

AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN: THE DOUBLE STIGMA REFLECTED IN LITERATURE

(Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*)

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RESUMEN

La literature afroamericana escrita por mujeres, de la que *El Color Púrpura* de Alice Walker es un claro representante, se caracteriza por presentar heroínas en busca de su propia identidad, utilizando el proceso de escritura como un acto de auto-descubrimiento y auto-definición. Mediante este proceso, personaje y lector descubren una voz muy personal y a la vez representativa de toda una comunidad: la de aquéllas que siempre sufrieron el doble estigma de no ser ni blancas ni hombres.

Palabras clave: sexismo, racismo, voz femenina, autodefinición, emancipación, doble estigma, “no blanco, no hombre”, comunidad.

INTRODUCTION

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 movement 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 the 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)

1. THE ROOTS: WOMEN'S SLAVE NARRATIVE

The roots of female Afro-American tradition can be found in the texts written by slaves expressing their desires and denouncing their situation. These early texts mark the beginning of a literary tradition that, because of its circumstances, is characterized by a series of features that will be present in all its history. These characteristics will be present all through *The Color*

Purple and, due to their great importance, I will briefly sum up these features pointed out by M. H. Washington (1989):

- The main character in female Afro-American narrative is usually a black romantic heroine in search for self-definement; in this sense, the act of writing is an act of emancipation. The heroine learns to control her speech as a symbol of control over the self. The "I" is the most important element and therefore the first person narrative style usually prevails upon any others.
- In their narrative there is a journey (physical and/or psychological) from passive resistance to active offensive; at the beginning the protagonist has " both the feeling of speaking into a void -that no one can hear you- and the feeling that what one is saying is merely emotional drivel - that you are saying nothing (new) " (Probyn, 1993: 106). At the end of the narrative we can perceive an evolution in the sense that our heroine is usually able to speak with her own voice and she reconciles with her environment. The end of the narrative tends to coincide with the beginning of the heroine's life as a self-reliant person.
- Woman's sexuality is also a key element in black female narrative. Sexuality is seen as paradoxical since it is a tie and a freedom symbol at the same time. On the one hand, it is a handicap for black women because it is traditionally violated; on the other hand, when she is able to have control over her sexuality, the black woman is able to have control over her life.
- Relationship of the heroine with another woman: in this sense, " woman will become the living mirror of a woman in which she loses herself in order to find herself again" (Lenk, 1985: 57)

All these can be regarded as key features in female Afro-American literature. They are characteristic elements in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and they also introduce this novel within a wider genre: Afro-American literature written by women.

2. THE COLOR PURPLE: FINDING A VOICE THROUGH WRITING

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 eighteen 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 practise 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 not never tell nobody but God. I'd kill your mammy" (24). 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.” (25)

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.” (26)

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 fight, she run away. What good it do? I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told . But I’m alive.” (27)

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 say
Fight. I say.” (28)

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.” (29)

“I won’t leave, she says, until I know Albert won’t even think about beating you” (30)

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.” (32) -

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.” (33)

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." (34)

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" (35)

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" (36)) 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..." (37)

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.

3. CONCLUSION

Celie is an example of an Afro-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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