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**Examining the dual sign of the black woman, through
Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'**

"by"

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Introduction

Introduction:

In this thesis I propose to initiate an examination of the history of black women, through the work of Alice Walker and in particular, her novel 'The Color Purple' (1983). The title of this thesis is 'Examining the dual sign of the black woman, through Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'. What this means is that our perception of black women can be based on what is called a sign representation has three types, 'the reflective', 'the intentional' and 'the constructivist'. The reflective approach puts meaning into an object, person, idea or event, and language functions as a mirror to reflect this meaning that exists already in the world. The second approach analyses the opposite. It holds that the author imposes his/her own unique meaning to the world, through language. Words should mean what the author means them to say. This is the intentional approach. The third approach, which is the one I am concerned with, is the Constructivist approach which acknowledges the social and public character using representation systems. Constructivists do not deny the existence of the material world, however this material world does not convey meaning. It is the social system which we use to convey our concepts and the linguistic or other representational systems, that construct meaning and convey our message to others. (source, Hall, 1977, pp. 24-25). The sign is, according to Hall, "something that bears relationship to the shape and texture of objects it represents". For example, a two dimensional image is a sign, but a sign should not be confused with reality (1977, p. 24)

The struggle of black women to challenge stereotypes and try to map their identities has a long and rich lineage: from times of slavery, through to the Civil rights movement and it continues today.

Black womens experiences of slavery differed from those of the male and chapter one examines some of the reasons behind this double standard.

Chapter two explores the dynamics of how women until the Feminist movement were mobilized through the ideals and objectives which were common to many identity based political groups within the Civil rights movement.

Many black women however ultimately found that they needed to develop their own strategies and I am interested in the way their aims differed from both the Civil rights movement and the feminist movement. My primary source of research was Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'. I also used the work of other black feminist authors, such as Bell Hooks and various feminist literary theories as a background to my analysis of Walkers novel.

Chapter three therefore is at first a description of 'The Color Purple'. An analysis follows, which examines how Walker works from her own family histories to supply a narrative, that is fictional, but mobilizes black feminist ideals of empowerment against the odds of dual oppression.

Chapter One

Chapter One:

History of blackness, 15th Century to the 19th Century.

There is no one particular history of slavery or blackness, only histories, but in this chapter I will examine aspects of slavery, gleaned from the work of specific authors, and in particular the position of the black woman within these histories.

Western slavery began in the mid 15th century, with the capture of black Africans in coastal raids by early Portuguese explores. (Dempsey, 1988, p. 3). Obtaining labour was a main focus in slavery, as colonization required a workforce. By the early years of the 18th century it was estimated that nearly 100,000 black slaves were being transported per decade. By the end of the century it was nearly 100,000 each year. The total estimate was 11 million by the end of the century (18th) with 2 million more dying from disease and maltreatment or murder (Dempsey, 1998, p. 3). At this point within western logic slavery was not conceived of as wrong. Slavers were considered ordinary merchants, many were politicians or philanthropists and the economic necessity for slaves in America took precedence over its morality. Also it was considered that slavery saved the African savage from massacre and intolerable bondage in his or her own country and this introduced the 'slave' to a happier way of life (Dempsey, 1998, p. 3). At this historical moment therefore many writers viewed Africa as a barbaric place. Africa was represented as being full of devil worshippers and cannibals.

The black man was viewed (represented) as being in need of civilization, as he/she was a subhuman savage, and thus he/she needed the influence of the white man (Dempsey, 1998, p. 3). As aforementioned representation works in three ways and it is the Constructivist approach that I am concerned with, in my analysis.

The female slave's existence in Western history is largely ignored. According to Dempsey "Justification for slavery introduced him (the slave) into a much happier way of life" (1998, p. 3) Dempsey automatically assumes all slaves were male and his oversight in the recent article in the Irish Independent echoes this historical invisibility.

I wish to refute this assumption by pointing to other histories which demonstrate that the female slave played a very large part in slavery. Her oppressions though different from the male slaves were just as harsh, if not harsher.

As I have already stated, the focus of slavery in the 15th century was mainly labour and the female slave was not seen as valuable to slavers at first. She was considered weaker than the male, therefore it cost less to buy a female, however as slavery progressed into the 18th century, slavers began using the female slave as a breeder, to increase the workforce, in this way her value increased.

In Maryland in 1664 the Anti-Amalgamation laws were passed. The aim of this legislation was to curtail sexual relations between white women and black men.

The offspring of such unions were deemed slaves, by law. Therefore racism around gender and sexuality existed from a very early stage.

The law decreed

That whatsoever freeborn white woman shall intermarry with any slave from and after the last day of the present assembly, shall serve the master of such freeborn women so married shall be slaves as their fathers
(Hooks, 1981, pp.15, 16)

In putting a stop to interracial relations, this legislation aimed to keep the white race 'pure'.

As I have mentioned earlier there were differences in the way male and female slaves were treated. This started aboard ship. Women were not shackled, they were allowed to roam 'free' as they were not considered as much a threat as their male counterparts. Male slaves were chained together in case they retaliated. One example of such a retaliation was in the case of the 'Amistad' which is the focus of a new film by director Steven Spielberg, who also directed the screenplay for Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'. However, loosely based on the historical event, the film shows the ship, bound for a Cuban port in the 19th Century. The slaves rose and overthrew the captain and most of the crew.

They sailed to the United States in 1841 and John Quincy Adams, a former United States President, pleaded before the Supreme Court that their enslavement was unlawful. This was a landmark case in that the slaves were released, most such

revolts resulted in the ringleaders being tortured or murdered (Dempsey, 1998, p. 3)¹

As aforementioned, female slaves were allowed to roam free. This made them more vulnerable to physical and sexual attack. According to Hooks "They were stripped of their clothing and beaten on all parts of the body the nakedness of the African female served as a constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability" (1981, p. 18). Robert Shufeld, an observer of the slave trade, documented this prevalence of rape aboard slave ships. He wrote that "In those days many a negress landed upon our shores already impregnated by some of the demonic crew that had brought her over" (Shufeld in Hooks p18, 1981)

The principal job of the slaver was to make the slaves docile and to remove all human dignity so that their spirit would be broken and they would be marketable in the colonies. Part of this involved the removal of names and status, so rendering the slave anonymous. Groups were dispersed, thus removing any common language and making communication between the slaves impossible and therefore making revolt an impossibility. When it deemed necessary, a slave would be murdered to instil fear in the onlookers and thus make them submissive to the slavers will.

¹. It is interesting that Spielberg has chosen to represent narration of the 'black struggle' for the second time. Many activists felt that his re-representation of Walker's novel sanitized and de-politicized it's message.

Only the strongest and most physically fit survived the passage. According to Hooks, white observers of the slaves, as they disembarked from the ships thought they looked joyful at the prospect of reaching a new and civilized land. In fact it was joy at being alive and reasoning that whatever lay ahead could not be worse than that which they had just encountered (Hooks, 1981, p. 20)

The double standard between males and females continued to differ when they began working in the colonial household. Certain tasks were considered 'female' and as such, the male slave refused to do them. Thus there was a double workload on the female slave as she worked in both the household and in the fields. "The female slave was primarily exploited as a worker in the fields, a worker in the domestic house hold and a breeder, and also an object of white male assault" (Hooks, 1981, p. 23). Female slaves were treated just as harshly in the fields as their male counterparts but they could not refuse to do this work, as the male slaves could do concerning domestic work. This shows that the taboo around the de-masculizing effects of feminine activities still held for black and white male subjects. If females displeased the master with their work in the fields, they were punished in the same manner as the males. "It was common to see a black female tied to a stake, stripped naked, being whipped with a saw or a club". (Hooks, 1981p. 23).

This could be seen as patriarchal rule as it allowed for women to be specifically discriminated against. Slavery involved sexual abuse, implemented through patriarchal rule, from the onset of puberty. Very little education was available for

black females, about their bodies or sexuality, and as a consequence they were left a target for sexual attack or exploitation, in the colonial household. Those who would not willingly submit to their masters attentions, were forced. There was no protection for these women through the legal system.

The feminine ideal was determined in terms of her role in the nuclear family as mother, wife, and daughter..... and the term 'prostitute' was an accommodating category, it comprised anybody female who deviated from the above stated female ideal and lived outside of the middle class codes of morality. (Betterton,1984, p. 82)

The negro woman was considered as the property of her white master and as such was supposed to be entirely subservient to him, whatever his wishes, sexual or otherwise; on pain of whipping or death. Perhaps to ease their consciences or somehow absolve themselves of responsibility for the actions, slaveowners often promised the slave a new dress or jewellery and in this way he was 'paying' for the sexual services of the slave.

This practice served to re-inforce the idea of black woman as prostitute as such she was seen as the blame for seducing 'weak' man who had no control over his sexual urges. This is the essentialistic view of sexuality, which was prevalent in the 19th century. It was viewed that "Sexuality was instinctive and innate and was regarded as the most basic and fundamental drive in the human animal" (Betterton 184 p. 74)

Linda Brent, a writer who had been a slave herself, commented on her mistresses' attitude towards the abuse of slave women:

I was convinced her emotions arose from wounded pride and anger, she felt her marriage vows had been desecrated and her dignity insulted, and she had no compassion for her husbands victim. She pitied herself as a martyr, but was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate slaves were placed. (Brent, in Hook's, 1981, p. 28).

Most white women absorbed the ideology taught by religion that female sexuality was divided into two categories, the pure and the fallen. The fact that their husbands were abusing slaves, however gave them some respite from unwanted sexual advances which they could not refuse otherwise, as woman's role was defined in terms of reproduction, so this in some way legitimized sexual abuse of black women and these attacks were not therefore seen as rape and were largely ignored. This enforced breeding was oppressive to the female slave and many died as a result of repeated childbirth and miscarriage. It was racism that caused slavery, but it was sexism that caused many of the oppressions of the black female.

So far in this chapter I have been concerned with how slavery held particular consequences for the black woman because of her gender and how her "biology was deemed to be her destiny". Even with the rise of the Abolition movement, dominant gendered images of black woman, were not to disappear. The Abolition movement can be traced back to the publication in 1755, of Francis Hutchesons 'A system of moral philosophy'. Hutcheson's thinking is thought to have influenced Thomas Jefferson, to demolish the legality and morality of slavery. (Dempsey, 1998, p. 3)

In 1776, the year of the American Declaration of Independence, public agitation grew against slavery and slaveowners and in 1788 a privy council was set up, and Sierra Leone was the first established haven for freed slaves. In 1807, Jefferson obtained the abolition of the slave trade in the United States, making it illegal for any American to participate in slavery in any way. Britain soon followed suit, with

the establishment of a West African Squadron to intercept slavers. (Dempsey, 1998, p. 3)

The negative image black women had bestowed on them did not change after abolition however. In this chapter I covered the history of slavery in part, as it provides a background to the formation of negative representations of black women that have been the site for struggle and change ever since.

Chapter two covers black womens fight for dignity and independence, starting with the years following the Civil War.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two:

Black women's rights, from the 19th century to the 1960's

In this chapter I would like to examine the years from 1880, up to 1970, offering historical research on the social, legal and economic aspects of black women's existence in the United States.

I would also like to briefly map the rise of the Feminist movement and how the aims and goals of mainstream feminism differed from those of black women's movements. Finally the chapter explores how, by various methods, black women have addressed these differences, from the white women and the black men, especially through literature. All of these histories go on to inform a deeper reading and understanding of Alice Walker's novel 'The Color Purple'.

As aforementioned, black women in the 19th century were faced with several dominant images of them, which had been present since slavery, such as black woman as sexually loose and immoral. Black women found they had to address a double agenda; they had to demand their rights as women, but also as black women. After the Civil war, during the reconstruction years of the early 1900's many black people strove to demonstrate that given the same social and economic opportunities they could be just as successful. However, institutional segregation existed in America. This meant that the state denied blacks their social and political rights, through denying them full American citizenship (Hooks, 1981, p. 55-58).

The dominant white society's reaction to multiculturalism was to construct a new social order, which patronizingly and dishonestly positioned black people as separate but equal. Black activists began to demand equality, and the 1950's in America saw the rise of the Civil rights movement. Part of this movement involved the appropriation of a new and alternate language. Language and its uses are a feature of Alice Walkers 'The Color Purple' which I will go into in more detail at a later stage.

The term black, according to Harris, is defined by blacks themselves not only by skin colour and hair but also through a specific configuration of life experiences that are distinctly different from those of all other racial and ethnic groups. (Harris, in Eagleton, 1985, p. 73).

The Civil rights movement was a collective action. It was a role model for other groups, such as the Anti-war, Anti nuclear, Student groups and the Feminist movement, which I shall focus on in more detail at a later stage in this chapter. The main figures in the Civil Rights movement were Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in the more radical Black Panther Party. Luther King fought to achieve political and social rights for black Americans. Luther King's famous 'I have a dream', speech in 1963 was a landmark, in that it opened up the way for political discussion and debate; for example the transformation of what was viewed as western or ethnocentric language. 'Black is Beautiful' is a phrase that was coined by the Civil rights movement to describe the pride in black identity which they stressed.

According to Gloria Joseph, 'Black is Beautiful' meant not simply to have pride in a particular shade of skin colour but also to have pride in ancestry. (Joseph, in Pandora, 1985, p. 224).

Some aspects of black society did not wish to assimilate into white society, to them this meant losing their African heritage and adopting the dominant culture and this applied to the more radical Black Panther Party.

The slogan 'Black is Beautiful' may be read as utopic however. Black women found that the Civil rights movement mostly dealt with male objectives and neglected those of women. This led to the setting up of their own particular reform movement, for black womens rights, which at its beginning identified with mainstream feminism, which arose in 1968.

Feminist work explored how stereotyping around gender had historical roots. For example, womans role was linked with reproduction and the home, thus her 'biology was her destiny'. The new feminist consciousness explored all aspects of society. Work was carried out on the 19th Century education system and how scientific discourse argued that women should not be permitted to seek higher education. Such 'intellectual overstimulation' was said to terminate womens menstrual cycles and interfere with womens reproductive organs (source, Kramarae, Pandora, 1985).

Another argument put forward by science was that women's brains were smaller and softer than men's, thus once again 'biology was destiny' and women's natural name was fixed within men's historical discourses. In summary, feminism exposed how throughout Western histories, different discourses, i.e. medical, artistic, legal, etc, worked together to naturalise the assumption that 'woman' was a fixed category which was determined by her biology.

The taboo around woman's education was doubly complex however for the black woman. Segregation was imposed in education during the post Civil war years, and black women were denied access to white only schools. Oberlin College in Ohio, founded in 1833, was the first college to open its doors to students regardless of their race or sex. The first black students arrived in 1835 and they constituted nearly 5% of the student body, this rose to 8% following the Civil war, when black colleges emerged in the United States in the 19th century. They were rarely single sex as the black community could not support a dual system, (Hooks, 1981, p. 51-86) and as we can see from the latter historical example there was however a dual system of oppression for black women which was ultimately economically viable for the dominant powers. Black feminism and white feminism differed and in addition, the Civil rights movement's objectives were traditionally male orientated, even though this was not stated openly by black activists, but it was taken as given and naturalised that the objectives stated by them were those of the black male. This is ironic however as many of the main incidents which sparked off the Civil rights movement involved women.

For example The Montgomery, Alabama Bus Boycott occurred in 1955. Rosa Parks, a domestic worker refused to give up her seat to a white man and sit at the back of the bus. Black activists as a protest against segregation on public transport began the bus boycott. (Fuenmayor et al, 1992, p. 51). It is ironic then that black women were crucial within political activism, while simultaneously inequalities of gender were completely overlooked.

Black activist Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) spoke of the position of the black woman in regard to her political and social rights and the contradictions in the treatment of black woman in regard to her political and social rights, and the contradictions in the treatment of black women, called the 'Aint I a woman' speech (1851).

It's name has been used to name feminist books, bookstores, new letters and conferences. I quote it in full as it helps to illuminate the double standard for women in society.

Well children, where there is so much racket, there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the south and the women of the north, all talking about rights, the white man will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this talking 'bout? That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches and have the best places everywhere, nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles or gives me any best place and 'aint I a woman? Look at me!, look at my arm! I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns and no man could head me! and 'aint I a woman? I could work as much, and eat as much as my man when I could get it and bear the lash as well and 'aint I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen them most of all sold off to slavery and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! and aint I a woman! (Truth, in Kramerae, 1985, p.235)

In ways Truth could be said to have influenced later feminist developments and her use of the personal was used to further her political interests.

The differences between black and white womens experiences firstly became highlighted in first wave of feminism.² In the United States in the 1870's and 1880's, Social purity feminism was based on strict Evangelical principles. This brand of mostly white feminism 'identified alcohol, violence and sexual evils as masculine evils and as threatening to women in a family situation'.

These activists took the view that women were different from men, in their sexual appetites. Women were deemed morally superior, purer and with little or no need for sex, unlike men who were ruled by animal passions. (Source, Walkins et al, 1992 p. 64).

Thus first wave feminism in the United States did not at first demand equality, but merely re-used the stereotypes, women were naturally superior and men as inferior and therefore they did not challenge the fixed notion that a womans body was her destiny. For example in the case of the Grimke sisters, who in 1839, published a book called 'American slavery, as it is'. These women were part of a group of Abolitionists who disapproved of 19th Century slavery and wished to abolish it. Their father had two children by a black female slave and thus they were concerned about the sexual exploitation of slaves.

² First wave feminism was pre-1960's, including the Suffragette movement.

However, it was not the black womans subjectivity that they were concerned about, but the subjectivity of the white woman, as they believed that white man had sinned against God with his depravity and must be saved. White women felt personally humiliated by what they considered white male adultery, not rape. This points to the complexity of the history of feminism and how women have at times, worked to re-inforce new stereotypes and essentialize what was dictated as woman.

The first National conference of coloured women was held in Boston in 1895. Black activist at this conference, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin recognised that there were differences in white and black feminism but that they did have some common goals. "We need to talk not only over these things that are of vital importance to us as coloured women, the training of our children and girls and how they can be prepared for occupations" (Hooks 1981, p165). What St. Pierre Ruffin is speaking about here is that all feminists were fighting for a common aim, the abolition of discrimination against women and part of combating this discrimination involved educating the younger generation for the workforce. Thus the need for black feminisms focus on occupation was due to women's economic oppression.

From 1900 to 1940, 40% to 60% of black women worked in domestic service as paid workers (Fuenmayor et al, 1992, p. 69). This continued the sets of binaries between white middle class patriarchal families and their black employees, since slavery. For example, loose/moral, dirty/clean and animal/human.

According to Phylis Palmer,

Working class women and women of colour have been the repositories for images of sexuality and moral inferiority..... as loose women who are so powerless that they pose no threat to men's authority or autonomy, their presence enabled 'good' women to be missionaries for social purity and they performed the labour that enable 'good' women to appear dainty and clean (Palmer, in Fuenmayor et al, 1992, p. 70).

Thus given that this dominant ideology existed, it is no surprise that the only jobs black women could get were as domestics. The 'invisible labour' of housework was done by coloured women and the 'good' woman could be responsible for the removal of dirt in her home and never have to touch it. (Fuenmayor et al, 1992, p. 20).

This exploitation of black women occurred economically in comparison to their male counter parts, but greater opportunities arose for all women during times of crisis such as World Wars I and II. White women were allowed to work in factories and offices for the first time during these years. Before this it was actually illegal for married women to work in certain jobs. According to Mary Evans, "Domesticity is a cage that the state sees as the natural state of women" (Watkins et al, 1992, p. 28). In ways it was because American women were devalued at home that they opted for the more public sphere of work. I would like to mention Sojourner Truth here, again, as she spoke about men helping women into carriages etc.

Thus such practices were merely part of the discourse of courtly love which acted as a screen to cover the exclusion of women from the public sphere.

American women gained the right to vote in 1919 and by the 1920's other progressive legislation was in place to protect womens rights. The 1930's saw the media playing a part in 'instructing' women in how they should play their part in society. From 1920 to 1945 major differences occurred in the White Middle class American household, for example homes changed from being directed by a 'lady-housewife' to being served by the wife. Without a servant to re-inforce her sense of superiority in the household, the wife found her role a lot less tolerable. Her new image was now as servant and mistress combined. Most middle class households during these years, which were the depression years, could not afford domestic help and thus the media served to naturalize the position of wife as mistress and domestic servant.

In the 1950's, dominant ideology attempted to place woman back in the home but because so much change had taken place this could not occur. These changes only served to highlight the ways in which women had been denied equality and women would not revert easily to their previous social position with images presented to them in the media. Hollywood, in particular was guilty of reinforcing historical stereotypes of black women. (Source, Hall, 1997) Hall defines stereotyping as

getting hold of the few memorable, easily grasped, and widely recognised characteristics about a person, reducing them to these traits, exaggerating them, simplifying them, and fixing them, without change or development, to eternity (Hall, 1997 p. 258)

Hollywood then was a force in re-inforcing stereotypical images. Particular stereotypical roles were always mobilized to play black characters, such as the 'mammy' who was a houservant in the white household. She was typically maternal in build and of a bossy nature. The stereotype of the mammy functioned to sanitize the relationships between slaves and their masters. In films the mammy was not portrayed as a beaten or abused slave woman but rather as one who had concern for the welfare of the white family. The sanitization of black histories can also be seen in Spielbergs interpretation of Walker's 'The Color Purple'.

The most famous example of the mammy stereotype was in 'Gone with the Wind' (1939). The actress who played her, Hattie McDaniel received an Academy award for her portrayal. This was the first time that an African American had received an Academy award and it is in ways not all that ironic, but very clear that it was for the performance of a stereotypical role which could be suggested as serving to legitimize slavery. Another dominant image in film, of the black woman, was that of the mulatto. The mulatto was a half-caste. She was portrayed as beautiful, but tragic. Her tragedy was that, as part black, she could not receive complete acceptance from white society, but as part white, she would not receive acceptance in black society either.

The mulatto was considered a symbol of shame as she was living proof of interracial relationships. "The actual body of the mulatto disrupts legislative policy and social conventions pertaining to both white and black relatins and concepts of racial purity" (Fuenmayor, et al 1992, p, 48).

As part of the many proved resistances to such stereotypical images, womens literature was a genre greatly influenced and inspired by the feminist movement. Many black feminist writers addressed issues that were particularly important to their ethnicity. A lot of literary works were based on historical experiences of slavery and ancestral accounts of black history or family histories, thus mobilizing the feminist slogan, 'personal is political'. The particular group of black women writers I wish to focus on however, date from the 19th Century onwards. Womens writing prior to the 1960's was mostly concerned with political texts on the women's struggle and the subjects of race, class and gender. Alice Walker wrote about historical experiences, those of her ancestors and others collectively, in many different forms and not always fictional. One of Walker's influences has been Zora Neale Hurston, a black feminist writer also. There are similarities in the two writer's work, for example Hurston's novel 'Their eyes are watching God' (1937) and Walkers 'The Color Purple' (1983) in that both novels are set in the southern states of the United States of America, in a rural setting. (Eagleton, in Blackwell, 1986, p. 29). Walker has spoken of Hurston's influence on her work.

I wrote my story called 'The revenge of Hannah Kemhuff' based on my mothers experiences during the depression and also on Zora Hurston's folklore collection of the 1920's.... I would not have written the story, which I enjoyed writing as much as Ive enjoyed writing anything in my life, had I not known that Zora had already prepared the ground on which I was moving (Walker in Blackwell, 1980, p. 30,).

Walker writes about the position of black women's literature. She maintains the black woman writer is not taken as seriously as the black male writer and that the reasons for this are twofold. "One is that she is a woman, the other is the subject matter she deals with." Womens writing can be harder to deal with for male critics

(most are male) (Walker in Eagleton 1980, p. 30). According to Barbara Smyth, black women writers are not, it would seem very likeable and until recently they were the least willing worshippers of male supremacy. (Smyth in Eagleton, 1992, p. 30-1).

It is on this literary point that I will summarize this chapter. The chapter began at the Civil rights movement and went on to deliberate the historical, sociological and biological work of first and second wave feminism, which worked to map the complexity of the black woman's history. 'Black woman' is a sign, as stated in title and theory sections. 'The Color Purple' (1983), by Alice Walker, thought fictional it is based on the experiences of black women during the reconstruction years (1919-1940). Hopefully at this point the socio-political and economic circumstances of the period that the book is based upon and also of when Walker actually wrote the text. Chapter one mapped the construction of negative stereotypes surrounding black women. Chapter two points to voices of resistance and Chapter three will focus on an analysis of Walker's 'The Color Purple'

Chapter Three

Chapter Three:

Analysis of Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'

In this chapter I would like to examine Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple' and the major themes within this novel and through this analysis discuss how a narrative that is fictional can mobilize black feminist ideals of empowerment against oppression. The novel was subject to acclaim when released and won the American book award and also the Pulitzer prize for fiction. This text addresses racial difference and in particular the oppressions of black women. Walker does not attempt to give a sanitized version of black women's history, so therefore this novel is based on real life experiences, including oppression because of ethnicity, class and gender. I chose to write about his novel because of the fact that it is an important representation of 'the black woman' and it offers an alternative to histories of dual representations and manages to map emphatically, the practical empowerment of the main character, Celie.

Firstly I will start with a description of the story, before going into a more in-depth analysis. The main characters in the story are Celie, her sister Nettie, Albert whom Celie marries, Shug Avery, who is Alberts lover and later becomes Celies friend/lover. The story is written through the eyes of Celie, the main character, in the form of letters to God, whom Celie writes to as she feels she has no-one else to turn to.

When Celie is fourteen she is raped by her father and has two children by him, whom he takes from her and he tells her that they are dead. Celie is then forced to marry a man who she does not love.

This man was originally interested in Nettie, Celie's sister, but their fathers gives him Celie instead, because he is ashamed of what he has done to her and he wants her out of his sight.

Celie then becomes surrogate mother to Albert's children. She becomes nothing more than an unpaid servant, who is subjected to physical and mental abuse, until she meets Shug Avery, a nightclub singer, who is Albert's lover and whom he takes in, when she becomes ill.

Shug Avery is a strong character who is set up as beautiful and independent and most importantly she is not afraid of men and especially not of Albert. Celie sees this and wishes this strength for herself. This admiration is the initial basis of their friendship. Celie also befriends Sofia, who is Harpo's (Albert's son's) wife. The bond formed between these three women strengthens them and in particular, Celie who up to now has been isolated. Celie discovers that through this collective strength, she can find the courage to fight her oppression. One day when Albert is away, Shug and Celie discover Nettie's letters in a trunk in Albert's room.

From these letters, the women discover that Nettie is not in fact dead, as Albert had told Celie, but that she is alive and working in Africa as a tutor to a missionary couple's two adoptive children, who in fact turn out to be Celie's two children, Oliva and Adam. Celie is angry with Albert for concealing Nettie's whereabouts to her and plots revenge. Shug is surprised at Albert for treating Celie this badly and it is this incident that changes Shug's opinion of Albert and she becomes closer to Celie.

Celie's only experience of her sexuality has been when she was raped by her father. She is ignorant about her body and about love. Celie describes being in bed with Albert, to Shug, "Its just somethin' he do to you" (p. 68). Celie has told Shug about her two children at this stage but she has not told her who the father was. Shug asks Celie whether making love with her children's father was any different than making love with Albert, and it is then that Celie tells Shug about being raped by her father and about never feeling loved.

Shug then decides that Celie should come back to Memphis with her and leave Albert. Albert objects to this and begins as usual to abuse Celie verbally. Celie reminds him of all the wrong he has done to her and jabs him with a knife when he tries to hit her. Albert cannot understand Celie's newfound strength and he is angry. He tells Celie that she will be back and that she is only fit to be Shug's maid. Albert does not believe that Celie can survive independently of him. Nettie informs Celie that she has discovered that the man they thought was their father was in fact their stepfather and that their real father had been murdered.

This meant that Celie's children were not in fact her biological father's. Celie then goes to see her stepfather and finds that this is true and that he had in fact married their mother, after their father's death.

Celie begins to feel happiness for the first time when she moves to Memphis with Shug. She starts to become self-sufficient and begins her own business, making pants. She now feels contentment as she has everything she needs, love, friendship money and time for herself. She feels validated for the first time.

At the end of the book Nettie returns from Africa, with Celie's two children, Olivia and Adam and also Samuel - Nettie's husband and Tashi, who is Adam's wife. Celie remarks that though she, Shug, Albert and Nettie are now old, she feels contented, surrounded by the younger generation, and especially, now that she has Nettie back, she doesn't feel old. "In fact I think that this the youngest us ever felt" (p. 244). Celie now ceases to write to God. Her final 'Amen' at the end of the book signifies this contentment, and Celie has ceased having a reason to write to her 'God'.

Patriarchy is a major theme within this novel and I would like to analyse the various forms which manifest themselves throughout the novel. According to Hooks "Patriarchy is a system of exchange whereby men are traditionally expected to provide economically for the women and children in the family situation, in exchange for sexual, housekeeping and nurturing favours". (1981, p.76). In patriarchal thought, woman is defined in relation to the man in her life.

Traditional patriarchal representation of women are of passive beings who are subservient to men. As aforementioned there are three systems of representation and Walker uses the Constructivist method to give us a fictional but realistic view of the subjectivity of The 'black woman'. Cora Kaplan describes 'The Color Purple' in these terms. "The Color Purple is a fictional celebration of black woman's capacity to access and affect the social relations in which they find themselves" (1986, p. 185). What she is saying is that 'The Color Purple' celebrates black womans resistance to patriarchy. Kaplan also states that

The Color Purple' also offers a dynamic version of black female subjectivity that in fact, re-writes representations as they appear in both white and black, male and female, southern fictins. It is a great part, a parable of the history of black female subjectivity." (1986, p. 185)

The constructivist approach acknowledges the social aspect of language. It means that we must not confuse the material world, where things and people physically exist, with the symbolic practices and processes, through which representation, meaning and language operate.

'The Color Purple' thus may be suggested as the means through which black woman can escape the oppressive categorisation of stereotypical representation that they have endured historically. Of course it must be acknowledged that Walker's novel is also a representation, yet it is one which I would argue departs from the traditional utilization of the sign of 'black woman'. It departs because it does not sanitize romanticise or sanitize or victimise, but emphatically maps a complex proven of self-awareness.

For example the patriarchal father figure occurs when Celie's mother finds Celie's father's hair in the girls bedroom, which was considered a sanctuary. She questions him about this and he says that Celie has a boyfriend that it is his hair that she has found. In this way he abuses the authority he has over Celie as father figure, because his version of events is believed over Celie's version. Also when Celie is forced to marry Albert, whom she does not love, Celie does not fight this decision as she knows that she must obey her father and that objection is useless. In accordance with Hooks' definition of patriarchy, women in the domestic situation were expected to provide sexual, nurturing and housekeeping favours. Walker makes this evident in the novel, in the way she depicts Celie as property for her father to dispose of. He 'gives' Celie to Albert, as someone to look after his children and as someone to have sex with.

Celie's father sees the fact that Celie cannot have any more children as a bonus, making it easier for him to get her off his hands. "She ugly, but she clean, and God done fixed her, you can do everything just like you want to, and she 'aint gonna make you feed it or clothe it" (p. 10).

Considerations of sexuality are linked to patriarchal thought. According to Betterton, mistrust of women and of their sexuality has, historically been a factor in patriarchy. Some of this originated from images of women as Eve figure, the origination of sin. Female sexuality was divided into two categories, the good and the fallen. (In Pandora, 1984, p. 82)

The term prostitute was as aforementioned an accommodating term, and one in which black women found themselves categorised, as they were seen as a deviation from the white middle class 'norm'.

There is evidence within the novel that appearance (physical attractiveness) was not a factor in sexual abuse of the 'black woman'. Celie and Shug were both subjected to abuse, though in different ways. In Celie's case, early on in the novel, Nettie is about to be raped by their father, and Celie offers him herself instead.

I ast him to take me instead of Nettie, while our new mammy sick, but he just ast me what Im talking 'bout.... I duck into my room and come out wearin' horsehair and feathers, and a pair of our new mammy high heels. He beat me for lookin' trampy, but he do it to me anyway (p. 9).

Here, Celie puts on feathers and high heels to indicate to her father to take her instead, as she thinks she will be more sexually attractive. He abuses her for looking sexually attractive but he rapes her anyway. Thus pointing to the notion that whether beautiful or ugly women are 'blamed' for sex. Shug, on the other hand is subjected to verbal abuse. Because Shug is a nightclub singer and because she has three children outside of marriage, from Albert, she is different from the 'respectable norm' and is seen as a threat.

Even the preacher got his mouth on Shug Avery, now she down..... he dont call no name but he dont have to, everybody know who he mean. He talk about a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin, singing for money and taking other women's men's, talk 'bout hussy, slut heifer and streetcleaner (p. 40).

Patriarchy can also be internalized, which means that women and men absorb this system of values to such and extent, that they internalize them and use them against

their own sex. For example, in the case of the ideological role of man as provider for the household. If for some reason, the man cannot fulfil his role, he can be ridiculed by other men because they might consider him inadequate or not a 'real man'. Also the man might feel that as he is not fulfilling this role that society has given him, he is in some way a failure. An example of internalisation that Walker puts forward in the novel, is when Harpo asks Celie for her advice on how he should discipline Sofia. Harpo has noticed the way Albert subjects Celie to abuse, in order that she obey him. Sofia, however is a stronger person than Celie and is much more independent. Harpo does not mind this independence, secretly he is proud of it, but he feels inadequate as he is a sensitive person himself and is therefore unable to fulfil the required masculine role.

Albert feels uncomfortable also, with Harpo's sensitivity and he derides him for it. Similarly Walker's picture of patriarchy is further complexified by the description of female internalization of dominant ideologies. Celie advises Harpo to beat Sofia, as she is secretly jealous of Sofia's strength and wants to bring Sofia down to her level. Celie knows that Sofia pities her situation and is embarrassed by this. When Sofia confronts Celie about her actions, Celie admits her jealousy and they discuss their respective situations and how they must combat them and their oppressors. Women also competed with each other for the affections of men, for example Sofia and Squeak fight over Harpo. Squeak is Harpo's girlfriend and she becomes jealous when Harpo asks Sofia to dance. Squeak hits Sofia, and Sofia beats up Squeak.

When Squeak looks to Harpo for help he does not give it, because if he is honest, he still loves Sofia, thus Walker offers us an unsanitized version of not only 'The black woman' but of black people in general.

Walker also expresses the fact that racism can be internalized and become evident among people of the same ethnicity. She uses the figure of the mulatto as an example. Self racism is evident when Harpo first talks to Celie about Sofia, before he and Sofia are married. "She pretty, he tell me, bright. Smart? (asks Celie). Naw, bright skin, she smart tho, I think" (p. 29). Harpo seems to find it more important that Sofia's skin is bright, than that she is intelligent. It is interesting however that Celie interprets this 'bright' to mean intelligence, thus this shows the different set of priorities of the male characters in this book and the female. Also Harpo would consider Sofia's intelligence less important than the fact that she is sexually attractive to him. It is also interesting that after Harpo's marriage to Sofia breaks up, he takes up with Squeak who is a half caste. Walker has spoken about self-racism in terms of the discrimination within the sign of the black woman.

"There is probably as much difference between the life of a black woman and a high yellow woman, as between a high yellow woman and an white woman" (in Pandora, 1985, p. 34). As according to Squeak, "They call me yellow, like yellow be my name, but if yellow is a name, why 'aint black the same, well, if I say, hey black girl! lord, she try to ruin my game! (pp. 85, 86)

Thus in summary, patriarchy in the novel is interlinked through three systems of abuse. Abuse through money, sex and violence and a particular statement that Albert makes to Celie is prime example of this. "Who you think you is?, he say. You can't curse nobody. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman!". Celie's answer to him asserts her subjectivity and it is her strongest statement in the novel and it is central to Walker's assertion that even in the face of all of this adversity, Celie then acts as a metaphor for black womens subjectivity in general. "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly, but I'm here."

Walker also makes a point of making language a feature in this novel. Celie uses a system of language called patois. Celie is not very well educated, yet she has a colourful and varied use of language, which is not technically correct English, yet it is like a separate language of its own and is perfectly understandable. An example of this is "This far I can go with it, look like my eye git full of water and my throat close" (p. 76). Thus Celie's language is an important part of her identity.

Walker also uses clothing as a symbol of empowerment. Trousers are associated with authority, it is therefore no surprise that Walker shows Celie making trousers once she is free of Albert. Celie's making of trousers does not mean she is rejecting her femininity, she embraces it, but she mistrusts men. She does not wish to become emasculated, she merely wishes the authority that trousers are associated with.

The male/active and female/passive are also challenged through the character of Celie, as she discerns her sexual urges by gendering them. When she first sees Shug naked she is confused as she realizes that her feelings are sexual. She thinks that she has "turned into a man" (p. 45) Celie has never heard of Lesbianism.

According to Brent Ingram, "Experiences of marginalized sexualities flew in the face of a total theory of psyche-sex-family-political-economy and that were considered unimportant, impotent, and wrong" (1997, p. 32) Celie turned to Shug because Shug is her first experience of love and of sexual feelings. It is interesting to note that towards the end of the novel, Shug and Celie's relationship changes back to one of friendship. Shug resumes having relationships with men. Celie is put out by this at first and then she realizes that she is less dependent on Shug than she previously thought.

It could also be proposed that religion played a part in patriarchy. One of the theories that Walker questions is the fact that the given image of God is one of a white male. She questions this in the form of a conversation between Celie and Shug, where Celie is questioning her spirituality as she cannot reconcile her 'God' with one that is white and male.

Shug tells Celie that she should substitute this image with one that is less threatening to her, such as one from nature.

Celies image of God is also a sign, and not reality. In order to remove this masculine image, Shug says "you have to git man off your eyeball before you can see anything a'tall..... conjure up flowers, trees, wind, water, a big rock" (p. 168)

Here Walker is expressing a validation of the downtrodden. Her theory is that we need not look to the given for spirituality, it is all around us, in the most unexpected of places. She substitutes this male image of God with the Color Purple. "This color that is always a surprise, but it is everywhere in nature" (Introduction, The Color Purple). In summary I wish to say that Walkers intention in writing this novel was to "explore the difficult path of someone who starts out a spiritual captive" but breaks free, through her courage to escape her subjectivity, with the help of others, that she "like nature itself is a radiant expression of the heretofore described as divine" (Introduction, The Color Purple) This chapter began by attempting to analyse patriarchal oppression, through the lens of the 'The Color Purple'. Through this process, it has been realized that patriarchy encompasses much more than simplistic models of oppression. Combating patriarchy needs men and women of all identities and backgrounds to take responsibility for their actions and for both sexes to realize that they are equal in their own right.

Conclusion

Conclusion:

I set out when writing this thesis to examine the history of 'the black woman' in society. As the research continued the sign unpacked, to be one that was much more complex than I originally thought.

In my exploration of this topic I mapped some of the origins behind explorative representatives of black women, through looking at slavery. Chapter two dealt with how these representations and stereotypes continued to influence black women's treatment by the dominant society. It also however explained how, many black voices fought through the Civil rights and Feminist movements to change this oppressive representational scheme. In chapter three, Alice Walker's novel 'The Color Purple' was mobilized as an example of how literature by black women was inspired by the feminist movement. As aforementioned there is no one history of black women, only histories and I have attempted to examine Alice Walker's version, through her construction of a text in an unglamorised fashion. Some of the novel's thematics were identified and acted as a useful lens, under which to examine the multiplicative nature of patriarchy. Walker's text also allowed however for a subjectivisation and thus a negation of the sign of 'the black woman', through creating a tangible, albeit fictional space for black women to speak from.

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