

Women's Alliance against Oppressions for Recovery from Trauma in the Color Purple

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Abstract: African women have long been the victims in the patriarchal society, living miserably in and out of their family. They are treated as the “mule” working hard and silently without any respect or dignity. Feminists are trying to wake up their life consciousness and improve their social status by encouraging women to send out their voice widespread and struggle for equal rights in various ways. This essay aims to present different actions taken by black women in the process of struggle for recovery from traumatic experiences in the novel *The Color Purple*.

1. Introduction

In the patriarchal society, black women remain in the most miserable situations, dehumanized physically and spiritually by being the tool of sex abused by men frequently and being the “mule” working silently in the house and the fields free of charge. They are also enslaved and humiliated by the whites, being the servants taking care of their household and their children, meanwhile, being humiliated as “nigger” not worthy of any respect and dignity. How to improve their humble position in the family and society? Some feminists encourage women to band together to obtain equal education opportunities with men, have their voices in the family life and in the social activities; then work hard to be independent politically and economically.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker portrays many typical female characters, such as Celie, her sister-Nettie, her daughter-in-law-Sophia, her lover-Shug Avery, her son-in-law's lover-Mary Agnes, and so on. All of the black women support and help each other to achieve their own independence and seek for their identities even though some of them have some conflicts and misunderstandings at the beginning. The black women are united together by ways of quilt-making, blues-singing, travelling and pants-making to gain identity and independence, respect and dignity.

2. Quilt-Sewing

Quilt-sewing is a symbol of beauty creation in the black cultural heritage, which derives from black women's daily lives and is dispensable in the history of black people representing the unity of African people, particularly a kind of black women's compromise and alliance. The African-American quilt is made of pieces of worn-out clothing, fabric from outgrown clothes, the scraps of material already used and small pieces given by friends and relatives. Quilt-sewing links the lives of grandmother, mother and daughter together, offering black women chances of exchanging daily stories; artistically reworking women's living experiences and recording their household chores. Quilt-sewing is a unique and integral part of black women's lives.

In *The Color Purple*, the first occasion of quilt-making happens between Celie and Sophia. Harpo once asks Celie what he ought to do to Sophia to make her mind. Celie's advice is to “beat her” (37). After that, she has trouble in sleeping, hearing a little voice saying that she has done something wrong or maybe she has sinned against someone's spirit. Celie gets very upset, worrying that Sophia will find fault with her. Just as she has expected, Sophia comes to her furiously one day bringing the curtains made and given by Celie, she asks Celie face to face that whether it is she who told Harpo to beat her. After a sequence of questions pressed by Sophia, Celie confesses, “I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't” (40). Hearing that, Sophia becomes grave and disappointed with Celie, she cannot understand why Celie

as a woman stands on the side of a man not with a woman. This reflects that women like Celie are poisoned for long time by the patriarchal values, thinking unconsciously that women should be controlled in men's hands, inferior to men naturally and undoubtedly. Then Sophia tells Celie about her life stories of fighting, opening the way for their communication to turn in another direction. Celie feels very ashamed of her and her wrongdoing to Sophia, who compares Celie to her mother who never stands up for herself. The two women talk about their family lives respectively; and this is the first time that Celie talks about her traumatic experiences in her family and those with Mr.____ to other person. Sophia inspires Celie, "You ought to bash Mr.____ head open, she say. Think about heaven later." (42) This time, Celie laughs, which never happens to her for a long time, both of them laugh so hard that they fall down on the doorstep suddenly. Then Sophia suggests that they make quilt out of the pieces of those messed up curtains.

Here, quilt-making symbolizes a way of reconciliation and alliance between Sophia and Celie. After that, Celie becomes peaceful in her mind and sleeps like a baby sweetly. She gives vent to her traumatic experiences through talking with Sophia who encourages her to be brave when facing difficulties; and they become good friends and unite together since then.

Celie learns the importance of fighting from Sophia, even though she still hesitates whether it is worth risking herself to struggle with Mr.____. At least, she recognizes that fighting is the only way to rescue her from the life full of fear and numbness.

When Shug is ill seriously, no one is willing to offer any help to her. Mr.____ picks her up and arranges Celie to take care of her. Under Celie's attentive and considerate care, Shug recovers her health gradually, and changes her mind about Celie. One day, when Celie and Sophia are working on a quilt on the porch, Shug donates her old yellow dress for scraps of the quilt. "It a nice pattern call Sister's Choice" (59). The three black women build a solid sisterhood through quilt-sewing, even though there may exist some misunderstanding or contradiction between them initially. Black women's force increases as a unity as more of them take part in or contribute their pieces of scrap to the quilt-making activity.

3. Blues-Singing

Blues is a type of folksong that originates among Black Americans of former African slaves, from spirituals, praise songs, field hollers, shouts and chants at the beginning of the 20th century; has a melancholy sound from repeated use of blue notes. African blacks make use of blues-singing to pour out their suffering and anger, and to soothe their tortured soul. As a type of music, it reflects the black people's life experiences, expressing not only their sufferings but also their strong sense of identity with the whole nation. With its flexible form of performance and main function of expressiveness, the blues has developed from a pure type of an unaccompanied vocal music into various styles and sub genres throughout America, Europe and Africa. "It even influenced later American and Western popular music, as it became part of the genres of ragtime, jazz, bluegrass, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, hip-hop, country music and pop songs."¹

In *The Color Purple*, the protagonist, Celie, is not a professional blues-singer, but she is strongly influenced by the black woman blues-singer, Shug, who awakes her woman identity, helps her recognize the true nature of God and achieve independence. In Celie's inner heart, Avery Shug is the most beautiful and ideal woman when she sees her picture at the first time. However, Shug regards Celie is the ugliest woman she ever saw at her first sight. Later, Shug completely changes her attitude towards Celie after she is recovered from illness with Celie's scrupulous care. She secretly composes a song as a gift to give her appreciation for Celie and sings it to her at Harpo's pub.

She say my name again. She say this song I'm bout to sing is call Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick.

First she hum it a little, like she do at home. Then she sing the words.

It all about some no count man doing her wrong, again. But I don't listen to that part. I look at

¹ Schuller, Gunther. *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968) 62.

her and I hum along a little with the tune.

First time somebody made something and name it after me. (74)

Celie always feels her negligible in Shug's eyes because she is ugly and has no alternative clothes for parties, whereas Shug is versatile and bright on the stage. So Celie hides her admiration and love for Shug in her deep heart, never expects that she can be loved by others, let alone by Shug. Listening to the song sung by Shug to her, she feels extremely flattered, becomes more confident in her own, and first time open her mouth humming along with Shug. After that, Celie and Shug become close sisters; they can talk some private topics, such as a woman's body, love with man and the God. Celie's traumatic experiences are greatly relieved by Shug's blues-singing and talking with her.

Avery Shug is a typical representative of black woman blues-singers, who bravely denies the obligation imposed on women in patriarchal society. She reconstructs her identity and financial independence by blues-singing everywhere. She is a very extroverted and transcendental woman who refuses to live as her ancestors or most black women do, but prefer a life-style of blues-singing here and there in her own way. Shug is an idol in Celie's mind, she possesses every quality that Celie lacks and desires. Although being a woman, Shug is more gallant and courageous, more powerful and capable than men due to her bold and free singing. She strongly objects to the male chauvinism. When Celie tells Shug that Mr.____ beats her when she is away, Shug is very startled. In her eyes, Celie is so virtuous and hardworking that she dedicates all herself to take care of her husband's lover out of illness and take full responsibility for the household; Mr.____ (Albert called by Shug) is weak, lovely and coward man who seems not like a man of violence. She decides to make it clear that why Mr.____ beats Celie, "I won't leave, she say, until I know Albert won't even think about beating you" (76). First time Celie feels security and warmth that cannot obtain from the men.

Due to Shug's protest and effort, Mr.____ treats Celie much better, and Celie has more freedom to go where she wants. For example, Celie wants to see how Shug works in the pub, watch her and hear her voice of singing, Mr.____ disagrees, "Wives don't go to places like that, he say" (73). Shug insists that Celie is indispensable wherever she goes, and threats that he should treat them without any bias. In the end, Mr.____ agrees in silence. This is the first victory of struggle for Celie's freedom with the help of Shug.

Shug is open-minded and well-informed because of her blues-singing all over the country. She encourages Celie to discover the mystery and beauty of her own physical body.

You never enjoy it at all? She ast, puzzle. Not even you're your children daddy?

Never, I say.

Why Miss Celie, she say, you still a virgin. (78)

With the enlightenment of Shug, Celie looks into her mysterious parts of body, feels the excitement of physiological response, she learns that her body is so wonderful for the first time. Through this physiological lesson given by Shug, Celie goes a further step towards her mental maturity. She is aware that she cannot treat herself as a "tree" any more, but a woman with physical enjoyment.

After that, Celie cultivates absolute trust on Shug, to whom she tells everything Shug wants to know about her. For instance, Celie tells Shug her most private and traumatic experiences with her "father". Shug is extremely shocked at the story, giving all her love to console Celie who is crying bitterly in her arms. Pouring out her heart to Shug, Celie is relieved greatly from her traumatic experience and acts like a little lost baby while laying herself in Shug's arms. She feels the maternal love and care from Shug for the first time in her life. In addition, Shug helps Celie find all of Nettie's letters which have been withheld by Mr.____ for so many years. From the letters, Celie knows that Nettie is still alive; this news is very inspiring to her because she ever despairs to think Nettie may have been dead. Through talking with Shug, Celie resolves her trauma considerably in her mind, gradually recuperates herself back to the normal state of living.

Mary Agnes (called Squeak by Harpo at first), is another blue-singer who becomes strong-willed and wins her freedom by blues-singing. After Sophia leaves Harpo for a new life, Mary Agnes

becomes Harpo's girlfriend who is so obedient that she is glad to do everything that Harpo wishes her. She is also very generous to offer her help to save Sophia from prison at the cost of being raped by the warden, even though she fails to beaten against Sophia out of jealousy at Harpo's pub. She becomes abnormally self-presented after being bullied, first asks Harpo to call her by her given name in place of the nickname "Squeak", and then begins to sing. "First she sing Shug's songs, then she begin to make up songs her own self." (100) She has no natural gift for singing in the eyes of others, but she doesn't care, presents herself by singing in front of others. After a while, people around her get used to her special voice and like her singing.

Going through the traumatic experience of being raped, Mary Agnes recognizes the injustice and coldness of the society in the patriarchal system. She is a woman who is obedient and soft on the surface, but strong and rebellious deep down. She forbids Harpo to call her "Squeak" which is a hint of conscious rebellion against Harpo as well as other men's humiliation to her self-dignity. She is a friendly girl with yellowish skin, who doesn't want to discriminate on others with black skin; hoping people can live with together equally despite of their colors. She sings,

They calls me yellow
Like yellow be my name
They calls me yellow
Like yellow be my name
But if yellow is a name
Why ain't black the same
Well, if I say Hey black girl
Lord, she try to ruin my game (101)

From this song, it can be inferred that Mary Agnes is kind and friendly, she expresses her wish by singing that people of different colors should be equal, and respect with each other without any racial discrimination.

Shug and Mary Agnes ally many more black people together by blues-singing. Shug likes Squeak and tries to help her sing better. They always sit in Odessa's front room with all the children around them singing and singing. Sometime Swain (Harpo's friend) comes with his box, Harpo cooks dinner, and Celie, Mr.____ and the prizefighter also join in the fun. Black people get on well and come together accompanied with the blues-singing of Shug and Mary Agnes. Their blues-singing improve black people's mutual understanding and relieve their previous hatred. Shug encourages Mary Agnes to sing confidently in front of more black people, persuades her to grow into a professional singer. Later, Mary Agnes plans to go to the north and be a real singer and decides to burst out of the cage built by Harpo.

I want to sing, say Squeak.

Listen Squeak, say Harpo. You can't go to Memphis. That's all there is to it.

Mary Agnes, say Squeak.

Squeak, Mary Agnes, what difference do it make?

It make a lot, say Squeak. When I was Mary Agnes I could sing in public. (205)

Harpo gets very surprised that Mary Agnes is going to leave him and their child in order to achieve her dream of being a blues-singer. Under the great influence of Shug, Mary Agnes transforms herself from an obedient and soft girl into a confident and aspiring woman. She has completely cast herself off the traumatic experience of being raped and hurt by the warden. She wants to be an equal member with corresponding dignity in the face of Harpo. She not only tends to play the role of just being a domestic woman but also a professional blues-singer outside.

In a word, Shug awakens both of Celie and Mary Agnes' self-consciousness and identity, meanwhile, help them break away from their own traumatic experiences by blues-singing which also reinforces black people's mutual living together harmoniously and unity as a group.

4. Pants-Making

In a traditional sense, it is men's patent and priority to wear pants which are branded with the mark of men. If a woman wears pants, she will be regarded as being ridiculous and rebellious and

will be mocked at. In *The Color Purple*, people in Africa, no matter men or women, all wear beautiful robes, whereas, in America, the black people follow the example of the white, men wearing the trousers and women allowed to wear skirts. In the novel, pants are the symbols of patriarchal power which women are banned to touch, not mention to encroach. With Shug's encourage and help, Celie begins to make pants and wins economic independence by making pants. Shug once wears Mr.____'s pants for fun, and Sophia also climbs up the ladder to the roof, hammering in nails in Harpo's pants at times. In the end, Albert (Mr.____) accepts women in pants, even helps Celie to design the pants as an assistant. All of these indicate that black women are stepping into the field of men and they begin to make efforts to achieve their self-arousal and self-consciousness. They want to have opportunity to share equal rights with men and strive for a meaningful life with dignity. So, women's action of wearing pants in the novel should be considered as a challenge to the social conventions and the universal attitudes towards female in the patriarchal society.

Pants-making plays an important role in Celie's exploration of her self-recognition in the process of fighting against the oppressions imposed on her by males. Under the help of Shug, Celie discovers the fact that for almost thirty years, Mr.____ has hidden all the letters from Nettie who is forced to leave Celie by him. Celie gets so angry with Mr.____ that she comes up with the idea of killing him with a razor while shaving him. Shug tries to calm her down and suggest making pants for her.

Shug understands that Celie wants to kill Mr.____ on impulse; actually, she is still afraid and not confident in herself when facing Mr.____. After looking at Celie up and down, she decides to help Celie to be more mature and independent first from her external appearance. She teaches her to make pants out of good material that is strong and free. They live on peacefully by reading Nettie's letters and sewing together. Celie learns how to control her emotions, "A needle and not a razor in my hand, I think" (147).

After reading Nettie's some of letters, Celie comes to know the real history of her family that their natural father is lynched by the whites who are very jealous of his business, then, their mother becomes seriously sick mentally and marries to their present father who lavishes all his attention to their her and her two little girls after the sudden loss of her husband, and with whom their mother becomes pregnant every year and more weaker and more mentally sicker until her death. For the first time in her life, Celie plans to visit her "father" whose name is Fonso. "So me and Shug dress up in our new blue flower pants that match and big floppy Easter hats that match too, cept her roses red, mine yellow, and us clam in the Packard and glide over there" (179). Wearing the pants designed by them, Celie looks very beautiful and confident in herself. She takes the initiative to visit her stepfather in pants, which signifies that Celie begins to realize the abuse and oppressions she undergoes from the mal-dominated family and society and learns to face the traumatic experiences with her stepfather with courage. Now, she is brave enough to challenge the patriarchal authority and justify her existence by wearing pants. Meanwhile, she has been ready to confront the previous trauma courageously and tries to relieve herself out of the traumatic events which have haunted her for so many years.

When Shug tells Mr.____ that she is going to Memphis with Celie along together, Mr.____ is extremely shocked by the news and Celie's refusal.

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 nee. (202)

Celie reveals Mr.____'s sins committed on Nettie and her, Mr.____ only responds in coherent words and becomes even more shocked when Celie says that Nettie and her two children will come home soon, and they may punish him together if they want. At the same time, she condemns Harpo that if he didn't try hard to rule over Sophia in the past, Sophia would not be put into jail by the whites and suffered for so long. Up to now, Celie has been conscious of the oppressions she suffers in the patriarchal society, and makes an attempt to emancipate herself both in body and mind.

The life with Shug in Memphis is quite happy and carefree, but also empty and confused when Shug goes out singing for weeks. Celie asks Shug to be a company with her while singing

elsewhere, Shug refuses her request, saying that her aim of bring Celie to Memphis is not to treat her as a maid, but love her and help her stand up on her feet. Celie realizes that she must do something she likes as Shug enjoys singing. She makes pants after pants in every color and size while sitting in the dinning room under the sun. At the same time, Celie starts to work on pants-making creatively, "I change the cloth, I change the print, I change the waist, I change the pocket. I change the hem, I change the fullness of the leg" (215). Finally, Celie makes the perfect pair of pants first for Shug who is very surprised with Celie's talent in pants-making when she put on the pants made by Celie. Being encouraged and praised by Shug for her pants-making ability, Celie comes to be clear that she can make a living through what she is doing. Then Celie can't hold her back from making pants for her friends and people she loves. Shug also gives her dining room to Celie for pants-making factory and puts on advertisement in the paper for her business. More and more people want to buy pants designed and made by Celie who gets so busy that she employs two women to assist her work. Celie becomes more confident and independent on herself through pants-making; she tells Nettie by writing that "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time" (218). Celie gets the sense of achievement that she never feels before through making pants for Jack to show her gratitude, and then for Odessa, Nettie and Sophia. Showalter once said that "the woman expresses her individuality by choices of cloth" (Showalter 67). Celie makes pants in accordance with each person's personality and character, and adds her individuality and imagination to pants-making. Under Shug's support, Celie's pants become increasingly popular among people around, because her pants are designed whole-heartedly for individuals, meeting the wearers' special demands, not like the commercialized pants made for mass production today. Celie eventually achieves the sense of fulfillment and economic independence with her feminine artistic creativity in pants-making which challenges the traditional women's self-image and men's economic dominance.

It is actually a manifestation of gender equality for women to wear pants in public occasions which embodies the significance of dismantling the bondage between two genders. Traditionally, it is supposed to be men's privilege to wear pants, while, women are excluded from it. One day, Mr.____ comes to visit Celie while she is sewing, he asks Celie what is so special about her pants; she answers that anybody can wear the pants that she designs and makes. Mr.____ responds with disagreement, "Men and women not suppose to wear the same thing, he said. Men spose to wear the pants." (276) Celie considers it differently, and tells Mr.____ something about Africans, which is learned from Nettie's letters. She tells him that people in Africa like to wear what they feel comfortable in the heat apart from missionaries who have their own principles on dress. Africans wear a little or a lot according to the changes of the weather. But no matter men or women, they all prefer beautiful and cozy dresses.

This is the first time for Mr.____ to hear or think about what Africans do. He also gets to know from Celie that men in Africa sew like women, too. Then Mr.____ makes no secret about himself to Celie that he used to try to sew along with his mother when he was very young, which was laughed by others, but he really likes sewing. Celie encourages Mr.____ to sew pants with her, and tells him something more about Africa. Their relationship is further improved by pants-making together, and Celie later no longer calls Mr.____ but Albert, they start to talk about whatever they want, and live harmoniously. With Celie's encouragement and influence, Albert follows her nature to help Celie with pants-making and offers his own suggestions on her work. The same thing also happens to Harpo who returns to his nature to stay at home again, while Sophia works as a clerk in Celie's store. Both of Albert and Harpo give up their identities imposed on them by patriarchy, willing to live on their true nature, at the same time, Celie and Sophia relieve themselves from the traumatic lives, acting freely like men do.

Celie finally not only achieves her economical independence and self-confidence, but also discovers her wisdom and artistic creation through pants-making which breaks the fixed roles men and women must play in the patriarchal society. On one hand, Celie benefits a lot from pants-making, on the other hand, she also unites more women and men to fight against the patriarchal system through pants-making, relieving her as well as others from their past traumatic

experiences. From then on, black men and women liberate themselves from the old values and rules controlled on them by the patriarchy, living and working peacefully and harmoniously under the same blue sky.

Black women's artistic creativity is of great significance to the survival and personal growth of the black women, and generates strong influences on the subsequent generations of black women who derive power and courage from their maternal heritage to overcome the difficulties and hardships in the patriarchal and racial society. In *The Color Purple*, women's quilt-sewing and pants-making represent black women's typical artistic creations, through which black women eliminate misunderstandings and hatred between their same genders, but also those existing between opposite genders, and draw more and more women and men together to struggle for the life they prefer.

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