

THE SHADOWED IDENTITY: A STUDY OF ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Shilpa Shukla, Prof. Niroj Banerji

Department of Humanities and Social Science
MNNIT, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh,
INDIA.

indian.sshilpa@gmail.com , Banerjiniroj123@gmail.com

The term Afro-American as a literary genre started to be considered from the so-called *Harlem Renaissance* at the beginning of the twentieth century; in fact, *Harlem Renaissance* can be considered as the spring of Afro-American voice: it was the moment in which scholars started to revive all the forgotten texts written by American Blacks, considering them within the frame of a literary tradition rooted in the time of slavery. In this way, this new perspective intends to articulate a new concept in literature in which the Black voice plays a role.

The great problem with *Harlem Renaissance* is that, in its approach, it tends not only to ignore but, in fact, to reject explicitly the role of woman in Afro-American tradition. The reason for this ignorance of the Black-woman cause, focusing only Black-male repression through History, is clearly expressed by B. Hooks:

“Oppression of black men during slavery has been described as de-masculinization for the same reason that virtually no scholarly attention has been given to the oppression of black women during slavery. Underlying both tendencies is the sexist assumption that the experiences of men are more important than those of women and that what matters most among the experiences of men is their ability to assert themselves patriarchally.”(Hooks, 1982: 22)

The feeling that the female black experience through History is reflected in black women's literary production is also shared by many other specialists in this field (Armstrong, 1990: 81) (Probyn, 1993: 37) (Hooks, 1982: 1). From the rediscovery of black feminine voice, it's the black woman who has the power of defining herself without the distortion of male and/or white perspective. The flourishing of black woman's voice implies, then, that she has the control over her own image and she now knows this new power:

“In the past and depending on who held the pen, black women have almost exclusively in terms of negative and regressive stereotypes (...). Now black women are themselves in the front of reclaiming their own womanhood, and the arena where their invisibility and misrepresentation is played out is the novel. The novels, essays and poems of Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker and Sherley Anne Williams, with their powerful celebration of maternal presence, have been instrumental in opening up the historically and distinct world of black women.” (Mirza, 1992: 146)

The act of writing down their experiences and the act of reading their own literature are mutual acts of empowerment. In fact, Black Women History is a history of Self-empowerment in a fight against external forces trying to silence their own voice. And this fight has not been an easy one since it implied to struggle against a double discrimination, *racism* and *sexism*.

On the one hand, identity has been denied to black women because of racism. Blacks in a white American society were considered as mere objects during slavery and afterwards it took

a long time to consider them as equal; when the Feminist movement began, it didn't include black women because of their colour. Black women have had the feeling, then, that "white women liberation did not challenge this sexist-racist practice; they continued it." (Hooks, 1982: 8). So, the first problem that the black woman faces is that society "denies the existence of non-white women in America." (Hooks, 1982; 8)

On the other hand, black women's identity has also been denied because of Sexism. Slavery has been considered as "a Black male phenomenon, regarding Black women as biological functionaries whose destinies are rendered ephemeral- to lay their eggs and die." (Stetson, 1982: 62). Therefore, the emancipation movements from the end of the American Civil War have been seeking the equality between white people and black men since black men were not able to risk their chances including women in their enterprise (Hook, 1982: 1)

Consequently, the yearnings of Afro-American women have been frustrated by the double stigma "non-white, non-man" and their main struggle has been to seek for a definition of themselves according to positive characteristics and not according to what they lack (either blackness or masculinity). This frustration feeling has been a characteristic in the female Afro-American tradition:

"When I was in the third grade I wanted to be president. I can still remember the stricken look of my teacher's face when I announced it in class. By the time I was in the fourth grade I have decided to be the president's wife instead. It never occurred to me that I could be neither because I was Black." (Wallace, 1982: 5)

One of the many alternatives opted by the Afro-American woman to build up her own identity has been the literary production. During the slavery period, being able to write and read meant freedom and active rebellion for a Negro; it also meant a way of saying aloud metaphorically what was forbidden to say aloud in practice. In fact, the black woman has found in writing a place on her own through which she can fulfil her ambitions and express her emotions without the white and/or masculine trace. Therefore, we cannot consider black women's writings as mere fiction since "there is an inherent Black woman identification in the Black female literary tradition (...) black women have used writing as a way of capturing and exalting their experiences" (Brethel, 1982: 185)

African American Literature constitutes one of the supreme enrichments of the 'black women' and 'black life'. The literature of the 'black people' is a composite of what is known coming from the unknown. The black women have been involved in the development of African-American writing since its inception. Their perspective is faithful to the actual experiences of the black women in North America. Among the women writers one of the most prolific black American women writers is Alice Walker. She is known not only for her classic novel *The Color Purple* but for her rediscovery of an earlier African -American women novelist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston. She is also known for her activism in causes like environmentalism, spirituality, racial justice and women's issues and against female circumcision. Walker in order to describe the lives of the black women within her community, has created one of the most striking protagonists who, like their predecessors is concerned about the past and at the same time, are different from them, and who believe in the survival of the whole people.

Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple* and renowned womanist, uses a color analogy to describe the women of two movements that are the foundation of women's rights and equality.

In her novel *The Color Purple* she brings out the especial Blackness of the novel. It may be called a “painterly novel” casting its narratives in terms of spectrum of colours in Black Women lives. Feminism is often the first and most prominent ideology that we all think about concerning the women’s rights movement. Considering the fight for women’s rights from the 1800’s through the Civil Rights Movement of the 50’s and 60’s to present day, womanism includes an extension beyond the boundaries of race and class. It integrates the needs of women who may have faced additional societal biases throughout the evolving history of the movement. Womanism considers a woman’s culture, family, and spirituality.

There are greater and more specific differences to each perspective, and a range of views within them, but overall there remains unity across the ideologies. Women from both schools of thought have marched together, sat with Presidents, and met with policy makers to fight for women’s rights. All labels aside, at the end of the day, each school of thought supports equality for women in our professional and personal lives.

The novel is written in two voices. One is addressed to god, i.e. Celie the main narrator’s naïve addressed or prayers to God and the other is Nettie’s who is Celie’s sister, in her letter from Olinka in Africa to Celie. This aspect of narrative brings to the fore the theme of repression of the voice, women and Black voice, and the breaking of silence. Both Celie and Nettie in a way break their silence in their addresses, Celie’s to God, communicated in private and in confidence of solitude and Nettie’s to her sister. Both of which do not reach the addressee, one to the white God whose ironic (non)existence is linked to racial oppression and other, Nettie’s letter to Celie which are intercepted by Albert, Celie’s tyrannical husband who Stashes them away from Celie who thinks she has lost her sister. There is a comparison between God and Mr. Albert who plays god being male. The white God who silences Blacks’ stories and the Black Male who silences Black women’s voices. The White Mayor who slaps Sophie Celie’s spirited and rebellious daughter in law and then sends to jail because she refuses to become housemaid; and rapes Mary Agnes Squeak Harpo’s second wife to show her that she is not his kin, when she goes to speak for Sophie is comparable to Mr. Albert Racism and Sexism are expressed in the same forms of violence and subjugation.

The epistolary style in Walker’s novel recreates the mode used by slaves to denounce their situation. The epistolary style is also an approach used traditionally by women to enter into the literary field:

“In the eighteenth century women were able to enter the realm of literature by means of letters (the epistolary novel) (...). Since letters and diaries have no clear defined literary niche, it was all right for women to practice on them.”(Boveschen, 1985: 47)

In *The Color Purple*, all the characters’ words are controlled by Celie’s supravoice having her, in this way, the power of manipulating their speeches. The only sentence that seems not to be under Celie’s control is the first one in the novel: “You better never tell anybody but God. I’d kill your mammy” This sentence is heading the first page and, by extension, the whole novel. It’s precisely this threat what makes Celie silence her physical voice and look for a new voice through the written language.

The Color Purple is structured as a series of letters addressed, firstly, to God and, then, to Celie’s sister, Nettie. At the beginning, Celie describes the sexual abuse on her by the man she assumes to be her father and how she is given like an object to Mr.-, the man who will be her husband:

“She spoiled. Twice. (...).She ugly. (...).But she’ll make the better wife. She ain’t smart either. (...). But she can work like a man.”

Celie has to bear “The exploitation of black women by black men” (Stuart, 1988: 61) and her story will be the story of “a black woman empowered to reject the role of passive victim and become active agent in her own life, through her relationship with other women: sister, lover, daughter-in-law and friends” (Stuar, t 1988: 64).

The first and, probably, most influential woman in Celie’s life is her sister Nettie. They will be forced to be separated by her oppressive husband but, before leaving, Nettie encourages her to be active:

“You got to fight. You got to fight.

But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is to stay alive.”

Celie and Nettie promise each other to keep in contact by letter but Mr. - hides all the letters from Nettie and Celie’s only addressee (and hope) is God, so she writes to him. However, her relationship with God doesn’t give her courage to adopt an active attitude and it’s only useful to her since it helps her to bear her oppression:

“I don’t say nothing. I think bout Nettie, dead. She fights, she run away. What good it do? I don’t fight; I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive.”

At this stage of her life another woman influences on her life; it’s Sofia, the wife of Mr.-’s son. Celie considers her as a model because she fights for her rights but Celie is not able to behave the same way:

“I’m jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can’t.

What that? She says

Fight. I say.”

But the great trigger for Celie to adopt an active attitude seems to be Shug Avery, her husband’s lover. Their relationship will be a very special one since Shug gives Celie the support to build up her own independent self:

“She says this song I’m about to sing is called Miss Celie’s song (...) First time somebody made something and named it after me.”

“I won’t leave, she says, until I know Albert won’t even think about beating you”

With Shug, Celie speaks about sex and she is able to redefine her image of God – from “old and tall and greabearded and white” (31) to a pantheistic God: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.”

Shug also helps her to find Nettie’s letters and “wear the pants” (literally and metaphorically) and thanks to her, and to Nettie’s letters, Celie is able to react and speak:

(To Mr.-) “You a lowdown dog is what’s wrong, I say. It’s time to leave you and enter into the creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need.”

From this moment on, Celie will be in control of her life being able to abandon her husband and work - precisely sewing pants-. Mr. - will try to intimidate her but now he won’t be able to humiliate her:

Mr.-) “Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly. You a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all.”

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

Men in Celie's life constantly prevent her from speaking and the act of writing down her feelings is a way of "shouting her rights in silence". Writing, to Celie, is a tool to stay alive and, therefore, it's as important to her as breathing:

"Long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along"

To finish, I would like to point out the important idea, conveyed in the novel, that women's power can even change men. Celie's liberation is a positive one because it also means the liberation of other people from their badness. In this way, what is good for Celie is also good for her community and, therefore, she can reconcile with her previously hostile environment.

Celie is unable to hate Mr. - ("I still don't like frogs, but let us be friends" and her attitude is a model for Mr.- who realizes that giving love and understanding he will receive the same:

(Mr.-) "The more I wonder, he say, the more I love.

(Celie) And people start to love you back, I bet, I say.

(Mr.-) they do, he say, surprise. Harpo seem to love me. Sofia and the children. I think even ole evil Henrietta love me a little bit..."

Celie's power, therefore, makes women more *man-like* (since they have opinion and they "wear pants"), men more *woman-like* (Mr. - learns to sew) and, in doing so, it also makes both more complete, more human.

Women struggle everyday against discrimination: color, gender, illiteracy, violence, insecurity, lack of equal opportunities; the list is long and bleak. Celie is an example of an African-American woman exerting her right of self-defining. She represents any black woman's experience but, above all, her own. Her voice stands for a whole community but, at the same time, she also claims her right of speaking as an individual voice.

Her experience is similar to that of many other black women: she had to bear the same type of discrimination, being always "the other" (the non- white and the non- man.) and she finds her path towards her own self through the written language.

Therefore, Celie is, above all, an individual searching for her place in society. In the same way, Alice Walker is also female Afro-American but, most of all, a writer searching for her place in literature; and the great popularity of her book together with the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983 to *The Color Purple* confirm that she has found that space.

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