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Alice Walker's Colors of Identity

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The paper traces back women like Celie, Shug, Sofia or Nettie engaged in journeys of self-discovery and development, ones that follow predicted feminist patterns, who try to get free from any dominance, either be it male, social or cultural. The colour purple signifies a metaphysical, social and personal rebirth reflected into different shades by their inner self. The social oppression for black women in their quest for freedom is the main theme of Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, written in the epistolary technique of Samuel Richardson's in the XVIIIth century English novel. In our attempt to analyse the theme and the female characters of the novel we are also trying to cross a bridge from the slave woman of the past belonging to a completely different culture and race to the contemporary paradigm of the liberated woman. The movement in time encompasses possible similitudes and differences.

Keywords: black women, identity, quest, letters, cultures

Introduction

African American women writers have created women characters who pass on their knowledge of life and survival through their culture and history from one generation to the next. The characters are neither perfect nor flawed. They are all trying to survive in an imperfect world that judges them because of the color of their skin and their gender. This knowledge enables the next generation of African American women to rise above the conditions in which they live and to reach a new level of understanding about life and about what it means to be an African American woman. Their literature reveals black women's efforts to redefine black womanhood. Particularly, the works show the common theme of women locating women-centred places for articulating black women's existence and identities outside powers that distort African American women's realities. To change the controlled and distorted images of African American women and to realize black women's autonomy, a radical change must take place within black female psyches in response to white dominant ideology. The transformation, in the case of black female subjectivity, comes out of a changed black female consciousness regarding how African American women see themselves. When African American women realize a new consciousness, black female autonomy and self-determination will emerge. Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Ntozake Shange, and Paule Marshall are novelists and artists who share the same principles.

Alice Walker, poet, fiction writer, and activist for the women's rights explores the issue of the spiritual survival of black people in her writings. This search leads her to discuss issues that other writers have avoided and issues that anger many of her critics. Undeterred, Walker continues to find roads to wholeness and to describe

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those roads in her writing. She is also committed to causes that go beyond the black community, seeing blacks as a part of a larger world that we must save from destruction. She has described herself as a "womanist" rather than a "black feminist", defining "womanish" as "referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior" and a "womanist" as being "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female".

On Being a Black Woman in White America

In a 1973 interview, Alice Walker said:

> I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black woman… For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world.

This statement is a succinct explanation of what all Walker's work tries to do. In novels, stories, poems and essays, she explores the issue of the spiritual survival of black people in search for some sense of identity and autonomy.

Although it is less well-known than her fiction, Alice Walker's poetry is integral to her development as a writer. Walker's poetry is a significant contribution to American letters, expressing the African-American female consciousness. Even in poems written about specific instances of prejudice, although Walker shows indignation, her ultimate conclusion is that change must take place within the individual. In her poetry, Walker works through personal conflict, feelings, moods, and concerns, these freely exposing the self.

An increasingly nature vision marks Walker's second book of poems *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, which won the Lillian Smith Award of the Southern Regional Council. The title poem of this poem concerns Sammy Lou, an "incorrect" woman who has killed her husband's white murderer and, on her way to the electric chair, reminds her children to water her petunias. There is a particular kind of sensitivity that envelops a black woman's self, figuratively reflected in different flowery embodiments like petunias in her poetry or lavender with their color purple that she perceives with Celie's eyes when walking through the fields in her admiration of God's creation.

It certainly makes one think of *The Color Purple*, the story of Celie, a barely educated black woman, who is raped by her stepfather and then married off to Mr.___, who needs a good worker to look after his children. Told by her stepfather that she had better tell no one but God about the rape, Celie starts writing letters to God. After her children by her stepfather have been taken away and her sister Nettie has been forced to leave, Celie is wholly alone. However, she slowly develops a community, an extended family that includes Shang, her husband's mistress and only true love, and Sofia who marries Celie's stepson. The love that Celie and Shug come to share allows Celie the freedom to say what she thinks and to develop as an independent woman, both in her sense of self and in her creative life-making the most comfortable pants available.

Eventually, with Shug's help, Celie discovers the letters that Nettie has been writing her for years and that Mr.___ has been hiding. Reading the letters, Celie finds out the truth about her family, and is so disgusted that God would allow such wrongs that she stops writing to him and starts writing to Nettie. Shug shares her conception of God as neither male nor female but present in all creation, and Celie is able by the end of the novel to address a letter of thanksgiving to "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything.

Dear God". She has moved beyond the concept of God as an old white man, to a concept closer to the animism of many indigenous peoples, especially Native Americans and Africans.

Celie writes, addressing her letters to God because she has no one else to write to and because she knows she mustn't ever tell no "body" because her body had been taken from her in turns by the men around her, first by her stepfather and then by her husband, Albert. Her language, too exists through much of the book without a body or audience, just as she exists without a self or identity. There is a correlation between color and identity throughout the novel: at the beginning when she has no identity everything is black but with the repossession of her body, once the process of discovery and developing of the self begins and grows gradually, colors change , too. At the beginning the orthodox Christian God that she inherits from her family looks like her father and in her mind she writes her letters to him, later on after she has read the Bible she finds out that God is a white man and she is no longer interested in him. This is why she is addressing God no more! The discovery of desire—for selfhood, for other, for community for a meaningful place in the Creation makes colors change. Purple may be the color of desire or of accomplished womanhood.

For some critics the color purple stands for the womanist norms of the novel subscribing Alice Walker to her long life endeavour regarding womanism.

"Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender" (Walker, 1976, pp. xi-xii), has become famous by now. With this statement, Walker indicates that both have things in common, but in the end are undeniably different. By ending on this sentence, she moreover closes the circle her definition is, as she began with a similar observation in the first entry, namely that a womanist is a black feminist.

It certainly makes one think of *The Color Purple*, again. Whether this was intended by Walker, we do not know. In her definition of Womanism, Walker indicates several different things that are not easily summed up.

Why she chose purple and lavender as the colors of reference (and not, say, blue and violet), is not clear. However, other colours are also used in order to symbolise the different levels of identity within Celie's personal growth from a marital slave into an independent self confident woman. Avery or Shug, the blues singer is the, sensual, bounteous woman who awakens the brutalized and silenced Celie to her own strength and sexuality. She represents the first identitty that Celie would like to put on in the same way in which she dreams to wear her *purple* dress in the regal *color* of the queens. It is the first time when Celie is impressed by a Black woman feminine look, whose association with purple makes her think that all human beings, irrespective of their *color* may fulfil any dreams, even an apparently impossible one, to become God. With loving song and tender touch, she opens Celie to her own loveliness and possibility and reveals a God who is not the "big and old and tall and graybearded and white" stern codger of Celie's old-time religion but, instead, an expansive God of trees, air, birds, people—an erotic God who "love all them feelings," who "love everything you love," and "love admiration … just wanting to share a good thing" (Walker, 1976, pp. xi-xii).

Purple may also be the color of eroticism and of her own sexuality. If red makes one think of love and passion, purple is more: the color of lesbianism which is the rite of passage to selfhood, sisterhood and brotherhood for Celie, Walker's protagonist.

The Color Purple provides, in fact, an example of a dual liberation: from suppressed female sexuality and identity. Celie learns how to survive within the male order and also to understand her position as a black woman in a white society. Black and white are the basic *colors* of identity which remain as the background of the

changing picture of herself. Once she starts looking at herself in the mirror that Shug urges her to take , she also starts releasing her insecurities about her female body and experiencing her female intimacy.This represents a crucial scene in changing her life for ever. *Colors* change, too, from shades of dark black (the color of skin) and grey (uncertainty) to a magnificent purple.

The Female Characters and Their Self-discovery Journeys

Celie's development is, for the most part, believable and engaging, if somewhat programmatic. She marvels at women who are seemingly in charge of their own lives, only slowly realizing that the same thing is possible for her. Her attractiveness as a character depends, however, on her remaining for the reader a rounded human being, not a coat rack on which to hang a feminist ideology. Her development follows the proposed feminist pattern. First, she learns from mentors, strong women such as Shug and Sofia who give her insight and courage to act. Second, she experiences true love and acceptance from other women. Through being loved and valued, she learns to love and value herself. Third, she learns the value of motivating anger. Last, she learns that she has skills, that she can do things, and her making of pants becomes an expression of who she is and of what she values.

Other women in the novel are engaged in similar journeys, either as guides or as learners or as both. Shug is a larger-than-life character who embodies a sensuality and independence that largely free her from male dominance. Her life revolves around men, in a sense, but on her terms and not theirs. Shug pays a price for her independence, earning the scorn of those in society who cannot abide the person, especially the woman, who steps beyond the normal boundaries. Shug is not, however, merely an iconoclast; she is a celebrator. She teaches Celie to take pleasure in life, in her body, in the beauty and diversity of the natural world, and in loving relationship with others.

Sofia is another strong woman, returning blow for blow during her husband's futile attempts to make her "mind". Sofia is stronger than she is wise; however any attempt to demean her, she breaks herself against entrenched prejudice and dehumanization. Her initial love for Harpo dies when she discovers that sex and marriage are euphemisms for male dominance, and the end of the book finds her a recovering but permanently scarred creature.

The remaining major female character, Nettie, follows a path different from of the others, but the end result is nearly the same. Committed to traditional religion and values, she labors idealistically for the good of an African tribe. That labor comes to nothing, as traditional religion is shown to be useless in saving the tribe from destruction by white, capitalist greed. Nettie, faced with a crisis of belief, takes refuge in the possibilities of human love much as Celie does. Nettie tells Celie what she discovers about the family as well as about the world. Her letters became more learned as her education improves and as her association with the educated missionaries changes her from the backward Georgia girl to a knowledgeable woman with vastly more experience than Celie. She is, in part, seeking to educate Celie by telling her of all she has seen and learned. Celie rejects standard English and her use of language is connected to an important theme of *The Color Purple*, finding the courage to speak. The repossesion of her body encorages Celie to seek selfhood and later to assert that selfhood through spoken language. During this process Celie learns to love herself and others and to address even her written language to a body, her sister Nettie, rather than to the disembodied God. Her quest is for independence, freedom, wholeness, and also for literacy.

But such a radical reevaluation of herself is not likely for a woman living as Celie does. She needs the example of a woman who embodies sexual power and this Shug Avery. She is the novel's professor of desire and self-fulfillment.

By her handling of the symbolic significance of Shug as a blues singer, of Afro-American religion, and of the black vernacular to develop Celie's long black song of suffering and womanist consciousness, Walker reflects the socialized ambivalence and double-consciousness of Afro-American culture and character. In the tradition of such blues "bad" women as Bessie Smith, Shug embodies and evokes the moral ambivalence of many black Americans toward music and behavior that they feel make the best of a bad situation by being as row, mean and wild as human existence itself frequently is.

Walker, in other words, is morally and politically unsympathetic toward what she considers anachronistic, chauvinistic conventions in the black family and the black church. She ascribes Celie's abject shame and passivity to the dominance of patriarchy and hypocrisy of the black church and family. Finally, in Celie's second letter in which she renounces God, Walker implicitly supports Shug's belief that people "come to church to share God, not find God". Morally and politically, both Celie and Shug are reliable narrators for the womanist norms of the novel. The sign of these norms is the color purple. "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (Walker, 1976, p. 123). The color purple signifies a metaphysical, social and personal rebirth and celebration of lesbianism as a natural, beautiful experience of love.

Like her treatment of religion and blues, Walker's encoding of black speech and male characters signifies her sexual, moral and political closeness to the black women in the narrative. Equally problematic is the implied author and protagonist's hostility toward black man, who is humanized only upon adopting womanist principles of sexual egalitarianism. Guided by the spirit and achievement of Hurston, Walker has Shug to express the theme of the book more poetically in the vernacular when she tells Celie: "You have to get man off your eyeball, before you can see anything at all" (Walker, 1976, p. 123).

Critical Views

Some critics saw only the abuse by Celie's stepfather and husband early in the novel, others objected to the changes in the men, saying that for Walker's men to be good, they must be feminized. Bernard W. Bell has pointed out that *The Color Purple* is

> …more concerned with the politics of sex and self than with the politics of class and race… its unrelenting, severe attacks on male hegemony, especially the violent abuse of black women by black men, is offered as a revolutionary leap forward into a new social order based on sexual egalitarianism. (Bell, 1987, p. 157)

He calls Celie's awakening to love and independence a "paradigm of a liberated woman". But a part of the self Albert has to deal with, however, is undeniably racial. Walker's main point in the novel is her concern in all her works: the survival whole of the people, whatever their abilities.

Critics have pointed out Walker's use of the epistolary form in the tradition of Samuel Richardson and other eighteenth-century English novelists: "Letters are so logical for women". As these white male writers told women's stories through those women's private, personal letters, so Walker tells the story of a barely educated black woman through hers. Not only does the epistolary form tie the novel to those written by men about women; in addition, it recognized that letters, along with diaries, are one of the few written forms allowed women in

Western culture and are an important source of information about the facts and attitudes toward women's lives. One interesting similarity between earlier epistolary novels and *The Color Purple* is Celie's use of blanks Mr._____ for her husband's name, in spite of the fact that she obviously knows his name. In Richardson's Pamela, the name of Pamela's seducer is Mr. B, even if it is known it may not be told out of some ethical implications of the condition of women at that time. In their victimization by men, their acceptance of sacrifice, and their renunciation of life and happiness Walker's heroines resemble women's in Richardson's time when they are submitted to cruelty and ferocity. Both Clarissa and Pamela illustrate the theme of the maiden, (and what is Celie considered like by her husband?) persecuted by a male of terrifying animality and diabolic intellect. Walker turns her female characters to lesbianism in order to escape men's sexual opression. For H. Deutsch they are the victims of sado-masochistic inclinations that have always existed in every man (1993, pp. 95-107). Walker liberates her women from slavery, both sexual and racial. She remains close to Richardson, too due to the aim she ascribes to letter writing-powerlessness is sublimated in writing. Letters make them resist victimization. Once they have mastered the pen , they are no longer unwilling victims, but heroines with significant prerogatives of choice and action(Green, 1991).

In spite of shortcomings, Richardson remains a wonderful entertainer and one of the greatest admirers of womanhood in Anglo-saxon fiction, Walker ows much to especially from the perspective of her womanist outlook.

In Walker's case, the blanks are not only an ironic reference to the epistolary tradition, they are not used primarily to show the distance between Celie and her husband (he is such a stranger to her that she cannot even use his name) as some critics suggest, but they are also a mark of indebtness to Richardson's epistolary tecnique and his preview of womanistic writing.

The Color Purple ends in happiness, reunion and celebration. Walker has said that she took her great-grandmother's life, which included rape and childbearing at age eleven, and give it a happy ending. Once again, she had begun with one of her ancestor's stories, completing and transmuting it through her art. Within a female sphere, black women relate like experiences and devise strategies against continued female oppression.

Conclusion

The paper traces back women like Celie, Shug, Sofia or Nettie engaged in journeys of self-discovery and development, ones that follow predicted feminist patterns, who try to get free from any dominance, either be it male, social or cultural.

In our analysis, we have ventured to affirm that *The Color Purple* signifies a metaphysical, social and personal rebirth reflected into different shades by their inner self. Critics have more insisted on the discourse on the problematics of Afro-American identity by revealing the manifest irrelevancy of the classic American myth to Celie. For most of them, *The Color Purple* provides an example of how freedom of self and interactions in a woman-centred place of confident women become one woman's freedom from suppressed female sexuality and identity. In our attempt to analyse the theme and the female characters of the novel we have tried to navigate across the cultural borders of the two cultures in order to highlight the *multiple consciousness* of the Africa-American woman writing. For Alice Walker the multiplicity and symbolism of colors speak for this *consciousness.* Finally, we have brought forward two main recurrent ideas, the *invisibility* of the African

American in the general context of white America which has turned into *visibility*. In the case of Alice Walker, like Celie, her main character, she transcends her invisibility not only by the act of writing itself, but also by perceiving a new *color* besides black and white, *the purple*.

Analysed from a colour-coded metaphorical perspective we have opened the novel to re-reading and re-interpretation.

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