

## Melancholic Celie in *The Color Purple*

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### ABSTRACT

In her theory of the melancholic subject, Julia Kristeva asserts that the melancholic subject has a sense of loss, but she cannot share this feeling with others as she considers it as private. Although the melancholic subject is stranger to her mother tongue, she should use language to get rid of her sense of loss. In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker devotes herself to the plight of black people's lives in white society. She believes that the black feel a sense of loss as they are subject to racism, sexism and gender discrimination in white society. These black people, especially black women, should use language to express their sense of loss and deal with their traumatic experiences. This article intends to focus on Julia Kristeva's melancholic subject and apply it to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

*Keywords:* Julia Kristeva, the melancholic subject, language, loss, Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

### INTRODUCTION

Alice Malsenior Walker (1944) was the youngest of the eight children in her family. Her parents were poor sharecroppers and their life was very difficult in the white racist society; however, they resisted the whites who forced them to put their children to work rather than study. As Alice was very talented, her mother intended to see her bloom and that was the main reason why

she always worked instead of her daughter and permitted her to devote her time to study her lessons. One day as Alice played with her brothers, an event changed her life and her behavior completely. As she explains,

*I feel an incredible blow in my right eye. I look down just in time to see my brother lower his gun... [A] tree growing from underneath the porch that climbs past the railing to the roof... it is the last thing my right eye sees. I watch as its trunk, its branches, and then its leaves are blotted out by the rising blood.* (Warren & Wolff, 1998, p. 1)

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She thought that she became ugly by the scar on her face; therefore, she hid herself from other people and could not communicate with them. Alice Walker herself admits that:

*I have always been a solitary person and since I was eight years old (and a victim of a traumatic accident that blinded and scarred one eye), I have day dreamed- not of fairy tales- but of falling on swords, of putting guns to my head or heart, and of slashing my wrists with a razor. For a long time I thought I was ugly and disfigured... I believe, though that it was from this period- from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast- that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out.* (Robinson, 2009, p. 295)

From that time, she started reading stories and then writing poetry. After graduating from high school, since she had a scholarship, she entered Spelman College. In college, unwillingly she became pregnant, and it led to depression. As a result of her depression, she tried to commit suicide; however, her friends found a doctor who did an abortion for her and saved her life. In Mississippi, 1965, she met Melvyn Rosena Leventhan, a Jewish lawyer, and two years later they got married. Their marriage was a kind of shock as it was the first legal inter-

racial marriage in Mississippi. However in 1976 they divorced amicably.

The divorce and so many other bitter events influenced Walker a lot that “she became suicidal”, and in fact, “she struggled with the thought of killing herself throughout the years, but writing became a way for Walker to heal herself” (Robinson, 2009, p. 295). Before writing, she was isolated from the rest of the world as she admits she was a solitary person, but then she started communicating with other people (Robinson, 2009, p. 295). She tried hard and worked a lot to become a prominent figure in literature. This article intends to focus on Julia Kristeva’s theory of the melancholic subject and apply it to *The Color Purple*. As Kristeva notices the melancholic subject heals herself/himself through writing. Here, Walker heals herself by writing novels and reflecting her traumas within her works.

## DISCUSSION

When a child is in the semiotic chora, she is within her mother’s embrace. Gradually, she understands that there is a difference between herself and her mother; and this is the time when she enters the symbolic realm, the realm of language. As the melancholic subject loses her mother, she cannot enter the symbolic realm. Sabo states that “no object can replace the mother and no sign can express the loss” (Sabo, 2010, p. 60); therefore, the melancholic subject cannot use language. As she considers her sense of loss a kind of private feeling, she cannot share her feelings with other people. Kristeva mentions that the melancholic

subject is “modest, silent, without verbal or desiring bonds with others” (1980, p. 30). The melancholic subject has heterogeneous subjectivity, i.e. she does not have unified subjectivity. She can gain fixed subjectivity as soon as she is able to express her sense of loss. In Iannetta’s words, this non-communicable and timeless grief is melancholia (Iannetta, 2002, p. 194):

*Let us keep in mind the speech of the depressed\_ repetitive and monotonous...they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. Even phrases they cannot formulate. A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerges and dominates the broken logical sentences, changing them into recurring obsessive litanies* (Kristeva, 1980, 33).

The following discussion will shed light on Kristeva’s theory of melancholic subject and its applicability to Walker’s *The Color Purple*.

As *The Color Purple* opens, Celie, the fourteen-year-old protagonist writes a letter to God and expresses “I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl” (*The Color Purple*, p. 3). The crossing out of the words “I am” reflects Celie’s uncertainty of her goodness. As the story goes on, the reader is informed that Celie is raped and impregnated by Alphonso, who Celie considers as her biological father. The repeated rapes influence Celie’s psyche a lot, so that she does not consider herself a good, pure and innocent girl anymore. Besides, her

father threatens her not to tell anyone about the rape. The revision of her sentence makes it clear for the reader that she no longer feels good about herself or her identity. In fact, Celie is so ashamed that she was raped by her own father that she does not intend to talk about it with other people.

*The survivor [of rape] most often, nearly invariably, becomes silent about his victimization, though the experience nevertheless, in every case remains somehow fundamental to his existence, and to his unfolding or enfolding conception of himself. This silence is an internal one in which the victim attempts to suppress what is recalled, or finds it repressed by some part of himself which functions as a stranger, hiding self from the same part of which functions as stranger, hiding self from the self’s experience according to unfathomable criteria and requirements* (Culbertson, 1995, p. 169).

As the victim of the rape cannot express her feeling within language, she prefers to keep silent. As Gieni notices:

*The survivor of sexual violence may experience a sense of linguistic powerlessness. In the immediate moment and in the long term, sexual violence can be seen as having an oppressive hold on the voice of the survivor, such that the experience remains unspeakable* (p. 2).

As Julia Kristeva holds the melancholic subject, she feels a sense of loss within herself, and in this novel, this sense of loss of virginity by Celie prevents her from sharing it with other people. Besides, one should notice that the style of her letters indicates her melancholia as her first letter and:

*those that immediately follow, is characterized by short, choppy sentences, halting rhythm, repetitive grammatical structures of subject, verb, object, concrete physical description, in an ongoing present and matter-of-fact tone. It is a style that mirrors Celie's traumatized cognitive process and depressed emotional state* (Proudfit, 1991, p. 17)

When Celie gets pregnant by her father, he takes the children and sells them. "He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kill it out there in the woods; kill this one if he can" (*The Color Purple*, p. 4). Celie is traumatized by the loss of her children and her fragmented and repetitive sentences reflect her deep sense of loss. In fact, Celie, a fourteen-year-old girl, lost her two children, her virginity, her mother's love, and her father as a supporter. These catastrophic losses have a great effect on a teenage girl like Celie.

Celie is isolated and does not have any friend or relative to talk with, that is the main reason why, when Mr. \_ intends to get married to her sister, but his father suggests

that he marries Celie instead, she does not complain. She is not a subject who speaks for herself, but she is moved to an objectified position in which other people talk about her. Her father states "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" (*The Color Purple* 10). The stepfather speaks as if "the prime objective of a woman's life was to obtain a husband and then to keep him pleased; duties focused entirely on the bearing and rearing of heirs and caring for the household" (Sampson-Choma, 2011, p. 178). In order to have a sexual relationship with Nettie, Celie's younger sister, her father intends to get rid of her. Then, after about three months of thought, Mr. \_ agrees to marry Celie as his children need a mother and he needs a housekeeper and a nurse.

As she enters Mr. \_'s house, she starts her chores. At the very beginning, Harpo, Mr.\_'s son, attacks Celie's head with a stone that breaks Celie's head. This action indicates that a black girl is safe neither in her father's house nor in her husband's. Mr. \_ does not react to his son's misbehavior. Celie tolerates her miserable situation and starts brushing Mr. \_'s daughters' hair. "They cry their selves to sleep. But I don't cry. I lay there thinking about Nettie while he on top of me" (*The Color Purple*, p. 14). As a result of her father's repeated rape, Celie is not only sexually but emotionally numb and she reacts neither to Mr \_'s children's misbehavior nor to sexual affairs. She is emotionally traumatized by the

repeated rapes and “mourns for her lost” virginity (Sabo 50). Celie “endures a barrage of rapes and brutality that causes her to experience her body as fragmented and as being possessed by others, namely her victimizers” (Pifer & Slusser, 1998, p. 47).

One day, Celie waits in the shopping center for her husband; meanwhile she sees a girl “I think she mine. My hearts say she mine. But I don’t know she mine” (*The Color Purple*, p. 15). The little girl is in her mother’s embrace and Celie thinks that the girl is her lost daughter. She is traumatized by the memory of her lost daughter. Kristeva notes that “the traumatic memories of a loved relative ... are repressed but constantly evoked” (1980, p.46). This is Celie’s time of evocation of the traumatic memory. She intends to take the memory of her lost daughter back in words, but she cannot express it out loud. “The depressed person, overwhelmed by sadness, suffers from a paralysis of symbolic activity. In effect, language fails to fill in or substitute for what has been lost at the level of psyche” (Elliott, 2012, p. 357).

Like her father’s house, Celie is not comfortable in her husband’s house as well, as Mr. \_ beats Celie without any reason and when he beats her “I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man” (*The Color Purple*, p. 23). She denies her body and her subjectivity as she intends to tolerate the beating. In other words, “Celie protects herself by denying the reality of her own flesh and emotion” (Byerman, 1985 p. 167). “Readers sympathize with Celie when she

compares herself to a piece of wood, which is insensitive to pain. She demonstrates by such reference that her husband treats her as an object” (Matunda, 2009, p. 125). Besides, “Celie’s descent from rage to hysterical illness to numbness speaks of the extent to which she has internalized the social-sexual order” (Gieni 26). She is afraid of standing against Mr.\_; therefore, she intends to suffer and tolerate rather than to risk her life. As Tillie Olsen observes:

*Literary history...dark with silences of mute inglorious Miltons: those whose waking hours are all struggle for existence; the barely educated; illiterate women* (Olsen, 2003, p. 10).

She has been consumed by the thought of survival that she is unable to stand up for herself (Hale 42). She was abused by her father and she has been abused by her husband; i.e., she is trapped in the vicious circle of oppression. “In Mr.\_’s house, Celie acts as maid, baby-sitter, object of sexual gratification, and target for sadistic tendencies” (Hamamsy, 2010, p. 154).

She never protests against the oppression even when her parents treated her angrily, she tolerated the situation.

*I think. I can’t even remember the last time I felt mad, I say. I used to git mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is. Couldn’t stay mad at her. Couldn’t be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say,*

*Honor father and mother no matter what. Then after while everytime I got mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick. Felt like throwing up. Terrible feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all* (The Color Purple, p. 40).

She cannot put her sense of anger into words; she does not react to anything because religion restricts her. In her opinion, she should respect her parents no matter what they have done to her. She thinks about the other world and she intends to gain salvation; therefore, she keeps silent and she does not protest. "Celie rarely evaluates or judges her situation. She knows of no other possibilities for her, she concludes that she must bear her lot in life; God will surely reward her in heaven" (Johnson, 1988, 71).

In fact, Celie has a self-comprehension problem. If she knows herself, and believes in her ability, she will not rely on after life salvation, but she will fight for her rights. She tolerates and has been the subject of torture and unfortunately, although "happiness exists at the price of revolt" (Kristeva, 2000, p. 7), "fighting is outside the realm of Celie's experience and nature" (Sampson-Choma, 2011, p. 167).

As Shug Avery, Mr. \_'s former mistress, arrives, Mr. \_ goes after her and brings her in his house. He forgets all about his responsibility toward Celie; moreover, he has a sexual relationship with Shug. "When I hear them together all I can do is pull the quilt over my head and finger my little button and tities and cry" (*The Color Purple*

75). She cannot express her sadness even if she protests no one listens to her,

*Lacking the filter of language, [she] cannot inscribe [her] violence in "no," nor any other sign. [she] can expel it only by means of gestures, spasms, or shouts.* (Kristeva, 1980, p.15)

As a result, she can only react nonverbally which is crying.

After the passage of the time Celie and Shug become intimate friends and they share their secrets and emotions. One day Shug informs Celie that Celie's sister, Nettie, has sent Celie some letters, but Mr. \_ does not give them to Celie.

*All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble about the house crazy for Mr \_ blood. In my mind, he falling dead every which a way. By time night come, I can't speak. Every time I open my mouth nothing come out but a little burp.* (The Color Purple, p. 110)

She is very angry that she cannot express her anger through words. She intends to kill Mr. \_ to take revenge on him. All these years, she waits for her sister's letter and now she is mad at Mr. \_. She cannot put her anger into words. "More than at any other point in the text, Celie seems on the verge of slipping into madness when she discovers Albert's [Mr. \_] suppression of her sister's letters"



(Cutter 168). "I don't sleep. I don't cry. I don't do nothing. I'm cold too. Pretty soon I think maybe I'm dead" (*The Color Purple* 110). As Sabo mentions,

*From Kristevan perspective this collapse of the symbolic is a tell-tale sign of melancholia, for it always, "ends up in asymbolia, in a loss of meaning: if I am no longer capable of translating or metaphorizing, I become silent.* (p. 57)

She lost her interest in life as the truth is revealed. When she understands that she is betrayed by Mr.\_, she becomes a living dead. "I know what I'm thinking about, I think. Nothing. And as much of it as I can" (*The Color Purple* 112). She does not have any emotion, passion, desire or interest in anything. All her feelings wither as she feels she is betrayed. She suffers all these years and remains loyal to Mr.\_; therefore, she does not expect him to hide Nettie's letters when he knows how precious the letters are for Celie. This is the last straw that breaks her back.

When Celie and Shug become more intimate and Shug expresses her love for Celie, Celie starts to express her suffering throughout the years. Shug acts like confidante to Celie with whom she can share her secrets and emotions. By talking about her past, she starts to mend her emotional wounds and put her fragmented subjectivity together (Fiske, 2008, p. 152).

*My mama die, I tell Shug. My sister Nettie run away. Mr\_ come git me to take care his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me, I say.* (*The Color Purple*, p. 103)

Shug acts not only as confidante but also as a mother. When Shug provides love, comfort and warm condition, Celie feels as if she is in her mother's embrace.

*Shug Avery provides Celie with an extended period of "female bonding;" who, with unconditional love, provides a "holding environment" in which Celie's nascent self is reflected back to itself; and , who, as surrogate mother and "good- enough-mother," and lover helps Celie to complete the development of those capacities that enable her to deal more effectively with loss, to finalize her gender identity and choice of mature love object, and to develop a stable sense of self.* (Proudfit, 1991, p. 23)

She enters the symbolic realm, the realm of language and starts describing all the years of her life.

*Here it seems that Celie has successfully moved through the mirror stage of symbolic language,*

*that is, language that she can use to represent any perceived lacks.* (Pifer & Slusser, 1998, p. 49)

Besides, Shug encourages Celie to fight for her rights and express her needs and desires. With Shug's encouragement, Celie changes herself from a victim to the victor who can stand against her oppressor. In fact, Shug's embrace creates the physical and psychic space Celie needs to process the horror of abuse (LaGrone, 2009, p. 33). Here, Celie addresses Mr.\_ and says,

*Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say. Then I say, you better stop talking because all I'm telling you ain't coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words... I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here* (The Color Purple, p. 187).

In this speech, Celie accepts herself as a woman who has the right to live and choose her life; she affirms and asserts herself. She stands up for her rights as she no longer intends to be under Mr.\_'s oppression. She gains the courage to break her long silence and put all the lost, fragmented and repetitive phrases into a complete, meaningful and informative message.

Unfortunately, Shug falls in love with a boy, much younger than her, and as soon as she expresses her love, Celie says "nothing. I pray to die, just so I never have to speak"

(*The Color Purple* 225). She thinks that she loses Shug who is her confidante, friend, mother figure and supporter. Therefore, like a melancholic subject, she keeps silent. "The mourning process is slow; however, Celie is subject to a variety of contrasting thoughts and feelings about Shug" (Proudfit, 1991, p. 29). However, the passage of time helps her to recover from this mood; moreover, she perceives that she can have the sisterhood bond with Shug until the end of her life.

As it is aforementioned, at the beginning of the novel, Celie suffers as men intend to have power and control over her. Her supposed-to-be father abuses her and her husband hides her sister's letters, belittles her and beats her; therefore, one can conclude that Celie's grief is over her lost virginity, lost sister, lost children, and lost identity. Moreover, Kristeva mentions that "melancholia is a disorder of self and self-identity and condition of loss" (Sabo, 2010, p. 49). As Celie deals with her problems, puts her suffering into words, shares them with her friends, and reunites with her long lost sister and children, she changes from a melancholic subject who does not dare express her feelings of loss and her bitter suffering into the speaking subject who interacts with others, shares her opinions, indicates her emotions and finally shapes her subjectivity.

*Overcoming traumatic sexual experiences at the hands of her stepfather and husband, as well as copious physical and verbal abuse, Celie creates a satisfying life for herself, Walker's novel*



*demonstrates the depth of trauma that a rape victim experiences, but also the process of healing and potential for a fulfilling existence in the end* (LaGrone, 1999, p. 167).

All in all, the epistolary style of this novel, which is like a diary, provides the reader with Celie's deep sorrows, pain, anguish and further her development from all these emotions; moreover, her triumph over oppression and violence. "Writing is the dynamic mechanism of healing and creativity"; it helps Celie to achieve a fixed identity (Su, 2005, p. 177). With the help of writing she overcomes the linguistic barrier, which her step father imposed on her; i.e., "Celie in her letters writes herself into being" (Gates, 1989, p. 243). If her step father insisted on her silence, she uses writing, which is a talking book, to tell everyone about her life, and through it she gains her total self and her voice. In addition, "writing also enables Celie to transcend the forced silence and break the marginal position imposed upon her" (Lare-Assogba, 2011, p. 52). Besides, the act of writing is a therapeutic strategy that Celie uses to escape from the state of despair; "important point of Kristeva is that the depressed do speak and often, in imaginary and creative ways. Art is frequently the product of melancholia" (Sabo, 2010, p. 58). In other words, letter writing helps Celie to discover herself and gain better understanding of herself and her surroundings (Hamamsy, 2010, p. 163). Celie is a melancholic subject and the more she suffers the more superior her

aesthetic work will be (Su, 2005, p. 189). That is the main reason why her letters improve and become a diary which reflects the transformation of Celie as a melancholic subject to the speaking being.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie transforms from a melancholic subject, who has a sense of unshareable loss, to the speaking subject, who can interact with other people and form her identity through communication. Sisterhood with Shug, helped Celie to come to terms with her losses and deal with them through letter writing which at the end turned into a personal diary. As a result of sisterhood and writing, Celie changed from a fragile girl into a determined and strong woman.

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