A Study on Spirituality in Alice Walker’s
The Color Purple

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Abstract

Representation of spirituality belief in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, is distinguishable. Celie has spiritual belief on God too much. She believes that God will rescue her father and husband from the struggle. The Color Purple is an epistolary novel, which means expressing through letter. She initially imagines God as an old white man, something like Dumbledore or Gandalf. But as a black woman who’s been abused by men all her life, Celie eventually begins to rebel against this image of God. She begins to see God as genderless and raceless, a more universal being who wants humans to enjoy all aspects of life—from nature to sex to the color purple.

Key words: Spirituality, Epistolary, Struggle.

Introduction

Alice Walker was born on February 9, 1944 in Putnam County, Georgia. She is an accomplished American poet, novelist, and activist. Her father was a poor sharecropper who once remarked that Alice was “wonderful at math but a terrible farmer”. In the summer of 1952, Walker was blinded in her right eye by a BB gun pellet while playing with her brother. Alice grew up in an environment life with racism and poverty, which, along with her passion for gender issues, remains a large part of her narratives. Walker was involved with many civil rights demonstrations, and in 1962 she was invited to the home of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Her first novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland was published in 1970. Meridian, Walker’s second novel was published six years later[1,2].

The Color Purple, awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 1983 and made into a successful film, is ultimately a novel of celebration. Initially, however, it is the tragic history of an extended African American family in the early and middle years of the twentieth century. Its tragedy is reflective of the country’s and its characters’ illness, and its celebration is of the characters’ and the country’s cure. Walker explores ways in which the role of faith and differing views of God affect the lives of blacks in the rural South and in Africa. She uses one extended family to illustrate a traditional Christian,
a pantheistic, and a native African tribal perspective on God’s role in human lives. The novel and film trace Celie’s life in the early 20th century at American south and her struggles with poverty, racism, sexism and violence, and the female friendship that empowers her[3,4].

**God as Celie’s listener**

In the beginning of the novel, Celie sees God as her listener and helping hand, yet Celie does not have a clear understanding of who God is. She knows deep down that her image of God as a white patriarch “don’t seem quite right”, but she says it’s all she has. Shug invites Celie to imagine God as something radically different, as an “it” that delights in creation and just wants human beings to love what it has created. Eventually, Celie stops thinking of God as she stops thinking of the other men in her life—she “git man off her eyeball” and tells God off, writing, “You must be sleep.” But after Celie has chased her patriarchal God away and come up with a new concept of God, she writes in her last letter, “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.” This reimagining of God on her own terms symbolizes Celie’s move from an object of someone else’s care to an independent woman. It also indicates that her voice is now sufficiently empowered to create her own narrative. She realizes that she is not a subject or a tool any more, but a real woman [5].

She also realizes that only spiritual and economic independence can liberate her from the patriarchal bondage thoroughly. Celie not only gains independence economically but also spiritually. From the beginning, Celie suffers from his stepfather’s sexual abuse and physical violence, but she is able to tell nobody about her affliction but to God, for God asks her to “honor father and mother no matter what”. And, when her husband maltreats her, she thinks: “I have to talk to Old Maker”.

The obedience to her stepfather and husband is exactly the same as the soul of the patriarchal society, in which man is the center and the ruler, and is superior to woman. In this sense, religion reflects patriarchal oppression to woman in spirit. So, Celie must get rid of this patriarchal God in her mind so as to achieve spiritual independence. With Shug’s help, Celie discovers Nettie’s letters, which have been burked by her husband for almost thirty years. Nettie tells Celie in her letters that their father now is not their natural father, who has been lynched by white men in their childhood. This shakes Celie’s belief in God, because she hasn’t gotten help from God. To Celie, God now acts just like all other ordinary men, “trifling, forgetful and lowdown”.

Shug is another woman in the novel who knows the value of women’s solidarity. When she finds how Albert has treated Celie over the years, she loses her desire for him and permanently erases him from her life. She then helps Celie and Mary Agnes escape their lives of domestic abuse and drudgery. In the process, she gives Celie a sense of her own unique beauty and spirit. Even Mary Agnes learns the value of women’s solidarity. She comes into the novel first as the other woman, the girlfriend of Harpo. She treats Sofia poorly and wants Harpo to banish her.

**Celic and Nettie’s Belief on God**

The church is an important part of the social life of the community in which Celie lives. At the beginning of the novel she is a staunch member of the church, and continues to be so, working as hard there as she does for Mr and his children. Her letters are addressed to God and she says “As long as I can s-

Her faith is naive and childlike, and it undergoes a number of revisions and alterations as the novel progresses. She realizes that the God she needs is not the one she originally envisages. It is significant that she sees him as white and old “like some white man work at the bank”. All the angels are white, too and she comes to realize that this God is useless to her. Nettie’s letters begin to show her that Jesus was more like her than a white man “with hair like lamb’s wool”, not “white” at all. She has been conditioned in her belief by the illustrations in the white interpretations of the bible. Her changing perceptions of God are completed by Shug Avery’s unconventional interpretations of God and His purpose.

Shug rejects the narrow Church and its false perceptions, preferring to have a personal religion in which God figures “Not as a she or a he but a It”.

Shug (and later Celie) admires the natural world and its beauty, in all its richness and variety, including sexuality. In fact there is a strong similarity between sexual satisfaction and worship. Celie comments that she and God “make love just fine” later in the novel. Shug asserts that it “pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field . . . and don’t notice it”.

Celic accepts this interpretation as part of her general emancipation and it liberates her as much as her sexual fulfilment with Shug and her economic success both do. By the end of the novel she has found a much more open and relaxed attitude to religious belief and a purpose in her life which was not provided by the narrowness other original church upbringing.

Conclusion

Nettie’s religious experience is different to Celie’s, being more conventional in the missionary setting in Africa, but she, too arrives at a more relaxed and tolerant outlook as the novel ends. Her experiences with the Olinka tribe are educational. Religions are often restricting, not liberating as they are meant to be - that the message of the Gospel has to be in harmony with the people receiving it. Her acceptance of the ceremony of the roof leaf as “not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way is it not God?” is significant, as is her decoration of her hut with native artifacts rather than the stereotypical images of the missionary Jesus and saints.

She ends up with a more spiritual and personal relationship with God as a result of her time in Africa, and like her sister comes to realize that the narrowness of conventional belief and practice closes rather than opens the way to a personal contact with the Almighty. Both the sisters complete a personal journey towards a deeper knowledge of God as the novel ends. Celie’s last letter begins. Dear God, dear stars, dear trees, dear sky dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God. Simple, naive in the extreme, but sincere and very optimistic.

References