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## The Image of God in *The Color Purple*

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### Abstract:

Religion has been a powerful force in shaping every society Celie narrates the novel through a series of letters most of which are addressed to God. In the beginning of the story she imagines God as an old white man. But as a black woman who's been abused by men since she was a child, she finally starts to rebel against the image of God. She begins to see God as genderless and race less, a more universal being who wants humans to enjoy all aspects of life.

This research is dedicated to trace the change in Celie's perspective of God and the reasons which led to this change. Celie's character alters many changes along with the course of events.

The research also answers some questions about faith and religion and whether religion helps any of the characters to work through their problems or bear their sufferings.

### Religion and the church

Religion had a great influence in shaping the culture of the American South. This religion was strongly based on the Western image of God. Many black people were repressed through religion which had teachings basically defined by white values. These values were practiced within black communities in both South America and Africa. In both places God is seen as a white male with absolute power and authority.

Walker states that *The Color Purple* is a "theological work examining the journey from the religious back to the spiritual". (MacColl, Alan) Celie cannot differentiate between God and the male figures in her life. She visualizes God as a man who is "big and old and tall and grey-bearded and white." (Walker 194)

In the preface to the novel, Walker writes that her religious development is the inspiration for *The Color Purple* as she presents religion and spirituality as the main themes in the book.

In rural Georgia in the 1930s, a 14-year-old Celie is a feminist heroine, but her story is different from any other familiar feminist story. After being continuously raped by her step-father whom she knows as her father, Celie gives birth twice and her children were taken away by her step-father. After suffering this trauma, Celie finds it hard to deal with any male figure in her life; her step-father, her husband, and even God. In each relationship, Celie is victimized and deprived from being a human. But her relationship with God, she believes, is the key to her salvation. She says that as long as she can spell the word "G-O-D" she has someone by her side (Andujo 64-65). Despite her belief of God, Celie is unable to build a meaningful relationship with him. Her understanding of God as taken from a man, her step-father as he warns her in the very beginning of the novel not to tell anybody about his abuse: "You better not tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy." (Walker 1)

God here is transformed from being Celie's protector to her keeper of secrets and this is the first step in her misunderstanding of his role in her life. Celie writes letters to God. She asks him for help and guidance. In her first letter, she writes, "Dear God, ... I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me". (Walker 1) However, God never gives her a sign or any answer to her prayers. The silence of God here suggests that Celie is a passive and weak character in the beginning of the novel as she writes to God and waits for his divine help while she must help herself to understand the real image of God before starting her self-growth.

Celie's sister Nettie escapes her father's house and is assumed to be dead. This adds more to Celie's despair until Shug Avery arrives in the town. Shug, a beautiful singer, comes to stay at their house and Celie becomes attracted to her. Soon they become friends and they discover a group of letters from Nettie which Mr. has kept hidden from her for years. Nettie describes her life

among missionaries in Africa. The novel at this point starts to be told in alternating letters from Celie and Nettie showing each sister's evolution and charting Celie's journey of self-discovery towards happiness. (Kenneth Butler).

Walker's idea of religion and her concept of God are based on the Christianity of the church in which God is presented through the bible as a white man. Although the novel takes place in a black community yet the teachings of the church are taken from the teachings of white people. Celie discovers through her journey that she, like Shug, cannot find God in the church nor in the patriarchal religion but she must search for him elsewhere.

The African –American church in the time of the setting of the novel deceived women by offering them false roles which obliged them to forget their desires to obtain equality and liberation in order to be seen as good women in their community. (Andujo 62) They taught people that God has put a specific family order which is not to be changed. The husband leads no matter how cruel or irresponsible, the wife submits and the children obey. Christian patriarchy presented man as the only leader in the family.

It is undeniable that Christianity has been conceived of by some people as a male based institution which extremely limits the role of women. "Biblical scriptures such as I Corinthians 14:34-35 and I Timothy 2:11-12 appear to place women in subjection to men and suggests that it is advisable for women to keep silent, especially in the church"(Andujo 61) Celie follows this male based institution and spends a great part of her life writing to a male God who doesn't give her power or help.

In the community in which Celie lives, the church is considered as an important meeting place as well as an organization that influences moral behaviors. For instance Celie is beaten by her step-father for supposedly winking at a boy in the church; Annie Julia is shot on her way home from the church; Harpo meets Sofia at a church service, and Shug is condemned by a priest in the church. These examples presents the church goes as hypocrites and judgmental.

Walker in this novel rejects the African-American type of Christianity and heads to the 'religion of nature'. She describes herself as 'a worshipper of Nature by the age of eleven, because my spirit resolutely wandered out of the window to find trees and wind during Sunday sermons' Shug's feelings as being part of everything in nature is a reflection of this idea. (MacColl, N.p)

Celie must go in a long journey in which she meets several people who are going to change her false believes about God and help her to gain her life back. But she is not the only person in the novel to undergo a change in her religious outlook; her sister Nettie is also undergoes a journey to find God in places far beyond the walls of the church.

### **The Image of God in The Color Purple**

Walker's *The Color Purple* generated many critical views since its publication in 1982 and the novel became a best seller.(Benevol 7) Many

articles were written about it. The novel won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. It was later adapted into a movie directed by Steven Spielberg. The movie motivated journalists to write more academic articles about the novel (Lauret 91-92).

Celie's mother dies in the early part of the novel and after taking her children away from her, Celie's stepfather marries her off to a widower, an older man, Mr.\_ She becomes trapped in a loveless marriage where her husband treats her as his slave. He beats her regularly. Despite that she accepts his ill-treatment and takes care of his house and his children because she is taught in her church to keep quiet and do whatever her husband orders her (Andujo 62).

Celie's only friend in her life is her sister Nettie. But she later runs away to escape being victimized like her sister. When Nettie needs help to escape, Celie gives her the name of the Reverend Mr.\_ and tells her to ask for his wife. This dependence on God and everything related to him shows that Celie is raised as a 'Bible-belt' churchgoer. (Benevol 13) The people of her community attended the local church every Sunday and talking to God or asking him for help was a normal part of their Christianity. As a faithful churchgoer and believer, Celie writes to God and tells him what she cannot tell to anyone else.

Years pass and Celie loses contact with her sister Nettie and remains in a life of domestic violence with her husband and his children. She never fights or demands her rights. But she keeps writing about her life to God. Delores S. Williams suggests that Celie's letters to God "serve a need to communicate her feelings—feelings that she is unable to share with anyone else". (Andujo 66) Her sister Nettie tells her:

I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it... Well, now I know what you meant. And whether God will read your letters or not, I know you will go on writing them. (Walker 130)

Williams writes that Celie is lonely and her letters to God are actually written to herself because of her loneliness and this is why she keeps writing even when she doesn't receive any answer. (Andujo 66)

Celie's ability to redefine God happens when she feels terrible and can't sleep after she does something wrong. She advises her step-son Harpo to beat his wife, Sofia, in order to be submissive, "I sin against Sofia spirit" (Walker 39) Celie knows no way better to advise Harpo because she follows the prescribed notion of behavior taught to her all her life. But her passive acceptance of her situation changes when Sofia confronts her. Sofia is a strong woman, a fighter who does not accept to be beaten by a man, "I loves Harpo... God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me." (Walker 40) Celie notices the difference between Sofia and herself and she thinks, "I can't even remember the last time I felt mad." (Walker 41) Celie is not able to

translate her frustration into actions of anger, "it becomes even more important that she gain the ability to come to terms with the god that dictates and influences the actions of her daily life." (Bickett)

Celie says that she doesn't fight her husband because she is going to endure as long as God promises of an afterlife and Sofia challenges Celie's concept of God as she tells her "You ought to bash Mr.\_ head open ...Think about heaven later."(Walker 42) According to Sofia religion is good when it is useful but if it stands in the way one's empowerment, it must be neglected. Sofia's words give Celie an escape to change her life and be a powerful woman instead of a sympathetic person but Celie does not feel that until she reconsiders her understanding of God. (Andujo 68)

Celie narrates the circumstances revolving around Shug's coming to town and through her narration the reader notices the hypocrisy of the church. Celie is not yet aware of this hypocrisy as she describes the events. People at the church gossip about Shug. "Even the preacher got his mouth on Shug Avery...He talk about a strumpet in short skirts...singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk about slut, hussy, heifer and street cleaner." (Walker43-44) Celie is surprised that nobody defended Shug. She thinks of defending her which means she thinks of justice which is a new idea for her. (Bickett)

Sofia's words about fighting and Shug's fighting against the constraints of her society ring a bell in Celie's mind to think how different those two women are from her.

Walker's understanding and appreciation of the greatness of God is a dominant theme in the novel which is fundamental in Celie's survival. In her essay "Right on Time: History and Religion in Alice Walker's The Color Purple," Kimberly R. Chambers writes:

Walker is careful to qualify her religious beliefs, claiming she needs 'a wider recognition of the universe' than she finds in formal religion. As she says 'I am trying to rid my consciousness and my unconsciousness of the notion of God as a white-haired British man with big feet and a beard'. (Chambers 44)

Celie starts to reconsider her own conception of God and man and her position within the system of patriarchy when she finds, with Shug's help, the collection of letters which Albert has hidden from her. She discovers that her sister and children are alive and that her father was killed and her mother driven mad. These shocking misfortunes break Celie's faith into pieces. When she realizes that "the god she has been writing to all her life is a man" who does not listen to "poor colored women" she starts to write her letters to her sister Nettie instead.(Walker 192)

Nettie's letters creates a leap in Celie's concept of God. The letters enlighten Celie's mind to discover the truth about the false teachings of the church which is still beyond her understanding. Nettie religious belief changes when she decided to work as a missionary in Africa to help the poor people of the Olinka. Yet "Nettie and Samuel are too honest and sensitive not to see the real needs of the Olinka people. Like Celie, they change their attitude about the variety of forms that religion can take, encompassing, for example, the significance of roof-leaf for the Olinka" (Pope). Nettie writes things such as "I hadn't realized I was so ignorant, Celie", and "It is the pictures in the bible that fool you." (Walker 125). Both Nettie and Samuel realize how compromised their missionary efforts are by the societies which send them. Their teachings started to be irrelevant when the identity of the Olinka is under threat. Nettie found a more internal expression of her faith away from the religious structures which she used to believe and her new found faith is similar to Celie's. (Pope) She also helps Celie, through her letters, to understand that the image of God that white people have created is misleading. The real Jesus has hair which Nettie describes as 'lamb wool' and holds no resemblance to white racial characteristics that both she and Celie believed.

Deborah E. McDowell writes that Celie's decision to stop writing to God and begin writing to Nettie "marks a critical point in both her psychological development and in her development as a writer."(Andujo 70)

Walker's understanding of God and religion in a spiritual way is obvious in her dedication of her novel 'To the Spirit' careful not to associate herself to any type of religion. This understanding of the author is presented through the character of Shug.

Shug is able to win Celie's trust and be her friend at first because of Celie's admiration and infatuation for her. Shug challenges Celie's concept of God when she tells her "God ain't he or a she, but ait". (Walker 195) This understanding of God amazed Celie and opened her mind to remove gender from her concept of God.

Shug was rejected by the church and she in turn rejects the image of God in the Bible. She rejects the false ideas that the church inflicts on people. She tells Celie that it is impossible to read the Bible without seeing God as a white man. "Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white...When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest". (Walker 195) Shug believes that worshipping God is an experience of beauty and appreciation of the richness of life as shown in the title of the novel.

Shug's belief about God leads Celie into a spiritual awakening where she banishes the image as the white man who gives orders and who is fearful and threatens with punishment to adopt a new image of God who loves everyone and who exists inside everyone. Shug tells Celie:

God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for...I believe God is everything...Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. (Walker 195)

Celie now rejoices her new found image of God. The one who loves everyone and who cares for all. Shug helps Celie to understand that worshipping God means to love him and to appreciate all the beautiful things that he creates in nature like the flowers, the trees, and the color purple. Shug tells Celie, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field and don't notice it." (Walker 196)

Now Celie sees God as totally different from what she believed all her life. God who is not a male and who loves women just like he loves all other creatures. It is not easy for Celie to immediately understand this new image of God. She tells Shug "But this hard work, let me tell you. He been there so long, he don't want to budge. He threaten lightening, floods and earthquakes. Us fight. I hardly pray at all. Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it." (Walker 197)

Celie's growth is obvious through her letters to God which are mainly letters of self-exploration that enable her to be connected with her feelings and express her thoughts despite the fact that they were letters without an audience. This connection between her between her thoughts and feelings enable her eventually to see the real God inside herself. (Andujo 70)

Celie, with the help of women in her life, is able to move from the image of God as a man to embrace the God who was inside her all her life. This newly found image enables Celie's spiritual growth and self-realization which leads her to demand respect from her husband after long years of silence. She tells him: "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need...Everybody look at her like they surprise she there. It like a voice speaking from the grave." (Walker 199-200) Celie turns from a forgotten person who never fights for herself to a new person with the help of God as she explains when she confronts her husband, "I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees" (Walker 206) She is now aware that God is part of every human and of everything in nature and the tree, a part of His creation, inspired Celie to stand up for herself. Celie learns to love herself because she herself is part of God's creation and with this love she is able to receive the love of others, she says "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time." (Walker 215) Her transformation even leads her to enhance her

creativity in sewing and she starts to sell her popular women pants as a self-sufficient woman.

This transformation extends to include her husband as she develops a new relationship based on respect with him. He gains self-awareness out of this new relationship with Celie, he says, "I'm satisfied this is the first time I ever lived on earth as a natural man." (Walker 260)

When Celie understands God and His creation she finds her true identity. A lost identity that she never finds until she learns to appreciate God and feel Him inside her soul. Even her new letters show her growth and spiritual rebirth, she writes, "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God." (Walker 285) It is obvious that Celie no longer sees God as the forgetful man who never answers her prayers. She becomes an independent and happy woman. Celie is able to love her emotional stability and is able to love herself and everybody else. She even feels younger than she ever felt in her life, she says: "...I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this is the youngest us ever felt." (Walker 288)

Walker chooses to focus heavily on spirituality. She clearly adopts the idea that God does not exist in the church but inside everyone and everything in nature. Walker writes in the Color Purple:

Have you ever found God in  
church? I never did. I just  
found a bunch of folks hoping  
for him to show. Any God I  
ever felt in church I brought in  
with me. And I think all the  
other folks did too. They come  
to church to share God, not  
find God. (176)

The image of God presented by Walker in this novel is not personified. Being neither male nor female. God is not black or white and surely not a white-skinned patriarch. The novel concludes that God exists in everything and everywhere in every time. God does not need an organized belief system or church structure.

### **Conclusion**

Breaking free from a belief that you had all your life is greatly difficult. Celie is imprinted with a misunderstanding from the Bible that God is a man whose identity is merged with that of all the cruel men in her life.

A woman silenced by all the men in her life would normally hate all men including God whom she falsely thought is a man like them. This false image leads her to be lonely and to have low self-esteem. When the image



of God is corrected gradually, the silent, uneducated woman claims her independence when she understands who is God.

The first words written by Celie, are "Dear God," and the novel ends with a letter, which reads, "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God" This illustrates the relationship between the novel and Walker's spiritual journey to find God outside the church.

In the context of *The Color Purple* Walker represents God as seen through religion of the church-based Christianity which offers teachings basically defined by white values although it is situated in a black community in Georgia.

Celie has no voice in the early part of the novel and she is silenced by male forces and therefore she writes letters to God who neither listens nor helps her. Organized religion has kept Celie from rising up in anger against all of those who have sinned against her.

As time passes, Celie's perception of God develops after she finds the letters from her sister hidden by her husband. Many calamities are revealed through those letters and Celie loses her faith in the God she has so long believed in.

At this point of Celie's lost faith Shug appears in the novel to change all Celie's false thoughts and offers her own mature understanding of God. Shug sees God as being everywhere, in the beauty of the world. The Olinka culture shares Shug's sense of God being everywhere in nature and Nettie comes to believe in this sense too.

Celie is shocked to know that all her beliefs in God are wrong. Shug takes Celie from the image of God as a man who does not listen to the positive image of God who exists inside everyone and loves everyone. She

Celie now sees that God is not a man and that he can be a great help in her battle for physical and verbal freedom. When the creator was a man, for Celie, she had no voice or identity. But when God is genderless and values everyone equally, everyone can claim their identity and have a voice.

*The Color Purple* obviously adopts the themes of religion and spirituality: a transition from a belief in God as an old white man to a God who exists everywhere and is part of human happiness.

The novel traces the wonderful growth of a black woman who was born with all the odds against her in a society which treated her like a slave and a victim of men, of traditional gender roles offered by false church teachings. Gradually this woman's perspective of life changes when she understands who is God and she finally finds her long lost faith in it.

As God is re-established Celie is able to find herself and consequently finds happiness for the first time in her life. And she is finally able to understand the world. Walker summarizes all these feelings in one of her poems as she writes:

I find my own

Small person  
A standing self  
Against the world  
An equality of wills  
I finally understand. (Walker, 6)

### المخلص

### صورة الله في اللون الأرجواني

### زينب عبدالكريم

كان الدين ولا يزال حتى يومنا هذا قوة مؤثرة في تشكيل اي مجتمع في العالم. تروي بطة الرواية سيلبي الاحداث من خلال سلسلة من الرسائل معظمها موجهة الى الله. سيلبي تتخيل الله كرجل ابيض كبير السن بلحية بيضاء وشعر ابيض. ولكن كونها امرأة سوداء امضت كل حياتها تتلقى معاملة سيئة من قبل الرجال منذ طفولتها تبدأ سيلبي بتغيير هذه الفكرة عن الله وتثور ضدها. تبدأ سيلبي برؤية الله بعيدا عن الاعراق والاجناس. تبدأ برؤية حقيقة الله الكونية. الرب الذي يريد لكل انسان أن يستمتع بكل جوانب الحياة. هذا البحث مكرس لتتبع التغيير في نظرة سيلبي الى الله والاسباب التي قادت الى هذا التغيير. شخصية سيلبي ايضا تتغير مع تغير نظرتها لصورة الله. كما يجيب البحث ايضا عن بعض الاسئلة حول الدين والايمان وما اذا كان الدين يساعد اي من شخصيات الرواية لتجاوز مشاكلهم او تحمل معاناتهم.

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