

# Women's Traumatic Experiences Caused by Patriarchalism in the Color Purple

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**Abstract:** Women in the World, Especially Those in Africa, Have Long Suffered Unfair Treatments in Patriarchal Society. They Not Only Have to Undertake Necessary Housework, But Heavy Fieldwork, with Humble Position At Home and in Society. This Essay is Designed to Describe women's Traumatic Experiences Caused by Patriarchalism in the Novel the Color Purple.

## 1. Introduction

Women are treated much inferior to men in patriarchal society; they are oppressed both physically and spiritually under the dominance of men. In patriarchal family, women are mostly treated like an instrument to satisfy their husbands' sexual desire, but they themselves have no right to be satisfied; meanwhile, they are the main labor force in the house and the fields. In the house, they are enslaved like maids: having food to cook, clothes to wash, houses to clean, cattle to feed and all the trifle chores around them to do; in the fields, they have to work all day long like a donkey. In Africa, women are much afflicted by patriarchalism than those of elsewhere. They almost undertake all the housework and labor without any complaint. This essay will be designed to present all traumatic experiences displayed by different women from the novel *The Color Purple*.

## 2. Celie's Trauma

In *The Color Purple*, Celie, the protagonist, a 14-year-old black girl, has suffered from her stepfather's sexual abuse and physical torture. Her "father" never speaks softly to her, just orders her to do what her mother would not do. She is impregnated twice by her so-called "father", who takes two babies (first a girl, then a boy) away from her one after another without informing her. Her mother sick and dead, she has to undertake all the housework even while she is pregnant. "I'm big. I can't move fast enough. By time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By time I git the tray ready the food be cold. By time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time" (2). Celie is sealed in such a complete dark and limited space that she has no one to give vent to her affliction and worries about being threatened by her "father", "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy." (1) This poor little black girl is restricted to a complete miserable world, submitting to her fate just as her stepfather warns her to do, without any intention and knowledge to struggle for self-value and self-dignity.

After Celie gave the second birth to a baby; her stepfather gets tired of her. "Say I'm evil an always up to no good" (3). That means her "father" doesn't want her be pregnant and give birth to babies frequently, just wants her to be his sexual instrument for ever. Then he takes the baby boy away, with Celie's breasts full of milk running down. "He say Why don't you look decent? Put on something" (3). This shows the "father" disgusts Celie's image of being a mother which looks scruffy and corpulent. Celie feels helpless and thinks "But what I'm sposed to put on? I don't have nothing" (3). The "father" is so selfish and cheeky, he gets ashamed of Celie who has been ravaged and trampled by himself like a piece of smelly cloth, never showing any pity on Celie or feeling guilty of himself.

One day, Celie is beaten by her "father" "cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got something in my eye but I didn't wink" (5). Although the "father" has not been attracted by Celie any more, he still controls and supervises her in an abnormally high-handed way, regarding her as his private possession not allowed to be coveted by others. From the church, Celie hears a

girl say “you git big if you bleed every month. I don’t bleed no more” (5). Going through two times of pregnancy and child-bearing, plus frequent physical and spiritual abuses by the “father”, Celie has lost the chance of being mother again.

In the church, Mr.\_\_\_\_ takes a fancy to Nettie and plans to pursue after her; the “father” refuses his proposal. Celie voluntarily asks to marry Mr.\_\_\_\_ in place of her sister with an aim to protect Nettie from falling into Mr.\_\_\_\_’s trap. Celie ducks into her room dressing her up as coquettishly as possible; then comes out in a pair of her new mammy’s high heel shoes. Her father beats her for dressing foxily like that. Celie tries hard to save Nettie from miserable marriage at the expense of sacrificing herself; she tries every means to persuade her “father” and Mr.\_\_\_\_ to change their minds by dressing herself in “fashion”. The “father” beats her for her clownish dress, but he never buys anything for Celie to dress her in a proper way. Later, the “father” “sells” Celie to Mr.\_\_\_\_ by enumerating Celie’s wrongdoings and merits.

But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain’t fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don’t need a fresh woman no how. If got a fresh one in there myself and she sick all the time. (7)

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)

Mr.\_\_\_\_ keeps silent while the “father” is marketing Celie, he continues, “Fact is, he say, I got to git rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. And she a bad influence on my other girls. She’d come with her own linen. She can take that cow she raise down there back of the crib” (8). Hearing that he can marry Celie without any bride-price, but with gifts of her linen and cow, Mr.\_\_\_\_ finally responds to the stepfather’s marrying conditions, requiring to have a look at Celie, the “father” tells him to see her next time, worrying about he may be very disappointed with Celie’s ugly appearance and clownish dress at the moment, he added,

She ugly. Don’t even look like she kin to Nettie. But she’ll make the better wife. She ain’t smart either, and I’ll just be fair, you have to watch her or she’ll give away everything you own. But she can work like a man.” “And another thing-She tell lies. (8)

Here the “father” emphasizes that Celie is very ugly, stupid, and not a virgin, assuring Mr.\_\_\_\_ that he has to accept the fact if he wants to marry Celie, meanwhile, he stresses Celie’s advantage that she will be a better wife because she is strong, clean, and hard-working like a man, finally, he slanders Celie that she is a liar in order to hide his despicable behaviors done to Celie if they really marries.

After three months’ careful consideration, with no woman willing to take care of his children any more, Mr.\_\_\_\_ comes again.

He say, Let me see her again.

Pa call me, Celie, he say. Like it wasn’t nothing.

Mr.\_\_\_\_ want another look at you.

I go stand in door. The sun shine in my eyes. He’s still up on his horse.

He look at me up and down. Pa rattle his newspaper.

Move up, he won’t bite, he say.

I go closer to the steps, but no too close cause I’m a little scared of his horse.

Turn round, Pa say.

I turn round...

Mr.\_\_\_\_ say, That cow still coming?

He say, Her cow. (11)

Here Celie is traded by her “father” and Mr.\_\_\_\_ as a domestic animal, without any dignity and value shown by neither of the two men, one examining her on the horse, the other ordering her this way and that. Finally, they make a deal of Celie along with her cow as a gift.

As a commodity, she is arranged by her “father” to marry Mr.\_\_\_\_ who is very reluctant but no way because he needs urgently someone to cook, clean and take care of his four children. On the wedding day, Celie’s head is attacked bleeding by Mr.\_\_\_\_’s eldest boy with a rock, but she goes on

cooking and cleaning for them till very late without any complaint. At the wedding night, she is sexually abused by Mr. \_\_\_ with bandage around her head. Later on, Celie's life turns no better than before, frequently beaten and abused by Mr. \_\_\_ cruelly without slightest hesitation. "He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them" (23). Mr. \_\_\_ marries Celie not for loving her but enslaving her as a tool or animal.

At a time, Kate, one of Mr. \_\_\_'s sisters, pleads for mercy for Celie.

Buy Celie some clothes. She say to Mr. \_\_\_

She need clothes? He ast.

Well look at her.

He look at me. It like he looking at the earth. It need something? His eyes say. (21)

Here "it" refers to Celie, showing her position in the family as inferior as an animal, often bullied and humiliated by Mr. \_\_\_. When Kate asks Harpo, Mr. \_\_\_'s eldest boy, to help Celie to bring in water, he answers, "Women work, I am a man" (22). This shows patriarchy has widespread influence on men of one generation to another, not regarding women as real human beings.

When Harpo asks Mr. \_\_\_ why he beats Celie, he replies: "Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for-he don't finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa" (23). Hearing these words, Celie realizes that this man she marries has nothing different from her "father"; both of them treat her not as a wife or daughter, as nobody. Then Harpo asks Celie, "How come you stubborn? He don't ast How come you his wife? Nobody ast that" (23). As a son, Harpo inherits her father's male chauvinism, considering that a wife should be obedient to her husband, humble in the family.

Here women are just regarded as possessions wholly owned by men, are disposed at men's will. Black women burden not only family needs, but also heavy labor in the fields, men just enjoy themselves freely. For example, when Celie is sweaty, chopping and plowing in the fields, her skin roasted coffee bean color; her husband is sitting "on the porch, look out at nothing. Sometime he look at the trees out front the house. Look at a butterfly if it light on the rail. Drink a little water in the day. A little wine in the evening. But mostly never move" (28).

Those words described above reflect black men's dominant role in the family, treating women totally at their disposal. Like Mr. \_\_\_, black men regard women's existence is for men's exploitation and convenience. Women should be driven to work and beaten like animals; they are tamed to be hardworking and obedient. Once beaten, Celie will associate herself with a tree or wood, in a state of numbness and dissociation. Many black women like Celie are deeply poisoned by patriarchy, considering innocently that they are just goods, slaves, bearing and working machines. They are infused with the idea that women are of inferior gender compared with men, humble and worthless in the world, thus they take it for granted that they have no way but endure men's maltreatment and torture.

### 3. Sophia's Trauma

Compared with Celie, Sofia is a quite strong, independent and brave, insists to fight against the male's control over women. When Harpo asks for his father's approval for his marriage to Sophia who has been pregnant for seven or eight months, "not quite as tall as Harpo but much bigger, and strong and ruddy looking, like her mama brought her up on pork" (31). Mr. \_\_\_ questions whether it is Harpo's, "Young womens no good these days, he say. Got they legs open to every Tom, Dick and Harry" (31). Sophia gets very angry, but not very sad, she says laughingly "What I need to marry Harpo for? He still living here with you. What food and clothes he git, you buy" (32). When she is leaving, she tells Harpo, "you stay here, when you free, me and the baby be waiting" (32). She hopes Harpo be independent as soon as possible, and marries her. Afterwards, they get married in Sophia's sister's house; then they and the baby live in their own house fixed up the creek shed.

Due to her power and disobedience, Sophia often conflicts with Harpo after their marriage. Harpo wants Sophia to mind and respect him in making decisions, but Sophia just does what she wants to do regardless of Harpo's thoughts. Celie appreciates Sophia's courage and power, but she can not understand why Sophia can be so proud and confident in front of Mr. \_\_\_ and her husband,

Harpo. When Harpo asks her how to make Sophia an obedient wife, as a victim of patriarchy for a long time, Celie suggests to Harpo, “beat her”. However, Sophia is stronger than Harpo physically, next time when Celie sees Harpo, who has been beaten by Sophia badly. The minute Sophia knows that Celie tells Harpo to beat her, she marches up to Celie, looking her straight in the eye, 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). Sophia feels sad and pitiful to Celie’s words,

she say, All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain’t safe in a family of men. But I never thought I’d have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me. (40)

Here we know Sophia has a strong sense of standing up for her dignity and self-respect since her childhood, if others want to tread her down, she will fight back without hesitation. This is the greatest difference between Celie and Sophia. Sophia tells the truth about Celie, “You remind me of my mama. She under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot. Anything he say, goes. She never say nothing back” (41). From Sophia’s growing environment, it shows that her attitude towards oppression is to fight bravely, otherwise, she will be trampled under other’s foot like her mother. She doesn’t want to follow her mother’s old disastrous road, so she adopts the way of struggling rather than surrendering. Harpo doesn’t want to submit to Sophia, fighting with her one way or another, but fails every time. Harpo then tries to gorge himself with food in an attempt to become as strong as Sophia. Although she still loves Harpo, Sophia gets tired of the marriage full of fights, “All he think about since us married is how to make me mind. He don’t want a wife, he want a dog” (65). Being disappointed with Harpo, Sophia runs to her sister, Odessa’s house with children, leaving Harpo in a deep depression. In patriarchal family, Sophia is a winner in the struggle for women’s dignity with Mr.\_\_\_\_ and her husband, Harpo. During the struggle, she also suffers a lot both physically and spiritually, because men won’t give up their upper hand easily. Patriarchy is deep-rooted in the whole society; it needs a long time to achieve equality and justice between men and women. So even though some of women like Sophia win victory in the family or society, they still have to endure great pressure and affliction.

#### 4. Shug’s Trauma

Shug Avery, Mr.\_\_\_\_’s lover, is an ideal character in the novel-beautiful, self-confident, independent, and in control of her own life, being Celie’s idol in her mind. She is also victimized considerably by patriarchy. She loves Albert (Mr.\_\_\_\_ called by Celie), and Albert loves her, too. Even though Shug has given birth to three children with Albert, she cannot marry him. Old Mr.\_\_\_\_, Albert’s father, hates her, fiercely objects to her marriage to his son because of her poor and disgraced family background. People have doubts about who is her real father, and have bias on the fact that her mother takes in white people’s dirty clothes. There are rumors that all her children have different fathers since she is singing here and there. All of these prevent her from marrying the man she loves, but can not hinder her from singing freely.

Due to her affairs with Albert, the rumors and the influence go with her forever. Shug is very good at singing; people in the town call her “queen honeybee” (43). She becomes rich and independent economically, giving vent to her sorrow and dissatisfaction by means of singing. However, when she is too sick to sing any more, people in the town refuse to take her in, even her parents abandon her at the moment. “Her mammy say She told her so. Her pappy say, Tramp. A woman at church say she dying-maybe two berkulosis of some kind of nasty woman disease” (43). The preacher also criticizes and shows no mercy to Shug, “He talk bout a strumpet in short skirt, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner” (44). Later, Shug is brought home by Mr.\_\_\_\_, and taken care of by Celie, recovering health gradually.

In the patriarchal society, women have no right to marry those they love; their marriages are arranged by their parents or elders. If they don’t care about others’ words, sticking to their love, they usually are regarded as Helen of Troy or dangerous beauty. Shug has got three children before

marriage; she likes singing, dresses herself boldly, she also smokes and drinks. Her image is very contrary to traditional women. If women like Shug fall in love with someone, people usually say they induce not love someone. It seems doomed to women of beauty to experience more trauma than common people.

## 5. Traumas of Nettie, Mary Agnes, and the Olinka Women

Nettie, Celie's younger sister, who is pretty and clever, is often harassed by her stepfather after her sister marrying to Mr.\_\_\_\_. She runs away from home to live with Celie, but Mr.\_\_\_\_ always has an evil design to Nettie, too. After trying various ways, Mr.\_\_\_\_ finds no access to nearing Nettie; then threatens to drive her away. No place to dwell in, Nettie has to leave her sister and look for another living place. At the suggestion of her sister, Nettie is to seek for the lady whom her sister ever met in the town, promising they will contact each other by writing afterwards. Mr.\_\_\_\_ tortures the two sisters psychologically and spiritually by separating each other and blocking the information exchange between them for almost thirty years.

Squeak, the girlfriend of Harpo, her real name is Mary Agnes who is yellow skin. Unlike Sophia, "she a nice girl, friendly and everything, but she like me. She do anything Harpo say" (83). Here we know Squeak has all the good qualities that a woman should have, especially is obedient to Harpo, which is needed most by Harpo. The first encounter between Squeak and Sophia is so awful that Squeak's teeth are knocked down by Sophia. But when she hears that Sophia is put in jail, she offers her help to her without any complaint. The warden of the prison is Squeak's uncle, "she say, he got three children by my mama, two younger than me" (93). She is dressed up radiantly by her friends, gets ready to meet the warden alone, hoping to free Sophia from the prison. However, the warden refuses to admit that he is her uncle and promises her on the condition of raping her. In the patriarchal society, women are often the victims of being raped by men with power in order to achieve their goals or improve their social status.

Olinka is an African village where Nettie and the missionary couple settle in. Patriarchy has a solid and prevailing dominance in Olinka, where men can have many wives, and with life and death power over them. "If he accuses one of his wives of witchcraft of infidelity, she can be killed." (168) Even though the chief's wives are unhappy and have to work like donkeys, "they still think it is an honor to be the chief's wife. He (the chief) walks around all day holding his belly up and talking and drinking palm wine with the healer." (158)

The way Olinka men speak to women is very weird; they don't look at each other when they are speaking. Men just listen long enough to issue instructions, looking at the ground and bending their heads toward the ground when women are speaking to them. When men are speaking, women look instead at their feet or knees, considering "to 'look in a man's face' is a brazen thing to do" (163). It is can be inferred that women are extremely inferior or even neglected to be nothing worth of respecting in front of men.

In Olinka, it is in work that the wives of a man get to know and care about each other. The women generally share a husband but the husband does not share their friendships with their wives. Many of the wives rarely spend time with their husbands. Some of the women are engaged to old or middle-aged men at birth. "Their lives always center around work and their children and other women (since a woman cannot really have a man for a friend without the worst kind of ostracism and gossip)" (167). Husbands are so indulge in their wives' care and admiration; they themselves are idle almost day after day.

People in Olinka believe that education is a privilege to boys rather than girls. They claim "A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something" (156). Tashi, an Olinka girl, is very intelligent in study. But her father and mother become upset because they find she is changing, becoming quiet and too thoughtful. "She is becoming someone else; her face is beginning to show the spirit of one of her aunts who was sold to the trader because she no longer fit into village life" (161). People of Olinka are afraid that education can perform spells on the girls like magic, enchanting them out of the village. So they firmly insist that the girls should not be educated.

Girls in Olinka must be cruelly scarred in their faces at the initiation ceremony, but boys need

not. Under the most appalling conditions, the scars are carved into a girl's face with compulsion. In this way, the women will instinctively keep their heads down when addressing to their husbands who are always arrogant and petted by their wives. This trauma is caused not only in the women's face, but deeply in their heart. So the social status of men and women in Olinka is as far apart as heaven and earth in patriarchal society.

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