



A Lacanian Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Themes like racism and sexism, the role of the artist, the relation between art and life, the process towards “spiritual health and self-definition” of the characters and environmental issues are Walker’s main Themes. She also writes about “the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women” (*The Temple of My Familiar*, p.250, 2004). She says herself that she is “preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of [her] people.”(p.250).

In *The Color Purple* the protagonist and narrator Celie, starts writing letters to God. Celie is abused and raped by her father who takes away her children after they are born. Eventually, father marries Celie off to a man who is just as abusive as he himself is. New husband, Mr. ___ simply marries Celie to take care of his four children, look after his house, and work in his fields. After several decades abroad in Africa Celie and her sister have a blissful reunion, and though they are now old women, the readers will get the sense that they’ve just begun the best years of their lives.

Throughout history, human beings have considered the conscious side of the psyche, the source of problems and disorders they come across. However, Freud subverts this view, maintaining that human mind is not just consciousness. After treating many patients, Freud theorizes the idea that the origin of human problems and behavior lies in their unconscious. He believes that a person’s behavior has to be judged by analyzing his unconscious mind that is “the irrational parts of our psyche which is the storehouse of disguised truths and desires that want to be revealed in and through the conscious” (Bressler, p.145, 2007).

Contrary to Freud’s definition of unconscious as chaotic and unstructured, Lacan (1901–81) believes that “the unconscious is structured like a language” (p. 93, 2007). Lacan posits three orders or states of human mental disposition: Imaginary order, the Symbolic order, and the Real

order. “Every order not only constitutes a particular aspect of the mental life of the mature human, but also attributes to stages in the development of the infant human as it approaches maturity.” (Habib, p. 54, 2011)

Lacan starts with a theory of the Imaginary order, focusing on the Mirror stage and the infant’s construction of an imaginary ego in connection to other persons (Others). In passing from Imaginary, the child enters the realm of Symbolic order. Lacan introduces the concept of the *Other* as the necessary structure of the Symbolic order- the language structures and social system through which we become talking subjects. In explaining the *Other*, the researcher is going to explain the concept of object *petit a* which is the lack in the *Other* and also a hole in the Symbolic order. The interpretation of the *Other* as a dynamic force in the signifying process is connected to the relation between the *Other* and the Real.

Both Freud and Lacan believe that the unconscious largely influences our conscious behavior. Unlike Freud, who explains the unconscious as a “chaotic”, “unstructured”, “bubbling pot of dark passions”, “hidden desire”, and “suppressed wishes”, Lacan asserts that the unconscious is “structured like the structure of language” (Tyson, p. 12, 2006). This means the well-structured part of the human psyche can be systematically analyzed like language. Lacan had a new attention to the original texts of Freud. Lacan thought that Freud’s ideas of slips of tongue, jokes, and interpretation of dreams all emphasized “the agency of language in subjective constitution” (p. 32).

The unconscious is not a part of the mind apart or distinct from the conscious, but rather a complex structure like consciousness itself. Habib argues that Lacan employed “linguistic and structuralism”, as well as “mathematics and logic”, to reformulate Freud’s idea of the unconscious and human subjectivity in a “Saussurean terminology of the connections between signifier and signified” (p.588, 2011).

According to Homer, the unconscious comes into being in the Symbolic order in the “gap between signifier and signified”, through the “sliding of the signified beneath the signifier and the failure of meaning to be fixed” (p.68, 2005). The unconscious is “delineated through speech and languages; it is constituted through the subject’s entry into the Symbolic order” (Homer, p.68, 2005). Like unconscious desire which is always seeking our lost object of desire, “ language is always seeking ways to put into words the objects, interestingly, these objects did not need words when we were infants and one with them in Imaginary order”(Tyson, p. 29, 2006). The use of language in general implies a loss or a lack, because if we were in union with that object, we would not need words for referring to the things. In the Symbolic order, language is the first and main system of meaning making.

Lacan’s 'subject' is the subject of the unconscious. Lacan plays on the various meanings of the term 'subject' in linguistics and logic. For him *subject* is also opposed to the 'object'. Lacan plays on the philosophical degree of the term to emphasize that “his concept of the *subject* concerns those aspects of the human being that cannot (or must not) be objectified (reified, reduced to a thing), nor be studied in an 'objective' way.” (*Seminars I*, 194). He distinguishes “the subject of the statement” from the “subject of the Enunciation” to show that because the subject is “essentially a speaking being (*parlêtre*), he is inescapably divided, castrated, Split” (*Ecrits*, p. 835 2005).

This pre-Oedipal stage starts from birth until somewhere around six months. In this stage infant is not able to distinguish itself from its mother's body and the objects in the world around and it does not find itself as "a coherent entity or self" (Habib, p. 589, 2011). In this stage, the child has no idea of itself as a "separate unit, but exists undifferentiated from the mother's body and the sensual world around it" (*Seminars II*, p.65, 2012). Imaginary Order is the world of images. This is not the world of the imagination, but a world of perception.

Mirror Stage occurs "literally" between the age six and eighteen months. "While the child supposes itself an elusive unified entity with the mother and the world, it sees itself in any reflective objects, and realizes it is an independent being that is separated from mother." (Tyson, p.32, 2006). Alternatively, it identifies with the picture and "experiences contradictory feelings such as being glad because of finding an ideal and independent person and woeful related to the lack of unity with mother and surrounding world. Now forever the child will be seeking the mother and unified world" (Bressler, p. 153, 2007).

According to Elliot, in pre-mirror stage that is early point in child's development "there is no clear distinction between subject and object, child and the external world and the mother". (Habib, p. 4, 2011) Actually child has no idea of him, and sees himself with mother and external world as a whole. "The child equally imagines its mother and experienced things in external world as itself. In this state of being, the child lacks any defined center of self, and thinks self and objects are interposing, exchanging, and interrelating each other ceaselessly" (p.142, 1994). As a result, "the first sense of identification is created in subject's life, i.e. with mother" (*Écrits* p.517, 2005) and external world. This point shows that the matter of hallucination begins from the early days of life, and then will continue a lifetime.

The symbolic order as one of orders principally includes language, law, communication, and the unconscious. When the child passes the Imaginary order, it steps into "the pre-given structure of social and sexual roles and relations which make up the family and society". In other words, the Symbolic is "the patriarchal sexual and social order of modern class-society, structured around the 'transcendental signifier' of the phallus, dominated by the Law which the father embodies" (Elliot, p. 145, 163).

Lacan conceived of the Symbolic order as a totalizing concept in the sense that it marks the limit of the human universe. We are born in to language – the language through which the desires of others are articulated and through which we are forced to articulate our own desire. We are locked within what Lacan calls a "circuit of discourse."

By desire, Lacan means unconscious desire. This is not because Lacan sees conscious desire not as something unimportant, but simply, it is unconscious desire that centers the concern of psychoanalysis. Lacan insists on distinguishing between these three concepts: desire, demand, and needs. This distinction begins to emerge in his works in 1957. It is also important to distinguish between desire and the drives. The drives are the partial manifestations of a single force called desire and desire is not a relation to an object but a relation to a lack.

Lacan argues that lack always accompanies the subject, for the term lack represents the lost signifier, and also castration, frustration, and privation. Signifier and castration will be explained in the following sections, but the frustration starts from the early relations between

mother and child (*Seminars, IV*, p.66, 1994), when it is not able to be unified with her or to answer its love toward her. The child starts asking the objects to answer its biological needs such as hunger, but these objects have a symbolic function too. They are going to act as the symbol of the mother's love (Evans, p.70, 2003). As a result frustration occurs when the infants' symbolic demands are not provided, and he feels the sense of being tyrannized (*Seminars, IV*, p. 101, 1994). In such a case, even when the needed object is provided, the sense of injustice and unhappy love will stay in the subject. Thus, subject's whole attempts for eliminating the sense of frustration will be ineffective.

1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for Fiction, "The novel follows a young troubled black woman fighting her way through not just racist white culture but patriarchal black culture as well" (Miller, p. 95, 1986). The book became a bestseller and was adapted into a movie in 2005.

The story takes place mostly in rural Georgia and focuses on the life of women of color in the southern United States in the 1930s, addressing several issues including their extremely low position in American social culture. Celie, the protagonist and narrator of the story is a poor, uneducated, fourteen-year-old black girl living in the American South. She writes letters to God because the man she believes to be her father, Alphonso, beats and rapes her. Alphonso has already impregnated Celie once, a pregnancy that resulted in the birth of a girl. Alphonso takes the girl away shortly after her birth. Celie has a second child, a boy, whom Alphonso also abducts. Celie's ill mother dies after cursing Celie on her deathbed.

Celie and her younger sister, Nettie, hear that a man known as Mister wants to marry Nettie. Alphonso refuses to let Nettie marry, instead arranging for Mister to marry Celie. Mister, needing someone to care for his children and keep his house, finally accepts the offer. Mister and his children, whose mother was murdered by a jealous lover, all treat Celie badly. Later Nettie runs away from Alphonso and hides at Celie's house. Mister rapes her. Celie then advises Nettie to get help from a well-dressed black woman that she had seen in the general store. The woman had unknowingly adopted Celie's daughter and was the only black woman that Celie had ever seen with money of her own. Nettie is forced to leave after promising to write. But Celie never receives any letters and thinks that her sister is dead.

Time passes and Mister's children begin to grow up and leave home. Harpo, the only child of Mister who becomes a major character, falls in love with a girl named Sofia. Sofia becomes pregnant and marries Harpo. Mister's long-time mistress, falls ill and Mister takes her into his house. Celie, who had been fascinated by the photos of Shug found in Mister's belongings, is excited to have her there. Shug and Celie become very close friends and they somehow help each other. When Shug is ill, Celie helps her and brings her food. They also have some affairs with each other and through Shug's lessons Celie reaches a kind of true understanding of herself. Meanwhile, Shug finds out that Nettie's letters are somewhere in the house. Celie finds them and read them. She becomes aware of this fact that Nettie and her children are alive and they are somewhere in Africa. She wants to beat Mister for hiding the letters but Shug doesn't let her do that. They both leave Mister and go to Memphis. There Celie starts her own business. Alphonso who was not his real father leaves Celie's real father's house to Celie and dies. Rich Celie becomes a good friend with Mister who has changed a lot during these years and Nettie and her

children come back to her. In the final scene it has been seen Celie and the whole family happy together.

Celie as Lacanian subject is full of lack. She is physically and psychologically abused. She is not only the victim of sexual and communal abuse but also the victim of her own mind. According to Lacan, the human being is always split between a conscious side, a “mind that is accessible”, and an unconscious side, a “series and derives and forces which remain inaccessible” (Tyson, p. 31, 2006). Subject experience something missing as a lack and desire to fill it in, to replace it with something. Lacan names this lack desire; desire cannot be satisfactorily fulfilled even when subject’s demands are met.

As Celie describes “God gave me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won’t ever see again.” As we can see she is full of suppressed desires and lack. She sacrifices herself for saving others. She is always a victim and afraid of fighting back because she thinks it just causes more problems. Her interaction with other people only causes pain and distraction. From the beginning of the novel she moves from a relationship with a stepfather who is sexually abusive to a relationship with her husband who abuses her labour and sex, to finally, a relationship with Shug w. According to Lacan the human subject who is born in a state of helplessness is unable to satisfy its own needs, and hence, depends on the other to help him or her satisfy them. In order to get the *Other’s* help, the subject must express the needs vocally; need must be shaped in demand. Celie’s telling of her story is an act of demanding.

I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug’s arms...
Nobody ever love me, I say. She say, I love you, Miss Celie. She say, like she surprise . . .
. . . Way after while, I act like a little lost baby. (CP, p. 108, 1982)

Shug by knowing her story begins to heal Celie’s long hidden wounds and this intimacy and respect between them helps Celie to find her own voice, a voice that expresses the ache and anger of that years of abuse and violence. All through her life over and over again, she accepts abuse and victimization. It is from Nettie that Celie first learns that resistance is necessary. When she complains to Nettie about how mean the children of Albert’s are, Nettie advises her, “Don’t let them run over you You got to fight, you got to fight” (p.25) and Celie can only respond: “But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (CP, p.26). There are several instances when she refers to herself less as a person and more as a character.

One of the main issues discussed by Walker in *The Color Purple* is that of Celie’s sense of split identity, and the insecurity she has over knowing exactly who she is and what her purpose is. Celie is desperately obsessed with finding a meaning for her life and her fragmented being. She seems to have problems to come in terms with herself and feels a deep lack in her split self. Lacan contends that because the subject is a subject of lack, she is caught in an endless and impossible search for completion and is thereby driven to perform an infinite series of identifications” (qtd, Smith, p. 77, 1982).

She does not see herself as complete and projects that image of incompleteness onto everything around her. These projections often come out as unclear images, especially in the Celie’s dreams. She never answers her questions about herself and her place in society.

In Lacan's view, one needs the reaction, responses, and recognition of others to receive something named identity. Our subjectivity is based on the interaction and communication with others. Since our identity is based on the interaction with others, or what is outside of us, it is something "relational". That is, the social and personal configuration in which we find ourselves will unavoidably change. Identity is not something fixed and stable, it is a process that will never end in completion. Identity is not only prone to constant change, but it is also incoherent (Bertens, p.162, 2001).

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker focuses on black women whose identity is shaped by male -centered society and describes the dimensions of domination of black men over black women. One of the most significant discursive challenges in *The Color Purple*, is about gender. From the beginning of the novel, the reader deals with gender discursive challenges between men's discourse and women's discourse. It is clear that masculinity is considered as superior to femininity in the discourses of the text. Celie as the representative of women in the South African society has a powerless position. She has been raped and beaten by her step-father repeatedly and forced to a loveless marriage with a widower who beats her for no reason. Celie's subjectivity is based on the desires of her father who looks at her as property. She is introduced to her husband whom she calls "Mister", as:

She is ugly. He says. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want and ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it.... She would come with her own linen. She can take that cow she raise down there back of the crib. (CP, p. 18, 1982)

Laclau and Mouffe believe that "power and politics create the objectivity for people, the objectivity which is taken for granted" (qtd in Smith, p. 87, 1982) Celie's step-father who is in the position of power, defines and creates the objectivity of her life, and tries to naturalize it as something normal. He tries to naturalize women inferiority to men, the objectivity which is created by his ancestors, which considers women as passive, powerless and inferior creatures. This discourse works in a way that even women admit their inferiority and they forget the fact that this objectivity is created by male and *the Law of the Father* in Lacanian term. Booker maintains that the Symbolic order is linked with *the Law of the Father*; it is a masculine realm. Thus, entry into the *symbolic* order is a basically different experience for boys who "accept and identify with the father's law" and for girls who cannot accept the "father's power" (p.36, 1996).

Celie is a slave or property to father and later to her husband expected to work and perform sexual labor, she is victimized by the system of patriarchy. Albert as her husband attempts to impose his power on Celie.

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. 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. That's how come I know trees fear man. (CP, p. 30, 1982)

For Celie the male community is observed as the source of fear and violence as she describes "wherever there's a man, there's trouble" (p.203). Not only Celie but also her mother, her stepmother and her sister accept cruelty and oppression because they accept the system of beliefs

and values which requires female subjugation to father and husband. As Sofia wife of Celie's step-son Harpo explains, " All my life I had to flight. I had to flight my daddy. I had to flight my brothers. I had to flight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men". (p. 46)

These instances clearly prove that South African society is completely male-dominated which consider men superior to women. Since man is in the position of power, this position let him to create the objectivity and woman is doomed to accept this created objectivity of her life. Sofia rebels against the authority of her own father, and later she is unwilling to behave respectfully to any man. When Albert's son Harpo asks Celie what to do to "make [Sofia] mind," she answers, " Beat her" (CP, p. 43) It is quite clear, Celie accepts this created objectivity for women because she has internalized the principle of male domination. In this novel women are forced to accept the desires of the *Other*, the unconscious desires and wishes of male-centered society.

Lacan argued that the psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious reveals a subject constituted in relation to *name- of- the- father* representing authority of the society presented in the system of language (*symbolic* order). The Symbolic order is also called by Lacan as the big *Other*. There is no distinction between self and other in the *imaginary* because self is other for the subject. Sofia as the only female character who attempts to resist representing authority of the society, when is asked by the mayor's wife to work as her maid answers: "hell no" (CP, p.86) but as we see the mayor slaps her and then She is jailed and tortured. " They crack her skull. They crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her feet like a piece of rubber. She can't talk". (CP, p.87).

The only black woman who dares to resist is imprisoned, brutalized and the warden condemns her to live in the mayor's home and raise his children and other characters do not seem bothered by the insults they endure. From Nettie's letters from Africa, it is realized that the situation there is not better. People in Olinka do not believe in educating girls and they also follow a "female genital mutilation" (CP, p.73) on their young girls. Walker believe "sexism for black women is not derive from racism and she adds" "We're going to have to debunk the myth that Africa is a haven for black people - especially black women. We've been the mule of the world there and the mule of the world here" (Walker, p. 273, 2004). Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* shows how female characters in male- centered societies are facing the colonization of their body, soul and mind.

For Lacan the Real is out of language domain that resists symbolization. Lacan describes the Real as something impossible to have. Thus, this resistance to symbolization makes the Real attain its traumatic quality. The Real symbolizes all that a person is not. It is the most remote and unreachable part of the human psyche. It contains indefinite *object petit a*, as symbols of primordial lack. We can never experience or really know them except through language. Moreover, language causes our fragmentation in the first place (Bressler, p. 155, 2007).

Activities such as painting, writing, playing, as a whole art we try to return to that imaginary unification. Art or literature as powerful instruments can entice a series of feelings to

remind us of the Imaginary order; however, it is just temporary. In *The Color Purple* Walker uses art not only as a means of communication and creativity but also a means of demonstrating women's unconscious desires which manages their rage into creativity. When Celie realizes that Mr. has taken Nettie's letters, she wants to kill him while shaving his beard. Shug asked her to do sewing pants: "a needle and not a razor in my hand, I think" (CP, p. 93). So Celie manages her rage into creativity and making pants becomes her artistic outlet. "Celie's career as a designer of folk pants is a symbol of Walker's respect for traditional women's work and careers where women assert themselves through creativity" (Næss, p. 28, 2013). Celie uses her ability to sew as a way of expressing her sexism, racist tensions, and for the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse she has had to endure. By keeping a needle rather than a razor in hand, she finds a non-violent way to overcome her hardships and financially independence.

How you make your living up there? He say.

Making pants, I say.

He say I notice everybody in the family just about wearing pants you made. But you mean you turned it into a business?

"That's right, I say. But I really started it right here in your house to keep from killing you." (CP, p. 258, 1982)

By the enjoyment she gets from sewing she can balance her emotions and calm her anger and reestablish her identity.

I got pants now in every color and size under the sun. Since us started making pants down home, I aint been able to stop. I change the cloth, I change the print, I change the waist, I change the pocket. I change the hem, I change the fullness of the leg. I make so many pants Shug tease me. I didn't know what I was starting, she say laughing. (CP, p. 212)

According to Lacan the Real is the place from which the need originates and is pre-symbolic in the way that we do not have any way of symbolizing it. We understand its existence as we experience it and it enters discourse as a sign, for example the child's crying. But the place from which need arises is beyond symbolization. Accordingly, the Real is not an object, a thing, but something that is repressed and processes unconsciously, intruding into our symbolic reality in the form of need.

One of the main issues discussed by Walker in *The Color Purple* is that of Celie's sense of split identity, and the insecurity she has over knowing exactly who she is and what her purpose is. Celie is desperately obsessed with finding a meaning for her life and her fragmented being. She seems to have problems to come in terms with herself and feels a deep lack in her split self.

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker focuses on black women whose identity is shaped by male-centered society and describes the dimensions of domination of black men over black women. Not only Celie but also her mother, her stepmother and her sister accept cruelty and oppression because they accept the system of beliefs and values which requires female subjugation to father and husband. Celie is a slave or property to father and later to her husband expected to work and perform sexual labor, she is victimized by the system of patriarchy. Celie as Lacanian subject is

full of lack. She is physically and psychologically abused. She is not only the victim of sexual and communal abuse but also the victim of her own mind. But through the story, silenced Celie has changed into a liberated woman who can easily communicate and even expresses her feelings.

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Note. CP Stands for *The Color Purple*
