Purple Identity

A study of identity changes in the novel The Color Purple

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Abstract

The thesis attempts to bring up the concepts of identity changes in Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple*, which is set during the 1930s in the Southern parts of the United States, where black people were oppressed by white Americans. The study shows that the protagonist Celie, a black young girl, adopts different identities due to stages of her life and the people surrounding her. It is shown that Celie's identity changes occur in different stages throughout her life, *Childhood, Wifehood, Segregation and Sisterhood*. This is due to her lack of knowledge about life in general, and her idea that other people make one's identity. It is found that Celie, when meeting a strong black woman, discovers that identity is never made by others, but people around you can influence and guide your search for identity.
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Introduction

Alice Walker’s novel The Color Purple is well known around the world, for giving Afro-American women a voice. The book describes the protagonist’s struggle and rise from the harsh times in the 1930s when the black people in the Southern parts of the United States had one of their hardest times. The black female population had a really low position in American social culture. The Southern states in the U.S. were still fully segregated when the U.S. entered World War II. Black and white people went to different schools, swimming pools, restaurants, and public bathrooms. Black people were allowed on the same buses as white people, but they were forced to stand up in the back while the white people had the privilege of having a front seat on the bus.

The novel dramatically underscores the oppression that black women have experienced throughout history in the rural South parts of the United States. Following the Civil War, most Black Americans remained disenfranchised, and were typically viewed as less than human by members of white society. Women were also regarded as less important than men, both black and white, making black women doubly disadvantaged. Black women of the era were often treated as slaves or as property, even by male members of their own families.

The protagonist Celie undergoes an extraordinary personal change. She evolves from being joyless, subservient and abused by her step-father and her husband to running her own business, owning her own house. Celie’s most significant alteration is in the ways she relates to traditional gender roles and how she tries to find herself throughout the novel. Originally, Celie believes that her part in life and her position as woman unavoidably means that she has to serve and obey men without any say. Throughout the novel however, Celie meets other young black women who have a significant influence on her; her younger sister Nettie and Shug Avery, who is Celie’s husband’s old girlfriend. They embrace her with love and
sisterhood which helps her in her search for her own identity. Nettie and Shug also influence her to make new discoveries and to see that black females can also fight for their rights.

*The Color Purple* explores the individual identity of the African-American woman and how embracing that identity and bonding with other women affects the health of her community at large. The book can also be seen as a demeaning novel for Afro-American men in that it shows a negative view of some of these men. I would like to meet this objection by stating that I am a man of Afro-American descent that grew up in Sweden. This indicates that I could argue and say that *The Color Purple* is degrading towards us; but my purpose with this paper is or is not to show that this novel is degrading towards Afro-American males. I could also argue that the character Celie is seen through a feminist point of view and point out the problems, and to be critical against the American society. I would say that all these claims are true, but I would also argue that regardless of this Celie represents a woman trying to find her place in the world through different events and settings. The novel may seem really sad and depressing, but like a lot of stories it ends on a happier note than where it starts.

My aim, then, is rather to investigate how the novel exhibits a young black woman in search of her identity, how she establishes herself and how her identity changes during the course of time. In the analysis I will look at different events in the novel where identity changes occur and in what way.

**Identity**

The Swedish National Encyclopedia's definition of identity is "by identity we mean the individual's awareness about himself/herself, his/her body, his/her personality and his/her capacity of self determination" (my translation). This is just one definition of many about what identity really is. Wikipedia defines identity as an "umbrella term used to describe individuality, personal identity, social identity, and cultural identity in psychology, sociology,
and philosophy”. Some might also say that identity is connected to psychology using Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theories as its foundation. In *Barn och ungdomspsykologi* Oddbjörn Evenshaug and Björn Hallén describe how Freud theorised the psychosexual stages that a child goes through during her or his development within their different emotional conflicts (52-56).

In Jonas Stier’s book *Identitet: människans gåtfulla porträtt*, he brings up Erik Homburger Erikson as an important theorist of identity in modern society. Erikson used a holistic approach to his identity studies. He believes that personality and identity are shaped through a close interaction with others, and within the biological, social and mental processes. He stresses the importance of the social and cultural environment as well as the individual’s liberty and independency in the creating of an identity (128-131).

Identity is based on how people slowly but surely identify themselves with others and how they handle different crises during their life. When people identify themselves with others they might lose a part of their own identity when a new one is created. This is why the development of personal identities follows and continues throughout our life, and it is when we socialize with others that our forming of a new identity emerges (Stier, 128-131). Evenshaug and Hallen say that identification with other people is a way of knowing who we are and making us a part of a collective identity. At first we identify ourselves with our parents and when we get older we start to identify ourselves with other people around us (52-56).

According the book *Reclaiming identity* by Paula Moya, one of the problems with essentialist conceptions of identity in literature, is the tendency to conceive one aspect of identity as the sole cause or determinant constituting the social meanings of an individual’s experience. Moya says that the difficulty with identity is that identities are constituted differently in different historical contexts. For example a woman like Celie might experience
her “womanness” differently from a middle class woman living in Victorian England. Just because you are a woman does not mean that you have the same “womanness” identity as all other women (1-4).

Each of us may experience some struggles between conflicting identities based on our different positions in life, or the different positions we have in this world as members of a specific community, ethnicity, social class, religion or gender. Regardless what it may be, our identity gives us a position in our life and in this world; it also gives us the connection between us and the society which we strive to live in. Identities which are formed and located in and by different places are shaped due to the spreading of people around the world.

Childhood

The protagonist Celie tells her story in letters, and in more than half of the novel she addresses these to God. She thinks of herself as one of God’s children put on this earth to achieve something, whatever it may be. She still feels that something is missing in her life: “A sense of identity” and what the real meaning is with her being on this earth. According to Woodward’s *Identity and Difference*, Celie is trying to find her identity by using God and her letters as an indirect wisdom book where she shares all her thoughts and stories. God is also the only one that sees her for who she really is and what her real identity is. The simple fact makes it harder for her to get an answer back from God.

God has permitted all the things that has happen to her in order for her to gain wisdom and resignation as Woodward comments (325). God is in a way a big part of Celie’s identity process. Even though he permits all these different negative events to happen to Celie, she still gains wisdom and knowledge, which play an important part in how her identity changes in the novel. The negative consecutions that occur in her life always have significance, although she questions God and asks why things occur. God and her sister Nettie are
everything for her, but God is the only one she can speak her mind to. Even though her mother has died she still feels that she cannot tell anyone about what is going on in her life, it could be that she feels ashamed of what has happened to her and tries to repress her horrible past and present.

Celie feels that she cannot identify with anyone or anything, and is also very lost or unaware of life and how life could be for others. She has no one to relate to, and no one that is in the same position in life that she is in. Her mind or fantasies of how things should be plays an essential role in her emergence of her sense of identity, but at the same time her fantasies are limited due to her confined life. Her identity is closely related to the constructions of her self and her personality, which is very vague. Her identity also refers to the aspects of her mental state and organization as Bosma comments in *Identity and Development* (23). Her mental state is something that suffers due to her confined life, which comes to halt her identity development. As mentioned before in the theoretical part, identity is shaped together with the mental processes.

None of her letters get sent; they are rather a way for Celie to communicate and gather her thought within herself, but also a way of thinking out loud in a safe and quiet manner. According to *Literature and Gender* written by Lizabeth Goodman, Celie explores her thoughts by putting them down into letters. In a way the letters are a creative act, something that she does consciously to reach away from her absurd domestic life, and in to other peoples' lives. For Celie writing letters is a way to escape, and a means of stepping over the make-believe boundaries between what is real and what is her dream or her fantasy. Her dream is to reconnect and reunite with the person she loves the most, her younger sister Nettie. Goodman argues that by Celie loving her sister so much she finds a way to see the good in herself and to love herself (158). Nettie always saw the best in Celie and always showed her love. By writing these letters she keeps her hope of seeing her sister one day. Her hope seems to be
drawn away from her because of all the tragic events that happen to her, but she still finds it through God and her sister.

In her first letter to God she tells him or her how her stepfather is ignored by her sick mother and refused sexual attention. He tells Celie that she will have to do the things her mother would not, and forces himself upon her. She cries and tries to avoid him. He chokes her and tells her to shut up and get used to it; "You better not tell no body but God, It would kill your mammy" (3), he threatens. At 14 years of age she has already given birth to a boy and a girl, her mother asks her while lying on her deathbed who the father is. Celie tells her that God is the father and God took the children away from her (1); which is also an example of how she uses God as an answer that cannot be questioned, since after all she sees him or her as the creator of everything.

A person in her position might think that her mother dying must be the most horrific thing that could occur during this time, not only for the simple reason that she is her mother, the woman that gave birth to her, but also that she is the oldest of her mother’s children. Is she supposed to take the mother role and take care of all the children while her despicable stepfather continues forcing himself on her to satisfy his sexual needs? She sees the look and the actions of her stepfather, who tell her that she is evil, but at the same time she questions what evil is and if he is the one that is evil enforcing his sexual needs upon her and taking her new born children while she is sleeping. She is scared: scared of what she thinks might happen to her, and scared of the way her stepfather looks at her younger sister Nettie. Nettie is terrified of him too, but Celie makes her a promise, a promise that she will take care of her with the help of God (3). Celie never identifies with or sees herself as the evil person her stepfather tells her she is. The love her sister has for her and all the good Celie tries to do is not coherent with the evil her stepfather ties her to.
He act like he can’t stand me no more. Say I’m evil an always up to no good. He took my other little baby, a boy this time. But I don’t think he kilt it. I think he sold it to a man an his wife over Monticello. I got breasts full of milk running down myself. He say why don’t you look decent? Put on something. But what I’m sposed to put on? I don’t have nothing. I see him looking at Nettie. She scared. But I say I’ll take care of you. With God help. (3)

This is the first time where her identity starts to change. From the innocent young black girl who looked to God for guidance and help to someone who accepts her life, and starts to adjust herself to her stepfather’s needs. However, she never feels like she wants to change or adjust herself in creating a new identity for herself. Instead, she feels like she has to take on a new identity due to the control and pressure her stepfather puts on her. The new identity she takes on is therefore not something she wants to have, but something she has to take on. This becomes clearer due to the new attitude and behavior she applies after the sexual abuses and her stepfather’s cruel treatment. One might also argue that Celie unconsciously adopts the role of the mother figure in the house; by being forced to substitute for her mother’s sexual abstinence which results in her giving birth to two children, and at the same time doing all the housework. Another argument would be that she is aware of her identity change, but that she feels that she does not have a choice. She feels like the best thing to do in this situation is just to do what she thinks people expects from her.

We get to know very little of how Celie’s childhood passes by and she quickly adapts and identifies herself as the grown up motherly figure without noticing it. At the same time she wishes that her stepfather would find a new woman to marry to fulfil his sexual needs. Her stepfather still looks upon her with spite and beats her for looking at a boy in church. She seems not to mind the beating because she knows what she had and had not done. The abuse
she receives from different men will play an important part in her life as her identity changes throughout the novel.

Her young age makes her a little unaware what reality is, and how the world works. She also lacks experience or rather has been prevented from gaining the relevant experience. Her youthfulness comes to display when she thinks that her younger sister Nettie has a boyfriend, who is the same age as her stepfather. Celie acknowledges and determines the definition boyfriend from the way he looks at Nettie during church, without comprehending the meaning of the word. She is stuck and she commutes between her younger adolescent behaviors, playing around in the yard with her sister like any other 14-year-old girl but also has to take care of all the children and continues to do all the things her mother used to do before she died. She also takes the role of the reasonable mother when she tells Nettie to marry the man she thinks is Nettie’s boyfriend, so she wouldn’t fall victim to her stepfather’s ghastly behaviors. Celie temporarily gains a little crumb of happiness when Nettie’s alleged boyfriend Mr.____ comes to their house and asks for her hand in marriage. That small crumble of happiness would turn into hopelessness as her stepfathers refuses the marriage proposal. Celie’s stepfather tells Mr.____ that he could have Celie instead, lying about her age and telling him she was twenty; she was the oldest of all the siblings, not too good looking, but also “spoiled” twice (8). In his mind, his plans for Nettie’s future were already clear; he wanted her to become a school teacher, and besides he thought she was too young, almost the same age as Mr.____ own three children. Their stepfather wanted to control both sisters, and by doing that he was controlling their identity development. He humiliates Celie in front of Mr.____ like she was nothing; that she was dumb and stupid, but as this quotation shows he knows deep inside that she would make a good wife.
But you don’t need a fresh woman no how. I got a fresh one in there myself and she sick all the time. He spit, over the railing. The children git on her nerve, she not much of a cook. And she big already.

She ugly. He say. But she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it. (8)

He had seen how she helps out in the house as she cooked food and helped the younger siblings, adapting to the motherly role that the house had lacked for some time. Celie feels hopelessness and gloom. Her motherly instincts come into place again when her worries for her younger sister Nettie grows stronger. Would she survive the antics of their devilish stepfather? How would her younger siblings manage without her?

Wifehood

The second change in Celie’s identity change is during her wedding day. She does not spend it as most women or girls would. Celie, still only 14 years old, starts to adapt and identify her self as a mother figure for Mr.____’s three young children. This becomes clear when Mr.____’s two sisters come to visit. They start to tell Celie about Mr.____ deceased ex wife and how bad a mother and wife she was.

You keep a clean house. It not nice to speak ill of the dead, one say, but the truth never can be ill. She never want to be here in the first place, say the other. Well that’s no excuse, say the first one, her name Carrie, other one name Kate. When a woman marry she spose to keep a decent house and a clean family. (20)
The first discrepancy between how Celie sees herself and how she perceives others seeing her identity is when she describes her situation as a wife in a new unfamiliar setting. She seems to be lost and unaware of what to do, so her first intuition is to act like a mother and not necessarily as a wife. The experience she has of being a wife comes from her mother who had been sick for some time, unable to act as a “wife” for her husband; but her mother had always shown love for her children, and that’s what Celie adopts in her role as a wife. Celie feels sorry for her new stepchildren, due to their loss of their mother. As seen in the novel she starts to identify herself as their new mother:

I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve. His mamma died in his arms and he don’t want to hear nothing bout no new one. He pick up a rock and laid my head open. His daddy say Don’t do that! But that’s all he say. The girls hair aint been comb since their mammy died. I tell him I’ll just have to shave it off. Start fresh. He say bad luck to cut a woman hair. So after I bandage my head best I can and cook dinner - I starts untangle hair. (12)

Motherhood comprises both the ability for biological reproduction and the necessity of social reproduction; it includes child-bearing and childrearing. Childrearing practices differ between different cultures. This suggests that motherhood, like other identities, includes biological and social dimensions. Like sexual identities, the motherhood theme is related to economic, social and cultural practices and systems. Being a mother and motherhood takes place in different social, economic and ethnic contexts. The actual mechanism of becoming a mother may differ; and can take place in different ways: through sexual intercourse, adoption or step-parenting. Celie both gives birth and becomes a step-parent. Like I have mentioned before, her
stepfather sexually abuses her, and even though it is against her will, its still sexual intercourse which leads her to give birth to two children; and she adopts the motherly role when she takes care of her sister, her younger siblings and Mr.____'s children. In Literature and Gender Goodman suggests that motherhood and pregnancy relate to childcare. Celie never adopts the childcare role for her birth children, and her childcare role makes her identify throughout the novel as the carer for other people's children.

Hill Collins, (1997) claims in her book Double Stitch: black woman write about mothers and daughters, that traditionally the nurturing mother roles are different between black and white women in the U.S. She claims that the identification of the total responsibility of childrearing is less applicable within the black family. The ideal for womanhood has been held back for the black woman, due to the racial oppression that denied black families sufficient resources to help them to form a regular household. Secondly, the sex-role segregation within different families has been less common within the Afro-American community. It could also be argued that in The Color Purple, the novel shows that Celie suffers from the sex-role segregation during her life, but on the other hand she does not feel obliged to acquire the mother role, as she already more or less identifies with it. Woodward argues that motherhood is a politically contested identity which illustrates the anxiety among essentialist and non essentialist views of identity, discussed by different feminist theories (242). These theories are about the constraining features of social institutions of motherhood as experienced by women under patriarchy which has often laid claim to an essentialist understanding. Feminist ideas could challenge those constraints, thus setting up a strain between the strands in the configuration of motherhood as an identity. She also discusses that ideas about motherhood may be partly attributed to the way in which motherhood is taken for granted as an identity for a woman, and this is exactly what Celie does when she adopts the role. This section and these events are the first in Celie’s life where there is a clear change in
her identity. At this part of the novel she is not forced to adopt the identity of a mother as much as she is forced into the identity role of a substitute sexual partner for her stepfather. She also adopts the motherhood as part of her identity instead of seeing herself as someone's wife.

**Segregation and Power relations**

Throughout the novel, black is the color of the underclass, which is also bound to black men. That makes black women the underclass of the underclass. As mentioned before, Celie is exposed to the white dominant race throughout her life. Her real father was lynched by a white lynch mob when she was very young. During the relation between Mr._ and Celie throughout the novel we can also see how racial oppression even exists between Afro-American people. As an Afro-American male in the southern part of the 1930s, Mr._ is subjected to racial oppression. He adopts and uses the white people dominant race's norms against his wife, even though she is black. By defining her as the other, though she is his wife, he seems to expose her to a double domination or 'double colonization' (McLeod, 176-179). In *Beginning Postcolonialism* McLeod also states the concept of double oppression or 'double colonization' comes from theoretical approach of postcolonial feminist criticism. It is when a woman lives her life under patriarchy and postcolonialism. During Celie's time with Mr._ she suffers from the consequences of both patriarchal oppression and due to Mr._ colonial oppression (200).

Maria Mårdberg claims in her thesis *Envisioning American Women: Roads to Communal Identity in Novels by Women of Color* that the term “Women of Color” often designates identification with minority cultures in contrast to the women of the colonizers’ decent, and the most important advantage of the term is that it draws attention to white dominance and
points to the experience of being non-white (33). The experience of being non-white for women is relevant for Celie in the novel. As I mentioned before, Celie and Mr.____ are subjected to the white cultural domination during this time. She is faced by double colonialization that her husband forces upon her. You can argue that he adopts the white man’s norm and power over the black woman during this time.

Celie refers to her new husband as Mr.____ throughout the novel, even before she is married off. In her article "Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple", Jenkins suggests that the fact that Celie uses Mr.____ for her husband instead of his real name is not only the way to refer to men in general but a way for her to leave the male identity blank. Mister might be the way Celie identifies her husband with the white slave owners or white men in general, and the supremacy they had over the black people referred to them as ‘Mister’. She argues that Celie labeling her husband as Mr.____ signals that she identifies the white man’s power structure, which is adapted and used within the black community during this time. Another aspect of Celie’s double oppression in the novel is when Mr.____ reminds her that she is in fact a black ugly woman. He tells her she is worthless and subordinated to him in terms of race and gender (209). He sees himself as a handsome black man, but still oppressed by the “white man”. Therefore he has to oppress the one that is seen as less worthy within the society which is the black woman Celie, but he does not look at all black women the same way. He treats Shug like a queen, however that is only because he feels that she is the woman that should have been the mother of his children (45). Mr.____’s treatment of black women shows that there are some similarities to how the colonizers saw the oppressors; some were seen as less uncivilized than others. That indicates again that Celie is identified by her ethnic background and for being a woman, and something different from her husband, something worthless. Due to the fact that the colonialist classified and rank different races into different categories, they had the power
to make the colonized black people experience them self as the ‘Other’ (Loomba, 153). This was something that was sustained until the postcolonial era, and something that you can see throughout the novel. Celic experiences and identifies her self as ‘Other’.

Reading between the lines in Celie’s sister Nettie’s letters tells you something about what black women’s oppression is during these times. Some readers may think that it is pretty obvious that the African American slave history is intensified due to the gender oppression of traditions within the family that were inborn from Africa. Something that ought to be observed is the undignified status of how black women are presented, from two different perspectives. These two perspectives have strong social, political and historical implications, if we take a look at Celie’s private experiences in her lifetime, and from Nettie’s point of view. According to McDowell “The majority of Celie’s letters represent the private paradigm of the African American female tradition in the novel, and the majority of Nettie’s letters can be said to represent the public paradigm” (47). These perspectives are demonstrated by the dissimilar registers used by the two sisters Celie and Nettie. Nettie is advantaged in the way that she is getting a wider perspective, and a better chance to perk up her life. I would say that in the novel, she is the one that represents the well-informed and mindful member of both her black race and her gender. She gives up a large part of her life to search for answers that can help and educate black people everywhere in the world. She lives everything she knows and becomes a missionary in a foreign land, the land of her ancestors, a land that contains more about her life and the slaves that were brought over on slave ships to America. When she talks about the indignations caused by her African experiences, her letters have the eminence of an educated person, a person that has been educated at a college or a university. Reading Nettie’s letters, we can also see her social awareness; they tell the reader about her self-conscious understanding of her different experiences, which is different opposed to Celie’s lack of ability to understand the world she lives in, but also her own situation. These experiences
interconnect with Nettie’s letters and support an underlying a hidden message in the novel, the worldwide situation on black women.

Celie identifies the “white” people as superior to the black people, but this is only because she is unaware of how the world looks from an outside perspective. When she starts reading the letters her sister Nettie had sent from Africa she becomes more aware of her cultural identity. She gains more knowledge about the world from another perspective and that black peoples’ lives are not as miserable as she believes. This is seen in the letters she gets from her sister Nettie:

Africa they had bigger cities then they had back home. I read where the Africans sold us because they loved money more than their on sisters and brothers. How we came to America in ships. How we were made to work. (32)

Celie becomes aware of her history and that not all black people are in the same situation as she is. There are other black people doing great things in the world, things she never could imagine a black person could achieve. Her awareness and how she identifies her self as “The Other” is starting to change. Some might argue that the writer Alice Walker might want to celebrate Africa and its cultures by describing it history or its culture, but my argument is that Walker brings up the African culture as it has an essential part to Celie’s identity development. She never gained any knowledge about black people or Africa. The only things she knew was what people told her and her perception of the “white man’s” Bible.

All the encounters with men so far in her life had been negative and she had adapted this fear-provoking feeling inside her every time she saw one. She would look at women in church but only for the simple fact that she had never met a woman that she was frightened of. There
is a rivalry theme between men and women throughout the novel. Celie feels like she has been dominated by most men in her life; her future husband, her stepfather and God whom she thinks is a white man.

Dear God, He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got something in my eye but I didn’t wink. I don’t even look at mens. That’s the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I’m not scared of them. Maybe cause my mama cuss me you think I kept mad at her. But I ain’t. I felt sorry for mama. Trying to believe his story kilt her. (5)

As I have mentioned before, her husband beats her not because she has done anything wrong, but rather to remind her that she is her husband’s property. She gets beaten and punished for being a woman; she get beaten by a black man who may take out his rage and anger from feeling the injustice of the hands of a racist and prejudiced society (Goodman 155). In the novel she refers to her stepfather as Pa or Him spelt with a capital H which places him close to God, but she only writes to God due to the lack of any living person with whom to share her troubles with. The way she refers to the different men in the novel shows exactly how for Celie “all men are nondifferentiated forces that implement power over her” (Tucker 84). This is when she adds a new dimension into her identity. She already sees herself as the mother figure for her stepchildren, and now she identifies herself as a black woman. A black woman that is inferior to not only “white people” but also black men.

During this time and still today a lot of people look and search for hope and comfort in the Bible. In the Bible Celie finds orders on how to feel and act. She does not let her anger and rage for her stepfather get to her mind and soul, even though he viciously forced him self upon her repeatedly too satisfy his sexual needs with violence abuse, because the “Bible say,
Honor father and mother no matter what” (42). When she starts gaining knowledge of things in her life that she believes are true and not, she starts to doubt God and her faith in him. Her view on others still stay the same; Celie feels the hopelessness fall into her mind and soul, as she sees herself as worthless or as God’s unwanted child.

Sisterhood

Sisterhood has a big part in Celie’s identity development, but religion and God are also very important aspects in her development. The sisterhood discussed in this part is not only the bond Celie acquires with her sister, but also her bond she finds with other women, and how they help her find herself and a new identity through seeing new aspects within religion and God.

At an earlier stage of Celie’s life, she had been shown a picture, the first one of a real person, of a woman named Shug Avery. Her first reaction was: “She more pretty then my mama and about a thousand times prettier then me” (6). Celie’s encounter with the independent strong independent black woman was when Shug Avery arrives at Mr.____’s home.

Celie had met another strong black woman before: her sister in law Sofia. She was married to Mr.____’s son Harpo. Harpo was not the man his father was, he bowed down to his wife and her authority. When he one day tries his fathers abusive ways to get his wife to obey him she strikes back. She was the first woman Celie had seen fight back against her husbands physical abuse, and also the first black person she had seen fight back against a white person. She had been confronted and battered by the “white” town mayor, which resulted in that she retaliated and was imprisoned twelve years for striking a white man. Sofia was never the same person after that.
Celic's first impression of Shug was that she is negative towards almost everything. She has a past and a reputation of a woman with dubious morals whose dress is insufficient in comparison with how other black women dressed during this time. Her parents had turned their back on her due to her sinful ways. She had also had a history of being Mr.____ past lover. Celic was struck by amazement when she meets Shug for the first time:

The woman should have been your mammy, he say. Shug Avery?
Harpo ast. He look up at me. Help me git her in the house, Mr.____ say.
I think my heart gon fly out my mouth when I see one of her foots come poking out. She look so stylish it like the trees all round the house draw themselves up tall for better look. (45)

Celic once again adapts the motherly role of nursing and taking care of sick Shug, as she was suffering from maybe tuberculosis or some kind of nasty woman disease (42), but only to be met by the cruel treatment she has been treated to her whole life. Shug at first has little respect for Celic and the life she lives. She copies her lover, abusing Celic and adding to her humiliation "You sure is ugly, she say, like she ain’t believed it" (46). You would think that it would destroy her emotionally: the one she was hoping to look up to and identity her self with, but only to get her hopes crushed. She is starting to identify with the cruel treatment that she has suffered all her life and adapting to it as if she believed it was supposed to be that way, her own destiny. However, Celic starts to feel something that she never felt before; she is fascinated with Shug and her beautiful body, but only for a split second (49). Celic seems to have a hard time identifying how she should manage with the whole Shug situation. She starts to compare Shug to her mama throughout the novel. The things Shug would say and how her hair was smooth just like her mama (53). Unlike Celic's birthmother, who was subjugated by the conventional gender roles, Shug had refused to be subjected and dominated by men or
someone else throughout her life. Instead, Shug had created her identity from her many experiences. She had refused to be subjected to how other people wanted her to be, and not allowing them to impose an identity on her.

Eventually, Shug invests Celie with power. She teaches Celie how to wear pants and how to make them. They start to develop a strong female friendship, almost like sisters. According to Goodman Shug's character is that of a woman that acts the role of the confidante person in the story, a stock character of the epistolary novel who links the traditional marriage-plot to the tradition of the etiquette-book (168). Shug's ways and thoughts teaches not only Celie, but also readers about feminine strength and the culture bonding that makes women powerful when they come together in subverting male control.

I consider Shug to be a key figure in the novel and in Celie's life. I consider this because of her association with the color purple, "the color of life" (145). The celebration of life is something that Alice Walker emphasis throughout the novel. The color "purple" and Celie both represent life, God's creation, and they both want to be loved by someone or something. There are also two subjects that Shug teaches Celie. At first Celie goes through life having a hard time noticing the beautiful aspects and appreciating them. The color purple is linked and equated with suffering and pain. Sofia's swollen, beaten face is described as the color of eggplant. Shug, by promoting an alteration in Celie's awareness of life and her individuality, also becomes in a certain way, the spokesperson for the "womanistic" principles in the novel. Shug's principles are a little more delicate and more receptive description of feminism, which is an significant issue that the novel brings up.

Shug also introduces a new view on religion where God and the universe is the same. Celie had been subjected to cruel things throughout her life and she never understood why: "He give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of step pa and a sister I probably
won't ever see again" (178). Celie's conclusion is that “[t]he God I been praying and writing
to is a man. And acts just like all the other men I know (193).

The Pantheistic view Shug introduces to Celie is very important and a key to the
development of Celie throughout the novel. Shug introduces a new view on how God and the
universe are linked together. How everything searches for attention and how everything on
earth wants to be loved.

I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or
will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you’ve
found It. My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then
birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and
feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling
is part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my
arm would bleed. And I laughed and cried and I run all around the
house. I knew just what it was. In fact when it happen, you can’t miss
it. Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and
give flower bouquets, trying to be loved. You even notice that trees do
everything to git attention we do, except walk? (197)

She tells Celie that she has never cared about what other people thought about her or the
things she did, but deep down in her heart she always cared about God (194). She tells Celie
that even though she had been a sinner from the day she was born, she still loved God but
sinners worry about God all the time. “When they do feel the love by God they do everything
to please him” (194). Celie finds this quite odd; all her life she had thought that by trying to
please God you would have to do things for him, going to church, sing in a choir, and feed the
preacher. This is where the turning point and understanding for Celie starts. Shug explains
that God loves everyone and if he loves you; you don’t need to do things like that. Admiring small things is enough. It comes as a shock for her, that a “sinner” gives her values and insight about God. Shug’s religious and theoretical understanding of God entirely contradicts Celie’s concrete and greedy conception of God, who Celie always has seen as an old, tall white man with a long white beard (196). Shug, on the other hand, argues in a redolent way that God is everything and that he or she is inside everybody. We came to earth and we leave earth with God; but only the people that search for it inside themselves find it. This spiritual change also brings liberation to her life (McEwan, 68). Hankinson states that:

it is only as Celie rids herself of her oppressive man-God figure and emerges into a distinctly non-Christian discover of God that she finally attains liberation making religion very central to Celie’s development; because of Celie’s realization that God is within her, her sense of fear and of being judged dissolves. She learns that she should focus on the creation and not God the person. (Hankinson, 324)

Celic’s change does not only include the way Shug introduces the alternative God to her, but also how the Christian view of God is related to the “white man” authority and power. Shug’s modification and view of the traditional Christian God is a self-revelation for Celie. She starts to liberate herself from identifying with and seeing herself as the “Other”.

In an indirect way Shug also gets Celie to stop writing to God, as she starts writing to her sister in Africa. Shug had found stolen and hidden-away letters in a bundle from the person who ever loved Celie, her sister Nettie. Still good-hearted Celie does not believe Mr. ___ would do that. Her hatred and anger grow stronger now more than ever. This is also the first time in the novel where Celie is angry (144). This is close to a turning point for Celie
as she starts to develop an identity for herself, as a strong black woman. Celie continues reading her sister’s letters, letting her know of the all black communities in Harlem and how they have black doctors. This was in a way an indication for her of how different the southern part of U.S. was from the northern parts. By reading Nettie’s letters Celie gains more and more knowledge, she learns that white people are from Europe and black people are from Africa, and how black people all over the world should work for the common goal which is to uplift black people everywhere (137).

During dinner, Celie tells Mr.____ that she is leaving him, he acts amazed. The words that came out of her mouth were so ruthless that it was as if Mr.____ was struck by lightning. This was Celie’s first act of independence. She finally feels like a strong black woman rather than as something worthless, as “the other”, as a “low down dirty dog”. For the first time she confronts him in a way that the people at the dinner table almost tipped their chairs over. She tells him about the letters and how her sister and her children that are living in Africa are coming home to “whup his ass” (202). When Mr.____ raises his hand to strike her in customary fashion she picks up her knife to strike back. Her fury was something that was built up for years and years of being abused and oppressed for being a black woman. She had finally identified that there was nothing wrong with her.

**Conclusion**

In the beginning of the novel we readers learn that Celie has never been given the kind of love and direction from her mom or her stepfather that a young girl needs. What kind of love can be discussed, but my interpretation suggests that she never got the love she needed from them. The only one that gave her love was her younger sister. Nettie, the youngest sister, is not the one that should help Celie in her ways of finding herself; one would expect it to be the other
way round, or that the parents would guide them both through life. Furthermore, Celie is not taught the ways of the world so as to understand the possibilities for happiness. Unaware of this, she lets people around her create an identity for her. She internalizes things that other people tell her to do because of the idea of being her own individual, doing what she wanted and was capable of doing, was never something she had thought of or learnt. However, considering her position as doubly colonized, as described in the segregation section, it may be argued that a black woman in her position never had a chance or an opportunity to do what she wanted to do with herself.

By analyzing this novel I would say that anyone who is split between or situated in-between different personal identities will be given an identity by outsiders, at least that is so in Celie’s case. I think that people in general need to find out and know what makes them the person they are, and what identity they feel comfortable with. People need to have beliefs, and by that I do not necessarily mean religious beliefs, so that people can prepare themselves to how to react when an adverse situation occurs. Celie realized that she had fallen into the stereotypical role of the black oppressed woman because she never formed any other identity than the one she was given by different characters in her life. Her life had been a struggle, a struggle to find an identity she felt comfortable with. She was able to enjoy more than half of her life by reclaiming the identity she wanted through the help of a friend. It could be argued that she never chose the identity, but that Shug gave it to her. I would say, however, that Shug only guided Celie in the end into the right path so that Celie never again had to be the subject of what anyone else wanted her to be.

This is the way it is, society in general would walk right over and across people lacking an individual identity. In order for us people to find what makes our lives joyful and meaningful, it is essential to know what is of significance and to bring in these beliefs into our lives so we can create a personal identity.
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