

The Process of Identity-seeking in *The Color Purple*

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Abstract: *The Color Purple* written by Alice Walker depicts the process of the female protagonist's gradual coming to her self-identity. Walker in this novel implicitly connects Celie's growth with her changing cognition of the universal being -- God. By means of the connection, Walker reveals the idea of "universality" of her works.

Keywords: process; identity-seeking; God.

Introduction

With the publication of *The Color Purple* in 1982, Alice Walker gained her literary reputation by winning the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1983. Walker, aware of black women as a particularly muted group, has devoted herself in much of her works to the issue of black woman. "*The Color Purple* is the story of five women, represented by the female protagonist Celie, who is black, battered, and ultimately triumphant over a world that seems to have been designed to drive a black woman mad" [1]. The novel witnesses Celie's gradually becoming of an emergent woman and its happy ending greatly inspires many other black women and readers. Celie's growing path is a process of self-identity seeking, which is accompanied by her gradual changing cognition of God's identity. This article will exam Celie's process of seeking both the identity of self and God, and prove that these two processes intertwine with each other and eventually lead to the emergence of a strong and independent black woman.

Celie's process of self-identity seeking

The loss of the identity

Celie's establishment of her self-identity goes through three phases in the novel. The first phase is the loss of her self-identity, resulting mainly from her suffering of the outside oppression and the inside self-negation. The novel opens with the main character's overwhelming appealing to God. It is God who Celie can only talk to and share with Him all her fear, helplessness and deep sorrow. Celie's language in this part has the apparent characteristic of naturalness, which helps to reveal a sincere prayer's poor situation. Celie's suffering of the outside oppression largely comes from the oppression of a fully male-dominated society. When Celie is about twenty, her "stepfather"

tosses her like some misbegotten Cinderella out of his house and into a motherless family. "Fact is, I got to get rid of her. She can take that cow she raise down there back of the crib"[2]. Marriage for Celie's "step father" and her future husband is more like an economic exchange. After the marriage, Celie does behave as what her father has said to her husband. She unconditionally submits to the desires of her husband Albert. When Harpo asks his daddy why he beats his wife, the husband casually replies "cause she my wife, plus, she stubborn" [2]. It seems that it is natural and justified for husbands to get full hand of their wives. Women are almost affiliated to men, fathers before marriage and husbands after wedding. Celie watches with curiosity as Albert's teenaged son Harpo falls in love with and marries Sophia, a big strapping girl who tells Celie she is "big" with Harpo's child. She watches with admiration when Sophia successfully stands up to her husband and finally resolutely moves out of the house. When Sophia questions Celie why she pushes Harpo to make her mind, Celie honestly admits that "cause I'm jealous of you, cause you do what I can't" [2]. Celie has nothing to do with her own outside oppression. What makes Celie become a more tragic woman in the novel is her own self-negation at the very beginning. When Nettie teaches Celie American history, though Nettie confirms that her sister Celie is not dumb, Celie humbly admits that "I'm not as pretty or smart as Nettie" [2]. When Harpo asks Celie why you are said to be stubborn, Celie simply replies that "I just born that way"[2]. Indeed, Celie has the strength, and that is her needlework beginning from her childhood, which she later also relies on to make a decent living when she leaves the house and starts a new life in Memphis. However, at first, when Celie settles down in Memphis, she still lingers on her past way of being a "maid". It appears that for Celie, except

for being a maid, she fails to recognize her other capacities. Such inside self-negation, accompanied by the outside oppression, contributes to Celie's loss of identity at the first stage.

The awakening of the identity

Lost for some time, Celie is awakened to realize her self-identity, which is also her second phase of identity-seeking. It is Shug who firstly sheds a beam of light on Celie's dull life. Shug returns Celie's sincere care of her illness by dedicating one of her songs to her. "First time somebody made something and name it after me" [2]. For a long time, besides Nettie, Celie finally finds someone who does know, care, and cherish her, and it is at this time that she gets to realize her own importance. Celie encourages Squeak to make Harpo call her by her real name Mary Agenes, which also suggests Celie's realization of a woman's identity. During this stage, Celie increasingly feels her own identity. Life for Celie is a process of coming into her own true voice, of saying no to the corrupt and violent world thrust upon her by men. The final climax comes when Celie discovers halfway through the novel that her sister Nettie is still alive, that Nettie has been writing letters to her for twenty-five years and that her husband Albert has kept those letters from her out of spite, her calloused heart break open and her rage pours out. "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need"[2]. For decades after marriage, Celie's first open and direct defiance of him shocks and horrifies Albert. Celie's reaction and behavior show her resist and rise, and at the same time, her full recognition of self, of her personal identity.

The establishment of the identity

If the main female character failed to establish her own identity after her realization, she could never be said to have already sought her self-identity. The symbol of Celie's eventual identity establishment can be her finally seeking a livelihood, and more significantly, her coming to a new woman. Traditionally speaking, women are deprived of the right to wear pants as men do. In contrast to African black people, American black men imitate white men to wear pants. However, most American black women are excluded. Celie boldly speaks against her husband that everyone can wear pants she made, and she later does do well in her pant business, successfully becoming an economically independent woman. During this process, Celie was reborn as well. Shug's temporarily leaving makes Celie become a more independent woman, considering that Shug is the only person who always backs her up and Celie has the unconscious tendency to heavily rely on her. Moreover, after all her suffering, Celie still maintains her goodness. The novel finally celebrates Celie's new image. She forgives Albert's cruel behavior, and is kind-hearted to all people around her.

Celie's changing cognition of God's identity Trust in God

The three phases Celie goes through on her way of identity-seeking coincides with Celie's three changing perception of God. God at first is the one Celie trusts and respects. Little Celie has no one to talk to about the incest, not even to her mother or her dear sister. She acts as what her "father" tells her, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy"[2]. The novel begins with a command, or even a threat of a tough father. Alice Walker touchingly presents readers an image of a helpless girl who can only turn to God for help. After Celie's arranged wedding, her life remains as miserable as before, even worse. If God and her sister Nettie are two ones Celie can count on before her marriage, at this time, Celie can only rest on God. When Nettie worries about Celie's situation at the new house, Celie only replies: "Never mind, never mind, long as I can spell G-O-D I got somebody along"[2]. Celie presents herself as a passive accepter, and God is the companion and a saver for her loneliness and helplessness. "Sometimes Mr. git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to the Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over. Heaven last all ways"[2]. Sophia and Celie's long talk further reveals Celie's passive reliance on God, and at the same time the deep loss of her self-identity.

Challenge to God

Celie's second stage of realizing her own identity is reflected by her challenges to God afterwards, which is directly caused by the discovery of Nettie's lost letters. "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"[2]. For the present, Celie seems to renounce God and think that God has betrayed her and ignored her; God seems to be only another callous, uncaring man. "I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl"[2]. In letter one, Celie at first sincerely utters the words to God. However, being a good girl to God does not receive God's caring in return. "If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place"[2]. Celie now believes that God allows her to suffer and He indeed pays no attention to her humble prayers. Celie's pent-up fury and frustration in her soul burst out at this time. Her anger lashes out against men and also against God. She not only poses great challenges to God's authority, but also points to a male-dominated society. The change of Celie's belief in God signifies her realization of herself. God can no longer be trusted upon, and can never rescue her. Celie therefore gives up writing to God, instead addressing to Nettie directly. In letter 76, Celie surprisingly puts her identity and address at the end, together with the word "Amen". "Amen" is a religious word which means "wish everything come true". All these details suggest Celie's self-awakening and starts to move from passiveness to activeness.

Re-recognition of God

Compared with Celie's early writing to God and to her sister Nettie, we surprisingly in the very last letter notice that Celie's wishes to write "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God" [2]. We witness the development of the protagonist into an independent woman with her own identity. At this stage, Celie knows better about the meaning of God. "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"[2]. Celie finally finds her inside God. "God just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" [2]. It might be said that Celie is that color purple in the field, attractive and precious.

Conclusion

In the *Color Purple*, Alice Walker associates a black woman's three phases of identity development with her changing perception of God at three different periods. By describing a woman's identity development through her changing views of a universal being—God, Walker also reveals the universality in her works. As Walker suggests, "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" [3].

References

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2. Alice W; *The Color Purple*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.
3. Bloom, Harold. *Alice Walker*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989.