

Breaking the Chains of Violence: Celie's Journey in Spielberg's *The Color Purple*

Christian Wongso Gunawan¹, Jenny Mochtar²

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University, Siwalankerto
121 - 131, Surabaya, 60236, INDONESIA

E-mail: a11190006@john.petra.ac.id¹, jennymd@petra.ac.id²

ABSTRACT

The African American films influence social perceptions, cultural values, and representation in media and how they reflect contemporary issues such as politics, gender, and race. Steven Spielberg decided to take on the challenge of directing *The Color Purple* (1985) because he was inspired by the highly influential novel by Alice Walker. This thesis intends to reveal the violence and resistance experienced by Celie as an African American woman in *The Color Purple*. Using Johan Galtung's theories of violence I can identify types of violence that Celie experiences which are physical, psychological, and cultural. I also apply Patricia Hills' theory on empowerment to analyze the way Celie frees herself from the violence by creating a positive image of herself, and by getting support from the other black women. In conclusion, *The Color Purple* provides an in-depth analysis of how a woman overcomes a patriarchal form of violence and achieves personal autonomy.

Keywords: black women, positive self-image, violence

INTRODUCTION

African-American films focus on the experiences and struggles of African Americans. In many works of African American film, the writers often bring the brutal realities of slavery, the struggles for freedom, and the lasting impact on the African American identity and culture. Mostly they use themes of resistance and empowerment that are central to African American films, showcasing the strength and resilience of Black characters in the face of adversity (Mckinsey, 2021). African American writers often highlight acts of defiance against oppressive systems and the pursuit of personal and collective empowerment. One notable African American writer is Alice Walker who wrote a novel, *The Color Purple* which is adapted into films.

The film received much praise and was nominated for an award, proving that Steven Spielberg as director of the movie could adapt to various genres and explore different points of view in filmmaking. Provides an insight into society and raises awareness about those facing violence, oppression, and injustice against a black woman (Novrianti, 2021). The film addresses serious social and cultural issues, including racism and injustice against African-American women in the early 20th century. The adaptation is based on a novel written by Alice Walker and published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in 1982. Alice Walker is known as an African American novelist, activist, poet, and essayist. She as a writer of *The Color Purple* received critical acclaim and was awarded the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. The novel has been widely read and studied, and its themes of gender inequality, self-discovery, and female solidarity continue to resonate with readers today (Novrianti, 2021).

The Color Purple highlights the enduring psychological effects of violence and oppression. Celie's transformation from deep despair to a position of empowerment exemplifies the strength and resilience of African American women as they confront their traumatic experiences. The narrative is

enriched by Celie's letters, which serve as a means to express her inner pain, demonstrating how trauma can foster a sense of isolation and despair (Lewis,2017). Illustrates the journey of healing that can emerge from the bonds formed between women. Through these relationships, the narrative underscores the significance of community and sisterhood in the process of overcoming collective trauma. The connections that Celie forges with other women become a source of strength, enabling her to navigate her pain and ultimately find her voice (Magdalene,2012). The film critiques a society that perpetuates gender and racial oppression. Celie's evolution from a submissive wife to an independent woman who stands up for herself became the themes of empowerment and liberation.

To understand more deeply about the character, Celie Harris is the character who represents resilience and self-discovery in racism and patriarchy situations. She endured a lot of trauma, such as sexual abuse and the grief of losing her children, underscoring the harsh realities of her life. Through her interactions with strong female characters like Shug Avery and Sofia, Celie starts to reclaim her identity and assert her agency. Her journey ultimately led to her self-acceptance and celebration of life. Celie's story, *The Color Purple* powerfully conveys the message that, despite overwhelming adversity, the bonds of sisterhood and the pursuit of self-love can lead to profound personal transformation and resilience. (Magdalene,2012).

To be able to analyze Celie, I will apply the theory to explain the kind of violence in Cellie's perspective using the Cultural Violence overview, and overall concept violence theory overview by Johan Galtung. This Violence involves physical, psychological, and cultural. Physical violence brings the visual of beating, choking, or using weapons such as firearms (Galtung, 1990, p.168). Verbal violence is a form of psychological violence that does not involve physical contact but rather uses words to bring down the dignity of others and affect a person's mental health (Galtung, 1969, p. 170). Cultural violence comes from a culture that has been normalized from the beginning or those in power and influence in society. (Galtung, 1990, p. 291). To explain her self-discovery, I use the theory of Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought*. Her empowerment is revealed through community and creating positive self-images. Through community, black women not only gain emotional support when interacting with the community but also access to resources and information that can improve their quality of life (Collins, 1991, p.5). Nattie and Shug Every play an important role in helping Celie through her process to handle the oppression together with giving her a perception for being an independent woman. In a positive self-image, Black women can reclaim their identities and present themselves in a way that reflects their true experiences and values. This act of self-representation is empowering as it allows them to take control of their narratives and challenge societal norms that seek to limit them. (Collins, 1991, p.180).

ANALYSIS

Physical Violence

Throughout Celie's experience, Celie received physical violence. Celie is subjected to violent and unpleasant behavior that damages her body. The evidence can be found when Her stepfather raped Celie. She gives birth to a child while she is still a teenager, and initially, the audience will not understand why Celie is already pregnant at such a young age. After we were shown the process of Celie's pregnancy, her stepfather forcibly took her children away, and Celie herself could not bear to see her newborn child taken away and sold to someone else. Celie does not explicitly tell that she was impregnated or raped by her stepfather, she expresses that she was raped through her confessions to God during her journey.

The data presented above clearly explains that initially, Celie experiences inhumane treatment. In social norms, her stepfather was supposed to protect and care for his daughter but instead forced Celie to have sexual relations. Celie was still very young and in a vulnerable physical condition. She could only resist with all her might and scream for help to give birth to the child that force belonged to her stepfather, but her voice and efforts seemed futile. Which is related to "physical

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violence includes physical contact carried out violently by the perpetrator" (Galtung, 1990, p. 117). As a result of this horrific situation, her stepfather even sold Celie's newborn child to a couple in Monticello, without considering the emotional and psychological impact that Celie and her child would endure.

Another physical violence can be seen when Celie is slapped twice by her husband in the kitchen and outside the house. Albert is not satisfied with her performance as a wife due to not following what her husband wants. Galtung himself stated is "One of the direct forms of violence that is exercised directly by an actor. This violence is visible and of a physical nature" (Galtung, 1969, p. 170). Her reaction is shock, holding back the pain and not fighting back. Celie does not have strong resilience and becomes a target of a patriarchal system that normalizes violence against women, it makes her feel powerless and voiceless (Galtung, 1990, p.175). In structural violence, "violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances" (Galtung, 1969, p. 182). Celie internalizes the view that she has no power to change the circumstances she faces, which is reflected in most women in turn reinforcing their position as a victim.

Psychological Violence

Through psychological violence, Celie experiences verbal abuse, affecting her psychology and causing her to lack self-confidence from the very beginning. One example of psychological violence is the abuse Cellie gets for her looks. It starts in the first scene during childhood, when Celie is still going through her teenage years. Her stepfather calls Celie a form of praise that belittles her when he says "Celie, you got the ugliest smile this side of creation". According to Galtung, Verbal violence usually consists of things that belittle, embarrass, or mock the victim (Galtung,1990, p.172). Her stepfather also verbally abuses Celie's purity. Since he sold his daughter to someone else, and ultimately, Celie is sold to Mr. Albert. When Mr. Albert comes to Cellie's house, there is evidence Her stepfather tells Albert, "She is the oldest and should marry first, she ain't fresh, but I expect you know that she's spoiled twice." It means Celie is no longer a virgin". Her father saw her as worthless, because of her virginity, and anyone could get Celie like a prostitute. This affected Celie's mentality that she was worthless, even though at the time Celie did not respond or fully understand herself as a damaged woman.

Another Verbal abuse also comes when Celie is resistant to Albert, He mocks Celie's appearance; "You're ugly. You're skinny. You're shaped funny." Albert also mocks her inability spontaneously "You're black. You're poor, you're ugly, you're a woman! You're nothing!" These words are openly insulting Celie's physical appearance, considering Celie a bad woman in every way. Making Celie a woman who has no value. Whatever Albert hates the way Celie does, Albert constantly talks about her appearance. According to Galtung's ideas, psychological violence can pose significant mental health challenges in society. Individuals who are victimized often face issues such as anxiety, depression, and decreased self-esteem, all of which can interfere with their ability to interact and function well in social settings (Galtung,1990, p.174).

Cultural Violence

The other kind of violence that Celie experiences is cultural violence. Galtung's idea of recognizing cultural violence reflects the attitudes and beliefs that have been embedded in individuals since childhood, which reinforces the view that violence has power and plays an important role in life. When her stepfather sold Celie to Mr.Albert, it was part of cultural violence, Celie's life has been filled with various forms of cultural violence since she was young. She is used as an object of financial transaction through her marriage to Mr. Albert, which shows that women are viewed as commodities in her society. Cultural violence can be seen in whole direct violence. In terms of Cultural Violence, we can see from the overall perspective of this film, that Celie is trapped in Mr. Albert's house, gets used by Albert as part of violence that becomes the patriarchal cultural norm.

"Cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right—at least not wrong." (Galtung, 1990, p. 291) which means all violence that Celie has from Mr. Albert and her stepfather is legal to their culture.

Furthermore, the culture of social standards triggers Celie's self-esteem based on her race and appearance. "I'm ugly, I'm black, I'm poor." - Celie. The evidence supports when Albert gives Shug every different behavior, so Celie believes that beautiful people are more worthy of love. This is influenced by social norms that link beauty and self-esteem. Finally, the culture of beauty relies heavily on the role of women. As a result, Celie begins to believe that she is "ugly" and "poor," which shows how these cultural norms shape her self-perception and contribute to her acceptance of the violence she experiences.

Johan Galtung's ideas, the cultural environment in which women live often takes their suffering for granted, just as Celie was subjected to a lot of violent behavior. The beliefs that exist in a society that views women as lesser beings also reinforce the feelings of helplessness they experience (Galtung, 1990, p. 291). This entrenched culture creates norms that make women feel trapped in their prescribed roles. It is evident that Celie is a victim of cultural violence and Galtung justifies it through his notion of cultural violence where the norms and values that exist in society legitimize or make direct and structural violence commonplace (Galtung, 1990, p. 291).

Creating Positive Self-images by Making Herself Able to Read and Write.

As mentioned, and discussed earlier, Celie experiences physical violence, psychological violence, and cultural violence. This prompted Celie to build herself up better, starting with encouraging herself to be able to read and write. reclaim their identities and present themselves in a way that reflects their true experiences and values. Celie found her positive self-image by making herself able to read and write. Celie's knowledge is limited by a situation in which she is uneducated due to her stepfather never educating or bringing her to school since her mother died but since profoundly impacted by the presence of her sister, Nettie, who brings Celie to become a critical thinker. Nettie teaches her word by word, which is where Celie begins to educate herself. Collin's idea that "Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential for the survival of the subordinate." (Collins, 1991, p.180). Collins believes that education involves more than simply acquiring information; it also encompasses the development of critical consciousness and wisdom to help marginalized individuals move toward liberation which is how Celie resists and survives based on the education that she has from Natie. As a result, Celie reads more fluently time by time when the vocabulary becomes more difficult. Not only that, Nettie's education influences Celie.

By embracing the teachings Celie rediscovers her voice and sets out on a journey towards independence and self-realization toward her process from education that Nettie gives. Collin comments on women "I knew that when an individual Black woman's consciousness concerning how she understands her everyday life changes, she can become empowered. Such consciousness may stimulate her to embark on a path of personal freedom, even if it exists initially primarily in her mind. If she is lucky enough to meet others who are undergoing similar journeys, she and they can change the world around them."(Collin, 1991, p.185).

Creating Positive Self-images by Being Financially Independent

Celie's second positive self-image is developing herself in the economic field. It started after she was left by her husband. This allowed Celie to survive on her own without Albert and live without suffering. Collin proves that black women can survive when they have the essential self-definition, for Black women's needs to survive (Collin,1991, p.97). Financial independence is very important in determining one's identity, as it allows individuals to make decisions without being bound by the economic constraints of others. Collins explains that economic independence gives women the power to demonstrate their autonomy and counter stereotypes that often portray them as dependent or depressed (Collin,1991, p.97). Celie's resistance can be proven through her work, proving that a

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woman can do amazing things and not all men can do. seen Harpo saying "I never figured I'd wear pants. Not of all the things Miss Celie made" a testament to his admiration for women like Cellie as independent women.

Through the ideas that Collin provided "This relationship between respect, independence, and assertiveness towards others and oneself, proves that few black women can afford to risk death because they can do so economically on their own (Collins, p.116). Being financially independent for women is very crucial in determining their self-identity, just like Celie, in the end. Celie found her own identity by building a Tailoring business. By having this independence, a black woman can make decisions without being affected by the economic limitations set by others. This is an important step for Celie to achieve freedom and control over her own life. Collins also argues that economic independence provides an opportunity for women to assert their rights and autonomy. When women have sufficient financial resources, they can challenge stereotypes that often portray them as weak or dependent on others.

The Support from the Other Black Women

Celie learns to read because to Nettie, and without her sister, she might have stayed stuck in her negative thoughts. Nettie offers different perspectives and lessons that help Celie develop her critical thinking skills. This gradual increase in knowledge allows her to reflect on her life with Albert, encouraging her to think more broadly. Ultimately, this empowerment helps her resist Albert and make better choices for her future. Additionally, Celie receives support from other Black women, like Shug, who help her discover her self-worth and motivate her to stand up against Mr. Albert in her quest for freedom. This choice wasn't easy for her, but various factors motivated her to finally take the step to lift the heavy burden she had been carrying. It marked a significant moment for Celie as she stood up against the injustice and oppression she faced. When she started to question her circumstances, she found hope in a letter from Nettie, which Shug Avery had given her before dinner. The letter shared Nettie's life updates, revealing that she was alive and that Celie's children, Adam and Olivia, were also doing well. Nettie conveyed a powerful message: that miracles and blessings from God are possible for those who believe. The letters symbolize the strong connection between the two sisters, highlighting themes of resilience, love, and the enduring bonds of family, even when they are apart. This encouragement from her community inspires Celie to take action.

Another support is when Nettie gives Celie Affirmation. There is Affirmation applied by Nettie, it is also emphasized by Patricia Hill, "Affirmation is also an important part of women's call for self-definition, which can take place in individual friendships and familial relationships of Black women." (Collins, 1991, p.110). The Affirmation convinces Celie that she can get out of this problem and live in peace. For example, in the subtitle where Celie read "And now God has sent me to watch over them to protect and cherish them to lavish all the love I feel for you on them. It's a miracle, isn't it? and it will no doubt be impossible for you to believe." This affirmation shapes Celie's mindset into a woman who is confident in what she wants, making her aware that God is with her and giving strength to Celie, this affirmation forms a pattern that illustrates how to overcome Celie's internalized negative perceptions within herself for empowerment and self-affirmation. This idea is also supported by Collins "Black feminist thought can empower Black women by affirming, rearticulating, and publicly expressing a Black feminist consciousness. (Collins, 1991, p.110) which is where self-definition arises through the empowerment mentioned earlier. This is what encourages Celie to rediscover or encourage her identity as a strong woman.

This becomes a final state for Celie as she begins to accept and celebrate her identity as a valuable individual, worthy of happiness and love. According to Collins, this decision symbolizes the awakening of her self-awareness and the affirmation of her right to live with dignity (Collins, 1991, p.113). Celie can resist at the end of the scene. Celie has chosen self-definition; it gives Celie adrenaline to fight back with Albert's actions by retaliating or criticizing firmly. Like Collins said

“These words and the feelings they invoke demonstrate her growing awareness and self-definition of the situation she encountered. Even though Celine looks weak physically, she dares to threaten with a knife so that Albert doesn't mess with her again. “They offer to the listener not sadness and remorse, but anger that leads to action. This is the type of individuality” (Collins,1991, p.113). This proves that Celie was not just aware of the situation, she just did not stand and is sad but she is finally able to release her pent-up anger to Albert which leads her to deflect negative thoughts. Celie's final move after the debate with Albert is to leave Albert without hesitation, in this part, Shug Every and Celie are fighting together by helping Celie escape from Albert.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the kinds of violence that Celie experiences can be categorized into 3 kinds which are physical, psychological, and cultural. With the help of her sister and friend, she is able to free herself from the violence and create a positive self-image of herself. Celie has experienced these kinds of violence since she was very young. Her stepfather does the first physical violence in the form of rape, and she is then sold to Mr. Albert, who becomes her husband. She also experiences physical violence from her husband when she is beaten because her husband is not satisfied with her performance as a wife. Furthermore, she also experiences psychological violence. The first psychological violence is done by her stepfather in the form of verbal abuse when she is being told for having an ugly smile. Another verbal abuse that Celie experiences is when she is considered a lowly woman because she has lost her virginity. Another verbal abuse is done by her husband who mocks her appearance. Third, the first cultural violence that Celie experiences is done by her stepfather who sells Celie as a child to marry Mr. Albert, and the second cultural violence is done by her husband. Albert as husband can dictate what Celie as wife can or cannot do.

After she experiences these 3 kinds of violence, she is able to free herself through empowerment. The first empowerment is done by creating a positive self-image of herself. She educates herself by being able to read and write. The second positive self-image created by Celie is by being financially independent. In addition, the positive self-image can happen because Celie gets support from Nettie in the form of helping Celie to study new words, spelling, and read books. The second support is done by Shug and Sofia, they encourage Celie to challenge the norms that have bound her and push Celie to fight back against Mr. Albert to gain her freedom. The analysis provides an in-depth analysis of how a woman overcomes a patriarchal form of violence and achieves personal autonomy. Celie's journey serves as a powerful example of how personal transformation can lead to empowerment and the assertion of women's rights to freedom and respect from black women by being resistant through self-definition.

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