

Celie's Identity Search in *The Color Purple*

The Uplift of an African American Woman Under Double Consciousness

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Abstract—Since 1982 when Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple* was published, the issue of the protagonist Celie's cultural identity as an African American woman has been discussed by scholars. As an African American woman writer, Alice Walker has a sensitive perception of racial and gender issues about African Americans. In most of her writings, Walker strives for equality, liberty, and independence for African American women. Celie in *The Color Purple* is a poor and uneducated black girl who later turns into an independent woman with self-esteem. After the introduction of the background of *The Color Purple* and Alice Walker, this thesis analyzes Celie's cultural identity in terms of the theory of double consciousness. As an African American, Celie searches for her African root and meanwhile strives for her American identity. Managing to get away from the racial and sexual oppression, Celie finally grows into an independent black woman. After Celie obtains her complete identity of an African American woman, she wins herself a decent life. Celie sets an example of uplift and liberation for African American women.

Keywords—African American; identity; racism; sexism; uplift

I. INTRODUCTION

The Color Purple (1982) is an epistolary novel written by Alice Walker. Alice Walker is an African American writer, poet and political activist, who has written fictions and essays about black people in terms of race and gender. She was born in a tenant family with Indian origin. When Walker was eight, she was accidentally wounded in the right eye. Later due to the delay of treatment she became blind permanently in that eye. The scar made her painfully shy. She realized, however, that injury enabled her to see people and things, to notice the relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out. During her college years, Walker met Martin Luther King and began to participate in the US Civil Rights Movement. In the preface of Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*, the "womanist" theory was advanced. In all her life, Walker has been fighting for equality, liberty, and independence for the black and especially for the black females. And her novel, *The Color Purple*, has won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Most of Walker's writings are concerned with the issues of race, gender and class, embodying cultural significance of blackness. As an African American woman, Alice Walker has experienced the oppression and personal tragedy in her life. She knows that establishing a cultural

sense of belonging for black people is essential to improve their circumstances. Through her writings, Walker makes black people's voice be heard by the society. They are calling for equality, liberty, and independence. At the same time, in *The Color Purple*, she also helps black women find a good way to get on their feet.

The novel, *The Color Purple*, depicts how the protagonist and narrator Celie grows from a poor, uneducated black girl oppressed by her father and her husband to an independent black woman who has a decent life. At the beginning of this novel, Celie writes letters to God about her miserable life with her broken English. For Celie, cooking, doing housework, looking after her little brothers and sisters and doing what her Pa says seem to be all for a black girl's life. What's worse, at the age of fourteen, Celie is raped and beaten by her Pa in the family again and again, for which she begins to fear and hate her Pa and any of the men. Then her Pa pushes her to marry Mr. _____ whose name Celie never wants to call because he is as cruel as Pa. It is in Mr. _____'s house that Celie meets Shug who later helps her find herself and begin a new life. With Shug's help, Celie gets the letters from her sister Nettie and knows the life in Africa where African Americans like Celie believe their family roots originate. Also thanks to Shug, Celie, a black woman in America, starts her own career by making pants for people. Since then, Celie gradually figures out who she is and is no longer ashamed of who she is. Thus, Celie wins herself a decent life in the end. In general, the story actually reveals the black females' pursuit of equality both on race and sex.

In Alice Walker's life experience, it is indicated that she is a great African American woman writer who has devoted a lot to the liberation of African Americans. In her *The Color Purple*, the depiction of the uplift of Celie is a kind of enlightenment to all the oppressed African American women. The discussion about Celie's identity in this thesis is unfolded around the relative background in the introduction. Celie's identity search is actually a process of liberation and uplift.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In *The Color Purple*, numerous issues are included, among which the issue of Celie's cultural identity has aroused the attention of many scholars. Here are some research results chosen from dissertations and from academic

journals. The relevant research papers abroad chosen were mainly published in 1990s, but most of those at home were accomplished after the year of 2000 and offer the important reference to following studies from a more modern point of view. Studies abroad state several different opinions. For example, Charles L. Proudfit argues that:

Such a psychoanalytic developmental reading will help illuminate Walker's literary portrayal of the importance of the mother for the female infant, child, and adult as she struggles to separate, to individuate, to develop her own identity, and to make a final choice of love object [1].

Charles thinks Celie's psychological growing up is the way to develop her identity. It tries to explain Celie's identity from the psychoanalytic point of view. After all, cultural identity is not only about culture but also about psychological growth, so scholars with psychoanalytic viewpoint believe Celie's formation of identity is a process of psychological growing up from an infant, then a girl finally to an independent woman. However, black feminist critic Barbara Smith emphasizes the womanist aspects of this novel. She says:

What Walker has done is for the first time is to create an extended literary work whose subject is the sexual politics of black life, as experienced by ordinary blacks...no black novelist until Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* has positively and fully depicted a lesbian relationship between two women set in the familiar context of a traditional black community [2].

This comment focuses on Celie's black female identity which is Celie's most obvious feature and also is the central issue of the novel. Most of the black women scholars regard Celie as a "womanist" image. The concept of "womanism" was first advanced by Alice Walker in her *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*. "Womanism" comes from "womanish" which is opposite to "girlish", so a womanist must have the characters which the word "womanish" carries, such as being audacious, courageous, willful, serious, responsible, and grown-up. "Womanist" also can be interpreted as black feminist or feminist of color. Another black women critic, Dorothy Randall-Tsuroto also praised the novel as a womanist novel. Besides, scholars at home also have done a lot of research on Celie's identity. "Womanism" draws their attention, too. Pan Kun believes that "Celie's reestablishment of her self and her world is the convincing illustration of womanism" [3]. Walker's works are featured with womanism which is reflected on the characters made by her. Others, however, focus on the male oppression to the female characters. Tan Yumei holds that "Celie's consciousness begins to be aroused gradually. She has realized her oppressed position and she decided to fight back" [4]. It means that actually Celie finds her self-identity through rebellion against the oppressions. What's more, Zhang Dongfang comments:

During the process from numbness to self-awareness, then to the final independence, Celie, though being black and female, gradually finds her own identity in this white-dominated society and becomes the so-called womanist as Walker defined. [5]

It mainly argues that after getting away from the oppressions, Celie gets her self-awareness to establish the cultural identity.

In general, scholars have researched Celie's cultural identity in three main aspects: womanism, racial discrimination and sexual oppression. Based on the previous studies, this thesis emphasizes the combination of these three aspects. Celie is a multidimensional person living in American society rather than a plain image in the book. As an African living in America, she owns the identity of African and American at the same time. Besides, she is a female, poor and uneducated. All these facts make her situation rather complex. In order to analyze Celie's complex identity, double consciousness theory is used in the discussion that follows.

III. AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

A. Double Consciousness

In 1897, W. E. B. Du Bois first put forward the concept of double consciousness in his essay published on *Atlantic Monthly*. Then he used this concept of double consciousness again to explain African American issues in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). As he said in it:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. [6]

African Americans were born as African and American at the same time. They have no way to give up any of the two parts in their identity. Segregated by the white in America and at the same time not identified with native Africans, they are in plight in the society. For a long time, African Americans have always been confused about who they really are. They feel like forlorn children of the world. They just wish they could be both Africans and Americans at the same time. Therefore, double consciousness of being both Africans and Americans is their way to get their identity back. Celie is one of those who are struggling with double consciousness and double identity. She is an American and she is a black. She is a black and she is a woman. As is commented in academia, "double consciousness" contains three levels of meaning: first, faced with the negative stereotype about them from the society, how the black define themselves; second, excluded by the white-dominated society, how they live in the environment where they are American but at the same time not American; third, how they deal with the psychical conflict as both Americans and Africans. Thus, with double consciousness, Celie needs to recognize herself as both an African and an American to

establish her double cultural identity as an African American, after which she also needs to face her female identity bravely to ultimately obtain her complete cultural identity as an African American woman. This complete identity is the key for Celie to win herself a decent life. Only after she removes the shadow of racial and sexual oppression of the white and the male can she establish herself well in the society.

Therefore, from the perspective of double consciousness, in Walker's *The Color Purple*, Celie is searching for her complete cultural identity as an African American woman through her struggle for class, racial and sexual identification. Only winning the independent identity can African American women like Celie be emancipated and uplifted. By analyzing the process of Celie's identity search, this thesis aims at a better understanding on the significance of cultural identity for Celie and other African American women.

B. Search for African Root

Since 1862 when The Emancipation Proclamation was promulgated, African Americans have experienced a series of movements, including Southern Reconstruction, Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Movement, and Black Power Movement. Until 1970s, African Americans started a craze for seeking their root culture back in Africa. On the one hand, after a series of movements, they felt more proud of their black culture, so they went to Africa to trace their root. On the other hand, since African Americans still could not find a way to solve their plight in America they thought Africa might be a better place for them to live and develop. Nevertheless, the fact is that going back to Africa did not work.

Celie traces her African root through Nettie's letter from Africa. For Celie, when reading the letters from Africa she feels like she is experiencing everything there personally. It is a process of self-recognition. As the offspring of African slaves who were imported to America, born in America, Celie knows nothing about her African ancestor. She only knows that she is black and is different from the white who proclaim themselves as Americans. Therefore, Celie regards herself not as an African and not as an American either. She is nothing and nobody, while through the letters from Africa Celie finds her African blood.

In the letters, Celie knows about her African root from the very beginning of the history. Going back to her born land for the first time, Nettie is so excited that she wants to tell as much as possible about the land. It writes:

Did you know there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago? That the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That Egypt is in Africa? That the Ethiopia we read about in the Bible meant all of Africa?

Well, I read and I read until I thought my eyes would fall out. I read where the Africans sold us because they loved money more than their own sisters and brothers. How we came to America in ships. How we were made to work [7].

There Celie knows about her race and the history of her race. She knows how they become the black in America.

More importantly, when the letter mentions about the Egyptians and the Ethiopia, Celie's racial pride is aroused for the first time. They colored people in America are always enslaved and dominated by the white, but here the Egyptian who are colored people used to enslave the Israelites (who belong to Caucasians); America is a Christian country where people see the Bible as the noblest thing, and the Ethiopia in the Bible means Africa where Celie comes from. For the first time, Celie is not shamed of her race, which gives her courage to continue to search for her African root and to admit her African blood.

Then Celie finds her origin of blackness. She makes sure she is from there. Nettie describes to Celie:

Did I mention my first sight of the African coast? Something struck in me, in my soul, Celie, like a large bell, and I just vibrated. Corrine and Samuel felt the same. And we kneeled down right on deck and gave thanks to God for letting us see the land for which our mothers and fathers cried, and lived and died, to see again [7].

Back to Africa, the African Americans find a home for their spirit. On that land, they connect to their ancestors and to their unchanged African root which is an indispensable part in their identities. Separated from their native land and living in a different culture environment for a long time, African Americans have lost the cultural sense of belongs. But back in Africa they find their cultural root back. Like all the other African Americans, after seeking out her root in Africa Celie does not swing in the wind anymore. On the contrary, in terms of racial root, she has settled down.

Finding her racial origin, though, Celie cannot just define herself as an African because she is away from Africa since she was born. Identity is dynamic but not stationary, especially the search for identity which changes with the particular person, events and social environment. Living in America all her life, Celie must differ from the native Africans. There is a conflict that she comes from them but she is not one of them. They are all black, but the native Africans are even blacker and speak the different language. Nettie describes:

They are the blackest people I have ever seen, Celie. They are black like the people we are talking about when we say, "So and so is blacker than black, he's blueblack." They are so black, Celie, they shine. Which is something else folks down home like to say about real black folks. But Celie, try to imagine a city full of these shining, blueblack people wearing brilliant blue robes with designs like fancy quilt patterns. Tall, thin, with long necks and straight backs. Can you picture it at all, Celie? Because I felt like I was seeing black for the first time. [7]

Although they are all black, they are different. For one thing, Nettie expresses her adoration and pride towards the black skin, delivering the racial confidence to Celie. Blackness is beauty and health but not ugliness and shame. For another, these words indicate that Nettie exclude herself outside the native Africans. The black in Africa seems to be something new and fancy to Nettie who herself is a black. She is always emphasizing the blackness of people there as if

she has never seen it before. When Nettie arrives at the Olinka village, the native villagers are also curious about her. It is not only a matter of the darkness of skin color, but also a matter of difference of culture and identity. Even if they all originate from Africa and have similar looks, it is the different culture embodied in them that makes them who they are. They distinguish from each other in ways of dressing, talking, behaving and thinking etc., which reveal their identities. Surely Celie knows she is not a total African and does not belong there. Therefore, although by now Celie has found her African racial root which is the basic part in her identity, she is still asking who she is.

C. Search for Identity as an American

United States Declaration of Independence endows every American equal right. It records:

we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

But in reality due to the racial discrimination, African Americans like Celie could not enjoy the equal rights. They are even not regarded as Americans, so they have to fight for it.

If the African part in Celie's identity is the existing objective fact born with her, then the African identity need to be gained by her subjectively. Identity is objective but at the same time also subjective and constructional; one is branded with the feature of his born racial community, but his cultural identity is underlined in the relations with other groups of people. Celie is black, so she used to think she is doomed to be ugly, poor and inferior. In her mind, she never had the concept of being an American. She just dragged out an ignoble existence under oppressions. But Nettie, Sofia and Shug all tell her to fight for her own rights — live as an American. For centuries, the racial discrimination has been the major problem African Americans are faced with. Racial discrimination embeds the subconsciousness that we are non-Americans in America into African Americans' mind.

In order to obtain her identity as an American culturally and psychologically, Celie has to rise against the racial oppression. In this novel, the fiercest racial conflict happens in the fight between Sofia and the mayor's wife. The mayor and his wife take their privilege over blacks as natural because of white superiority. Blacks are meant to be workers or their servants. The mayor's wife says "would you like to work for me, be my maid?" "Sofia say, Hell no" [7]. "Hell no" is not the words expected by whites to hear from blacks to insult them. As a result, Sofia was put into prison even if she had tried her best to fight back. Celie hears about all these happenings. She learns from Sofia that she needs to rise up to fight for dignity against the arrogant whites. Then Shug helps Celie to break the fetter of whites. Oppressed in the society for a long time, like most African Americans, Celie is brimming with fear for the white as if white men are all God. Shug tells Celie:

Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white." "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God." "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." [7]

Celie gradually becomes free from white men's fetter. From Shug, Celie knows that everyone is born free to chase his or her happiness and she should enjoy her rights of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness which the American constitution has endowed to every American despite their skin colors. Once Celie acquires the self-consciousness that she is as equal and as free as anyone else to choose her life, she owns the American spirit. She dares to fight for herself and she gradually recognizes herself as an American. Her struggle for equality and for integration into the mainstream society reversely contributes to defend American spirit.

The problem of racialism, however, has not been settled today in America. It is a long process of reconciliation and understanding. No one side can crush down the other. The result of Sofia's violent fight is:

When I see Sofia, I don't know why she still alive. They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it sticks out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of an eggplant. [7]

But the black cannot be easily beaten down by torture. "I dream of murder, she says, I dream of murder sleep or wake" [7]. Revenge violently on each other just causes destruction to both sides. The white and the black are both the children living in one land. They cannot "throw out they own children, just cause they was a little different" [7]. "The only way to stop making somebody the serpent is for everybody to accept everybody else as a child of God, or one mother's children, no matter what they look like or how they act" [7]. No matter what happens, the two races have to live together in one country finally. It is just like Sofia finally makes a peace with the daughter of the mayor's wife, Miss Eleanor Jane. After all, they are all Americans, including Celie.

D. Double Identity of African American

African Americans usually find it difficult to search for the proper identity on account of their dual nature. They are with double consciousness that they are Africans and they are Americans. They are born in African culture, but when they come in the American society where they interact with outside world, the collision between African culture and American culture causes the cultural dilemma for them. African culture is the mother whom they are born from, while American culture is the mother who nurtures them. They do not want to give up any of the two cultures between which they cannot choose. The reason why culture is so important to a person is that one's cultural belongings decide his cultural identity. Under such circumstances, only African Americans combine the two cultures well, can they establish their double identity of African Americans. W. E. B. Du Bois says in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

...this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness — an American, a Black, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder [6].

African Americans' opinions about themselves are mostly obtained from the white's eyes from which they just get pity and contempt, so their inner world is almost distorted. They always struggle between their two identities. Celie in this novel is no exception. Trying to keep the complete two parts of her identity, she does not lose her African culture and at the same time she wins herself the American life. On the one hand, she keeps African tradition of sewing. On the other hand, sewing is not only a kind of housework to make quilts anymore but a skill to win her a career which helps her live independently. Although she still lives in the black people community, Celie knows to strive for her rights as an American citizen, including independent life, equal position, free love and inheritance of property etc. In the novel, Shug sings a song for Celie. "The beautiful and meaningful song here emphasizes the importance of Celie and improves Celie's self-awareness of a lot" [8]. For the first time, there is one thing in the worlds named after her name and totally for her own. Celie feels her existence and importance as a black woman, which signifies her self-consciousness begins to be established. After obtaining her identity of African American, Celie benefits a lot from it. She both can preserve her African traditional culture and develop her American spirit. The racial problem exists all the time. The only way to solve it is to accept it and to love all the races as one family. In Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, it says:

-Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins a white, beige and black?

-Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented [9].

But another problem is that Celie suffers from sexual oppression.

IV. INDEPENDENT BLACK WOMAN

A. Facing up to Female Identity

Celie used to fear to admit her female identity due to the ill-treatment by the men. At the beginning of the novel, Celie writes letter to God for help. She is scared because she is raped and beaten by her own father who later is proved to be her stepfather. "When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me ,saying You better shut up and get used to it" [7]. Celie is ill treated by man but still cannot call for help. Even she cannot choose her love and marriage. Her marriage to Mr.____ set up by Pa turns out to be another nightmare. "I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy." [7] Mr.____ marries her just to get her to cook, clean and take care of his children. Like in Pa's house, Celie has to do everything told by the man, Mr.____, or she gets beaten.

"Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr.____ say, Cause she my wife." "He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them" [7]. Celie is so afraid of men that she just bears all the pain silently. "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Ceie you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man" [7]. Abused by men all the time, Celie hates all the men and is ashamed of her female identity. She thinks all the disasters are caused by the natural weakness of female, so he never dares to look in the mirror to face her femaleness.

Until Shug appears in Celie's life, Celie begins to appreciate the beauty of females. When Celie first sees the photo of Shug, she says:

Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motorcar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some[7].

Shug is a female idol for Celie. Celie never knows a female could be like this. When Shug integrates into Celie's life, she also becomes Celie's teacher to teach her to find female identity. Zhang Dongfang comments:

Shug's attention to Celie are really significant to Celie's realization of her self-identity...Celie loves Shug not only because Shug is the woman she always dreams to be, but also for the reason that Shug is the only two people in the world who loves her and cares about her. It is her love for Shug that enables Celie to bury her sad double narrative of paternal origins and construct a new identity within a feminine domain.

From being ashamed of her female identity to being touched by the other female, Celie has one more step to go. "She say, What, too shame even to go off and look at yourself? And you look so cute too, she say, laughing" [7]. With Shug's encouragement, Celie finally goes in front of the mirror and looks at herself directly. She faces up to her female identity for the first time and the confidence to her femaleness lays the foundation for her future independence.

B. The Uplift of the Black Woman

If Celie's first double identity is African American, then her second double identity is black woman. She is a black oppressed by the white and she is woman oppressed by men. The only way to uplift is to break the double oppression. Alice Walker defines "womanist" as black feminist who enjoys women's beauty, love and strength. Feminists strive for female position, rights and equality, but they often ignore colored women. Therefore, colored women need to be womanists to fight for their own rights, liberty and love.

Celie is a womanist character who fights against the double oppression in the novel. The issue of racial oppression has been discussed in previous part. This part will focus on how Celie breaks through men's domination. In the American patriarchal society, women are totally controlled by men about what they have to do and what they must not do. Shug is the pioneer to break men's authority and she

helps Celie get out of the custody of men. With Shug's support Celie goes to the jukejoint where Mr.____ forbids her wife to go. Then together with Shug Celie makes pants and wears pants which used to only be worn by men. Finally here comes the wining day of Celie. When Shug declares Celie is leaving Mr.____ to Memphis, Mr.____ gets angry and shouts at Celie. But this time, Celie fights back and gets her voice heard. "I say, Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble" [7]. "Mr.____ reach over to slap me. I jab my case knife in his hand" [7]. After that quarrel, Celie manages to leave and starts a career by making pants. It is a great turning point. Since then Celie lives a better life, while Mr.____ is beaten down physically and mentally. It is a black woman's triumph. "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time" [7]. Living independently, Celie wins herself a decent life.

The success of a black is hard to be achieved because of racial discrimination, but the success of a black woman is harder because one more obstruction, sexual oppression. Therefore, Celie's uplift means a lot. It signifies the African American women's wakening of self-consciousness. "It enables the black women to obtain self recognition, self-appreciation, self-respect and self-reliance". [10] It also sets an example of liberation of African American women. Harold Bloom wrote:

Walker suggests that her purpose has been not only to create and control literary images of women, and black women in particular; but to give voice and representation to these same women who have been silenced and confined in life and literature [11].

Through her skillful work, Walker aims to explore an ideal way for African American women to fight against racial and sexual oppression and to find their whole identity, so that they can live better.

V. CONCLUSION

Generally, in *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker, with a depiction of Celie's search for her complete identity as an African American woman, illustrates a hopeful way to liberate African American women. Owing to the double consciousness of an African American and a black woman, Celie's life way is rather difficult. In the process of search for identity, Celie has to overturn the racial and sexual oppression to gain her position as an equal American. Besides seeking the cultural belongs, she starts a career and makes a living by her own.

Cultural identity is the key to get equal position and equal rights in a country; equal position and equal rights are the basis to start a career; a career is the source of independent and decent life. Therefore, if African American women intend to live a decent life, then they should strive for their whole cultural identity. Actually not only for the African American women, but all the races are the same.

No one should be thrown out or be ill-treated because he is different. Although people have different skin colors and speak different languages, they are all human beings living in

one garden. The difference among them just makes the garden more prosperous.

All the races in the world are the children of one mother.

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