A Feminist Reading Of The Color Purple By Alice Walker

For copious amount of years the epistolary novel, The Color Purple has earned its global recognition through the controversies, morals, and themes it contains. A specific character, Celie, has drawn a significant amount of attention to herself through the critical perspective of feminists. Celie's constant trial of degradation from the rape of her step father, the separation from her two children and her sister Nettie, and the physical/labor abuse from her husband, Albert, heighten the meager agony an african-american women endures. The main voice of the novel comes from Celie, however within the novel itself, Celie is given anything but a voice. Being born a black woman pushed her into a constrained life filled with neglect, pain, loss, and hardships. As long as Celie's life is dominated by the men who surround her, she lacks any self worth or self power.

From the beginning of the novel, Celie's character is demoralized and used for the advantage of her step dad, Alphonso,

First he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. (Walker 1)

As young as thirteen years old, Celie's body has been taken away from her and tainted with men's corruptness. She has been made to believe she deserves this life. The fact that she is a woman is meant to compensate for her suffering. Celie realizes that she is only meant for pleasing men in whatever way they see fit. The self worth and self respect a woman should have has been stripped from Celie simply because of the gender she is and the gender that controls her, males.

Celie's society has deceived her into settling for less than what she is worth. "Nettie done pass me in learnin… She try to tell me something bout the ground not being flat. I just say, Yeah, like I know it. I never tell her how flat it look to me" (Walker 10). Walker has characterized Celie as an uneducated black girl who has no motivation nor purpose in trying to better herself. As a young teenage girl she acknowledges the lack of education she has and accommodates it by allowing her step father to sell her off to Mr. Albert. The Color Purple has created an image of women, like Celie, that showcases them to be quitters, slaves, objects, weak, and worthless.

For instance, the entirety of Celie's life consists of deprivation from family and love. Two nouns that should be free to anyone in the world come at a cost to Celie. Being a women, in The Color Purple, means you hold the responsibility to "clean, marry… [and get] spoiled [pregnant]" (Walker 7-8). A woman's role meant nothing if they were not capable of maintaining a household and reproducing.

Throughout the first part of the novel, Celie, as shown above, was complacent with being a slave to men and never thought nor acted on behalf of it. However, as her story progresses and she gets older, Celie begins to realize the true colors of the world that has encapsulated her for a copious amount of years. The Color Purple is written as an epistolary novel, for the majority of the novel Celie is writing to God. Although, when Celie connects her suffering to the men in her

life she brings God into it as well. Celie can only see hatred and betrayal from God since he embodies a male figure.

As the epistolary novel switches from letters directed to God, to letters directed to Celie's sister Nettie, Celie's character starts to grow and develop into a person of her own. Her character is slowly drifting from the control of men, but is still prejudiced. Nettie's letters to Celie are still kept hidden along with Celie's children Alphonso had sold off in the beginning of the novel. Celie's confidence began to grow when she befriended Shug Avery, Mr. Albert's lover. Shug, another black women, taught Celie how to have some respect for herself. When women see other women being successful and powerful regardless of the men in their lives they are given hope. Being surrounded by women made a difference to Celie's life. Shug and Sofia, both strong fearless women encouraged Celie's character to develop self respect.

Once women realize that men have no right to hold any power over them, they start to succeed. Celie, Shug, and Squeak leave to Memphis where Celie, "[is] so happy, [she] I got love, [she] I got work, [she] I got money, friends, and time" (Walker 218). From believing there was no place for happiness in her life and being complacent, to finding happiness within herself and creating a successful pant business, Celie owes her change and achievements to the absence of men in her life.

Needless to say, after thirty years of emotional and physical abuse Celie's character managed to reconstruct not only herself but her morals and ideas of women and their worth. Celie's persona changed from being insecure and lacking any self respect to being confident and successful. Having self awareness allowed her to move past the false barriers men would use to prejudice her. Before realizing that women can have power as well, she believed men were destined to be superior and in control. Towards the end of The Color Purple, Celie has come to forgive Mr. Albert for his abuse of her, but will never love him nor any man. When Celie was gifted with her real father's land and house she made sure to eliminate any sign of evil, or in other words, any traces left of her step-father that had once lived there. Alphonso had hidden the fact that when Celie and Nettie's father had been lynched he had left his daughters the house. Celie wanted to rid herself of the first man who caused her an unspeakable amount of pain:

She [Daisy] took some cedar sticks out of her [Daisy's] bag and lit them and gave one of them to me [Celie]. Us started at the very top of the house in the attic, and us smoked it all the way down to the basement, chasing out all the evil and making a place for good (Walker 250).

A new realization Celie was once blind to: a joyful healthy life cannot consist with the corruptness of men and their faux dominance.

Although Celie underwent optimistic character changes, it does not hide nor make up for the thirty years she was divested of self worth. Women will continue to get the short end of the stick in life. It's true, Celie did find happiness in life but only after a copious amount of suffering. Overall, Celie's character is meant to represent the women who struggle to hold any means of authority over themselves due to society and male dominance; women are capable of success but what price do they have to pay to get there?

Work Cited

1. Walker, Alice. The Color Purple. Harcourt, 1982.