



Treatment of Language and Identity in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Asra Qudisia

Research Scholar, Aligarh Muslim University, asramakhdumi11@gmail.com

Abstract

Alice Walker uses language as a symbol of growth of her women characters in the novel *The Color Purple*. As the novel opens we see the protagonist is weak and so is her language. As the novel progresses the author evolves the character of the main female protagonist and develops her language as well. It shows that language and identity are inter-connected with each other. In this research paper I will try to analyze the use of language as a symbol of identity development as Walker portrays in this novel. *The Color Purple* asserts the lost identity of African-American women by using their colloquial English rather than the standard American English. Walker uses language as a tool of affirmation for the black identity.

Key words

Language, identity, oppression, assertion, Afro-American literature, *The Color Purple*, gender inequality

Introduction

“You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill mammy”(p.11). Alice Walker’s 1983 Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winning novel opens with this warning from a step-father to his step-daughter of not speaking to anybody about the abuses he has done on her. But Celie, protagonist of *The Color Purple* speaks and tells her agonized tale if not to any human being but at least to God. So, she decides to write letters to God. When she writes, words help her to discover her lost identity. She tries to find her lost self in writing those letters to God and starts making sense of her meaningless life. She is an illiterate black girl from south of United States. Alice Walker shows how Celie reclaims her identity by overcoming linguistic barriers in which she is deliberately trapped since her childhood. Walker uses language as an important tool in her novel to let Celie find her true self. It’s the tool of language which Celie is barred from using and it’s only through language which she later uses and finds her Identity. Walker writes the first part of the novel in black southern dialect, although she is acclaimed for writing in standard American English. Her use of black southern dialect becomes a challenge as she incorporates the native dialect of her community into the literary canon of standardized American English. Walker wants to reclaim her mother tongue and bring back life into the oral traditions of her community in which women had an active participation from the past. This text is in spoken form of English which shows the form of verbal communication of the black

community. The 'I' in the novel should not be confused with the 'I' of author's self. Although, Alice Walker belongs from Georgia, the southern state of America where the novel is set. She is renowned for her feminist stances and this aspect is vividly present in her novels, especially *The Color Purple* for which she was globally acclaimed.

She writes about the turbulent times of 1930's America when racism was on its peak. The novel is in epistolary form, in the first half of the novel Celie writes letters to god in her broken English. Her words are spelt wrong and her letters don't follow any grammatical rule indicating that the writer is not well read, an important aspect of Celie's Identity. In the first sentence of her first letter to God, there is a complete erasure of the phrase "I am". This indicates the level of confidence of the protagonist who is not able to assert herself, so she proceeds by writing "I have been" instead of "I am". In the second-half of the novel, the letters written by Nettie, her lost sister appear. She has been writing to her sister from thirty years. The use of language by Nettie is standard American English which shows that the writer must be literate which is true. Nettie is an educated girl who lives with her guardians who are Christian missionaries. There is a contrast between the two forms of English's used by two different people who live in completely different worlds despite being each other's sisters in relation. Another aspect of the color purple is the relationship of the characters with God. The protagonist takes refuge in God when nobody listens to her in the first part of the novel. Her concept of God is a male, white masculine figure. In her imagination he is just another man, part of that patriarchal system to which her step-father and husband belong.

Language and Identity in *The Color Purple*

Allen (1986), argues that "people facing the cultural struggles are mostly inarticulate, almost paralyzed in their ability to direct their energies towards resolving what seems to them insoluble conflict" (p.135). Women of minorities are far away from the mainstream and from the ethnic centers of power. In *The Color Purple* Celie is not only mistreated for being black but for being a woman also. The culprits of Celie belong to her own family and black community. Celie never experiences any racial prejudice directly from white members of society but she is victimized by the people of her own race, her own family, her husband and her step-father. So the women of black community who is victim in her own domestic set-up, in this case Celie remains unaware of the potentials of language. She never speaks for herself because she is from the very early period of her life silenced and she has somehow internalized this behavior of remaining silent and never questioning people about the way they treat her.

When Celie is raped and impregnated by her step-father she decides to write to God. She says "maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (p.11). Nettie later recalls "I remember one time you said your life makes you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was" (p.122). Celie was on the verge of insanity but it was her written words to God which helped her to release her emotions and unburden herself

from the trauma of sexual and physical abuses she has survived in the hands of male members of her family. For her writing becomes a kind of therapy which helps her victimized soul to let relieve herself from the pain she is experiencing for so many years. Further in the novel we see that Celie channelizes her anger in a positive direction. So, it's by writing letters to God she saves herself from getting insane. She writes in those letters about the rapes she has survived multiple times. She writes about her lost children who were sold away by her step-father. She wants God to share her sorrow because here on earth is nobody to listen to her agonized tale and sympathize with her. She says "as long as I can spell G-O-D- I got somebody along" (p.26).

Nettie also writes to heal her emotional wounds. She is separated from her sister in an early age. Though she never wants to remain far from her sister, Celie but life takes such turns and she has to leave her only beloved sister. It's the male gaze which parts them. Celie's husband has an evil's eye on her, he attempts time and again to seduce her but is unsuccessful in his plans. When she leaves her sister's house she promises Celie to write to her, knowing the fact that Celie hardly knows how to read and write. She writes to her for thirty long years and never gets any answer. But this does not stop her from writing. She continues to send letters to her sister which she never answers. Writing letters for Nettie becomes an important part of her life. She says, "when I don't write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and chocking on my own heart. I am lonely..." (p.122). So for both the sisters writing becomes an essential part of healing there emotional wounds. Both sisters feels that expressing their self in words is an important thing, this act of writing letters helps them in getting their voices heard.

In the earlier part of the story where Celie is a mute spectator and feels difficult to speak, it's Alphonso, her step-father who has used every means to silence her. He deprives, intimidates and accuses her, "you better shut up and get used to it" (p.11). He uses these words to threaten Celie so that she may never speak. He ensures that Celie remains illiterates throughout her life and stops her from going to school. He deprives her from the basic education, when she starts to read and write he stops her schooling. He says "you too dumb to keep going to school" (p.19). Celie is herself convinced that Alphonso did the right thing because she has no say in the decisions taking place in her life. Nettie somehow argues with him and protests that "Celie is not dumb" (p.19), showing her defiance and not submitting to the powers of Alphonso. He accuses Celie and says "she tells lies" (p.18), before getting married to Albert, he warns him against Celie. So, Alphonso creates a false Identity of Celie in front of other people. He not only makes her silent but also makes her untrustworthy person in the eyes of other people. He does this because if in any case Celie speaks and tells about the incestuous relationship with Alphonso, no one will believe her words.

She is time and again reminded by him that she is ugly and stupid. After years of listening to the taunts of being ugly and dumb she believes it to be true. Her Identity is very much influenced with what Alphonso says and thinks about her. After

getting married to Albert she is never given any status of wife in their marriage. He marries her for satisfying his physical lust and for the purpose of rearing his children from his first wife who is dead. Celie performs the domestic chores without saying a word against the two men but her hard work is never acknowledged in any of the two houses. Her life revolves around these two men and she has no Identity of her own as she never questions them for herself. To break her long silence she communicates with God in the letters but she limits her expressions in those letters. She thinks God as an oppressive father, just like her step-father who demands submission and threatens punishment. She says “he threatens lightning, floods and earthquakes”(p.179). So she restrains her thoughts and feelings while writing to God. On the contrary when she writes her letters to Nettie, she writes with full exuberance and more long letters.

Asserting lost Language and Identity

Her first experience of witnessing strong and independent women is when her step-son Harpo brings his wife home. Sophia is an out-spoken woman who never lets anybody mistreat her. She asks Celie “you ought to bash Mr. ___ head open... think about the heaven later” (p.47). She is envious of Sophia’s headstrong nature, she asks Harpo to beat Sophia. Later, Sophia confronts her jealousy because she has never seen in her life any woman who has such strength against her husband. Sofia tells Celie “all my life I had to fight...i love Harpo , but I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me”(p.46).Sofia is a black woman who stands against patriarchal norms of black society being aggressive and defiant. For Celie she becomes a model of resistance against domestic violence and encourages Celie to speak for herself.

Celie starts believing in herself after she meets another independent black woman,Shug Avery. It’s her communication with Shug that she starts to think of herself as a worthy human being. She feels that its first time in her life somebody takes pains to understand her. After she is comfortable in speaking to Shug she discusses her sexuality with her. She gets to know some aspects about her personality which she never explored before. She realizes that she feels more expressive and protected in the company of women. She expresses her hate for men in presence of Shug. On the other hand Shug develops a unique relationship with Celie. She encourages Celie to shed her meek and timid behavior and take stand for herself. Shug becomes an idol for Celie ,she being a blue singer has a very unique way of speaking, her way of talking is her weapon against the society where she is looked down as a degraded woman, as Celie hears from a local preacher about Shug who describes her as “slut, hussy, heifer and street-cleaner” (p.48-49). This is the view of people about her and to resist this social hatred Shug has developed tough language, she has a “mouth just pack with claws”. When Albert tries to come closer to her she screams at him and says “turn loose my goddam hand... I don’t need no weak little boy” (p.51). Celie first time in her life witnesses women with such sharp tongue. She eventually develops her language by talking to and spending time with Shug. Later in the novel she calls her abusive husband “a lowdown dog” (p.170) in his face which is itself a revolutionary act. Celie all her life faced linguistic barriers for defending

herself and once she overcomes that barrier she develops her identity and starts claiming her lost self.

Celie while writing letters to her sister Nettie explains the personality of the women who have inspired her. Writing about Sophia and Shug in her letters she relives the action and speech of these strong women, this helps her to compose a new self on her. Sophia and Shug are the feminist models who dare to assert autonomy, challenge patriarchy and let Celie shed her feminine attributes of shyness. Walker has shown how Celie develops her language and identity drawing strength from women around her. Inspired by female figures around her Celie transforms her from a mute spectator to a person who does not submit's to the powers of her oppressor. Celie overcomes the warning and threats of punishment by her husband and step-father to form her true identity. Celie bears the burden of those rude and brute remarks which both Alphonso and Albert shower upon her. She is traumatized by these two men to such an extent that she never dares to write their full name in letters, she addresses both of them as Old Mister and New Mister with a blank space. In her later life when she gets full confidence in speaking and command over her Language she addresses them by their respective names.

Albert taunts her , “you ugly, you skinny, your shape funny, you too scared to open your mouth to people...you black, you pore...you a woman ...you nothing at all” (p.186-187). In the past she used to absorb these rude remarks but after she gets command over her Language, she does not remain silent, she replies back and says “I am pore, I’m black, I may be ugly...but I’m here...”(p.187). She claims her lost Identity against her husband’s allegations of ‘nothing’ by attacking back with the weapon of Language which now she knows how and when to use and of which she was always in her earlier life deprived. She further says to her husband “the jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say”. She curses her husband and her step-father and this curse proves fatal for Alphonso who soon dies in his house. She uses the same abusive words against them which she had been listening to for so many years from them against her. Now, Celie has a “mouth just pack with claws”. Her speech and act are one. She in a tone full of revenge says to her husband “you better stop talking because all I am telling you ain’t coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words”(p.187). Now the things turn upside down, Albert has to listen to what she says. Celie expresses herself with passion and courage. She has remained silent for so many years and after knowing her potential she speaks without any fear. She has seen everything in terms of violence and now has nothing to lose. Once she develops her Language she uses it with full force against those who have always silenced her. She uses Language just like other strong women of the novel. Her words which were long silenced by her abusive husband now flow in a torrent. Celie acts and speaks aggressively to overcome the violence she has witnessed for such a long time.

When the story proceeds, she further tries to channelize her anger in a creative direction. When Celie comes to know about the letters which her sister has written to her for thirty years and her husband had kept them in a secret box so that Celie may

not receive any of those letters, she reacts with rage and wants to kill Albert for keeping her in dark for so many years about her sister. She asks Shug for a razor to slit Albert's throat. But Shug stops her and advises her to remain patient. She helps her to replace her anger with creativity by asking Celie about the idea of opening her own tailor shop. Celie by the end of the novel is a businesswoman who designs pants for men and women. This job makes her financially independent. Celie changes herself drastically and Albert recognizes that change, he feels guilty of what he has done with Celie but it is only possible when Celie first reclaims her Identity. She fights for her rights and gains her respect, this makes a person as harsh and cruel as Albert to change his attitude towards his wife. He starts looking Celie in a respectful manner. He acknowledges her worth once she starts speaking for her rights. In the final phase of her story, she forgives Albert, this act of forgiveness shows Walker's attempt to highlight qualities of embracing everyone when it comes to the love and affection of woman. Woman has the ability to love even those people who have always behaved with her in inhuman way. It is not a weak characteristic of a woman's identity but it shows how magnanimous her identity is. She takes her revenge but in a positive way, by showing love even to those people who always hated her. This feminine quality is promoted in the end of the novel when she decides to live her life with Albert. But it is not at the cost of her self-respect. Celie identifies her worth, reclaims her identity by speaking back to the people who victimized her, after they feel guilty about their actions and try to transform themselves then only does she accepts them with their apology. She develops a new relationship with her husband but on equal terms, as a life partner, not as maid in her husband's house which she was in her earlier period of marriage.

Celie in the earlier letters to God writes in a defected language with no knowledge of any grammar. Her letters are spoken words with colloquial tone. She is unable to produce proper English, yet it is her Black English which helps her to assert her Identity. Walker proposes that "it is uneducated but personal, difficult but precise". Language frees her from the demands of the society. Once Celie is liberated, she feels confident to talk in her own way. When sewing companions try to correct her language and ask her to communicate in a "proper" way, she says "look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feels peculiar to your mind". She uses language the way it sounds and feels. She very gracefully conveys her feelings and emotions in her defected English.

On the contrary, her sister Nettie is an educated black girl, her language is sophisticated in comparison to Celie's language. She learns the Standard English from her guardians who are part of the mainstream world. But somehow, Celie's language manages to outshine Nettie's Language. Her writing has a vigor which is absent in the formal writing of Nettie. She by writing in her own dialect dissolves the boundary of spoken form and written form of English, this helps the reader sink deep down the consciousness and explore her complex identity.

As Celie gains confidence in her female Identity, she gains mastery over her Language. Her writing's evolve along with her Identity. From an illiterate black girl

who was ignorant of the atrocities done on her, to a self-conscious and intelligent woman. From a mute spectator to a woman who knows how to protect her Identity. Her letters show her changing personality, a simple written record of events to what was done on her to full-fledged dialogues, charged with suspense, humor and irony, her letters show a great deal of variation from the beginning of the novel to the end.

Conclusion

Both Language and Identity are essential factors of human existence. Language helps human beings to claim their presence in the world. Through her employment of epistolary technique Walker makes the voice of silenced women of her black community heard. Celie and Nettie are emancipated with the power of letter writing, in doing so they not only acquire their identity but their subjectivity as well. The vivid contrast between the letters of the two sister's show the difference between the formal Standard English and the vernacular English of the Blacks.

Walker portrays such issues in this novel which are not only related to the specific situations of Black Americans but these issues of Language and Identity are universally applicable to people of different communities and different languages devoid of gender specificity. The variations in a language with respect to a particular person and his or her environment, society and its customs, the fluid nature of human beings, and fight for ones rights are some of the important aspects of modern literary world and culture which needs to be addressed.

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