

The Color Purple: Reconciling Identities

*Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength –
in search of my mother's garden, I found my own.*

Alice Walker

“In Search of Our Mother's Gardens”

Racial subjugation, women's oppression, sexual abuse. These are common issues when the subject is the black woman condition. The black woman condition (which is not one that we should be proud of, unfortunately, since it is based upon a cruel oppression) is not just the “privilege” of third world nations in Latin America or Africa, but it reaches poor and rich countries as well. The United States is still proud to be considered one of the most powerful economies of the world for the past eight decades, but it is not ashamed to have not banished ethnic oppression inside its boundaries, especially to the most depreciated group in the rate of social oppression: black women.

The United States, which is considered a multi-ethnic society, usually associated to the ‘melting pot’ metaphor (since there is a great variety of ethnic groups that constitute that nation) has failed to congregate such diversity based on the principles of equality. For some time the segregation of black people in the US had a legal constitution, thus, it was not considered crime to banish colored people violently for having a seat in the white area of a bus. Based on the idea of “separate, but equal” the segregation law in the US known as Jim Crow established different schools, restaurants, hotels, neighborhoods, and bus seats for black and white people. During this time a number of black resistance movements took place in different areas of the US, especially in black neighborhoods such as the Harlem. Cultural movements as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement were also means of black resistance. Some of the black people struggled to death and are remembered until today as martyrs of that time, such as the leaders Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

The Jim Crow legislation did not develop without a series of acts of resistance. Some of these acts, as Rosa Parks's courageous refusal to give up her seat to a white man and move to the back of a bus, where colored people were supposed to sit, became crucial to the later achievement of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Her refusal led to her arrest, but it was the beginning of what would be known as the “Montgomery bus boycott”, when a mass of blacks, headed by the Baptist Minister Martin Luther King, Jr., refused to take the Montgomery bus in protest against Mrs. Parks’s arrest and segregation politics. Although the history of that time almost ‘erased’ the anonymous contribution that female heroines had in the establishment of the Civil Rights a black lady was the first to refuse to give up her seat and accommodate a white inside a bus. This incident was one of the great resistance acts of the time, and is sometimes forgotten when the heroes of black American history are mentioned.

After more than forty years since the establishment of the Civil Rights in the United States the segregation is not more an institution, but black people remain on the last positions of social and economic scales. If the situation of black men is one of great disadvantage in comparison to white men in the US black women are yet more depreciated. As Frances Beale argues in her essay “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” (1970), statistics have proved that the salaries of non-white women have been the lowest of all in the United States. She considers a black woman in the US as a “slave of a slave”, since she has been used as the scapegoat for many evils of American society, including being considered responsible for the economic predicament of black men.

Based on the concept stated by Homi Bhabha in The Location of Culture (2001) that the “beyond” is part of a revisionary time, which enables one to come to the present in order to “redescribe a cultural contemporaneity” I argue in this work that Celie, the black protagonist of The Color Purple, through a hard and suffering process of return to her memories inhabits an intervening space of cultural negotiations in the novel. As she inhabits this intervening space Celie is challenged to reconcile with her past to transform her present and reaffirm her black woman identity in the American society of the forties. This work aims at analyzing the double form of oppression that Celie experiences in the novel, since she is a black woman who suffers the consequences of living in a segregated society but who has also to deal with the abuses committed by black men, such as her stepfather and husband who make part of her own ethnic group.

On the first part of Walker's novel the black protagonist Celie seems to fit appropriately Frances Beale's expression: she is the 'slave of a slave'. When she was only fourteen years old she had already suffered sexual abuse from her stepfather (that she believed to be her real father) and had with him two children (Olivia and Adam), who were sold without her agreement for a couple without kids. Her stepfather, after being tired to abuse her, gives her in marriage to an older man that she does not dare to speak his name (she just calls him "Mr"). Celie is also separated from her lovely and smart sister Nettie, who brought a little affection to her childhood and adolescence.

Up from this tough reality Celie is challenged to overcome her oppression in silence. She has to run a family that is not hers, a husband and children that she did not choose to have while her own kids are somewhere in the world. Celie decides to use her little knowledge of the alphabet that she learned with her sister to write letters in a diary as a way of being someone, of discovering an identity: "Dear God, he beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got something in my eye but I didn't wink. I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them. Maybe cause my mama cuss me you think I kept mad at her. But I ain't. I felt sorry for mama. Trying to believe his story kilt her" (Walker 5). As she has no one to address to, her sister has gone and she does not know where to, she decides to write letters to God, for whom she could trust her moorings.

Therefore, The Color Purple, one of Alice Walker's novels of more international repercussion, which has also received a film adaptation in 1985, is an epistolary novel written in the first person in its majority, although by the middle of the book, when Celie meets her sister Nettie she establishes with her a second voice discourse, since they start to send letters to each other. Celie's letters work in the novel as a useful way to escape from reality and meet her inner self. On her first letters Celie used to write about her daily routine and suffering. As time goes by, Celie's letters become more complex as if they were a reflex of her own growth in the novel.

Celie experiments a turning point in her life of humiliation and disappointment when she meets Doci Avery, who is her husband's lover, and the only woman that he seems to love and respect, especially because

she did not permit him to treat her as his own property. In the beginning Doci was rude to Celie, stressing her physical disabilities, but later on she decided to help her to find desire and feel what it is to be a woman. Celie was not able to see beauty or feel pleasure in her life with Albert, a husband that she just discovered the identity when Doci called him by the name. Although Celie was obliged to give this man pleasure whenever he needed her, she did not know how to use her body in her own benefit. Doci was a real possibility Celie had to find beauty and discover pleasure. After some time of intimacy in the novel Celie and Doci become lovers and that fact was crucial to her turning point in the novel.

Doci turns to be not just Celie's lover, but also a faithful friend. She helps Celie to find her sister's missing letters that Albert had hidden during a long time. Nettie's letters open a new world to Celie, for the first time she is in touch with the experiences of an African descent in return to Africa and her roots. Her sister Nettie had been sent to Africa with a couple to work as a missionary and she was with Celie's children, Olivia and Adam, who had been adopted by this family a long time ago. Nettie writes in her letters about the conflict Olivia and Adam had when they met Tashi, an African girl that was about their ages and that they believed would not proceed with her beliefs and rituals of cutting the face and accepting feminine mutilation after she had been in touch with the western culture. The fact that Tashi did not assimilate the western culture can be seen as a means of resistance in the novel. Although this missionary family had an African descent they were in Africa as Americans and for Tashi, to abandon the rituals followed by her ancestors would be a kind of assimilation, which is the imposition of one culture on the other, as a way of domination and manipulation.

At the same time that Olivia and Adam were in touch with their own African roots they did not feel themselves completely at home in Africa. On the other hand, while in the US they felt themselves in some way dislocated, since their blackness constituted a matter of segregation, especially at the time the novel was passed, which is somewhat between 1910 until 1940, before the approval of the Civil Rights. Being black in the United States, especially before the approval of the Civil Rights, was the same as being dispossessed in one's own land. As W.E.B. DuBois claimed in The Souls of Black Folk (1903), "Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?" (DuBois 869). This feeling becomes somewhat controversial, because to be black

in the United States, especially at that time, was to be part of a minority that did not have the same access to housing, health, and education as whites did.

DuBois, being himself a black man in America, assumed that, in his own country, he was not able to develop a single self-consciousness, one that was part of his inner self. For him, his consciousness was somewhat duplicated, as a mirror that could only project one's image through the reflex of the world of someone else. In his own words, in The Souls of Black Folk,

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the eyes of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two selves – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder [...] (869)

The essence of this double-consciousness, of being both black, of African heritage, and American, thus partaking of a European derived tradition, turns into an authentic form of defining black Americans. This “double-consciousness” was in some way presented in not just Adam's and Olivia's experiences in Africa, but in all the missionary family as well.

The double-consciousness of black discourse has been exhaustively studied and analyzed since DuBois first coined the term. What the majority of black male theorists have not taken into consideration was the fact that the discourse of black women is still more peculiar, inasmuch as their voices are usually silenced and repressed, thereby reinforcing their condition of oppressed women.

Celie's personal development in the novel assumes a deep level, which is better understood through the analysis of the term “Bildungsroman”, in which there is a strong emphasis on the hero's development process, which is no longer described by a single unit but through a dynamic path that constitutes the narrative. Celie's trajectory of life is similar to a quilt, in which there are many pieces that need to be placed together. From a humiliated and shy 14-year-old black girl Celie turned into a black successful designer. When she finally discovers all the obscure points that were surrounded in her story Celie is able to reconcile with her identity in

the novel, and becomes a black woman who is conscious of her blackness and gender in the American society that she is now ready to face.

The maturity that Celie achieves in the end of the novel has much to do with the way she can see Albert, her ex husband, Doci Avery (who is also called by her artistic name, Shug), and her children from this part of her life, as an independent woman. This is the final letter she wrote in her diary:

Dear God. Dear Stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.

Thank you for bringing my sister Nettie and our children home. Wonder who that coming yonder? ast Albert, looking up the road. Us can see the dust just a-flying.

Me and him and Shug sitting out on the porch after dinner. Talking. Not talking. Rocking and fanning flies. Shug mention she don't want to sing in public no more – well, maybe a night or two at Harpo's. Think maybe she retire. Albert say he want her to try on his new shirt. I talk bout Henrietta. Sofia. My garden and the store. How things doing generally. So much in the habit of sewing something I stitch up a bunch of scraps, try to see what I can make. The weather cool for the last of June, and sitting on the porch with Albert and Shug feel real pleasant. Next week be the fourth of July and us plan a big family reunion outdoors here at my house. Just hope the cool weather hold... (Walker 285).

Celie finally steps ahead of the sexist fight with Albert after she has learnt her power and strength as a woman. She is happy with her family, which is in part Albert's children, her own children, Shugs and her dreams.

In Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1983), she argues for a place, "a garden" where she could follow her ancestors' creative spirit. As Walker observes, how could her mother influence future generations through her art, or even her writing, if she had never had the time "to know or care about feeding the creative spirit?" (2319). Walker gives a surprising answer to this question, by stating that the secret of finding such a rich creative heritage is in looking at the "low" things of life, instead of always privileging "high" ones. To look "high", in terms of black feminist legacy, would entail a search for a systematic chronological order of black feminist writers who produced literature according to the standards people were

used to. On the other hand, to look “low” means contemplating the artistic expression of past generations of women who have, though not in formal patterns, enriched their people’s tradition with their quilts and arts: “I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible – except as Creator: hand and eye. [...] Her face, as she prepared the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life” (Walker 2321). In Walker’s case, she finds her literary memory in her mother’s yard, where this woman creatively planted flowers with the hands of a sensitive artist. Celie is also in one of those yards, following the creative spirit that her female ancestors left her; but she has changed, maybe in a way that her mother had only dreamed about, and she could finally turn it into real.

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