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Review

From Othering to Self-Naming: A Womanist Reading of the Black Female Characters of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Through the fictional characters of Alice Walker's *The color purple,* this paper analyzes the social condition of African American females and the silent, mostly unseen violence they are exposed to. It focuses on the tridimensional challenges these women face, othered by sex, race, and class, as a social category deprived of voice and agency. It uses the womanist theory for its analysis of the novel's text and comes to the conclusion, following the dynamics of the female characters of the book, that a collectively sustained fight, fecundated by love and understanding, is the soundest way to liberate both oppressed and oppressors.

Key-words: *The color purple*, womanism, violence on females, oppression, African American females

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INTRODUCTION

Our society today strives to create mechanisms and institutions that empower violence victims and make it easy for them to pinpoint and denounce perpetrators. In spite of all the devices put into place to prevent and denounce physical and psychological violence, there are two distinct fields where interpersonal violence hardly lends itself to prevention or righting, or at least some contexts in which its denunciation and punishment are very tricky: intimate family circles, and institutionalized discriminatory violence. These two categories of violence are among those which African American females are exposed to the most. They are the major focus of Alice Walker's *The color purple* that this article probes. The analysis made in this paper pairs the journey of the black female characters in the novel to the ethos put forward by womanist criticism, the othering of African American females on the trimensional basis of race, gender, and class. The black female characters of *The color purple* fall victim to the discriminatory social treatment on the account of their race, their gender and their class. The womanist theory lends itself as a relevant lens through which we can study the trajectory of the main female characters presented in *The color purple* since this theory focuses on literary works from the three perspectives developed in the novel. While most of these characters are first crushed by the social forces that hamper a fulfilling life, they gradually rise to get a voice. Their attempts to wrench away the wheels of their own lives in a constructive opposition to the social forces that thwart and limit their autonomy are analyzed through the grid of the womanist theory. It is the description of the twilight of sexist, racist and classist categorizations, and the

development of the black female agency that this paper purports to make through Alice Walker's *The color purple*.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Womanism is a theoretical and theological current of thought initiated by African Americans who felt that black women were marginalized in the American society. The coinage of the womanist concept is attributed to Alice Walker who first used it in her 1983 essay *In Search of our mother's gardens: Womanist prose*. None of the epistemological categories and social movements struggling against social inequalities in the US, antiracist organizations, feminist movements, labor unions, or white-dominated Christian movements, they argued, covered the all the basic concerns of the African American female or opened perspectives that the latter could entirely identify with. So Walker and other scholars labored to give an elaborate content to the concept.

Initiated in the critical thinking of scholars like Katie G. Cannon, Clenora Hudson-Weems, Delores S. Williams, and Jacquelyn Grant, who called themselves "womanists," womanism was a breakaway from white feminist theological movements that, in 1985, was ushered into academic discourse through Katie G. Cannon's essay The emergence of black feminist consciousness (Harris, 2010, p.1). These academics resented how African American females' perspectives and experiences were silenced in public discourse and in the academia. Black females, womanists argued, were crushed by their race, their sex, and their class. So they first of all premised their struggle on the fight for the recognition for black females of the same rights as to white men and women, and black men. Womanists first posit that there are

> Subtle ways of enforcing African American women's absence from discourses on topics …[which] often lie in unspoken institutional practices. Black feminist theory helps womanist ethics explain how African American women (and men) have been excluded from full participation in the academic production of ethical theory [and public institutional discourse in general]. (Harris, 2010, p.51)

The voice of black women becomes therefore necessary to problematize and critique their subtle racist, sexist, and classist exclusion in priority, but the perspectives of all African Americans in general. The womanist ethos thus diverges from the white feminist discourse not only in this that womanists see racism and classism ingrained in the fabric of the feminist ideology, but they also viewed the struggle as informed by an endeavor that embraces the nurturing values of collaboration with, and defense of, the interests of black males. Most womanists object to the incorporation of lesbianism as a womanist value but at large, they concur to acknowledge the following values as defining the core of womanist beliefs: self-naming, self-definition, family-centeredness, wholeness, role flexibility, adaptability, authenticity, black female sisterhood, struggling with males against oppression, male compatibility, recognition, ambition, nurturing, strengthening, respect, respect for the elders, mothering, and spirituality (Alexander-Floyd & Simien, 2006).

It is the theoretical grid used in analyzing the move from othering to self-naming in this paper.

Kendra Cherry defines othering as "the phenomenon in which some individuals or groups are defined and labeled as not fitting in within the norms of a social group" (2020). Othered individuals or groups have characteristics which are seen as negative and which define them as a "them" from without in opposition to "us." We then speak of self-naming, as a reverse process, when the individual or group proactively engages in the enterprise of self-definition. The African American female characters studied in this paper engage in this dynamics which the paper explores

THE SELF-FULFILMENT JOURNEY OF THE FEMALE CHARACTERS OF *THE COLOR PURPLE* AS AN ADVOCACY AGAINST SEXISM

The first time Celie stands up against her husband, Mr. _____'s brutality, the latter gives her a reply that mirrors the terms in which he sees her. He says: "Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, you nothing at all" (Walker, 1982, p.187). The discourse in which he defines Celie deprives her of a voice, reduces her to a nonentity on the account of her race, her class, and her gender, the three categories identified by womanists as defining the black female's subservience in the American society. It is the first time Celie raises her voice after she has been told by her step-father who rapes her at the opening of the novel: "You better not never tell anybody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker 1982, p.1). Before this breakthrough, Celie has always endured the crushing domination of her male relatives in total silence. It is really startling that, as if complying with her step-father's instruction, so far isolated and crushed by her husband, she has addressed her letters only to God, invariably opening with them with "Dear God".

The story of *The color purple* is about a community of black families that crushes its females. Celie, a young girl of fourteen, is regularly assaulted by her step-father when her mother goes insane and cannot satisfy his sexual desires. Celie gets pregnant and the two children she births are sold by her step-father. The latter gets rid of Celie, marrying him to an abusive husband she calls Mr. _____ who treats her like a mule. Celie has to attend upon the numerous children he has from his previous marriage, till the family farm, and take care of Mr. _____'s mistress, Shug Avery, who falls sick. When Celie's step-father starts eyeing her younger sister Nettie, Nettie runs to find shelter with Celie and Mr. _____, in turn, tries to

force Nettie into having sex with him. Nettie is made to leave as she refuses and, accidentally, finds refuge with a family of missionaries traveling to Africa, the same family that has adopted Celie's two children. Celie's encounter with Mr. _____'s daughter-in-law Sophia and his mistress Shug Avery helps her overthrow Mr._____'s overbearing phallocratic domination. At the end of the novel, Nettie comes back from Africa with her nephew and niece to an independent, a financially thriving and mentally emancipated Celie now surrounded by her new family of sisterhood.

Most of the hardships fall on Celie and the other female characters of the novel on account of the female-hostile norms that define and structure their society. This male system of sanctions has carved a space of subservience to women and stifles their fulfilment. To start with, Celie and Nettie are denied education by their step-father on the ground that he cannot bear the charges incurred. Both girls are forced to drop out although they are smart and doing well at school. It is only the end of the novel which informs the reader that Pa, with the wealth the family has inherited from deceased Celie and Nettie's father, could have afforded leaving them in school to get a good education. They are thus defined solely by their status as females, regardless of personal achievement or character.

The only justification Mr. _____ finds to Harpo who asks him why he beats Celie is that she is his wife and that "All women good for—he don't finish" (Walker, 1985, p.132). The exercise of violence comes in not as a sanction, since Celie does not get beaten only when she does something wrong, but is used as an instrument of total control that has to be part of the male apparatus of domination. Studying Walker's writing, this is what Harris surmises from the way that black males use violence on black females:

> […] violent and oppressive treatment of slaves by slaveholders was sometimes internalized by the slaves themselves and passed on as methods of discipline, rebuke, and punishment. This practice of violence did not break at the same time the chains of slavery did. Rather, even as black and African slaves became free women and men, the death-dealing effects of slavery became cloaked in various forms of intracommunal and intimate violence and used as tools of self-hatred. (Harris, 2010, p.110)

The hardships that are the lot of Celie and the other female characters is so moving and their mule-ification so hard to bear that, borrowing from Walker's own images, "even grief feels absurd. And at this point, laughter gushes up to retrieve sanity" (1984, p.12). Celie has so much absorbed her subjection that she does not even think about fighting back. She believes that she is irretrievably unworthy, ugly and a half-wit. With self-awareness, she undergoes a metamorphosis that looks astounding for the reader lured in the beginning of the novel into believing that Celie is mentally retarded. Never, before she has met Sophia, Harpo's wife, and Shug Avery, the assertive figure mistress to Celie's husband, has she tried to question the authority of males on her own life and thus tried to fight back. "What good it do?" she wonders. "I don't fight, I stay where I'm told……. I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (Walker, 1982, pp.21 & 163).

Walker, in her womanist fight against female domination, does not portray black males only as bad eggs, self-centered, domineering, and careless perpetrators of violence, but also as victims of their own constructs of malehood actuated through the physical and psychological violence they exercise on females (Wang, 2016, p.63). Harpo is a good illustration of this point. He has appropriated the male social construct of his father as he refuses to work. He also tries to beat his wife Sophia and Sophia fights back and wounds him. Her rejection of his domination destroys his self-esteem and makes him weep. Harpo develops an eating disorder, a bulimia, intended first to give him weight so that he can overpower his wife. Harpo loves Sophia but cannot stand failing to dominate her. As Sophia leaves him, he settles in a relation with another young woman, Mary Agnes to whom he attaches the degrading nickname of Squeak.

Shug Avery enlightens their men's Janus-faced behavior through the character of Mr. _____ that she calls Albert. She observes that these men are as sweet as sugar with their lovers over whom they cannot exert their control, while they martyrize those they have at their beck and call. The sour and sullen figure of the man she sees with Celie sharply contrasts with the joyful, laughing and easy Albert she has fallen in love with. Also, at their next encounter after Sophia has left Harpo, Harpo speaks to her with much respect, and is full of regret. At the end of the novel, Mr. _____ that Celie now calls Albert propositions her again with much respect. But Celie declines his proposition.

Walker enlarges her womanist defense of black females, extending the focus of *The color purple* to African women. Although the setting of the little Olinka village where, with her host family, Nettie's gospel preaching mission leads her is not described with much gender-based violence, women still hold a subservient position and are denied the opportunity of literacy. They make sense of their lives and acquire a social identity only through the utility they serve for males and look content with their situation. This is what Nettie observes when she sees her insistence that the women bring their daughters to the mission school met with refusal. The Olinka woman she discusses with is clear about this: "A girl is nothing to herself, only to her husband can she become something." When Nettie asks what that "something" the girl may become is, the woman answers her: "The mother of his children" (Walker 1982, p.162). That the highest aspiration of the female is to bear children for her husband defines the Olinka tribe's social structure as vertical with male dominance. Only a woman who has birthed five boys can rise into the position of the an "honorary man," breaking free from patriarchy. Olivia's

mother uses her prerogative of honorary man to get her only daughter schooled.

The Bible and the Christian religion seem to play contrasting roles in defining male-female relations in the two settings of the novel across the sea. In the African communities where Christianity is making inroads, Samuel the missionary and his family preach and plead for girl education and monogamy as a core Christian value. But the figure of God in the Bible is used in the US justify the social organization and to coerce Celie and her sorority into obeying the male domination enshrined as a divine order. Even beaten, raped and deprived of her children, Celie first accepts her condition as a divine prescription: "Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways" (Walker, 1982, p.42).

The womanist analysis of the narrative enables to interpret the significance of the so-called women's strong family spirit and natural inclination to sacrifice differently, in terms of social subjection to males rather than an innate ability linked to the female identity. Celie being a "Good housekeeper, good with children, good cook" (Walker 1982, p.20) has nothing to do with an inborn congenial female attitude. It is a construct of exploitation extolled and nurtured by males. The kind and loving sorority gradually collaborates to triumph over male chauvinism. The mutual support of Celie, Shug Avery, Sophia, and Mary Agnes, kindly helping one another, proves most fruitful to each and all of them, but especially to Celie who succeeds in breaking free through a process of self-discovery and self-esteem building. She confesses: Now that my eyes opening, I feels like a fool... it is like Shug say, You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall" (Walker 1982, p.179). In addition to the man that African American females have to get off their eyeballs, they also have to contend with racism and classism.

BLACK FEMALES AS PREY TO RACIST AND CLASSIST DISCRIMINATION AND EXPLOITATION

Racism, arguably, takes the heaviest toll on Celie and Nettie's wretched life trajectory. If the recurring topic addressed in *The color purple* is black male chauvinism and domestic violence, they certainly come only second to racism in importance. The characters of the novel, male and female alike, feel powerless under the boots of white supremacist practices known to be in full swing in the 1920s' southern states of the US. This setting of inter-war period southern US lends itself to the conflation of the two paradigms of race and class. All black people were supposed to be poor or lynched. White people were supposed to belong to the dominant class. Roughly sixty years after the abolition of slavery, its shadow had not completely disappeared from the social practices of the south. The influence of racism is the first factor that destroys the two sisters' family. Their father, a well-to-do businessman, gets lynched by white storeowners because his thriving business engaged in a competition with theirs. They accuse him of stealing their customers, so they burn his store, then drag the man with his two brothers out of their home at night and hang them. Lynching was perpetrated in the southern states as a disciplinary measure meant to maintain white supremacy. The recorded cases of lynching perpetrated against black people, it is estimated, amounts to 3446 between 1882 and 1930 (Cole et al., 2004, p.36).

When Miss Millie, the white mayor's wife, meets Sophia and her children, spick and span in Henry Broadax's nice car with Sophia wearing an expensive wristwatch, it is out of jealousy and the envy to humiliate people whose living standard she sees as too high for African Americans, that she asks Sophia if she wants to be her maid. Millie does not conceive of the wide consumption of cars, telephones, and radios of the Roaring Twenties as meant for black enjoyment. Her fingering Sophia's children and assessing their cleanliness remind too obviously of how the enslaved were felt and assessed for sale on the auction block. Her question, also, is meant more as an injunction than as a query. As Sophia refuses, the mayor gets out of his car and slaps her. Sophia knocks the mayor down and this leads her to being beaten almost to death by police officers and condemned to twenty years of prison. Celie is inconsolable when she sees what the policemen have left of Sophia. She says: "They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of a eggplant" (Walker, 1982, p.87). Sophia who is known as a strong and resilient woman experiences the direst straight of her life with the harsh treatment she is inflicted in prison. She is on verge of giving up when Mary Agnes comes to her rescue. Sophia confesses fighting back all her life. But she is now broken by her harsh treatment in prison tailored to her offense to the mayor and his wife.

Mary Agnes is the mixed-race girl that Harpo marries when Sophia leaves him. She is the one they send to the prison to plead with the warden, Bubber Hodges, because the latter happens to be her (white) father's brother. Bubber manhandles then rapes Mary Agnes although he knows that she is his niece. Mary Agnes comes back from her encounter with her uncle limping, wearing a ripped dress, with traumatic memories of her visit to the prison. She says:

> He saw the Hodges (family features) in me. And he didn't like it one bit… the minute I walk through the door, he remembered me. He took my hat off. Told me to undo my dress. He say *if he was my uncle he wouldn't do it to me* [italics mine]. That be a sin. But this just little fornication. Everybody guilty of that" (Walker, 1982, p. 95).

The warden's assault on Mary Agnes is tinged with

racist considerations since he insists that she is not his niece. But he knows very well that his brother has fathered her. For him, kinship does not go over racial barriers. It is in the same vein of thought that his brother has abandoned all the children he has with Mary Agnes's mother who is black. The obvious favor Mary Agnes asks and which the warden accommodates in exchange for assaulting her is making life unbearable for Sophia. The desperate black community designs a plan that is premised on the blind desire of white people to make life unbearable for black people. Bubber means to further degrade Sophia who refuses to conform to the role that her society has designed for black males and females: serving the White. So the warden does not know that he is doing Sophia a favor by moving her from the prison to serve the mayor in his house. He would probably not have accepted had he known that he was relieving Sophia of an unbearable burden that threatened to kill her. It is after serving the mayor for five years day and night that Sophia is allowed to see her children once a year. Celie is raped. Mary Agnes is raped too. The only difference is that the former is raped by a black man and the latter by a white man.

That racist sentiments are inbuilt in culture and inherited almost inescapably at an early age is what the cases of the mayor's little children show. Sophia works at raising little tyrants who see in her nothing more than a foot wiper. But the narrative, in this frame, makes a little nuance in the transmission of the hate of black people to children. It does not take hold with all their children. The mayor's daughter Eleanor Jane shows kindness to Sophia and, when she grows up, has even come to see in Sophia a second mother. So her case requires that one nuance the theory of cultural transmission of racial hate.

Walter equally broaches the theme of segregation of the 1920's American south. This is reported in Nettie's letter. Nettie tells Celie in her letter riding a night train with beds and a restaurant that only white people can use. Sophia herself is confronted with the issue of segregation that reveals its own paradoxes and limits. Miss Millie the mayor's wife cannot drive her first car she is offered by her husband. As Sophia who is now her maid can drive, Sophia sits beside Millie and teaches her how to drive. But once she starts driving, Millie will not tolerate that Celie sit beside her when they go on errands. Also, while Sophia follows her for her shopping, Millie has to go in the stores and come back alone with her heavy purchases since Sophia cannot enter: "The mayor's wife was shopping –going in and out of the stores- and her maid was waiting for her on the street and taking the packages" (Walker, 1982, p.123). Millie is obliged to carry all her purchases out alone in spite of Sophia's presence because Sophia cannot get into these white-only stores.

The society structured by Jim Crow laws entraps white people themselves into funny, embarrassing situations that they can hardly extricate themselves from.

Although Millie has destroyed Sophia's life, sent her to prison and forced her to serve in her home with a status hardly above that of an enslaved worker, she is scared of Sophia and always speaks to her from a distance. Also, when she brings Sophia to visit the latter's children, she cannot manoeuver the car in a reverse drive to extirpate herself from the narrow yard. She spends long minutes in an awkward situation, sitting stiffly in the car before she is spotted by the children. Then, since Sofia cannot sit beside her and show her how to manoeuver, she wrecks the engine of the car altogether and has another hard time making up her mind to get into a black man's truck to get back home: "Oh, she say, I couldn't ride in a pick–up with a strange colored man" (Walker, 1982, p.103). The womanist narrativization of white people's hate is made in a compassionate, constructive perspective. In doing this, it also shifts the focus from the victim's misfortune to identify the traps the advocates of white supremacy set for themselves in enforcing a system based on the hate and degradation of African Americans.

The casual, sometimes ironic tone in which the story is woven, echoing the narrative mood found in such works as Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *A mercy,* or in Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes were watching God*, is completely unemotive, devoid of the childish whining that usually goes with tales of horror. Its holistic vision makes the search for solution a collective and collaborative endeavor. The womanist perspective, and black feminists' arguments at large, lay claim to a more holistic understanding of the harms that follow from social injustice, from multiple oppressors. These arguments could hardly find any more relevant illustrations than in these narrative strips intent on describing social injustice by showing all its various effects of human suffering, on perpetrators as well as on victims. This holistic understanding of social injustice is what Alice Walker explains to us in *The world has changed*:

> As long as the world is dominated by racial ideology that places whites above people of color, the angle of vision of the womanist, coming from a culture of color, will be of a deeper, more radical penetration. This is only logical. Generally speaking, for instance, white feminists are dealing with the oppression they receive from white men, while women of color are oppressed by men of color as well as white men, as well as by many white women. But on the joyful side, which we must insist on honoring, the womanist is, like the creator of the word, intent on connecting with the earth and cosmos, with dance and song. With roundness. With thankfulness and joy. Given a fighting chance at living her own life, under oppression that she resists, the womanist has no or few complaints. Her history has been so rough—captured from her home, centuries of enslavement, apartheid, etc.—she honors Harriet Tubman by daily choosing freedom over the fetters of any internalized slavery she might find still lurking within herself. (Byrd & Walker, 2010, p.391)

The color purple argues that discriminatory social practice target African American women and all black women in general more than it does other social classes. The burden of black women are twice, tenfold the

difficulties experienced by other women. Their condition thus requires a different approach of advocacy than white feminism. That is why “womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” (Walker, 1983, p.xii), that is more in intensity, in understanding, in depth, and in scope.

CONCLUSION

The color purple covers the common experiences of black women in their communities, from the patriarchal domination to racism and classism. Black women are inflicted physical and psychological violence but coming together, they have found the way to liberate themselves and liberate some of their torturers from the social constructs that prove negative to victims and perpetrators alike. The core value womanism hails through the novel is female resilience through sisterhood, connection and communion. These are ethics related to love that reach back to the African culture. But with the same subtlety, with regards to the ethics of love and connection, the most important question that the novel asks seems to be as follows: How do you fight without hate, how do you fight people that you love, people that are your family, people who are part of you, and get out the fight making yourself and your adversary feel whole as Celie, Shug, Sophia, and Mary Agnes do? How do you fight people that are both adversaries and loved ones without destroying them? This seems a very difficult and tricky fight ethos that the womanist philosophy puts forward.

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