Celie

The Color Purple tells us a story of two women in love with one man. The character of Shug Avery, a dynamic singer, is based in part on Zora Neale Hurston but also in part on Walker's own aunts, who were

domestics up north, but who had wonderful nails, and were all beautifully dressed-just fantastically vibrant women with great perfumes. Walker early knew very well that hers was the story of two women who felt married to the same man. What completes the love triangle in all its symmetry is Celie and Shug's love for each other.

Where Celie is not attracted to men, she is immediately drawn to Shug, who has been her husband's lover for years. Shug and Albert never married because his lightskinned father disapproved of Shug's dark skin; now her own father considers her a tramp because she has had three children by a man she never married and makes her living by singing in juke joints. Celie begins to dream of Shug from the moment first she sees a picture of her. Rather than being pushed further apart when Albert brings Shug into their home to recuperate from what the town gossips suspect is "some nasty woman disease," Celie and Albert find that their mutual love for Shug draws them closer than ever before.

Shug's love for Celie is deep-rooted and results in an on-going physical relationship as well as a powerful emotional affiliation. As a result Shug inspires Celie to celebrate her existence. She also loves Shug in a way that radiates all elements of God's world that he has given to Celie. Once Shug implants the idea in Celie that she is somebody, she undergoes a transformation which encompasses her sexual awakening.

Daniel W. Ross has described this point very effectively by stating that one of the primary objects of feminism is to restore women's bodies, appropriated long ago by a patriarchal culture, to them. Because the female body is most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to fear or even to hate their bodies.²⁵ In the same way, Andrienne Rich expresses that women must overcome these negative attitudes if they are to achieve intellectual progress. She writes :

But fear and hatred of our bodies has often crippled our brains. Some of the most brilliant women of our time are still trying to think from somewhere outside their female bodies - hence they are still merely reproducing old forms of intellection.²⁶

Mae Henderson has said of Shug , "Unlike Celie, who derives her sense of self from the dominant white and male theology, Shug is a self-invented character whose sense of self is not male inscribed. Her theology allows a divine, self-authorized sense of self."²⁷ Celie rejects her former notion of a white and male God in anger when she learns, with Shug's assistance that Albert has " stolen " Nettie from her by hiding her letters. Finally reading through the stocks of old letters, Celie learns her real father was lynched and the man she knew as her father was really her stepfather. She is understandably relieved to learn that her children are not her brother and sister, yet she is angered by all God has allowed to

happen to her. She no longer writes to God and even denies His existence as she explains to Shug why she doesn't :

What God do for me ? I ast.

She say, Celie ! Like she shock. He give you life, good health, and good woman that love you to death.

Yeah, I say, and he give a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God, I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown.

She say, Miss Celie, you better hush. God might hear you.

Let, im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you.²⁸

Celie is now ready to accept the genderless God that Shug offers her. Shug points out that she too lost interest in God. When she discovered that He was "big and old and tall and gray bearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted."²⁹ Shug also informs her may God is inside her and inside everybody. She believes that God is everything. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be.

As Wendy Wall points out, this conception of God that both relocates and regenerates Him proves that Celie's letters to God, "which have been directed toward the task of creating self," have been appropriately addressed. "Her letters connect her to this interior being."³⁰ Celie has become the sort of self-invented character Mae Henderson refers to, and her creation of self enables her to achieve her goal of

entering creation, when she finally leaves her husband. In another sense she will enter creation by becoming one with all created things, and in her climatic and mystical departure scene she does. She takes on seemingly God-like powers when she curses Mister before going to Memphis with Shug. As she confronts her husband, warning him that all the suffering that he has inflicted on her will be inflicted on him twofold, it is not her voice she hears, but the trees and the wind and the dirt speaking to her. In another sense, she will enter creation by becoming a creator herself. Tempted at one point to slit Mister's throat for all the evil that he has done, she chooses the needle over the razor and takes advantage of her skill as a seamstress to enter the world of business. As God does when his efforts are taken for granted, she sets out to create something new.

It is Shug who reveals Celie the mysteries of the body and sexual experience. Shug encourages Celie to explore her body and feel its different units. When Shug asks the way her body looks, she responds instantly as if she has found something beautiful and precious. Celie is surprised to see that she is pretty and beautiful. As body can be a painful experience for women. Naturally, women often think of their bodies as torn or fragmented. Celie has no desire to get to know of her body because it is the source of exploitation. However, Shug's presence generates in her an erotic stirring and creates a spiritual bond between

them. "I wash her body, it feels like I'm praying."³¹ Thus Shug prepares Celie to love sexual pleasure guiltlessly.

Shug becomes not only a model for Celie, but also a mother that Celie never had. She protects Celie from Albert, a beast like husband, gives knowledge about her body. Celie, too, on the other hand takes utmost care of Shug when she was brought home by Albert. It is Celie who gives new life to her which builds concrete relationship between the two black women. Till the very end of the novel both of them take each others word.

It is Shug who brings Celie to Memphis and leaves her so that she can become independent. Shug teaches her to sew the pants and earn her living. At the same time she explains her the true nature of all pervasive colorless God and teaches her how to fight against injustice. Celie and Shug, of course, cross traditional gender boundaries as soon as they enter into their lesbian relationship. There is something masculine in Shug, inspite of all her flamboyant, feminine charm. Even Celie acknowledges that Shug is manly in her talk at times.

Thus Shug works as a changing force in this novel. She not only changes Celie but at the same times she changes Mr. — too. She is really responsible for Celie's journey towards self-consciousness. It is

Shug who gives Celie self-respect and social status. Nettie asks, " what can she become? " and is told, " the mother of his children".

Celie and Nettie

The only person who loves Celie in the early days of her life is Nettie, her younger sister. She is also the victim of sexual advances of her stepfather and brother-in-law, Mister Albert. As a result, she has to leave her home and her beloved sister. But one gift she has given to her sister, Celie is the ability to read and write as Celie had to quit school the first time she became pregnant. As Mr.— hides Nettie's letters Celie remain ignorant of Nettie's whereabouts and unsure that even she is still alive. So Celie worries about Nettie and writes her letters to God.

The very first letter of Nettie opens with a message : "You've got to fight and get away from Albert. He ain't no good."³² She provides information about different things. Nettie has gone to Africa with Corraine, Samuel and their children, Adam and Olivia. Samuel and Corraine work as the missionaries of the American and African missionary society.

In one of her letter Nettie informs her that Olinka don't believe in educating girls. One of the Olinka mother says, "A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something."³³ She tells that only boys are allowed to take education. In their class all students

learning are boys. Thus girl is a neglected sex in Africa who are deprived of education like white people at home who don't want colored people to learn. The women also do not "look in man's face" Women's lives always center around work and their children and other women and have rare opportunity to spend time with their husbands. Among the Olinka the husband has life and death power over the wife. If he accuses one of his wives of withcraft or infidelity, she can be killed. Thus in Africa the domination always is of men.

However, Nettie's life in Africa is far off from satisfaction. When Celie asks her how is she, Nettie replies : " Oh, Celie ! My life here is nothing but work, work, work and worry. ... And I have nothing of my own. No man, no children, no close friend, except for Samuel. But I do have children, Adam and Olivia. And I do have friends, Tashi and Catherine. I even have a family- this villege, which has fallen on such hard times."³⁴

Thus by providing the glorious history of the black race, Nettie reveals the history of the power of the black race. She informs Celie that New York is a beautiful city where a section of it called, Harlem is owned by the blacks. There are colored people who own family motor cars and live in houses which are finer than the white people's houses. These people live in much beauty and dignity. However, these people love Africa. Nettie writes about the black people of Africa and their social

customs, religion and culture. In one of her letter she reveals that Jesus Christ was not White but Black.

In Africa Nettie has discovered a "more fluid and internal" God, to use Wall's term. Among the African people who worship the roofleaf plant that makes their way of life possible, she has learned that the God that she has tried to introduce them to, the one from the 'white folks bible' that Celie found incompatible with the reality of her life in the rural South, is not necessarily any more compatible with the reality of life in Africa. Nettie's letters also free Celie of the old white haired gentleman called God who has kept her in bondage to an oppressive system.

Nettie also informs that Olivia and Adam are her children who were taken away by Alfonso from Celie and handed over to Samuel and Corraine who adopted them. In addition to this, she writes that their father Alfonso, is not the true father, but a stepfather. Thus Nettie virtually gives back Celie her children, Olivia and Adam ,and tells the true family history which liberates Celie from the guilt of incest. For Celie knowledge is power. She learns that she doesn't have to obey Albert, if obeying him means a loss of self, as surely it did when she was ignorant of her own feelings and lacked the sense of self-worth.

Through a miracle of fate and fictional license the children's adoptive mother Corraine dies leaving her husband Samuel free to marry

Nettie, thus resolving one of the many secondary love triangles and setting the stage for Celie's whole family to come back to her in one convenient surge. Before that happens, however, Celie has a lot of catching up to do as she reads Nettie's letters from Africa. And there are many, for as Nettie explains, "when I don't write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart."³⁵ The epistolary format is difficult to sustain for the whole work, but Nettie serves us a convenient audience to replace the God that Celie has rejected except the last letter in its salutation, reflects Celie's newfound pantheism : "Dear God, Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God."³⁶ The remainder of the novel consists of Nettie's accumulated letters and the letters to Nettie that now replace Celie's letter to God. Nettie's letters, in their formal English, seem stiffly didactic after the poetic beauty of Celie's nearly illiterate attempts to verbalize her plight, but they provide a parallel between the oppressive, male-dominated southern society that Celie has now become strong enough to rebel against and an equally oppressive and male-dominated society in Africa. In the end Celie is happy that Nettie, Olivia and Adam, Samuel, Tashi come to live for ever with her.

Harpo and Sofia

Reversal of gender roles is initially most obvious in the characters of Harpo, Albert's son, and Sofia, Harpo's wife. Even as Harpo grows into manhood, Celie, his stepmother, notices that his face begins to look like a woman's face. As soon as Harpo marries the big, strong, and ruddy-looking Sofia, who has already borne him a child, Mister predicts, that she will soon switch the traces on him, and she does. Sofia is at home in a man's pants, splitting shingles and working on the roof. She prefers field work and even chopping wood to keeping house. The irony is that Harpo truly enjoys "woman's work", and the two could have been quite content with him cooking and washing dishes and her doing traditional men's work had Mister not raised Harpo to feel less of a man if he was not in control. Harpo can't simply accept that he and Sofia are happy in their reversal roles and that love is a far more important element in marriage than obedience ----- but must rather try to prove his manhood by beating her to make her "mind". They fight "like two mens" with Harpo constantly getting the worst of the beating.

Sofia Butler demonstrated to Celie how to live with one's husband as a self respecting person. The day Harpo marries Sofia, his father starts him giving wages for the work he does on his farm. However, he feels that Sofia doesn't behave with him the way Celie behaves with Albert. He

complains that she never does what he tells. When he consults Albert about Sofia's disobedience, he preaches his gospel : "wives is like children. You have to let'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do them better than a good sound beating."³⁷ When Harpo tries to seek advise of Celie, she asks him to "beat her". But very soon Sofia's spirit appears before Celie and asks her why she told Harpo to beat her. Sofia tells Celie :

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, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me.³⁸

Thus Sofia is a forceful woman who always fight against injustice and oppression. She finally loses her interest in Harpo and leaves him. She doesn't like to become whiteman's house maid. She eventually goes to jail for striking the white Mayor, survives there only by masking her own natural aggression and pretending to be the meek and submissive Miss Celie. When at the end of the novel Harpo and Sofia are together again, they revert to the roles that they are most comfortable with even if society is not, with Sofia clerking in the store that Celie has inherited from her real father and Harpo staying at home.

Sofia represents the black woman who wants to fight for her own dignity. Sofia's struggle is for dignity as an individual who is both black and female. Though her struggle is not always successful, it provides an opportunity to her to display her fortitude and ability to transcend her racist and sexist circumstances. Her varying responses to her environment illustrates the need for the development of the black society, which allows for an individual to define one's meaningful existence within the larger American society. Naturally, the very presence and activities of Sofia make tremendous impact on Celie's thinking. Thus Sofia unknowingly convinces Celie that the black women suffer not because of any inbuilt disabilities and faults in them but because of their sex and race and the lack of will to fight. Sofia inspires Celie to fight against racist and sexist tyranny.

Bernard Bell has rightly pointed out that The Color Purple is "more concerned with the politics of sex and self than with the politics of class and race its undertaking, severe attacks on male hegemony, especially the violent abuse of black women by black men is offered as a revolutionary leap forward into a new social order based on sexual egalitarianism."³⁹ A part of the self Albert must contend with, however, is undeniably racial, and a part of his acceptance of self is an ability to love that part of himself that his own partially white father most hates.

As Celie, Shug and Sofia stitch, quilt, cook, and garden, they produce a communal art by which the cultural heritage is reestablished as a living connectedness, linked to the collective human need for warmth, food, beauty, relationship : the significant values which Celie comes to recognise as her denied history as a black woman living in a racist and sexist society. In fact, Nettie, her sister, Sofia, Harpo's wife and Shug Avery, Albert's beloved all these women stand united against racist and sexist tyranny. Thus Celie succeeds in constituting her "essential black womanist self" by forming a community of women which facilitate one another's growth in the course of the novel. Shug helps her to save herself from the linguistic and sexual abuses she suffers at the hands of her step-father and husband by providing her with the knowledge of body, sisterhood, and artistic creations to struggle against all the forms of patriarchal and sexual oppression. Nettie helps her in breaking the linguistic silence through writing letters and thereby giving her the knowledge of the world and reality, that she lives in. Mary Agnes helps her by giving the gift of creativity through designing and marketing pants which could be used by men and women with equal grace and comfort. Sofia, a black woman warrior, provides Celie with a model of resistance against sexual and racial oppression. Writing about Sofia, Shug and Nettie allows Celie to relive, to rehearse their speech or action, thereby composing "a new self " to enjoy freedom at all levels of her existence.

Thus Celie draws her literary strength less from "the books of men" than from "the tongues of women".⁴⁰ She writes to Nettie, "I am making some pants for you ... I planned to make them by hand, every stitch I sew will be a kiss." The intimate figure of speech threading together her three creative modes-writing, sewing and loving - acquires freshness and distinctiveness by being a so much a part of herself. Transformed Celie affirms her existence against her husband's alleged, "nothing" when she retorts, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly ... but I'm here." She also begins to perceive what official history writes out in its legitimization of a particular set of power relations as "truth" : class relations filtered through racist victimisation and sexual relations determined by economic domination. Thus Celie celebrates her economic independence, achieved through nurturing sisterhood and communal arts, as a viable mode of survival in the institutionalized forms of oppression in America by creating the black womanist consciousness.

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