

## RULES OF LOVE IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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*The Color Purple* sparked controversy on its release, the black society was shaken by the depiction of violence within their ranks. Alice Walker's tale achieves its effect through the introduction of relevant and hidden problems in diverse relationships. The goal of the following paper is to analyze the existence of love or lack thereof in those relations by questioning hierarchies through a feminist perspective and postmodern theories of subversion. The examination of *The Color Purple* shall ultimately provide clarity on the social criticism aimed at the work and on its pertinence to African-American women's literary expression, life and position.

**Key words:** *Alice Walker, binary opposition, bell hooks, sisterhood, relationships, postfeminism*

When Alice Walker wrote the novel *The Color Purple*, its reception ranged from highly favorable to outright detrimental. Steven Spielberg's eponymous film which came out three years later inflamed further the debate raging in the black society. This debate focused on the representation of male characters in the novel. Most African-American men in the media characterized Alice Walker's work as damaging, hateful, and unrealistic. The majority of said men did not even attempt to watch the film or read the book and stigmatized it as an "abomination". On the one hand, they felt that women's books ought not to be praised as much and, on the other, they were not prepared for the disclosure of violence inflicted by black men. In the following paper we shall attempt to review the distribution of power in the different relationships Alice Walker portrays in the novel and to ascertain if she purposefully wrote a hate letter to black men or merely exposed angles of reality, where sexism and brutality do exist. We shall achieve our ends with the help of the postmodern theory of difference and subversion of binary oppositions developed by Jacques Derrida, and later appropriated by feminists in gender and women studies. One of the novel's merits is its ability to represent diversity in the portrayal of love. This grants us the opportunity to discuss some of the binary

oppositions: male/female, feminine/masculine, gender/sex, public/private, and the position of love among them. The epistolary form adds one more layer to consider as it uncovers Celie's naïve, candid, and unblemished worldview.

In *Positions*, Jacques Derrida considers the idea of binary oppositions. According to him, "in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-a-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment" (Derrida 1981: 41). In other words, in the power structure of binary oppositions one of the notions takes precedence and overshadows the "Other". The only way, in Derrida's words, to subvert and change the distribution of power is to make the "Other" the more powerful member of the two. Notable French feminists Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous later elaborate on his ideas in the context of feminism. Toril Moi recounts Hélène Cixous's discussion of gender and claims that it is compulsory for one of the two members of the opposition to destroy the other and send them in their designated place of passivity (Cf. Moi 1989: 125). In a strict patriarchal society, the man triumphs and the woman submits. We encounter this traditional paradigm in Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s relationship, if it were actually a mutual relationship. Early in the novel Celie's father figure gives her property value by disposing himself of her and sending her off to "work like a man" and "make a better wife" (Walker 2014: 10) for Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Due to her value not being enough, a cow is included in deal (Walker 2014: 13). This episode sets up the future distribution of power in their relationship. How is she supposed to leave passivity of the "Other" when she is represented as no better than a cow and as one having less worth than property? The roles they fit into are forced upon them by the society. Celie's feminine nature unites itself with her female nature because she succumbs to expectations and does not question the preexisting patriarchal structure. Celie admits: "I don't know how to fight. All I know is how to stay alive" (Walker 2014: 18). Celie is adapting to survive and is not ready to oppose authority and fight her battle against the dominant. Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s sexual encounters, marked by lack of emotion and love, appear to be a time for reflection for her and a time for Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ to satisfy his animalistic needs and to assert his power. She does not explore her sexuality until later in the novel when she is exposed to a new worldview. If our topic is love and division of power, then we perceive that love disappears in the original

hierarchy Derrida suggests. A disruption has to come or the woman would be left perpetually in her state of passivity – sexual and emotional.

The transition outside the established model Alice Walker achieves through her character, Sofia. Sofia is the wife of Harpo, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s son. She appears to be the complete opposite of Celie. She is the metaphorical voice of equality and tribulation. Harpo says of her: "I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk" (Walker 2014: 35). The way Sofia ventures into life is unfamiliar to Harpo and he feels threatened by her assertive personality and strong will. The only way he can deal with this problem is to ask for advice. The way Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ passes down "wise" words to Harpo exposes how men enter societal power constructions. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ advises him to subdue her through violence. Physical and psychological supremacy is administered through brute force and self-worth devaluation. Hélène Cixous claims that men always prove something to somebody, they are never content to be anywhere except for the top. They have to "show off" (Cixous 2004: 161). This may be due to their hidden insecurities and fears. They need not only to be successful in the private sphere but, more importantly, in the public one. Therefore, if Harpo accepts Sofia for who she is, he would be turning against tradition and old mentality. Debate on the division between nature and culture has involved many leading critics and feminists since World War II. Donna Haraway speaks of the way second-wave feminists endeavored to displace women and extract them from the category of nature (Haraway 2007: 87). Women's self would not be evaluated in terms of biological determinism but in terms of diversity and change. Harpo cannot comprehend the idea that women's psyche and creative power exist separately of their biological nature. However, we can look at another aspect of his situation. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is not the only person who gives Harpo advice; Celie also tells him to continue beating his wife. The significance of this moment resides in Celie's inability to discern right from wrong. She later ascribes it to jealousy: "I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't." (Walker 2014: 39) Alice Walker shows us that Celie's actions are disgraceful. Celie is betraying her gender/sex because she has not yet discovered her self-importance and worth. Fear rules over her life and thoughts. Later on in the narrative, the heroine manages to free herself through the power of sisterhood, literally and figuratively. Sisterhood is the key to freedom. Being part of a whole gives them a common goal. Sofia's departure from the existing structures of not only gender, but also of race is viciously punished. Love exists in Harpo and Sofia's relationship, but Harpo's demons constantly displace and overshadow it.

Before one of them crushes the other, Sofia leaves Harpo with the words: “He don’t want a wife, he want a dog” (Walker 2014: 62). Squeak replaces her in Harpo’s life physically, but she never manages to spark a similar emotional connection. If we only pay attention to physical characteristics, we find that Sofia is described as being quite big and of bright black color, while Squeak is presented as small, unimportant, and almost mute. Their physical appearance, intentionally contrived by the author, exposes their mentality, worldview, and later actions. Harpo uses her to satisfy his ego and she never reaches him on a deeper level due to her nature. There is a connection between hierarchy and love, as we have ascertained. The real question that we need to answer is whether hierarchy of gender has a negative or a positive influence on love. In our examples so far it has been negative. Molly Hite finds “timeworn theories about male and female natures” as “useless for describing the qualities of people” (Hite 1990: 442). Just as those theories of gender roles and their hierarchy are useless for the individual, they are also useless in the question of love. Lack of limitation leads to healthy relationships and true devotion.

Squeak becomes a character and receives an individuality after she lets a white man rape her in order to save Sofia from going to prison. Bell Hooks, in her mixed review of *The Color Purple*, discusses the problem of this scene. According to her, Squeak’s rape does not have negative consequences, in fact it has a positive outcome – Sofia is released from prison. She further elaborates that black male rapists are more mercilessly represented and nothing positive comes out of their actions (Hooks 1990: 463). In short, black male violent acts take precedence over white male violent acts. She falls into the group of critics who prefer first winning the battle of race and then the one of gender. Does it mean that black violence as represented in the novel did not occur in the black society? The partial answer to this question lies in Calvin Hernton’s lengthy defense of the novel and in Jacqueline Bobo’s article “Sifting Through the Controversy: Reading *The Color Purple*”. Jacqueline Bobo traces historically the way black male writers have spoken negatively towards black women writers, giving examples with Zora Neale Hurston, Ntozake Shange, and Lorraine Hansberry among others, in order to show that the treatment of Alice Walker is not an exception to the rule (Bobo 1989: 339). In addition, Calvin Hernton explains that black readers search for the despicable men to be white in the novel, but only find that they are one of them and that causes them pain. Hernton calls black men’s violence “a system of oppression within another system of oppression” (Hernton 1987: 17). He supports the text if it would lead to a change in the binary opposition and

the society. Moreover, one example of something “positive” that comes out of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s rape and violence is that Celie has a place to live. He expects of her to work and sleep with him as a payment for food and shelter. This is an oversimplified idea but it demonstrates that in both situations sex is traded for something. Overall, Squeak fills Sofia’s empty space, but she cannot fill her shoes. Only after she finds her identity, can Squeak fight for her place in the world and in love.

Our discussion so far has only reviewed relationships between men and women in the black society on American land. The pairing we shall consider in the following paragraph appears removed from the American context. The two protagonists, who would later become a couple, have travelled to Africa when they were still not romantically involved. When Celie marries Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Nettie moves in with them since she has no other place to go to. Soon after her arrival, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ starts sexually harassing her. He had wanted to wed her, but Celie and Nettie’s alleged father first insisted on dispensing with Celie. Nettie, being more independent and free-spirited, escapes Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s household with Celie’s help. She joins Samuel and Corrine on their missionary crusade in Africa by sheer chance. Alice Walker intentionally includes Africa in the story; during the civil rights movement in the 1960-70s African-Americans were actively trying to retrace their roots back to Africa. Nettie’s perception of the treatment of women in the African tribes strikes the reader as barbaric but purposeful, in accordance with the tribal manners. Some critics find the episodes beyond borders detached and not pertinent to the overall story, but others perceive them as a way to bring the question of roots “sharply” into the spotlight (Juneja 2008: 72). The African episode proves interesting because Nettie escapes the limits of patriarchy and becomes an intellectual friend to Samuel rather than a lover. Samuel’s wife dies and only then does Nettie assume her position. It remains questionable whether Samuel and Nettie had had any feelings toward each other before that moment during their stay in Africa. The way they treat each other resembles today’s relations between men and women in intellectual circles. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes about gender, binary divisions, and capitalist culture in her essay “Explanation and Culture, Marginalia”, and her reflections would be especially applicable here. She puts masculinity in the center and femininity in the margin. In her opinion the capitalist society operates on the basis of “masculinist centrism”. What is more, she claims that there are women who actually move away from the margin and are accepted in the center, most often in intellectual circles, but this only happens if the woman “behaves like men” (Spivak 1996: 37). She bases her theories on a

speech given by Adrienne Rich. The question remains whether Nettie reaches the goal of equality, or she is simply accepted in the men's club for being more intelligent and consensual to their decisions. Samuel's character is not antagonistic but he continues to be the keeper of women who would do anything for him. The power structures do not break down. Yet Nettie's experience of love is quite different from Celie's because she has the illusion of freedom and equality. Nettie enters the elite club of women allowed into the male structures of society, although this image is far from perfect and is for the most part misleading.

The character Alice Walker created to destroy and shift the focus of the male/female binary division is Shug Avery. The story of Shug Avery commences as a myth. She is an otherworldly creature who entices, confuses and, most of all, resides permanently in the cultural heritage of the black folk. She is the elusive jazz singer and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s unfulfilled desire. From the moment Celie hears her name and sees her picture, she acknowledges her as an icon and a guiding light. Shug returns to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ after she loses everything and is nearing the end of her vital powers. Celie, being enthralled by Shug, resolves to nurse her back to health. If Shug were to die, then Celie's only goal in life would die with her. Her feelings are reflected in her letters, but are not vocally enunciated: "Come on in, I want to cry. To shout. Come on in. With God help, Celie going to make you well. But I don't say nothing. It not my house. Also I ain't been told nothing." (Walker 2014: 44) Celie is under Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s control, she has to be told when she is supposed to want something, the house she lives in is not her house and it will probably never be. She needs to hold on to Shug in order to stay alive. Celie is not squeamish, when she has to bathe and mend Shug's decrepit skin, she is not hindered by her "ugliness". Celie admires Shug's beauty from all angles and in all conditions. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, who had wept and spent his whole life idolizing the blues singer, is unable to be as loving and caring as Celie. Shug recovers and the two women grow close and fall in love.

The novel's fiercest opponents usually stand up not only against the representation of the black family, but also against the depiction of lesbianism. Celie and Shug's relationship crosses the boundaries of the socially accepted behavior, even more so by proving to be more efficacious than the bonds between men and women. Donna Haraway, in her examination of gender, treads deeply into the category and reconsiders power structures. She says that feminism's agenda should be the demolition of the "social system of heterosexuality" (Haraway 2007: 90), because society artificially ascribes gender and position, and in this way

the woman loses her idea of self, as Celie has done in the novel. She has been controlled during her whole cognitive life. The divisions based on sex, Haraway continues, should be eradicated because if gender equaled sex then lesbians would not be women since they could have no place in the binary demarcation. Haraway is influenced by French feminists and in this case specifically by Monique Wittig. The way Alice Walker endeavors to be realistic and to imbibe her novel with her womanist theories is through the introduction of the lesbian relationship. It cracks the base of traditional beliefs and presents theory into practice. Celie uncovers her selfhood through her love for Shug Avery. There are two standpoints on the meaning of their relationship: some, like Ellen Barker, see Shug's affection as motherhood in a psychoanalytical reading of the text (Barker 1999: 55), while others, like Bell Hooks, see it as sisterhood. "Walker posits a relational basis for self-definition that valorizes and affirms women bonding" (Hooks 1990: 468). Hooks' explanation appears to fit better in a discussion through the lens of feminist deconstructivism. Both sisterhood and motherhood in the African-American culture have propelled change and development. Women find freedom through togetherness. Motherhood includes the dissemination of knowledge from one generation to another, while sisterhood expects simultaneous experience of the world and reciprocation. Shug Avery does not only pass on knowledge and act as a mother to Celie, she also changes and gets a hold of herself through Celie's nurturing influence and through the creation of a balanced relationship.

Furthermore, sisterhood protects their interests. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has been in the habit of beating Celie since the beginning of the novel, this is his way of showing her where she is supposed to exist and of nurturing his masculinity. Shug puts an end to his practices and urges Celie to reformulate her ideas of identity. She tells her: "Us each other's peoples now" (Walker 2014: 165). They have to stick together through the good and the bad. Sisterhood takes precedence over the sexual element of their relationship, but the fact that they deviate from the prescribed norms of heterosexuality opens the floor for discussion on the topic of lesbianism. Bell Hooks criticizes the potential of the novel as deconstructive due to the fact that Shug is not solely devoted to Celie and she has previously had a relationship with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. According to Hooks, this places homosexuality in a position within heterosexuality and she thinks that this makes the deconstruction of the binary principle meaningless (Hooks 1990: 457). Lesbianism exists to make the heterosexual dynamics better as evidenced in Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ changing his ways at the end of the novel and

becoming self-sufficient. In spite of that fact, the position of lesbianism does not change its influence over Celie and Shug because since the inception of Celie and Shug's love, Shug has severed her emotional ties to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Moreover, Celie finding herself is reason enough to perceive their relationship as fruitful and meaningful. It is not a step backward, it is a step forward, even though it remains in the bigger picture of heterosexuality. Love can only flourish freely when the individuals are free to express and to receive it. The only threat to their bond is the young man Shug chooses to elope with. This episode teaches Celie that love can only be given and you have to accept your beloved despite their flaws, Shug's flaw being the incessant desire for renewal and rebirth. All the ideas considered so far are represented all the more potently through the style of writing. According to Maria Lauret women writers are the people who can put into words what abused girls cannot (Lauret 2000: 99). Alice Walker's tale of reinvention accomplishes that through Celie's epistolary, naïve, and truthful letters, individual growth, and description of diverse relationships. Her work is important because it presents the problems of her community and gives a voice to the voiceless.

Alice Walker weaves a quilt of emotions and relationships. She positions the personal ahead of the public. Although she was blamed for minimizing the bigger problem of race and class and focusing on the personal predominantly (Selzer 1995: 126), she succeeds in capturing the essence of women and love. The positive comments from women who have seen themselves in the novel prove its timeless themes and cultural significance. The fact that the author challenges the preexisting binary oppositions adds another layer of meaning and strongly positions the novel in the ranks of the womanist canon. We can finish this deliberation with Alice Walker's defense of Celie: "For if and when Celie rises to her rightful, earned place in society across the planet, the world will be a different place, I can tell you" (Walker 2011: 118). Celie earns her place in the society through love and change.

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