



Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi

Academic Journal of History and Idea

ISSN: 2148-2292

10 (5) 2023

<https://doi.org/10.46868/atdd.2023.296>

Araştırma Makalesi | Research Article

Geliş tarihi |Received : 12.08.2022

Kabul tarihi |Accepted: 30.09.2022

Yayın tarihi |Published : 25.10.2023

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Atf Künyesi | Citation Info

Kara, G. (2023). Breaking Free: Unveiling Emotional Liberation in ‘The Color Purple’ and ‘The Bluest Eye’: a Journey of Ethnic Women Through Conversations With God. *Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi*, 10 (5), 1275-1286.

Breaking Free: Unveiling Emotional Liberation in ‘The Color Purple’ and ‘The Bluest Eye’: A Journey of Ethnic Women Through Conversations With God

Abstract

This article explores the complicated relationship between literature, religion, and the social representation of women, with a particular focus on African American narratives. Drawing on T.S. Eliot’s assertion that literature plays a role in critiquing and disseminating culture, this article examines how cultural norms and religious beliefs are reflected in literary mediums. Using Alice Walker’s ‘The Color Purple’ and Toni Morrison’s ‘The Bluest Eye’, this article highlights the therapeutic role of spirituality and personal dialog with God in the lives of marginalized women. Amidst systemic challenges, these intimate spiritual connections serve as tools of comfort, self-discovery, and resistance. The novels not only point out Celie and Pecola’s emotional and spiritual journey, but also illuminate the transformative power of spirituality in the midst of difficulties. Through this exploration, the article underscores the enduring connection between literature, religion, and the diverse experiences of minority women.

Keywords: Literature, Religion, Social Representation, African American Narratives

Özgürlüğü Açığa Çıkarmak: 'Mor Renk' ve 'En Mavi Göz' Romanlarında Etnik Kadınların Tanrı ile Diyaloguyla Duygusal Yolculuğu

Öz

Bu makale, kadınların toplumsal yansımaları, edebiyat ve din bağlamında değerlendirirken özellikle Afro-Amerikan hikayelerine odaklanmaktadır. T.S. Eliot'un literatürün, kültürün tanımlanması ve yayılmasında etkin bir rol oynadığına dair görüşünden yola çıkarak, bu çalışma edebi eserlerin içerisinde kültürel normları ve dini inançları nasıl ele aldığını derinlemesine inceler. Alice Walker'ın 'Mor Renk' ve Toni Morrison'un 'En Mavi Göz' eserleri üzerinden, marjinalleşmiş kadınların Tanrı ile kurduğu özel iletişimin ve maneviyatın, yaşadıkları zorluklarla başa çıkmadaki terapötik önemini vurgulamaktadır. Bu derin ruhsal ilişki, onlara sadece konfor değil, aynı zamanda kişisel bir keşif ve zorluklara karşı bir direnç sunmaktadır. İki eser, sadece Celie ve Pecola'nın ruhsal yolculuklarına ışık tutmakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda maneviyatın, zor zamanlarda bile nasıl bir dönüşüm aracı olabileceğini gösterir. Bu inceleme, edebiyatın, dini inançların ve azınlık kadınlarının yaşadığı deneyimlerin birbirine ne denli bağlı olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Edebiyat, Din, Sosyal Temsil, Afro-Amerikan Anlatıları

Introduction

The entwined nature of literature and religion emerges as an influential force, directing and reflecting societal values, ideologies, and beliefs across epochs. T.S. Eliot's claim, which emphasizes literature's role as a critique and disseminator of culture — inseparable from religion — underscores the depth of this symbiotic relationship. As Eliot astutely points out:

"Literature, in its finest sense, I understand as a description, criticism, or furthering by dissemination, of culture; I understand culture as the way of life of a particular people living together in one place. That culture will include its religion. To say that it includes its religion is a way of saying that culture and religion cannot be wholly separated" (1963, p. 16).

Drawing from Eliot's words, it's evident that literature doesn't merely serve as an artistic reflection but acts as a conduit, echoing the intricacies of cultural norms and religious beliefs. This relationship has profoundly impacted society's understanding and portrayal of women, a demographic often placed within confines crafted by dominant ideologies.

The annals of ancient Greek and Roman literature are testament to this, where women, rather than being known for in their entirety, were frequently pigeonholed into roles that were passive,

submissive, and oftentimes secondary. This depiction not only illuminated the then-prevailing societal attitudes but also fortified them, giving them literary credence and longevity.

Medieval Christian literature presents another layer of complexity in this matrix. Here, women oscillated between two extremes: they were either sanctified, revered as virtuous embodiments like saints and martyrs, or they were demonized, casted as temptresses leading men away from divine righteousness. The Biblical account of Eve stands as a prominent archetype of the latter. Adding to this kaleidoscope of representations is Hesiod's portrayal of Pandora, which resonates with the ambivalence found in many classical texts: "From her is the race of women and female kind: of her is the deadly race and tribe of women who live amongst mortal men to their great trouble, no helpmeets in hateful poverty, but only in wealth" (2012, p. 34). Such literary reflections, spanning diverse timelines and cultures, amplify the intricate interplay of literature, religion, and societal values, particularly in their depiction of women.

The Renaissance era introduced pivotal female literary characters, yet the paradigm of the 'angel in the house' persisted. This trope, idealizing women as pure, nurturing, and staunchly devoted to family, circumscribed women's roles and aspirations, limiting their agency within the literary sphere and the wider society. The Enlightenment era heralded a time of reason and individualism, but literature often clung to traditional gender norms, providing scant challenge to the marginalization of women. Not until the late 19th and early 20th centuries did feminist movements gather steam, striving to redress the balance and challenge the unequal treatment of women in literature and other arenas.

Renowned authors such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have masterfully portrayed the oppression to women which include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. In addition to their feminist perspectives, these authors have also integrated religion into their novels, adding another layer of complexity to their marginalized characters. To be specific, Morrison's and Walker's characters struggle to shape their identities through spiritual dialogs with God.

Their exceptional literary insight is evident in their portrayal of women who seek solace and strength in their spiritual bonds made possible by profound dialogs with the God. In the sacredness of these spiritual conversations, these women find an unconventional way to address, alleviate their problems and to overcome their problems. The inclusion of religious motifs and the exploration of faith in her novels give her works great depth and underscore the continuing importance of religion in the emotional emancipation of marginalized female characters.

In *'The Color Purple'* and *'The Bluest Eye'*, both Alice Walker and Toni Morrison deftly use religious symbolism, beliefs, and practices to explore the complicated inner lives of marginalized women. Walker's protagonist Celie finds strength through her intimate communication with God, expressing her deepest emotions and using her letters as a means to reclaim her identity. In Morrison's *'The Bluest Eye'*, the story revolves around a young girl who speaks fervently to God, asking Him for blue eyes. Through these powerful literary devices, both authors illuminate the importance of spirituality as a source of resilience, self-expression, and a yearning for acceptance in the face of societal oppression.

In both *'The Color Purple'* and *'The Bluest Eye'*, a notable feature is that the characters who have conversations with God are those who are marginalized and excluded from society, often labeled as weak or voiceless. These women, like Celie in *'The Color Purple'* and Pecola in *'The Bluest Eye'*, find themselves in situations where they are unable to make their voices heard and suffer emotional and social hardships.

For characters like Celie and Pecola, who lack a supportive and nurturing environment, talking to God becomes a means of emotional catharsis. They find comfort in their spiritual connection and use it as an outlet to express their deepest feelings, fears, and longings. Having no one else to confide in, their conversations with God provide a safe space in which to release their emotional baggage. Through their intimate dialogs, the characters gain a sense of empowerment and strength that enables them to overcome the challenges of their lives. Despite their marginalized status and lack of agency in their respective societies, their faith becomes a source of resilience and hope.

In describing the emotional catharsis, they find in conversation with God, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison underscore the transformative power of spirituality in the lives of marginalized women. These women may be marginalized and silenced by society, but through their conversations with the God, they find a way to reclaim their identity, discover their voice, and connect with a source of strength beyond the limitations imposed on them.

Ultimately, conversation with God becomes an act of resistance and self-discovery for these characters. It represents a form of agency that enables them to overcome their struggles, find inner healing, and to assert their worth in the face of societal oppression. Through these expressions of faith, Walker and Morrison underscore the importance of spirituality as a means of emotional liberation and empowerment for those facing exclusion and adversity.

Walker's portrayal of Celie in *'The Color Purple'* shows a powerful journey of self-discovery. Celie, facing immense adversity and abuse, finds strength through her communication with God. She pours her heart and soul into her letters, using them as an emotional outlet to express her deepest feelings and fears. In this intimate correspondence with God, Celie discovers a sense of strength and healing that enables her to reclaim her identity and overcome life's challenges. Celie's deep connection to God becomes her lifeline in the absence of supportive human relationships. Having no one else to confide in or find comfort in, she finds solace in her conversations with God. Believing that God hears her and acknowledges her thoughts gives her a sense of purpose and a reason to persevere. For Celie, communication with God is a way to validate her existence and sustain her will to live. These letters are of tremendous importance because they give her the opportunity to anchor herself in life itself. Without this connection to God, Celie fears that she would have no reason to go on, as her experiences of abuse, neglect, and loneliness have left her feeling completely isolated. Her letters therefore serve as a lifeline, providing a channel through which she can process her feelings, find strength, and ultimately regain her identity and sense of self-worth. In this way, Celie's letters become a testament to the power of faith and spirituality to give her hope and support in the face of overwhelming adversity.

In Morrison's *'The Bluest Eye'*, on the other hand, we meet Pecola Breedlove, a young girl living in a society marked by racial oppression. Although the novel does not focus primarily on religious themes, Pecola's complex relationship with God is highlighted. As she endures the burden of racism and societal pressures, Pecola also finds herself talking to God. Her conversations with the divine reflect her desperate longing for acceptance and belief that divine intervention could give her the desired blue eyes by which she believes would change her life and make her beautiful. Walker's *'The Color Purple'* and Toni Morrison's *'The Bluest Eye'* examine the lives of African American women, exploring the profound impact of religion on their emotional well-being and personal growth. Set in the Deep American South during the early 20th century, these novels shed light on the struggles and resilience of their female protagonists.

Celie's faith takes an unexpected turn when she crosses paths with Shug Avery, a spirited and independent blues singer. Shug becomes a catalyst for Celie's emotional catharsis and self-discovery. Challenging conventional religious beliefs, Shug inspires Celie to question societal norms and embrace her true self, ultimately empowering her to confront her tormentors and break free from oppression.

'The Bluest Eye', on the other hand, centers around Pecola, a young African American girl who yearns for acceptance and beauty in a world that devalues her identity. Pecola's journey includes moments of talking to God, seeking solace and understanding amidst a harsh reality filled with racism and prejudice. Her conversations with God reflect the depth of her pain and longing, offering a glimpse into her profound emotional struggles.

Both novels challenge traditional interpretations of religion, exposing the complexity of religious experiences and inviting readers to reevaluate their own beliefs. They serve as powerful commentaries on race, gender, identity, and spirituality, shedding light on the intersectionality of oppression faced by marginalized communities.

1. The Role of Religion in *'The Color Purple'* and *'The Bluest Eye'*

1.1. Celie's Letters to God: Seeking Comfort and Healing

Minority women face a multi-layered web of challenges due to their unique positioning at the intersection of race, gender, and often socioeconomic inequalities. The literature has painstakingly drawn out this complexity over the years, with religion often appearing as a beacon of hope, a refuge, and a mechanism of resistance to the oppression they face. Alice Walker's *'The Color Purple'* is a luminous text in this context. Celie, the main character, embodies the trials and tribulations faced by many African American women in the early 20th century South. Despite the relentless onslaught of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and the pain of being torn away from her sister Nettie, Celie's spirit cannot be erased. Amid this bleak backdrop, Celie's letters to God become her voice, her catharsis, and her hold on some semblance of hope. They are, in essence, her dialog with the divine, in which she seeks understanding, comfort, and reassurance in a world that often devalues her existence.

In a society where racism and patriarchy conspire to marginalize and silence her, Celie's letter-writing to God becomes a defiant act of agency. Through these letters, Celie processes her experiences, confronts her pain, and affirms her existence. The God to whom Celie writes is not a distant or abstract being, but a very intimate and immediate presence in her life.

Celie's transformative journey also illustrates the evolving nature of her relationship with God. Initially, her understanding of God reflects the dominant, patriarchal views prevalent in her environment. But as she grows up, interacts with strong women like Shug Avery, and begins to understand her own worth, her perception of God evolves from a judgmental male figure to an amorphous, loving, and all-encompassing entity that exists in nature, music, love, and everyday moments.

The evolution of Celie's relationship with religion mirrors the experiences of countless minority women navigating the complicated matrix of race, gender, and faith. For many, religion is a refuge, a space of empowerment, and a tool to challenge and redefine social norms. While religious teachings can sometimes perpetuate patriarchal and oppressive ideas, they can also provide a framework for resilience, resistance, and liberation.

Celie's letters become a poignant expression of her sense of alienation and isolation. Through this sacred form of communication, she seeks comfort and purpose in her tumultuous existence. Pouring her heart into these letters, Celie experiences a cathartic release, liberating her innermost thoughts and emotions, as she grapples with the trials of her life. These letters become a lifeline for her, offering a connection to something greater and a source of strength to endure the hardships that befall her. In *'The Color Purple'*, the act of writing becomes a powerful means of coping and finding a semblance of peace in the midst of her harrowing journey.

'Dear God, Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God. This is the first time I ever wrote to you, because there is so much. Seems like there is more every day. The battle of meanness and good continues. But love is always there. It's just that most of the time we aren't watching. Always fightin'?? somebody about something. And I think what I'm doing, talking to you like this, is finding the way. Dear God. The truth is inside me and it's known to you, so if you want to look, go on, search me. You won't find me that way, though. What's in people is what you want to see, not what they pass by on the street and sometimes throw at you. And what you want to see, I've got to find a way to get up close enough for you to see it. But what is it that you want? It is the truth that set me free'' (Walker, 2004, p. 23).

Physically, emotionally, and sexually abused, Celie's life is full of pain and deprivation. In the absence of a supportive and nurturing environment, she turns to God as her confidant and source of hope. Through her letters to God, Celie's struggle to find herself, seek love and understanding, and her growing connection to the divine are vividly portrayed. Her faith in God's presence and His ability to answer her prayers gives her a glimmer of comfort in an otherwise bleak existence. Despite the hardships, Celie's letters serve as a means of empowerment, as she finds her voice and strength in the process of pouring her heart out to the God, seeking solace and understanding amidst the challenges she endures. By writing to God, Celie finds a sense of connection and affirmation. In this way, she seeks understanding, love, and compassion, as she longs for someone to

acknowledge her struggles and offer advice. The fact that she addresses her letters to God reflects her deep spirituality and her belief in the power of the divine, which gives meaning to her suffering. In this way, the letters to God become a form of emotional release for Celie. They allow her to express her pain, anger, and confusion while holding on to the hope that her words will be heard and understood by a higher power. Through this act of communication with the God, she finds the strength to endure her hardships and master the complexities of her life. Despite the overwhelming challenges she faces, she holds on to her faith and finds comfort in the belief that there is meaning and a higher purpose to her experiences. In a world that has alienated and silenced her, the act of writing to God becomes her lifeline and a powerful manifestation of her enduring spirit.

In addition to Celie, *'The Color Purple'* features other strong black female characters who play important roles in each other's lives. Shug Avery is a source of inspiration and empowerment for Celie, helping her discover her self-worth and inner strength. Sofia, with her combative spirit and refusal to submit, challenges social norms and stands up against injustice. Mary Agnes, who later becomes known as Squeak, also breaks with societal expectations and tries to assert her identity in her own way. The bonds forged between these women exemplify the importance of sisterhood and support in a community that faced systematic discrimination and exclusion. By empowering each other, they demonstrate the strength to be found in solidarity and collective empowerment.

'Dear God,

I am fourteen years old. I am/ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me. Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing. He was pulling on her arm. She say It too soon, Fonso, I ain't well. Finally he leave her alone. A week go by, he pulling on her arm again. She say Naw, I ain't gonna. Can't you see I'm already half dead, an all of these children. She went to visit her sister doctor over Macon. Left me to see after the others. He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don't never git used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook. My mama she fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause he good to her now. But too sick to last long' (Walker, 2004, p. 45)

Celie's ability to talk to God represents her resilience and inner strength. Throughout the novel, Celie maintains her faith despite the abuse and discrimination she suffers. Her relationship with God develops along with her sense of self and self-determination. Initially, her God is the traditional, patriarchal God that society places before her. However, as she grows and learns from other strong female figures like Shug Avery, Celie redefines her understanding of God. She sees God as more of a spiritual entity that exists in all things and represents love, rather than a male figure of judgment and authority. Thus, for Celie, talking to God is not just a religious practice, but a form of self-exploration and self-expression, a means of recounting her life and processing her experiences, and a tool for personal growth and self-empowerment. Her transformation in her understanding of God reflects her personal journey toward self-discovery, self-love, and independence.

'The Color Purple' is a powerful portrayal of the experiences of black women and remains a significant work of literature because it explores identity, resilience, and the importance of standing up against oppression. Through the lives of its characters, the novel draws attention to the historical struggles of black women in America and highlights their ability to survive, thrive, and support one another despite the immense challenges they faced.

1.2. Pecola's Conversations with God: A Cry for Acceptance

In Toni Morrison's novel, *'The Bluest Eye'*, Pecola Breedlove's conversations with God are a poignant and heartbreaking cry for acceptance. Pecola is a young African American girl living in a racially oppressive and emotionally abusive environment. She longs for blue eyes because she believes it would make her beautiful and finally give her the love and acceptance, she so desperately desires. "Please, God. Please make me disappear" (Morrison, 1994, p. 26). Pecola's conversations with God serve as a refuge where she can unburden herself from the overwhelming burden of self-hatred. Growing up in a society that idolizes white beauty standards, she internalizes a belief that she is unlovable and unworthy due to her dark skin and marginalized identity. Through these conversations, Pecola grapples with her feelings of inadequacy and confronts the damaging impact of societal beauty norms on her self-perception. Amidst a world that continuously rejects her worth, Pecola turns to God for validation and acceptance. These conversations reflect her yearning for love and understanding, as she seeks reassurance that she is seen and valued despite the cruelty she faces. Pecola's quest for divine affirmation highlights the importance of recognizing the inherent worth of every individual, regardless of their race or appearance. "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she

was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time” (Morrison, 1994, p.67). These words reveal Pecola’s unflinching faith. Despite the discouragement, she holds onto hope, implying a deep-seated belief in the transformative power of divine intervention. This is a common theme in literature where characters, particularly those experiencing suffering or marginalization, often turn to religion as a source of comfort and a way to find hope in desperate situations. Religion often provides a framework for characters to understand their experiences, particularly in situations that seem unjust or incomprehensible. In Pecola’s case, her prayer to God reflects her desperate search for an explanation and a solution to the societal rejection she faces because of her appearance.

Throughout the story, Pecola’s life is marked by tragedy, neglect, and lack of affection from her family and community. These circumstances lead her to turn to God, who gives her confidence and helps her cope with her overwhelming pain and isolation. Pecola’s conversations with God are an emotional plea in which she expresses her deepest longings, fears, and desires, seeking comfort in a world that constantly rejects her.

For Pecola, these conversations with God are more than mere expressions of despair; they symbolize spiritual empowerment. As she engages in dialogue with the Divine, Pecola rediscovers her voice and agency. Through prayer and reflection, she starts to cultivate a sense of strength and resilience, defying the oppressive forces that seek to suppress her identity.

Through these conversations, the reader gains insight into the profound psychological impact of society’s beauty norms and the destructive effects of racism on a young girl’s self-esteem. Pecola’s longing for blue eyes represents her internalized belief that she must conform to prevailing white standards of beauty in order to be beautiful and valued. Her quest for acceptance becomes a desperate plea to be seen, heard, and loved in a world that consistently denies her humanity.

Morrison’s portrayal of Pecola’s conversations with God highlights the tragic consequences of a society that perpetuates harmful ideals of beauty and discriminates against people based on race and appearance. It is also a powerful commentary on the importance of empathy, compassion, and acceptance in combating the harmful effects of prejudice and creating a more inclusive and loving society. Pecola’s cry for acceptance becomes a poignant reminder of the need for genuine understanding and recognition of the worth and dignity of every human being. As Pecola shares her innermost thoughts and desires with God, she embarks on a journey of healing and liberation. These conversations become a means of catharsis, allowing her to process her emotions and work towards self-acceptance. In these intimate exchanges, Pecola takes steps toward liberating herself

from the shackles of self-hatred and societal expectations, embracing her true identity as a valuable and worthy individual.

The integration of religion in *'The Bluest Eye'* illuminates the intimate relationship between the individual and the divine and provides a refuge for characters who are otherwise marginalized and oppressed. Pecola's dialog with God is deeply personal and reflects her sincere longing for change and acceptance. This spiritual communication underscores the profound importance of religion in providing emotional comfort and hope in the midst of adversity. These prayerful conversations allow Pecola to view her feelings of self-loathing and her desire for social acceptance through the lens of faith. By sharing her innermost thoughts with God, she engages in an intimate form of self-reflection that points her toward healing and liberation. She not only asks for blue eyes, a symbol of social acceptance and beauty, but uses this divine communication as a means to understand and process her own emotional turmoil and self-perception. Moreover, this religious engagement represents a form of spiritual resistance to the societal norms and prejudices that have defined Pecola's life thus far. Through her conversations with God, she recovers her individuality and worth in the eyes of the divine, though not in those of society. In this sense, her spiritual journey is interwoven with her quest for self-acceptance, making her relationship with God a catalyst for emotional liberation.

Conclusion

Religion, a cornerstone of human history, has played an influential role in shaping social and individual norms since the dawn of civilization. Literature, as a form of language art, grew out of humanity's search for existential meaning and an understanding of the world. Beginning with religious texts, which are among the earliest known works, the interplay between religion and literature developed, resulting in fairy tales, myths, and epics in all cultures. This influential relationship continues today, with religion influencing the function and dissemination of literature. This historical symbiosis between the two disciplines has enhanced their creative potential, weaving a deep and timeless bond that transcends eras.

In the literary masterpieces *'The Color Purple'* by Alice Walker and *'The Bluest Eye'* by Toni Morrison, this bond takes shape in the protagonists' dialogs with God. Celie and Pecola find comfort, strength, and healing in these profound conversations, which serve as windows into their entwined emotional worlds. Their religious dialogs become a safe space in which they can express their fears, hopes, and desires, especially in the face of social exclusion.

These dialogs symbolize Celie and Pecola's unyielding spirit and emphasize the role of faith as a beacon of resilience in the midst of their turbulent lives. Their candid exchanges trace their journey toward self-realization, autonomy, and strength, and are an inspiring testament to their stubborn resistance to societal norms and oppressive circumstances. Ultimately, *'The Color Purple'* and *'The Bluest Eye'* deftly employ the motif of divine dialog to illuminate the protagonists' personal struggles, demonstrating the enduring influence of religion on literature.

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