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THE COLOR PURPLE: AN EXISTENTIAL NOVEL

BY MARC-A CHRISTOPHE

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is a song of joy and of triumph: triumph of one woman's struggle against racism, sexism, and social determinism to ultimately blossom into the wholeness of her being. This epistolary novel evolves around Celie, a battered fourteen-year-old woman/child who, after having been raped by her stepfather, was married to a neighbor farmer who needed a mother/maid for his children from a previous marriage. The story unfolds through the many letters that the lonely and despairing Celie writes to God and later to her sister Nettie, who is a missionary in Africa. Thus, it is through Celie's eyes and consciousness that we learn of her tribulations, of Mr.—'s oppressive presence and of her friendship with Shug Avery, a blues singer whom Mr.— brought into the house. Parallel to the main story, Walker introduces us to the gender conflict between Mr.—'s violent and sexist son, Harpo, and his wife, Sophia, an indomitable, amazon-like woman who dramatizes the plight of the female in rebellion.

Like a classical tragedy in which the fate of the hero/heroine unravels within a conventional locus which symbolizes the world, Alice Walker's story unfolds on a rural farm, a "microcosmic" domain complete unto itself with little or no interference from the outside world. However, it is the simplicity of this world which, as a creative device, allows Walker to emphasize her characters's traits and behavior in an almost caricature-like fashion. Thus she is able to distill the oppressive brutality of Mr.—, to draw in vivid arabesques the complexity of Shug Avery's soul, and to present us in all its sorrow and beautiful epiphany the miracle of Celie's rebirth. It is this process of rebirth and self-realization which I will study through an analysis of Celie's alienation, her quest for the self, and her existential fight

for recognition.

In *The Color Purple*, womanist¹ writer Alice Walker views oppression as an essentially masculine activity which springs from the male's aggressive need to dominate. In the novel, man is the *primum mobile*, the one by whom and through whom evil enters the world. Not unlike the great feminist Simone de Beauvoir, Alice Walker believes that human reality is such that there exists in each individual a consciousness of

a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed—he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object.²

Accordingly, man expresses reality in terms of conflict and he perceives social relations and even nature itself as a series of dualistically opposed contrasts which create a dynamism of survival. These ideas form the core of the relationship between Mr.— and Celie. *The Color Purple's* most daring and enduring quality is the novel's rejection of racial emotionalism and its emphasis on the main character's (Celie's) existential fight for recognition. This is not to say that Alice Walker is insensitive to the racial undercurrents of American society. However, as a militant writer who is engaged in liberation struggles, she feels that the cause of women can be best served if she focuses on the violent reality of what can be termed as the inhuman condition of woman. In an interview granted to *Sojourner*, she explains the reasons behind her emphasis on black male/female gender conflicts:

Of course, the [whites] oppress us; they oppress the world. Who's got his big white foot on the whole world? The white man, the rich white man. But we also oppress each other and we oppress ourselves. I think that one of the traditions we have in

¹ Alice Walker prefers the term womanist over feminist. According to the writer, it expresses more completely the totality of her being.

² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans H. M. Parshley (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), p. xvii. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

Black Women's literature is a tradition of trying to fight all the oppression.³

And then, she adds:

If someone is beating you up at home, you don't then just sit in the room afterwards and write a novel about the white man's rule. I mean to deal with the guy who beat you up in your house and then see who's beating you up on the street. (*Sojourner* 14)

For Alice Walker, racism does not fully explain the oppression of black women by black men. For whether it is an oppressive society (America) in which the emasculated black male feels the need to recapture his masculinity through the oppression of the female, or in a much "freer" society like the Olinkas (Africa) before the arrival of the British, the end result is similar: the male always oppresses the female. Thus, it may be concluded that in *The Color Purple* racial factors are irrelevant to the understanding of the existential fight between Mr.— and Celie. The element to which the writer accords greater importance is not race but power, the power to be, to concretize one's self, or to mold others. As we saw in our discussion of reality as apprehended through existentialism, power as a concept and as a tool is more relevant to the interpretation of social mores and the understanding of the novel's thematic construction. The relationship between Harpo and Sophia is based on power, between Celie and Mr.— on power, between the English settlers and the Olinkas on power, and between whites and blacks in America on power. Accordingly, it can be argued that in a multiracial society like the United States, the dominant race uses its power to dictate the existential modalities of the minority races. This power is so intense that it controls the minorities' cultural and physical perception of self. This dynamic process explains why some blacks would want to borrow the external signs of whiteness by bleaching their skin, by straightening their hair, or by

³ "Alice Walker Is a Free Woman," *Sojourner*, Jan. 1983, p. 14. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

wearing colored contact lenses in order to move closer to white phenotypes, because white is synonymous with control, manhood, power. In reference to the social dynamism of American society, Walker had this to say:

They [Black men] never examine their relationship to Black women and rarely to Black children. Because their whole thing is to be manly. Not only to be men but to be white men. Their whole number is to be white men. (*Sojourner* 13)

From an existential standpoint, the white man is for the black man “the one who looks at,” the one whose eyes give shape to and determine his existence, “the being for whom [he is] an object.”⁴ The sociologist Hubert M. Blalock believes that oppression of one group by another results not when there is an inherent opposition to another race (racial, physical differences) but when “the majority group views discrimination as an effective tool for reducing the ability of the minority to act as a social competitor.”⁵ Furthermore, adds Blalock, prejudices (racial or social) arise when “the majority (dominant group) defines the minority’s (the oppressed group’s) variance from social norms (his norms) as a form of social deviance that threatens its sacred traditions.”⁶ In both examples, the dominant group yields power and unilaterally decides the modality of existence for the subgroup. Thus it can be stated that the one single fundamental difference between oppressor and oppressed, between subject and object, to use existential terminology, is the dominant group’s freedom in dictating the social norms by which the minority group must abide. It is in this context that Jean-Paul Sartre declared that the subject possesses “pure and total freedom” (Sartre 362), because he is determined by none other than himself.

The above-mentioned social dynamism is highlighted in

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Book, 1956), p. 360. Hereafter cite parenthetically in the text.

⁵ Hubert M. Blalock, in William M. Newman, *American Pluralism* (New York: Harper, 1973), p. 218.

⁶ *Ibid.*

The Color Purple by the conflict between Celie and Mr.—. In Mr.—’s eyes, Celie is the ultimate object, someone who exists to satisfy his despotic whims and whose fate is determined by her very essence. He tells Celie, “You Black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, . . . you nothing at all.”⁷ For Mr.—, Celie is what *he* wants her to be; and to the extent that he interprets his wife’s being and controls her existence, she exists only by and for him, not for herself. This observation is echoed in Sartre’s statement on the relationship between subject and object: “Insofar as I am the object of values which come to qualify me without my being able to act on the qualification or even to know it, I am enslaved” (Sartre 358). In that respect, Celie is Mr.—’s slave, a being who derives her existence only through the goodwill of another being. Celie’s subservience to Mr.— was so complete that she could not bring herself to pronounce his name, for to name is to take possession, to project one’s own perception on the Other. Celie could not call out Mr.—’s name until she regained control of her own existence.

The Color Purple’s human dimensions reside in the successful coming into existence of Celie, who concretizes herself by revolting against Mr.—’s rule and determinism. In this most revealing quest, she will be helped and supported by Sophia and Shug, two independent women who become Celie’s doors into a world of self-definition and self-fulfillment.

Gradually, as the novel unfolds, we witness Celie’s metamorphosis—from a wretched woman who accepts her condition—into a free being who decides to take charge of her life. While threatening Mr.— with a knife, Celie declares: “It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need” (p. 22) This quote conveys both the extent of Celie’s alienation as well

⁷ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt, 1982), p. 176. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

as her understanding of the true existential meaning of power: power to decide for oneself, to decide for others, power to punish and to kill. The rapport between Mr.— and Celie clearly exemplifies this creator-to-creature interplay:

He say, Celie git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. (p. 22)

This depersonalization we witness in Celie (her wanting to turn into wood, to become inert) is standard clinical behavior of alienated people who, when facing seemingly insurmountable problems, pretend to be other than who they are and attempt to transcend their situation by transforming their reality. Often,

this depersonalization of the self results from the subject's impossibility to determine his/her life; it is a loss of feeling himself[/herself] as an organic whole . . . an alienation from the real self.⁹

Celie's alienation, the result of Mr.—'s oppression and objectification, is best illustrated by the following quote, which expresses for the reader the character's estrangement from the real self as well as Mr.—'s destructive and dehumanizing influence:

Buy Celie some clothes. She (Kate) say to Mr.—. She needs clothes? he ast. He look at me. It like he looking at the earth. *It* need something . . . his eyes say. (p. 20; emphasis mine)

And yet, it is within this emptiness, this absence of love, that she musters the will to survive. In that respect, it is interesting to note that Celie's quest started with her original "hatred" for Sophia. When she tells Harpo, Mr.—'s son, to beat his wife Sophia like she so often is beaten by Mr.—, she does so not out of meanness or simple evilness but because she envies Sophia's will and freedom. In response to Sophia, who asked her why she suggested such an

⁹ Frederick A. Weiss, "Self-Alienation: Dynamism and Therapy," in *Man Alone*, ed. Eric and Mary Josephon (New York: Dell, 1962), p. 464.

action to Harpo, Celie replies,

I say it 'cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it 'cause I'm jealous of you,
I say it 'cause you do what I can't. What that? she say. Fight, I
say. (p. 38)

By telling Harpo to beat Sophia, for perhaps the first time in her life, Celie expressed her own volition and, through Harpo, attempts to impose her will upon another being. And such is the paradox of existence: that one's redemption should emerge from another beings' subjugation.

Again, it is easy to understand and accept Celie's attitude if we consider that before Shug's arrival, Sophia was Celie's only model of the indomitable woman. Sophia confesses to Celie:

. . . all my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to
fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A
girl child ain't safe in a family of men. (p. 38)

More than Shug, perhaps, Sophia's struggle against Harpo's will was the catalytic moment which made Celie aware of the existence of alternative rapports between male and female.

Even at this stage of her development, we can find the origin of Celie's lesbianism in her contact with Sophia. Like the slave who perceives the master in any action or situation charged with power or violence, or like the attraction exerted by the dominant group over the dominated one, Celie comes to associate Sophia's freedom and Shug's detachment from social contingencies with their apparent masculinity, i.e., freedom. Actually, Celie's lesbianism is rooted more in the character's search for a role model, a kind of alternative reality rather than any "transsexual neurosis" symptomatic of past traumas or inner imbalance. Lesbianism in *The Color Purple* is for Celie and Shug the expression of a self directly in conflict with a man-made, man-dominated society. Interestingly, the two characters' behavior is echoed implicitly in one of Alice Walker's poems where the author advocates her brand of radical

individualism:

Be nobody's darling
Be an outcast
Take the contradiction
of your life
And wrap around
you like a shawl
to pary stones
to keep you warm.⁹

Alice Walker's own quest as well as her characters' in *The Color Purple* is a quest for authenticity. Her characters' lesbianism is not an end in itself but an expression of being, a philosophical attitude based on the individuals' rapport with their physical and moral environment. Many critics would argue, though, that by emulating man's social mores or behavior, Shug Avery lacks authenticity, that she in fact transvestites her "feminine essence" and borrows the trappings of man's power. However, in response to this argument, one may contend that the so-called feminine essence is more societal than inherent, that it is more a set of learned behaviors than predetermined ones, and that it is society which has created the myth of the "true woman" in its articulation of what a woman's existence should be. As Simone de Beauvoir expresses it, "she [the true woman] is an artificial product that civilization makes, as formerly eunuchs were made. Her presumed 'instincts' for coquetry, docility, are indoctrinated, as is phallic pride in man" (de Beauvoir 408). Shug Avery, in her bisexuality, may be symbolic of an absolute being—both subject and object in her feelings for Celie and in her rapport with Mr.—, who is struggling to resolve the gender and social limitations imposed upon her by society's definition of "normal," "natural" beings. The problem here, as we have previously noted, is less a sexual one than an existential one, for it deals with every human's perception of himself/herself or his/her per-

⁹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (New York: Harcourt, 1983), p. 39. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

ception by others. Simone de Beauvoir has clearly pinpointed the conflict existing between a woman's quest for self-accomplishment and her "role" as an object, a mere "tool" to be used to fulfill man's needs:

Woman is an existent who is called upon to make herself object; as subject she has an aggressive element in her sensuality which is not satisfied on the male body. . . . Woman's homosexuality is one attempt among others to reconcile her autonomy with the passivity of her flesh. (de Beauvoir 406-07)

In Shug's lesbian embrace, Celie finds not only a refuge but also the crystalization of an otherwise unformulated wish: the wish to be other than what society (Mr.—) wants her to be. It is Shug who awakens Celie's body to love and the enjoyment of love's mystery. It is Shug who helps her transcend her objectification by Mr.— and to finally accede to the rank of subject. Thus it can be concluded that Shug's feminine/masculine embrace, according to de Beauvoir's theory, allows Celie's own femininity to blossom in its full plenitude:

Between women love is contemplative; caresses are intended less to gain possession of the other than gradually to re-create the self through her; separateness is abolished, there is no struggle, no victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality. (de Beauvoir 416)

The relationship between Shug and Celie is in direct opposition to the one between Celie and Mr.—, for whereas Shug is bent on helping Celie discover her true self, Mr.— thinks only about power, control, and self-realization through the oppression of others (Celie, Harpo).

This redefinition of human relationships, of human values as found in *The Color Purple*, is also encountered elsewhere in Alice Walker's work. In *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (1983), she defines womanist in these terms:

From womanish (opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous,

audacious, courageous or willful behavior. . . . Responsible. In charge. Serious. (*In Search of Our Mother's Garden* xi-xii)

In other words, adds the writer, "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (*In Search of Our Mother's Garden* xi-xii). This definition is echoed in *The Color Purple* in a conversation between Celie and Mr.— in reference to Shug's and Sophia's "abnormal," "different" (we would say womanist) selves:

Mr.— think all this is stuff men do. But Harpo not like this, I tell him. You not like this. What Shug got is *womanly* it seem like to me. . . . Sophia and Shug not like men, he say, but they not like women either. (p. 228)

These are indeed a new breed of women. They are in complete control of their lives and destiny. They are, to use Walker's declaration, "outrageous, audacious, courageous, responsible," and although they love women, they do not reject man's civilization, for they sometimes love "individual men," "sexually and non-sexually."

This womanist philosophy is a humanist one, for it is geared not only toward the full development of one gender but toward the recuperation of male and female, toward the "survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female." Within its parameters, it encompasses love, joy, music, artistic pleasure, and, above all, the reattachment of humankind to a cosmogenic worldview where everything is part of everything else, a world that would give importance to all living creatures, big and small, for they are expressions of the divine. To Celie, who objects to Shug's use of *It* in referring to God, Shug replies:

Don't look like nothing, she say. . . . It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything. . . . Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. (pp. 166-67)

It is Celie's conviction that she herself is part of God's design and forms one with all beings. This conviction will carry her in the final stage of her voyage of self-discovery. No longer a shadow in the light, she has rejoined the com-

munity of men and women; she has found herself, her own place in the great chain of being and is able to marvel at the creation, at life itself:

Now that my eyes are opening, I feels like a fool. Next to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr.—’s evil shor shrink. (p. 168)

Celie’s final letter is a song of glory, the revelation of a newfound harmony between the heroine, the universe within and without: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God,” wrote Celie (p. 242). And this is the true meaning of *The Color Purple*, which is a quest and a celebration, a song of sorrow and of joy, of birth, rebirth, and the redeeming power of love.

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