

Trapped in Double Katatonic Silence: A Postcolonial Perspective to 'The Color Purple'

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*T*here is a striking parallelism between feminist approaches and postcolonial theories. Just as a woman is considered to be a *space* to be penetrated, a colonised region reveals itself as an embodiment of a motherly *space* which is occupied by a coloniser country, as a fatherly *place*. In this sense, the colonised space - as woman - represents passivity whereas the coloniser place - as man - symbolises activity with respect to its actively functioning paternal means. This article deals with Walker's novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), with respect to gender relations with a special touch on the double oppression of women in a colonial context, which opens the novel to the postcolonial feminist criticism.

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“When Freud describes and theorises, notably in Totem and Taboo, the murder of the father as founding the primal horde, he forgets a more archaic murder, that of the mother, necessitated by the establishment of a certain order in the polis.” (Irigaray, “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother” 534).

*I*t is widely known that poststructuralists regard individuals to be *mere subjects*, which shatters the autonomous Cartesian notion of the *self*. The *subject* is *subjected* to language, as a discursively constructed being, encoded within socio-political order, which is always masculine. Since Plato’s systematic thought on binaries, the dominant ideology or the master narrative has been consistent in its attempt to fix the place of *once-individuals* in the face of society and thus language of that society, and has been functioning in order to position women somewhere different, somewhere fluid, somewhere unidentified, among the other subjects. Cixous, in her “Castration or Decapitation?”, asks: “Where is she? Is there any such thing as woman? At first, many women wonder whether they even exist. They feel they do not exist and wonder if there has ever been a place for them. I’m speaking of a woman’s place, from woman’s place, if she takes (a) place (481).

The paternal society positions women in the place of an *object* rather than a subject. Or as Cixous states, they do not even exist. They are *non-existents* since it is impossible to define woman without man: Here the Saussurian aspect of thought, which is the continuation of Platonic binary epistemology as its reflected form on language, plays cruelly: a signifier is identified with what is not available (as in cat-mat example). *Woman* is what *man* is not, *female* is what *male* is not and *she* is what *he* is not. Even such instances quickly illustrate what Cixous implies when she states: “As soon as we exist, we are born into language and language speaks (to) us dictates its law, a law of death” (“Castration” 482), which shows that even language is masculine. As an “imperfect man” with anatomical “defectiveness” in Freud’s terms since femininity is associated with “having/not having the phallus” (Cixous, “Sorties”, 233), a woman has to survive in a *place* where Phallus is the transcendental signifier, and for this reason, she “is said to be outside the Symbolic: outside the symbolic, that is outside the language, the place of law, excluded from any possible relationship with culture and the cultural order. She is outside the Symbolic because she lacks any relation to the phallus, because she does not enjoy what orders masculinity – the castration complex” and she is “embedded in the Imaginary in her ignorance of the Law of the Father” (Cixous, “Castration” 483-84).

In order to provide sufficient background for the analysis of *The Color Purple* from postcolonial-feminist framework, it might be helpful to present a synopsis of the novel. *The Color Purple* is about a woman, Celie, whose development from a poor and inferior position to independence is achieved at the end. Although the work is not considered as a gothic genre, it somehow carries a gothic mode as it tells of a woman who has been exposed to unpleasant experiences after her mother's death - since "[t]he gothic fiction is mainly about the daughter's separation from her mother" (Heiland 166). After her mother's death, Celie, a black woman, is sexually abused by the man she takes as a father, Alfonso, who has impregnated her twice, causing Celie's desperate situation with two illegitimate children, Olivia and Adam. She is even deprived of her children as Alfonso stole them from her. In the domestic sphere, she is treated as a non-existent and a colonial object by Alfonso, who is a white man. Apart from the sexual abuse and all the unpleasant treatments, she is forced to a miserable marriage with a man, called Mr ---. Thus, her marriage can be figured as a departure from the house of the father to that of the husband, which is another form of patriarchal power. Gilbert claims that "a daughter who tries to escape paternal desire flees from culture to nature" (Gilbert, "Life's Empty Pack" 509), which is the motherly space. In the case of Celie, her *flight* to the house of husband turns into a complete *plight*.

An undesired marriage between Celie and Mr --- becomes the metonymic extension of active patriarchal institutions, functioning for the advantage of the male-dominated society. Celie's marriage with the man who wants a wife to take care of his home foreshadows that she will be suppressed by the patriarchy. Mr --- is a black man who adopts himself according to the norm of the white man, which makes him the embodiment of *mimicry* in Bhabha's terms ("Of Mimicry and Man"), and in this sense, he symbolises a sense of *presence* (of the Phallus as the paternal metaphor) as opposed to the *absence* (of Phallus). He represents the colonial power over his black wife as well as the paternal authority. One of the ways for a man to take control over a woman is to expose her to physical or psychological violence, and Mr --- is the one who uses both: He exploits his wife physically by constantly beating and sexually abusing her. Apart from Celie, Nettie, Celie's sister, is another woman who is exposed to violence when she refuses to satisfy Mr ---'s sexual needs as a result of which she is threatened and beaten violently for which she has to escape from the house. He is the embodiment of *activity* as opposed to the feminine *passivity*. As Cixous claims, "hierarchical oppositions that come back to the man/woman opposition...can only be sustained by means of a difference posed by cultural discourse as 'natural', the difference between activity and passivity" (Cixous, "Castration" 482). Mr --- regards his masculinity as 'naturally' superior; according to him, he is 'biologically' superior to the women around him. He acts according to the misconception that "without man, [a woman] would be indefinite, indefinable, nonsexed, unable to recognise herself (Cixous, "Castration" 483). However, he is not naturally superior to the women; it is not the matter of Phallus as the power only, but an attempt of Western culture, thirsty for valorising the masculine side of the binary opposition. He becomes the man whom Cixous defines as "Prince Charming...who teaches woman (because man is always the Master as well) who teaches her to be aware of absence (absence of phallus)... He will teach her the Law of the Father. 'Without me, you would not exist, I will show you'" (Cixous, "Castration" 484).

Celie is exposed to psychological violence which is another way to oppress the woman as ‘the other’. She is seen as ‘the other’ because society ‘others’ people who cannot be classified in their masculine functioning system as Irigaray puts forward: “Who and what the other is, *I never know*. But this *unknowable other* is that which differs sexually from me.” (emphasis added, Irigaray, “Sexual Difference” 238). Mr ---- tries to objectify and ‘other’ Celie by isolating her from all her contact with her friends and relatives. He even hides the letters written by her sister, Nettie. Through distancing Nettie from Celie, Mr ----, who is afraid of losing his superior position, does not only pacify Nettie but also Celie in order to guarantee his paternal authority since sisterhood is of significance as it challenges the patriarchal oppression as Monroe indicates (110). At this point, the letters are of an important function as they represent the *silenced language* of both women. From the beginning of the novel, Celie writes letters to God, an unaddressed persona. In a similar vein, Nettie’s letters to Celie are hidden by Mr ----. Thus, the voice of the “subaltern” in Spivak’s terms is silenced by male oppression, which gives no opportunity for the voices to speak from ‘the other side’. Celie’s pondering about her sister, who might have died, shows that Nettie is metaphorically *dead* in the Lacanian Symbolic (fatherly) since she is pacified in the Lacanian Imaginary web (motherly). Celie’s statements in her letters to God also signify her passivity: “I think about 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.*” (emphasis added, Walker 22). Although she thinks that her stay is better than her sister’s attempts to escape since Nettie is dead or ‘metaphorically’ pacified, Celie ironically remains the most passive one by assuming that she is *at least alive* ‘literally’ when she is in fact dead metaphorically.

Through her acquaintance with Shug, who is a powerful and confident woman who resembles neither Celie nor her mother in terms of her resistance to male domination, Celie begins to ‘speak’. Despite her being economically dependent on Mr ----, which is another form of oppression, she decides to leave home for Memphis. Mr ---- reacts to the decision illustrates how much he degrades his wife: “Nothing up North for nobody like you... [He laughs] Maybe somebody let you work on they railroad” (Walker 186). It shows that he sees Celie as nothing but an unintelligent sexual object who has no abilities other than taking care of the household as it is clear from Mr ----’s more direct verbal assaults: “You bitch. You running off to Memphis like you don’t have a house to look after?” (Walker 181). From this perspective, he symbolises all the paternal cultural norms and institutions which regard women in the *domestic space* as opposed to men who are responsible to deal with affairs outside in the *public place* while dominating over the domestic sphere at the same time. As the woman is considered to be *outside* the culture and the symbolic, “the masculine would try to bring the outside in if possible.” (Cixous, “Castration” 489). Once again, it makes the functioning Western ideology come to the very surface: man is dominant, woman is subordinated. This ideology is functioning like a “machine” to repress the others as Cixous claims: “subordination of the feminine to the masculine order ... appears to be the condition for the functioning of the machine.” (Cixous, “Sorties” 231.) Thus, through physical and psychological violence at home by trying to bring the other *in*, the patriarchal order is maintained and functions in the smallest structure of society, which is the metonymic extension of the patriarchal norm dominating the Western thought.

Feminist critics define patriarchy as “the rule of the father including the rule of older man over younger, of fathers over daughters, as well as husbands over wives” (Jenkins 984). Apart from Alfonso’s behaviours towards his daughter, Celie and his wife, and apart from Mr ----’s harsh cruelty towards Celie and her sister, Nettie, Mr ---- also tries to control over the whole domestic life: “The rule of older man over younger” becomes apparent right at this point: He instructs his son, Harpo, about how to treat Sofia, Harpo’s wife. It is clear that in order to maintain total control over the other sex, “man...has transformed his penis [*sexe*] into an instrument of power so as to dominate maternal power.” (Irigaray, “The Bodily Encounter” 538). Whenever Mr ---- tells Harpo that Sofia’s resistance reduces Harpo’s *manhood*, Harpo beats his wife who is also silenced by patriarchal power like Celie, her mother and Nettie. Jenkins claims that “control, dominance and independence are quintessentially masculine” (993). By making women exposed to physical and psychological violence, Mr ---- secures his place in the patriarchal circle both in inner circle of the family life and in the outer circle of the social life.

McLeod states that “feminism and postcolonialism share the mutual goal of challenging the form of oppression” (174). *The Color Purple* is not only the story of gender oppression but also of cultural dominance. In this sense, women in colonial contexts are doubly oppressed as they are subordinated not only because they are female but also because they are colonial objects. As mentioned before, Celie is a black woman and due to this fact, she is double-marginalised in the gaze of the Other (capitalised Other in Lacanian epistemology), which the Western society. Although Mr --- is black as well, he symbolises the white man norm, as mentioned previously, and disguises himself as the “white-man God”, thus he is *the Other* (as opposed to the small *other*, *mother*). The cruel treatments Celie is exposed to are not only caused by her gender but also by her ethnicity as a black woman. Her voice that can only be heard through the letters are silenced not only because she is seen as maternal power threatening the paternity, but also because she is regarded as a power which is to be suppressed as a colonised object, threatening the coloniser.

Mr ---- takes being a white-man as a norm, as a centre, as an origin, and as Cixous claims, “the origin is a masculine myth” (“Castration” 489). White dominance is normalised by the dominant ideology, and Mr ----, as a *subject* in this system, unquestioningly accepts it. Spivak, in her “Imperialism and Sexual Difference”, claims that “[t]o take the privileged male of the white race as a norm for universal humanity is no more than a politically interested figuration” (Spivak 517). Thus, Spivak identifies the cultural norm of white maleness as a political mark which is not neutral or natural but is governed by requirements of a particular class or society interest.

When Celie reveals her decision to leave Mr ----, he shouts: “Who do you think you is? (...) You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you poor, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam... you nothing at all!” (Walker 187). His verbal assault to Celie underlines Mr ----’s manner as befitting a white man norm which directs verbal violence towards the other because of race (“you black”), class (“you poor”) and gender (“you woman”). In other words, he sees Celie as ‘the other’, which is constructed by a set of features belonging to the othering discourse. It is interesting for Mr ---- to internalise the white man norm since he, himself, is black. Through seeing his wife as “nothing at all”

(Walker 187) and thus disqualifying her, Mr ---- ironically oppresses and tyrannises his own race. That may be the reason why he has no name in the novel; he has no specific identity. He is just a subject in the dominant culture who has to employ what is taught to him by the Western ideology in which power is used by “the racial hegemony over the minority’s culture or race” (Christophe 102). All in all, the title (*Mr.*) he uses and makes the others use before his *non-name* illustrates how he positions himself in the racial hegemony by internalising the Western thought.

Ceile’s reaction against this Western ideology both as a black woman and a colonised object is greatly influenced by Shug, who is labelled as a tramp by the male look because of her sexual confidence. One of the most striking examples in the novel which encourages Ceile’s decision of resistance is Shug’s own image of God:

Well, us talk and talk about God, but I’m still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?)” (Walker 167)

When Celie tells Shug that she stops writing to God as she loses her faith, Shug encourages Celie to adopt a new image of God, who is not white and male as Celie imagines. Thanks to Shug, Celie believes that God is disembodied since ‘it’ is with no race or gender. With her changing concept of God as a paternal authority, Celie resists to Mr ----: “The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot in!” (Walker 187). When Celie outbursts her feelings to Mr ----, she may seem as ‘hysterical’ from a male point of view. However, the hysteria attributed to woman “may have constituted...a refusal of the paternal demands that not only their own families but also their culture defined as psychologically right” (Gilbert 509). Thus, such outbursts are also repressed to silence the oppressed ones, which makes the ideology functions.

According to Karl Marx, “ideology is the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or social group” (Althusser 158). Althusser, in his essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus”, puts forward that the socio-cultural milieu imposes “world outlooks” on the public; these world outlooks are imaginary as they don’t respond to reality (162). According to him, “cynical men base their domination and exploitation of the people on a falsified representation of the world which they have imagined in order to enslave other minds by dominating their imagination” (163). It means that what men represent for themselves is not their conditions of existence or their real world, but their relation to those conditions of existence represented to them. It is in fact the point where ideology is imposed. For instance, the dominant ideology imposes the imaginary relation between God and the real king or priest since it attempts to make people accept that there is no difference in obeying God and the king or the religious leader, which is always a masculine figure. Turning back to the Christian-God image dominating throughout the novel, the ideology as the grand narrative tries to establish an equal relation with God and the white-male. Reacting against male power is equated with resisting God. Thus, even the gender and race of of God is ideologically and culturally constructed and imposed. “And the gender of God, the guardian of every subject and discourse is always paternal and masculine in the West” (Irigaray, “Sexual Difference” 236). Celie’s metaphorical flight from the

house of *white He-God* paves the way for her literal flight from the house of her husband.

After having left her husband, her journey from domestic sphere to public sphere begins, and is finalised when she finally takes up a position in the latter. By setting her own business, she gains economical power just as the repressed colonised regions gain wealth which gives them power to resist the coloniser. The more powerful she gets, the less domineering Mr ---- and all the ideology he stands for becomes. The transformation Mr ---- undergoes is made even more apparent at the end of the novel when he soon realises that the one whom he has assumed as the powerless and passive is now the powerful and active. At that point, he is, for the first time, called with his name, Albert, by leaving his title, *Mr*, behind.

As Bary suggests, “a postcolonial point of view focuses on the importance of reclaiming the past and marginalised voices” (193). Ceile’s once-double marginalised voice becomes clear to show “the *subaltern can speak*” in Spivak’s (1985) terms. The “double colonisation” which “implies living under the negative effects of both patriarchy and colonialism” is resolved at the end of the novel through listening to the voices from ‘the other side’ (McLeod 175). As it is clear in the novel, the woman is subordinated both in the domestic and colonial context. *She* is a *black woman* who can only be identified as non-male and non-white from the patriarchal point of view. According to Mardberg, the term “woman of colour” Spivak uses in her “Imperialism and Sexual Difference”, (526) refers to “identification with minority cultures, and...it draws attention to white dominance and points to the experience of being “non-white” (Mardberg 33). Mr ---- ‘s efforts “actively to produce his woman” (Cixous, “Castration” 484) as a non-male and non-white *creature* have failed thanks to Celie’s attaining power both as a woman and as a colonised object. As soon as he realises that the other leg of the binary opposition which is the repressed one rises, he gives up his title, *Mr*, which symbolises the Western thought that has always been prone to suppress the ones whom it cannot identify without clinging to only one side of the binary. Now Celie is the one who ‘literally’ and ‘metaphorically’ becomes *alive* in the Symbolic by not only being capable of achieving many things unlike Mr ---- once believed, but also “capable of transforming [Mr---’s] existence” in Jenkins’s terms (934) through managing to form her own.

From the beginning of the novel, Celie’s and Nettie’s being exposed to male exploitation, repression and abuse gives the novel a *male-oriented* tone at the first glance which is “one of the problems of the feminist critique” as Showalter suggests in her article, “Toward a Feminist Poetic”. In other words, women are seen as passive and submissive figures who are constantly suffering from the male dominion even in writings that are paradoxically considered to be as feminist. Through such suffering female characters, women are still trapped in the repressed leg of the binary, which paradoxically strengthens the opposite leg, feeding or satisfying the Platonic dichotomy itself. That is why popular fiction and cinema ending with female suffering, death - usually in the form of suicide - or a female character who is locked up in a room - as in the case of the madwoman (!) in *Jane Eyre* and in *Wide Saragossa Sea* - are considered feminist *but* from a *male-gaze* since they use the male discourse (or male way of expression) in order to criticise the paternal law, which, in the end, turns woman into a

'loser' no matter how harsh such works intend to criticise the masculine authorities. Or much better, some narratives end up with the accomplishment of a female character that becomes independent from the paternal power. Such female characters, either through committing a murderous act such as killing the father/ husband or through having a *place* in the patriarchal society by leaving the *domestic* sphere (generally attributed as a woman's space) and beginning to work in *public* sphere (attributing as a man's place); in other words, by gaining economic independence (just as a man) might remind us of another form of masculinity. Although such endings might sound *more feminist* when compared to the former one, women are still constructed discursively by male-qualities to achieve a place in the patriarchal order. Murderous act, fighting against the male or gaining economic independence by working outside, each of which is traditionally considered a male territory, are still associated with the masculine attack which is made possible with *penis* metaphorically. In other words, a woman who can transform herself into a male (socially-constructed one), win the struggle; it is not the victory of the female but of a woman who chooses to leave behind her femininity, and who chooses to be on the side of the masculine power in order to be identified in the Symbolic as the masculine cultural register. From that perspective, Celie is raped, attacked, exposed to suffer and silenced by a male and colonising power, which is consolidating the masculine and the coloniser. As for *The Color Purple*, although it does not end with the female defeat, the female character in the novel, Celie, may seem as a woman who wins over the man, Mr.---, by changing her feminine qualities into the masculine according to a traditional male dominated perspective. In other words, although the novel criticises the colonising male power, at the first glance it may sound to strengthen the colonial power and satisfying the Platonic binary, paradoxically. From this perspective, one may hear the sound of Cixous, when she says: "Beware, my friend, of the signifier that would take you back to the authority of a signified!" (Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa* 892). However, Alice Walker arranges such an ending to rescue Celie from all of those masculine origins and from the authoritative signified. What makes Celie's journey different from the other traditional feminist novels is that rather than winning over Mr.--, which most probably would not destroy the binary opposition but rather, change the dynamics of the binary by giving more weight to the once-repressed leg, Celie achieves power not through gaining masculine qualities, but through her "aphonic revolts" in Cixous terms ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 886) which is quite feminine, through making Mr.--- realise his own futile absorption of Western epistemology, making him leave his Western title (*Mr*) behind. In that sense, Celie achieves to stand 'out of the opposition' rather than consolidating it. In other words, she gets a *place* not by insisting on 'sexual opposition' but by insisting on 'sexual difference'. When considered from this perspective, Celie is one of the female figures in literature who reminds us of Cixous's statement: "In the beginning are our differences" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 893), which challenges the masculine origin of words.

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