

# Self-Differentiation and its Ramification in Women through the Novel - The Color Purple

Yashasvi Gupta

Department of Social Science, Postgraduate

**Abstract:-** This study aims to describe the subconscious loss of self of women through literature. The research used the descriptive qualitative method, Murray Bowen's 'Family theory' and 'Theory of Differentiation'. The research data is collected from dialogues and monologues of characters in 'The Color Purple' novel. The research results showed the protagonist, Celie, and Shug was in contrast on the scale of differentiation. Shug was able to have high levels of differentiation even in the societal setup which constantly demeaned and oppressed her, but Celie gave in and accepted her fate. Celie's life was a series of dysfunctional families, trauma bonds, multigenerational oppression, and societal pressure, which lead her to have a low level of self-differentiation thus making her misery rigid and unendurable. She tries, from a young age, to protect, and foster her sister which also keeps her sane and gives her a sense of purpose but she loses herself in the cycle of oppression.

**Keywords:-** Self-Differentiation, Dysfunctional Family, The Color Purple.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Women living in a patriarchal society and facing oppression every day tend to have low levels of differentiation. Their identities are intervened with their family and they often attach themselves to the members of the family to have a sense of purpose. Alice Walker throughout the novel the color purple Communicates how women have to fight to gain identity in society. The protagonist of the novel Celie was severely oppressed and dominated by men in her life. Walker shows a battle between the patriarchal society and the lives of the woman to sustain a personal identity in that society. Patriarchy doesn't only affect the social strata of women but also, they are psychological identity. Society has indirectly set limits for women as to what they can do and achieve, this injustice and inequality have made women dependent on men or their family members irrespective of their gender. Being oppressed from a young age, women lose goal-oriented thinking because of which they have low self-esteem & Cinderella complex. They spend their whole life believing they are not good enough to take decisions or have leadership positions.

According to Murray Bowen's theory (1), a person with a well-differentiated self doesn't get affected by the opinions or validation of others on the other hand people with poorly differentiated self, people often seek external validation and acceptance. They try to live their lives with the eyes of others and how other people view them. The slightest disagreement or disapproval can affect their confidence and level of self-esteem.

## II. WOMEN IN SOCIETY

Society and the familiar groups in which a person is cultured, make the personality of a person, it's how they are raised, nurtured, fed, and treated that makes the person think, act, or feel. Parents play a major role in molding the personality of a person, if the parental figure is emotionally available and present, the child will be able to form his or her sovereign personality but if the parents don't take up the responsibility it is often the elder child who has to act as a parental figure. The elder child associates their personality with that of their sibling hence leading towards a poorly differentiated self. When both parents aren't emotionally available or don't take responsibility for raising the child together one of the parental figures has to take charge, women of the family are often the ones who take up the task to sympathize with everyone in the family. In the patriarchal setup of society men are often "The bread earners" of the family, the women get the job of raising the children and doing the household work. This patriarchal connotation forces women to stay at home and fuse their personalities around being a homemaker, they are supposed to take care of every member of the family and to be calm and composed at all times, even in crises, to make decisions always considering the needs of the family and never on their own often creates an emotional turmoil, which then leads to retaining a personality which is wholeheartedly dependent upon the opinions and needs of others.

The differences between society as an individual and the people living in it are determined by the people's level of individuality, a person with a less developed self would often do what society dictates and walk linear in the motion of society. These people are '*Social Chameleons*' (2) who use '*mirror neurons*' (3) in the brain for social acceptance basing their personality on other people living in the same society as them and feeling a sense of comfort and inclusiveness. In Bowen's (1) study of the family, he mentions how bullies depend on the acceptance of others because of which they force people who are different from them to change if one doesn't agree or align with their opinions they resort to violence because disagreement is what threatens bullies, same as a rebel, a poorly differentiated person who seeks validation from a certain group of people and has to deny the opinion of some other group, it appears to others, the rebel has a sense of self but whatever he or she does is to be accepted by their peers. These rebels would often disagree and invalidate their parents because they want to be as 'cool' as their peers, thus even though it may feel like they don't want to be validated it's often that they don't want to be validated by their family but by their peers.

Women are often made to follow rules, act in a certain way, follow a certain path, and establish an identity revolving around other people. These extreme limitations and criticism give birth to people pleasing, a lot of women self-doubt when they are not able to do a certain task, for instance, pass an exam, men, on the other hand, would say that the exam was hard or the task was impossible rather than doubting themselves, thus doubting the objective rather than the subject performing the task. When it comes to external validation women tend to base their personality on how the world views them. Since early childhood years, rejection means existential death, and to pertain to their existence in society women often don't set any boundaries and even if they do, the boundaries are enmeshed with others as they are raised to take care of everyone around them. Capitalism thrives on this insecurity of women; women with low self-esteem linger to *compulsive buying*, and in the process grant huge profits to corporations. It is only when women will start feeling validated in themselves and will differentiate themselves from the opinions of others only then will society be able to achieve true equilibrium. In the male-dependent and dominated setup of society, fellow women can play a major role in uplifting and empathizing with each other regarding the emotional interdependence between them and society. For instance, a homemaker mother spends all day administering to the needs of the family, housekeeping, and making sure everybody is comfortable and well-fed, and if she doesn't take out time to do something that she relishes or invests time in a hobby she would start questioning her identity and get emotionally detached. Her whole personality will revolve around taking care of others. Because of this she will never feel confident enough to pursue an assertive or even materialistic career.

The reason why a lot of women are good Teachers or Human Resource Managers is that they are taught from a young age to make sure everybody else in the family or society is living a good life, they are called "Nurturers" because they are given that role from an early age. If the elder child of the family is a woman, she often takes the role of a mother, she tries her best to disentangle the conflicts of the family and keep everybody pleasant and happy. In this pursuit she often neglects her own needs, thus sacrificing her sense of self for others.

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The protagonist of the novel 'The Color Purple', Celie, is an uneducated and poor woman who was tortured and maltreated throughout her life. She was often raped by her father, and because of this, she got pregnant several times. She had no control over her life, her children were given away by her father to someone for adoption. Celie's character is a passive one, she stays quiet and doesn't share her opinion or thoughts with anyone, because of the history of torture she had been through in such early years she had become numb to a lot of her feelings, and she realized that to survive she had to stay quiet and admissible. She wrote letters to God, as a means of an outlet for her self-expression. Celie's little sister, Nettie, couldn't have a normal childhood either but Celie tried her best to foster and protect her from the abuse of their father. Celie tries to get Nettie married to Mr. dash so that she could save her from the abuse Celie had gone through. Nettie was the more

attractive one, Celie knew that many older men wanted to marry her or have her so she always had her back. Nettie was the one who helped Celie read and write, she was the one who went to school and learned while Celie was at home taking care of the house and the children. Both of these women took up the roles of adults to survive. Their survival instinct didn't allow them to form any individual identity, they tried to make the best out of what they had. Celie attached herself to Nettie, and this bond kept her sane and alive.

Shug Ivory, another character from the book, has distinctive character traits, because of which she is deprecated by society. She is a singer by profession but her reputation is of a 'nasty woman', she is a woman of dubious morals and spurned by her parents. She hasn't allowed anyone to influence her personality, which is the reason Celie is impressed by her and describes her as 'Mama', even though she is very different from Celie's biological mother, who was oppressed by her father and fit into the traditional gender roles. Celie starts seeing Shug as a role model because she views Shug as a ray of hope. When Shug falls sick, Celie takes care of her, and reciprocating it, Shug shows a great deal of appreciation for her. This makes Celie realize how unappreciated she has been all her life, she had done all the work and taken care of all the people around her, but no one had ever thanked her or acknowledged her contribution. She gets to experience new emotions with Shug, she teaches her about experiencing pleasure and experimenting with her sexuality. Celie, in a conversation, mentions to Shug that she was "still a virgin", as she had just experienced sex as an aggressive trait of her father or husband, being raped multiple times, created a misconception about intimacy, but she never experienced pleasure during sex. The men in her life always used her as a nonexistent entity to gain pleasure but never in her whole life they were thoughtful enough to consider her pleasure. Shug made her realize how important it was to be connected to oneself, she taught her about love, spirituality, and sexuality, and in the process made Celie fall in love with her. As their relationship grows, Celie starts advancing her persona and Shug becomes her lover, friend, sister, mother, confidant, and teacher. Their relationship helps Celie grow into a strong and opinionated woman and helps her heal and process the trauma she had gone through.

The agony Celie had gone through made her repel men, she mentions to Shug, "I don't even look at men. That's the truth. I look at women, though, because I'm not scared of them."

Walker in the novel often portrays how women were just an entity belonging to men, another character Sophia, seems to be under the patriarchal notion, that if she gets pregnant her father would agree to the union of her and Harpo. It is illustrated how, if a woman gets pregnant, she will belong to another man and can't have eccentricity before or after being a mother.

The cycle of familial projection circles back in the family even after the death of a family member, when Celie's mother is sick her father continues the vicious cycle of abuse by inflicting it on her daughter. The oppression continues and Celie is the one who takes up the role of the mother. She cooks, cleans, takes care of everyone in the family, and satisfies her

father Sexually. In the whole scenario, the father doesn't act as a parental figure who provides comfort but rather trouble and hardships for both children. While taking care of everything in the family, trying to stay sane and survive Celie also has to make sure that her sister Nettie is safe from the villainy of her father. All these responsibilities made Celie mature at a very young age as a result of which she fails to develop distinctiveness from her preserving self for the survival of her and her sister.

#### IV. ANALYSIS

Dr. Bowen in his family systems theory (1) refers to the concept of '**Differentiation of Self**'. This theory defines people as the fusion between their emotional and intellectual selves, The less differentiated people are entangled in their emotional and intellectual functioning and are dominated by the emotional system. The people who have a low scale of differentiation are emotionally dependent on familiar people and less flexible. They form a rigid opinion and are not open to anything beyond it on the other hand the people who have a high level of differentiation have the liberty of thought and are independent in their emotional and intellectual functioning. It's not that they are free from all the stress and anxiety, but they can deal with all of it with greater autonomy. *Bowen* (1) describes important parts of the differentiation of self has to do with levels of 'solid self' and 'pseudo-self'. A 'solid self' is based on clearly articulated opinions and life principles and is developed over time by the building blocks of reasoning Whereas the 'pseudo-self' is crafted by emotional and societal pressure. A pseudo-self consists of actions beliefs, and principles incorporated and influenced by a certain group of people. Pseudo-self is often in agreement with varied groups of people, these people seldom disagree or try to change anyone's opinion including their own they move with the river of thoughts in the way others are moving because of this they get influenced by every other person, or entity. A lot of people with a pseudo-self are greatly altered by the opinions of the people present in society and even the internet, they form their opinion according to what is trendy which keeps on changing, to be accepted and to fit in with most people of the generation.

In the book 'The Color purple', it can be observed that the protagonist Celie, has a toxic household, mostly her father, who forced her to not have any opinion and stay quiet and invisible at all times. She figured if she won't speak up against the violence and torture, she would be able to bear it and her father would at least spare her sister, even when she gets married to Mr. dash, the cycle of abuse continues because of this, she never got a chance to experience stability in her life. The constant battle between trying to survive and maintaining stability in life she couldn't focus on having any assertive opinions of her own because that would hamper the safety of her and her loved ones. It is until she meets Shug, she realizes that she's allowed to have her own opinions and experiences and that her life was not conjoined with her family. Shug teaches her what it was like to have her individuality even though she was marked by society for being an opinionated woman, she was constantly criticized for making herself her priority and called "sick" for breaking the order of society and for choosing a different life than the monotonous life of a lot of

women of that time. Shug is an example of a highly differentiated self, she is well aware of her needs, and she helps Celie by inspiring her to be herself and not let anybody impose an identity on her.

Collete Dowling, an American author, described '**The Cinderella complex**' (4) in her book entitled 'The Cinderella complex: women's hidden fear of independence (1981)', This complex takes its name from Cinderella fairytale Princess, as she waits for her man "The Prince Charming" to save her from the miserable life she was living. In the fairytale when "The Prince" is trying to find Cinderella, she puts in almost no effort to make that process easy for him, thus forming the notion that the women need to be saved or rescued by a man. According to the story the woman has to suffer her whole life and has no option other than to wait for Prince Charming to end her misery, the portrayal of women being helpless and at the mercy of men in a lot of fairy tales, young girls grow up believing that getting a man is the only goal they must achieve to feel whole. A climate of opinion is created that a woman should not worry about her own needs, wants, and opinions but just be dependent on her significant other and in most cases a man. A lot of girls Living in an oppressed and depressive society believe that only a man can provide a solution for their problems, and they must wait for the perfect man who would come riding on a White Horse. It is believed that the woman needs to be perfect, beautiful, and feminine enough for that perfect man, for instance, most girls at young ages are given dolls to play with to bestow upon the idea of motherhood. It is expected from women to be attractive, sacrificial, Patient, and sexually innocent so that a man could choose her to provide her with security and identity.

This dependence of women on men leads to the loss of self and even though they are brought up in an environment in which they can have a differentiated self they lose it later in life when they get married. A woman could be goal-oriented and financially independent, but presuppositions of society exist because of the gender norms and to fit in those societies women have to fulfill the criteria. Even after all the feminist movements, Motherhood is considered the most beautiful part of a woman's life, and unless she becomes a mother all her achievements aren't considered worthy. A low level of self-differentiation leads to greater dependence on men in society, this dependency leads to unrealistic expectations from men, the women rely on men for all the decision-making, which then leads to dissatisfaction in women as the final decision doesn't incorporate the consideration of their opinion. It makes women believe they are helpless and cannot do anything to change or improve their life or, that their life doesn't depend on their own decisions but rather they must be helped by someone else usually a man.

Since early childhood, the upbringing and nurturing of the opposite gender is sexist. Men are made to do outside tasks of the household and the women are made to stay at home, when men are given trucks or building blocks to play with, women are given utensils and dolls. This trains women to do the household work and to take care of people in their life but the men are trained to do the skillful work.

In 'The Color Purple', Celie accepts her dejected life as it is without rebelling against it, because of the constant torture she had gone through she loses all her hopes of a better life. That is only until Shug comes into her life that she realizes her true self. Because of taking the role of mother at such a young age, she becomes a People pleaser for later years of her life. She stays quiet so that she doesn't offend anyone. Shug's personality is the total opposite of Celie, the contrast in their individuality is what sparks hope in the eyes of Celie, she starts to believe she too can be like Shug. The criticism directed towards Shug doesn't bother Celie because she remained confident and didn't let anyone force an opinion on her. Such harsh criticism was directed towards Shug because she had the potential to seriously threaten the structure of society and how women should behave. Social structures are created in a way that benefits men and their needs. *Allan Johnson (5)*, a *sociologist of masculinities* identifies this social stratification and recognizes the fear of men is a patriarchy's core motivating force, Patriarchy encourages men to seek status to compete with other men and be defensive against the humiliation faced by patriarchy.

In the patriarchal setup, a woman is used as a trophy summarizing a man's success against another man, men demean women in front of other men to be accepted and if a man doesn't want to do so, the pressure to adopt a mean attitude towards women to be masculine enough takes over. Society teaches men to suppress their emotions and for many men, women are chains to link them by the world of emotions, when women are not able to fulfill their needs, they are often blamed for being not loving or sexual enough.

Shug's personality was the focus of criticism because she was in connection with her spirituality and sexuality, if a woman is sexually potent and goes to several men for her pleasure she is frowned upon. A good woman should only belong to a single man (6). *Polyandry* is criticized more than polygamy. In many religions, polygamy is accepted as a social construct but polyandry is strictly restricted.

*Tony Humphreys (7)*, Writing about self-esteem and sexuality mentions how some people either over-belong or under-belong to a particular community for instance, to parents, teachers, and relatives, creating confusion in sexuality and sexual intimacy. Self-esteem and sexual behavior are interlinked, as heightened promiscuity can be emotionally healthy for both men and women, Shug's character in 'The color purple' was well aware of her sexual identity which, according to society, brings shame to her and her family but makes her feel content with herself. Not only she knows pleasure and identifies it as a need, but she also inspires other women to prioritize their own needs above all.

Having one's individuality and differentiated self could lead to higher satisfaction in life. *Ed Diener (8)* And his work on subjective well-being, found that every individual measures life satisfaction differently than others as it is not unheard, of people, who have low income or poor health have a higher life satisfaction than many of their friends who have it all. Even though there might be no objective way to measure life satisfaction it has a great deal to do with Feeling content. It can

be seen in Walker's *The Color Purple* that even though Celie's life didn't change as she was still married to Mr. dash and was still living the usual life but it was after meeting Shug and growing into a resilient woman, she feels satisfied with herself. She had no control over her circumstances and couldn't fight against the injustice she was going through. Shug made her realize the importance of love and contentment in life.

A study conducted about the relations between *differentiation of self and satisfaction with life amongst Israeli women: a cross-cultural perspective (9)*, Found that a possible association between satisfaction with life in Arab women relies on *Bowens theory(1)*, In which high level of differentiation was associated with greater levels of psychological adaptations of the problems and mental health, as well differentiated people can guard their emotions and intellect while also contributing to personal relationships. The connection between emotions and satisfaction in life is a cycle of adaptation to stress and anxiety and well-differentiated people can cope and handle it in a much more mature way than people belonging to low levels of differentiation. These people tend to have a low level of disassociation with their emotions, thus taking responsibility and accountability for their actions.

*Nora Sabahat (10)*, In the study of self-differentiation and why it matters in families and relationships, found that emotional transmission of negative emotions was more contagious than of positive ones, which influences the psychological and physical health of people in personal relationships. Negative emotions such as disassociation of feelings and unaccountability of emotions can lead to problems in interpersonal relationships in which one of the people suffers a great deal.

One of the implications of having a low level of self-differentiation is displaced aggression. *University of Science and Technology of China* researched the effects of anger and trigger identity on **Trigger Displaced Aggression (11)**, based on the premise that a man who was severely insulted by his boss comes home and instead of petting his dog kick set with all his strength, thus It is also called kicking the barking dog effect. TDA (11) refers to a reaction by an individual who is unable to respond to the initial source of provocation but when provoked by a relatively weak trigger situation, engages in aggressive behavior that does not come close to the initial conflict. According to the **Ego Depletion theory (12)**, one's self-control resources are not in abundance because of which they can get easily exhausted, having low levels of self-esteem and the inability to do anything could increase aggression which can also lead to individuals engaging in immoral or illegal acts. If the consecutive time between both the aggressive episodes is different there is a low level of self-control which results in a higher level of displaced aggression, and compared to other emotions such as sadness or neutral emotions, anger can prompt individuals to make more hostile inferences.

Celie's father can be seen as having a low level of differentiation because of which, he doesn't care if his wife is sick or dead, he replaces her with his daughter thus using the aggression and sadness of the loss of someone in sexual aggression. He stays in denial of the fact that his wife has died

and even though he was not fond of her she still was a part of his life, unable to process this trauma he stays in denial and tries to direct the aggression into a sexual one, in the process raping her daughter and traumatizing her for life.

## V. CONCLUSION

Celie's Life is a representation of how trauma and an unfulfilled childhood can affect a person and make them silent to injustice for a long period. While her father, husband, and society expected her to not speak against anything that was happening to her she gets inspired by Shug's personality to find happiness and peace even in times of crisis, her character portrays how the level of differentiation with self can affect a person's happiness and overall satisfaction with life, even though her living situation didn't change she was still tortured by her husband, but by Shug's help, she was able to explore her self-identity. She mentions several times that even though she has had sex before she had never experienced pleasure, she wasn't connected to the body that was experiencing sex because her father constantly raped her in her childhood. Shug's personality depicts how a well-differentiated self can inspire other people to have autonomy and express their emotions. Society criticized Shug constantly for being self-aware but she didn't let anyone cloud her opinions, and always believed in making her judgments.

Male characters in the novel, such as Celie's father, also convey how denial can affect a person's life and also of people associated with them. The father displaced the aggression on her daughter and she grew up as a reflection of him. Bowen's Theory of self-differentiation (1) Outlines how family systems affect the individuality of a person and how an unstable household can affect self-esteem, intellectual capacity, reasoning, decision-making, beliefs, and knowledge negatively. A person grows up believing the chaos of their childhood home is an acceptable environment thus choosing partners that mirror the same chaos. The cycle of abuse continues, a lot of times people aren't aware of what a peaceful household is because all they have seen are people with relationships that were entangled with each other leading to dysfunction in the family. There is a possibility that a person comes out of a dysfunctional household having a higher level of differentiation and the ability to take their own decisions and have autonomy in their life, but there is a much higher possibility that they emerge at the same or even lower level of differentiation as their parents.

The upbringing of women in a patriarchal society hampers their self-worth. An unstable and dysfunctional childhood can affect them for a long time, thus choosing a person that mirrors the chaos of their childhood and fusing their personality to the partner or children. It becomes difficult for the parental figure when the children grow up and form their personalities. The Parents attach themselves to the family to an extent that it becomes their life purpose to make everyone feel loved, but when the children grow up and demand space and autonomy in their decision-making, it becomes uncomfortable for them. When the children don't get the required freedom to grow their individuality which is different from the family, it

affects their future relationships. This cycle continues until someone breaks the generational trauma and the family projection process. Celie's situation indicates if she hadn't found Shug, she would have stayed in the vicious cycle of being oppressed and unhappy with her life just like her mother. No one was there to make her aware or educate her about the injustice she was going through, she accepted her fate without rebelling, and this acceptance made the cyclic rotation of generational trauma stronger. To break the cycle and reverse the effects of a dysfunctional family and oppressive society one needs to break the pattern by perceiving and being in connection with their emotions. A well-differentiated self is conscious of the abuse happening to them and takes charge of revolutionizing the situation. A lot of times due to helplessness or lack of resources and support, people are unable to form a school of thought or speak up opposing the circumstances Even though the situations are unpreventable, recognizing maltreatment and oppression during the injustice period, goes a long way.

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