Reclaiming the Self:
An Exploration of Celie’s Spiritual Journey in *The Color Purple*

*Womanist*: “A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health (*In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* Alice Walker).

Published first in 1982, Alice Walker’s epistolary novel *The Color Purple* is one of the most read texts across race, class, gender and cultural boundaries. The novel follows Celie, a black woman set in 1930’s Georgia who struggles to define herself against an unrelenting patriarchal God. Celie endures many struggles in her life at a very young age—finding herself raped by her stepfather, following two pregnancies, forced to marry a man she has never loved, and struggling to define a God she is oppressed by—Celie is pinned underneath a deep-rooted dominating force from an inherited theology founded on patriarchy.

Only through reclamation of the erotic, Celie, with the help of her love interest Shug Avery,
is Celie able to foster her own creativity and voice and ultimately reconnect Celie to herself and to a
different God. Walker’s use of reclaimed sexuality and womanhood in *The Color Purple*
demonstrates that true spiritual fulfillment comes through womanist thealogy rather than patriarchal
religion.

II. Rape and Domination: Celie’s Patriarchal Religion

When introduced in the novel, Celie is a fourteen-year-old black girl that is terribly betrayed
by her stepfather and has every reason to lose hope. Celie’s stepfather rapes her and forces her to
complete silence. Immediately, the very person she should be able to trust, forces Celie under a
strict patriarchy. He betrays her in one of the most dehumanizing ways possible, ultimately taking
her autonomy away, and imposing a sexual, mental, and physical dominance over Celie. He leaves
the room forewarning her, “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your
mammy” (Walker 1). Celie’s letter writing is a direct response by the assertion of her stepfather’s
authority. Because Celie is silenced, this is literally her only outlet for the pain she endures—and
even with that, she is writing to a God that she believes does not even care about her problems.
Those very words uttered by her stepfather, push and confine her an insistent patriarchy.

Albert, Celie’s husband whom she is forced to marry, is another example of the patriarchy
Celite must endure. When Shug, a past lover of Albert’s, and Celie discuss sex—sex with Albert—
Shug asks Celie, “I have to confess, I just love it. Don’t you?” (Walker 75). To which Celie
replies:

“Naw, I say. Mr. ________ can tell you, I don’t like it at all. What is it to like? He git up on
you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain’t there.
He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep” (Walker 76).

Celie’s forced intercourse with her husband is a direct model of her past relationship with her stepfather, and serves as an example of oppression under patriarchy. Celie views sex as a job, a duty, an obligation, when in fact it is the source of her power—which Shug shows her later when she insists that Celie discover her physical body.

The situation with Celie’s patriarchal relationship with her stepfather and husband are paralleled by her relationship with God. As bell hooks asserts in her essay “Writing the Subject: Reading The Color Purple” she claims, “Straightaway Celie’s letter writing is placed in a context of domination; she is obeying orders” (hooks 455). Celie is forced to share her secret only with God and therefore under the assumption that she has become spiritually unclean as a result from her inherited theology. As argued in T.W. Lewis III’s essay, “Moral Mapping and Spiritual Guidance” the opening is where, “Celie is the object of exploitations and abuse; she suffers the loss of children, sexuality, and feeling. It is a place where birth, death, and marriage occur without celebration…its ambience is numbness, and Celie survives by denying all affections save one—her love for Nettie” (Lewis 486). Since Celie is forced into the role of an abusive patriarchy, she is then pushed under the authority of a God that is at the top of that patriarchy—compelling her to conform to those ideals.

The God Celie believes in is reminiscent of the men in her life that have done harm to her. God, to her, is a domineering man-in-the-sky that refuses to listen to her because he is a man. Celie says:
Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won’t ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other men’s I know. Trifling, forigtful and lowdown… He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted (Walker 187-189).

Over the course of the novel, Celie is raped and impregnated by her stepfather, and also married to a much older man, referred to as Mr. _____ who separates Celie and her sister Nettie as young girls. She is then forced to write letters to a silent God: “Dear God…Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me…” (Walker 1). Because Celie is so damaged, her only source of salvation is through the love of her sister, Nettie and later through her love of Shug Avery—the only person that is able to debunk her image of a white, bearded God.

**III. For the Love of Shug**

One of the more significant events in Celie’s journey is the rejection of her inherited theology of a white male God, which Shug Avery helps foster. Shug helps Celie debunk the image of the white God that Celie feels jaded by. Mara E. Donaldson and Mary Patricia Beckman discuss the importance of Celie’s revelation: “With Shug’s help, Celie rejects her inherited theology’s portrayal of God as white and male. Shug explains to Celie why she rejects the God found in the white man’s church” (Donaldson, Beckman 126). Shug then explains to Celie that:

Ain’t no way to read the bible and not think God white, she say. Then she sigh. When I found out I thought God was white, and a man. I lost interest. You mad cause he don’t seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything colored
say?” (Walker 190).

This conversation presents much difficulty to Celie at first, however she begins to create another theory that:

God ain’t a he or she, but a It…It ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything…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 (Walker 190).

This rejection of the white male God allows Celie to redefine her experience as an African American woman and as a religious adherent of Christianity. Not only does she redefine her experience for herself through Shug’s help, she also uses her sister Nettie’s letters to help. Nettie, on a missionary trip to Africa, says in a letter:

God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roofleaf [an entity of worship for the Olinka, an indigenous tribe in Africa] or Christ—but we don’t. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us (Walker 256).

The rest of the novel, in terms of Celie’s letters, is not written to the patriarchal God again—he has now transformed into literally everything that surrounds her. Celie takes Shug’s theology into account as displayed when Celie addresses her next letter to “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (Walker 286). She arrives at a point where she sheds the patriarchy of her inherited thealogy and begins to see God in everything.

With Celie’s newfound theology, she begins to experience a spiritual and sexual awakening that is set in motion with the help of Shug. Celie becomes exposed to the power of sexuality
through her, and later falls in real love with her. Shug is the catalyst in the journey for Celie to regain her wholeness. Since Celie believes that her sexuality is morally impure, the introduction of her body to herself as a tool of natural enjoyment shakes her foundation. Because Celie has been taught by the patriarchy that surrounds her (stepfather, husband, and white God), that her husband—for merely his own sexual pleasure—owns her body. Celie has now started on the road to herself. In hooks’ essay, she discusses that after Shug’s arrival:

“Patriarchy is exposed and denounced as a social structure supporting and condoning male domination of women, specifically represented as black male domination of black females, yet it does not influence and control sexual desire and sexual expression” (hooks 456).

Eroticism, according to Audre Lorde, is “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (Lorde 52). This power, which has been under suspicion of patriarchy, teaches that this power is highly suspect, thus creating an inferiority of the power of women, and only through the denial of this power are women truly viewed as strong. Lorde claims:

“The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with the opposite, the pornographic (Lorde 54).

The hyper-sexualized concept of the African American woman’s body suggests highly negative connotations. By aligning the body with the pornographic, it denounces the strength, intensity, and ability of the erotic, as it is a “measure between the beginnings of our sense of self
and the chaos of our strongest feelings” (Lorde 54). The importance of sexuality within womanism reveals sexuality in touchstones to power and spirit—and ultimately a path to the self.

The relationship with Shug allows for Celie to begin a journey of self-discovery. Though many would find this completely impure, it can be argued, as Margaret Kamituska has, that Walker’s novel “focuses more broadly on the bonds of love shared in sisterhood…it seems to prioritize sisterhood over lesbian love” (59). It is correct to state that Celie does indeed harbor sexual love for Shug, but the bond between the two, shown through Shug’s declaration of love for Celie, and the various events (Shug’s song for Celie, the invitation for Celie to move in with Shug, and Shug’s help in discovering the letters her sister Nettie has sent and kept hidden by Albert from Celie) the two both endure. The reduction of their relationship to a purely sexual, emotionally vacant sexuality is then transformed into powerfully emotional sexuality.

The concept of patriarchy is debunked. Celie frees herself of Albert’s control by leaving him, as well as the God that ignores her. She is able to love Shug because her own sexual desire is not controlled by the patriarchy that has, before, controlled everything else.

IV. “But I’m Here”

Celie’s revelation and her reclamation of the erotic allows her to shed the patriarchal and hierarchical God, she finds a power in herself—through her own voice. At a holiday dinner, Celie, Shug, and Albert have a confrontation after Shug tells Albert that Celie is leaving him and moving to Memphis with her. When Albert finds out the news Celie describes the incident:

Mr. ______ reach over to slap me. I jab my case knife in his hand. You bitch, he say. What will people say, you running off to Memphis like you don’t have a house to look after?
You not gitting a penny of my money, Mr. _____ say to me. Not one thin dime. Did I ever ast you for money? I say. I never ast you for nothing. Not even for your sorry hand in marriage (Walker 196-197).

With Shug by her side, Celie is able to stand up to the man that has oppressed her for years and communicate, quite strongly, her distaste for their marriage and his domineering nature. This is the point in which Celie is finally able to stand up for herself, saying: “I say until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble. He laugh. Who you think you is? he say. You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all” (204). Celie replies: “I’m pore. I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here (Walker 205).

Celie’s “But I’m here” moment, is her way of saying that she exists and that she is now fighting for herself. However, according to William H. Becker, there is not much of a description as to why Celie has now arrived to the acceptance of her existence. How can Celie make that affirmation? Where does she find the courage to affirm herself, in spite of all those negativities which had earlier been sufficient to imprison her in self-rejection (Becker 160)? Becker then highlights several possible moments in which Celie develops into a fighter, those being Celie writing to God, Shug encouraging her to fight, and finally Shug as a role model and guide for her to listen to her inner longings and act on them.

The importance of the voice in the novel is imperative to Celie’s growth. By listening to her inner longings, Celie then arrives at her self-affirmation. Her recognition of her own voice, and the voice of her role models allows for a growth that leads to her own existence—another step in the
arrival to the self. Becker discusses the voice and the importance of listening. He claims:

In women’s groups there is often “a depth of hearing that takes place before the speaking—a hearing that is far more than acute listening…rearing of this sort is equivalent to empowerment. We empower one another by hearing the other to speech. (Becker citing Nelle Morton 161)

However, in stark contrast to Becker’s claim, bell hooks discusses the letters that Celie writes as a sort of radicalization and masking that Walker creates through her own authorial presence. Hooks explains:

Traces of traditional African-American folk expression as manifest in language and modes of storytelling are evident in Celie’s letters, though they cannot be fully voiced and expressed in the epistolary form. There they are contained and subsumed (hooks 467).

Though the letters may serve as a masking of legitimacy, the fact that Celie is able to find her voice at all—because she was so damaged—is remarkable, whether Walker asserts her authorial power or not. Celie’s letters are her way of expressing the darkness in her life, an outlet of pain. The arrival of her vocal resurrection is powerful.

V. Back to Nettie

As the novel comes full circle, Celie is reunited with her sister Nettie years after Albert sent her away when they both were young. Having inherited the house of her stepfather since his death, Celie becomes financially independent—through a successful pants business—and is now very close to being fully spiritually awakened. The reunion with Nettie, though highly stylized, serves as
the last stepping-stone to Celie’s reclaiming of her self.

When Nettie’s foot come down on the porch I almost die. I stand swayin, tween Albert and Shug. Nettie stand swaying tween Samuel and I reckon it must be Adam. Then us both start to moan and cry. Us totter toward one nother like us use to do when us was babies (Walker 287).

Through Celie’s struggles and her enduring nature, she is finally rewarded for her tribulations. Her sister, whom she missed for so long, is now the final marker in Celie’s journey. Celie finds herself completely happy and altogether complete. Celie has shed the patriarchy that had oppressed her for years, reclaimed her sexuality—through her love of Shug, in turn forcing her to acknowledge her own existence.

The novel ends during a celebration of the Fourth of July—an interesting note to end on. T.W. Lewis III claims that Celie “naming the day brings back into view the dominant community and its order which in the past had often interdicted the life of Celie’s people” (Lewis III 490). However, Celie does indeed recognize this issue and says “White folks busy celebrating they independence from England…Us can spend the day celebrating each other” (Walker 2). Though the African American community, with which Celie now identifies herself with more, is still under the racist oppression of the White “folks,” she has still shed, within her own community, the patriarchy of her own oppression, and still finds happiness with herself. “But I don’t think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt” (Walker 289).

VI. Conclusion

Walker’s ability to connect the power and the path to the self is significant in Celie’s
journey to finding her voice. The significance of the renouncement of a white, bearded God, is the gateway to Celie’s self. She is able to cultivate and allow her love or Shug to manifest. The reclamation of the erotic and the affirmation of her own voice, are the turning points that follow and help in which Celie’s journey to self-actualization. Walker’s novel is a testament to the power of the body and its relation to the self in terms of power and spirit. Though some womanists find that *The Color Purple* tends to stylize some aspects and assert her authorial power in which a radicalization of story occurs, it can be said that overall, the novel is a strong tribute to the divine power of one’s self.