



## Strands of Compassion Fatigue in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to highlight the strands of compassion fatigue which is evident in the life of Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Compassion fatigue takes place in highly stressed individuals or characters who are easily drawn to the suffering of others by nature. It happens when emotional and physical stress response begins to occur from the gradual depletion of empathy or from the ability to nurture others. It provides explanation for psychological, emotional and physical toll which can occur while dutifully offering help to others. Compassion fatigue takes a major toll on Celie in *The Color Purple* while caring and helping others thereby leaving her totally drained, exhausted and disconnected. This paper attempts to present the struggles that caregivers, like Celie go through and how they become burned out or apathetic through the psychotherapeutic approach. It becomes obvious that Celie's compassion fatigue is a reflection of her need for psychotherapy. Compassion fatigue poses a risk to the individual who neglects personal mental health at the expense of helping others. Due to the emotional and physical demands of the persons around Celie, who are suffering or dealing with trauma while she constantly gives her time, energy, love and strength to attend to their own needs to a point of exhaustion. It explores the concept of Compassion fatigue and the major life-threatening dangers it can pose in the life of the caregiving individual. Celie's epistolary therapy through her letters serve as a tool for self-therapy which eventually put her on the path to healing.

**Keywords:** Compassion Fatigue, Celie, Burned Out, Caregiving, *The Color Purple*

### Introduction

Compassion fatigue occurs when individuals devote much time in caring for others and eventually get drained and exhausted. They are emotionally and physically burnt out while providing support and care for others without any consideration for themselves. Compassion fatigue brings about frustration due to stress and depression caused by constant exposure to trauma and the sufferings of other people. Tarakci et al., (2023) notes that compassion fatigue is a concept used to express the feeling of exhaustion and fatigue after a while in people who constantly give emotional support or empathy to others. It is a situation especially seen in caregivers such as health workers and social workers. This reveals that after a period of caring for others, the emotional burden takes a major toll on the caregivers and this leads to fatigue and burnout. Celie assumed the role of a caregiver after it was forced upon her by her step-father, Alphonso in *The Color Purple* and this left her totally exhausted as revealed in her epistolary narrative. Raised in a predominately black neighborhood in rural Georgia, Celie started narrating her pain, ordeals and trauma to God through letters. Constantly beaten, raped and impregnated by her step-father, Celie had to still put up with him regardless of her situation. She provided care for her ailing and dying mother, protected Nettie, her sister and performed conjugal duties for her pedophilic step-father. Wu & Lu (2025) mentioned that compassion fatigue or job burn out is due to prolonged exposure to various types of traumatic realities. Celie is repeatedly exposed to the suffering, trauma and distress of others by providing care for them. She neglects self-care and her mental well-being. However, feeling empathy and compassion for others while experiencing high levels of stress can lead to compassion fatigue, leaving the carer unable to help their patients sufficiently (Coetzee & Klopper, 2010).

The setting of Celie's story is unmistakably among poor blacks in rural areas of the South. Having very little exposure to education or the outside world, Celie is lives most of her life very isolated and ignorant (Mogea, 2022). Celie actively cared for and provided emotional and physical support for her stepfather, sibling, husband,

his children, Shug Avery and most of the people that crossed her path. Apparently, Shug Avery is her husband's mistress and Celie was mandated to provide care when she took ill. Celie cared for Shug Avery until she was fully recovered. Research shows that caring for others can result in both positive and negative outcomes like compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue (Geoffron et al., 2016; Stamm, 2010). The caregivers' ability to empathize, their desire to care, and their care skills can lead to a decrease in staff energy over time. Several sources of stress, such as time pressure, insufficient social support. Excessive workload, uncertainty in treatments, conflicts with health personnel, and the working process, can cause burnout, intensity, and physical and/or mental health problems (Kalinkara & Kalayci, 2018; Moc, 2023). Celie in *The Color Purple* took upon herself the duty of caring for her sibling, Nettie at an early age and continued to do so her abusive husband and his children. Turgoose & Maddox (2017) maintain that compassion fatigue is comprised and burnout and is described as the culmination of the negative impacts of working in a psychologically upsetting environment that can impact on an individual's ability to feel compassion for others. Celie constantly finds herself in this situation and was often willing to offer emotional and physical support to others notwithstanding the toxic atmosphere she found herself in. Walker (1982) writes:

*He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don't never git used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook (11).*

### Impact of Compassion Fatigue

Shafqat et al, (2024) notes that compassion fatigue refers to the emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by prolonged exposure to the suffering of others. Compassion fatigue took a major toll on Celie psychologically, emotionally and physically. In her epistolary narrative she is perceived as having developed a somewhat cynical view about life and was pessimistic. Walker (1982) reveals Celie's convictions:

*I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say everything listening. But I'm here (210).*

She was constantly told that she was ugly and accepts to see beauty in others. Walker (1992) reveals her reaction to Shug Avery's beauty, Celie confesses, "The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me." Celie was constantly under stress while providing care for others made Celie to neglect herself and she is left with low esteem and self-doubt in addition reduced confidence. Compassion fatigue leads to detachment, burnout, and emotional depletion, affecting caregivers' well-being and service quality (Shafqat, 2024). Celie was embracing a life of withdrawal and self-isolation while caring for others.

Compassion fatigue can give rise to a gamut of negative emotions, including anger, annoyance, intolerance, irritability, skepticism, cynicism, embitterment, and resentment (Stoewen, 2020). Even though, Celie was forcefully married to Albert, he treated her like a domestic servant, and she dedicated all her time trying to serve him, his mistress and the children. Compassion fatigue is a type of caregiver burnout which is developed by those persons who interact with traumatized individuals (Figley, 2002). Alphonso sexually assaulted her and made her continue to wait on him hand and foot. He had already impregnated her twice and the children are taken away from Celie. Zhang (2024) confirms this as she reveals that Celie was raped by her stepfather when she was young and abused by her husband after marriage. Her tragic experience made her feel disgusted and afraid of men. She was emotionally drained and eventually became numb and detached from reality. Alphonso convinced her that it was pointless to reveal her situation to others and she resorts to letter writing to God. Walker, (1992) captures his threat "You bet never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy." Out of fear, Celie obeys him and provided sexual comfort for her pedophilic parent without questions.

The negative psychological and physical impacts of compassion fatigue involved hopelessness, deep physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion; disconnection from others, and affected the well-being of care providers (Figley, 1995). Celie continues to struggle under the burden of caring for everyone around her amidst work and stress, emotional fatigue and the feeling of detachment. Her letters to God reveal that she has trust issues and could not tell a soul about her ordeals. She was ready to disconnect from others by not sharing her troubles but she constantly provided care for them. Stoewen, (2020) pinpoints that with compassion fatigue, the caring, feeling, and acts of compassion decline, replaced by an outwardly impassive detachment. The person becomes more task and less emotion-focused and may increasingly pull away from others, becoming socially isolated.

Essentially, compassion fatigue disturbs the ability to think clearly, modulate emotions, feel effective, and maintain hope (Stoewen, 2020). Celie often blamed herself for everything that happens to her and this affects her mental health. In the relentless pursuit of healing others, Celie completely forgets to nurture and nourish herself. With regards to the negative impact of compassion fatigue, Malik, (2024) mentioned that an important aspect of this condition is emotional exhaustion that is a feeling when one is no longer be able to give oneself to others.

## Conclusion

This paper highlights the idea of compassion fatigue as in the case of Celie and how the consequences are inevitable and significant to the suffering caregiver. Celie's case is noteworthy as her epistolary narration provides multiple emotional hazards that plummeted her self-esteem and affected her mental well-being. The position of Celie here as a slave or property – consistent with her father and subsequently with her husband, and she is dependent upon for the domestic, field and sexual labour (Abed & Sarwade, 2022). Her epistolary narrative suggest that she tackled situations quietly. Caregivers' having to silence their conscience to continue care can lead to remorse (Ericson Lidman et al., 2013). Compassion fatigue is insidious. As a person's ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving change, and these changes impact physical and mental health (Stoewen, 2020). As a caregiver, Celie faced untold emotional, physical and psychological pains that she captures in her letters to God and Nettie. Ceylantekin et al. (2023) mentioned that caregivers face situations such as sleep deprivation, exhaustion, social isolation, stress, and depression following provision of long- term care, which results in ignorance of healing problems, compassion fatigue, and a form of burnout. By trying to suppress her own pains and hurt, she covers or internalizes her wounds and exhaustion and refuse to let on. Celie provides emotional support for Shug Avery and the other women even though she was perpetually neglected. Her mental well-being was on the edge because she not allowed to speak for herself or defend herself. This led to isolating Celie from what is happening around her such as concealing her mails and keeping them hidden from her for several years. Tekin et al., (2025) reports that compassion is an emotion is viewed as an emotion that arise whenever an individual witness another person's pain and makes a move to help them. Given the encounters posed by compassion fatigue, it is critical to prioritize preventive measures, seeing its potential impact on caregivers like Celie. This paper concludes that with this knowledge on compassion fatigue, one must note that there is a cost for caring and getting burnt-out in the process. Celie's experience is a journey that takes her from one emotional stop to another until her healing process began. A deep insight into the idea of compassion fatigue can become a useful and optimistic concept of understanding human behavior and experiences. In line with these narratives, one may recommend that further studies dwell on how compassion fatigue affects the opposite genders who play key roles literature. Wynn, (2020) notes that as a related but distinct phenomenon, compassion fatigue refers to feelings of social, psychological and biological exhaustion that occur after long exposure to compassionate stress. Compassion fatigue does not only affect one gender, race or occupation. It is very important to broaden the scope to include other genders and status thereby showing that various individuals are still susceptible to compassion fatigue. It can be explored further down the line to investigate how the challenges brought about by compassion fatigue can equally affects any one no matter their status or race.

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