

## THE LANGUAGE OF DISCORD IN THE NOVELS OF ALICE WALKER

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### Abstract

**Alice Walker** hinges on her ability to narrate her story through her characters, settings and powerful and unique language. The language used and the treatment of her themes viz. race relations, alienation, search for identity, psychic and physical oppression of women through marriage, rape and motherhood and the spiritual survival of the whole community poignantly highlight the socio-political, cultural and psychological discord present in the lives of the Afro-Americans. This paper is primarily based on the selected novels of prolific Pulitzer Prize winner, Afro-American writer, Alice Walker who has explored the dynamics of discord and violence plaguing the African-American communities in her works. This paper attempts to discuss her effective usage of words, silence, symbols, motifs, religion, settings etc. that serve as a definite medium of discord experienced at the multi-dimensional levels. This paper concludes on the note that Walker has made a significant contribution to the Afro-American points of view and perspectives on life, politics, culture and history and her novels have earned her a well deserved reputation as a writer of the protest literature.

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Through effective language, Walker highlights the cruelty and inhumanity inflicted by the whites through the institution of slavery, causing untold dissension in the minds of the blacks. Walker disparages the initial racism found within the African American community itself, especially the

significance attached to *skin colour*. In *The Color Purple*, Harpo admires Sofia's skin colour more than her intelligence. He tells Celie, "Sofia is bright ...Naw bright skin". He insults Shug by saying, "She black as tar".<sup>1</sup> Tashi has misgivings in leaving Africa for America as "it was clear to her that black people did not truly admire black skinned black people like herself, and especially did not admire black skinned black women".<sup>2</sup> The importance of skin colour in America has created for the Black American an identity which surpasses any other individual consideration. The white considers himself immaculate, pure, sacred and the elect and the black is considered an embodiment of evil and savagery, thus, reducing him to the status of a slave. In *Meridian*, Lynne's black husband assesses her fault at being raped, "By being white Lynne was guilty of whiteness. He could not reduce the logic any further, in that direction... Black people for years were "guilty" of being black. Slavery was a punishment for their "crime".<sup>3</sup>

Walker holds this *motif of blackness* responsible for the kind of emotional and spiritual vacuum in the lives of her characters. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Brownfield wonders at the white man who is able to "turn his father into something that might as well have been a pebble or a post or a piece of dirt".<sup>4</sup> Becoming a victim of racism himself, he reproaches his wife with her colour, "You ain't white" and "He liked to sling the perfection of white women at her because colour was something she could not change and as his own coloured skin annoyed him, he meant for hers to humble her".<sup>5</sup>

Walker highlights the price the black women and children pay as the victims of economic, racial and sexual exploitation. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Margaret, Brownfield's mother was "like their dog in some ways. She didn't have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to his father".<sup>6</sup> Driven to drink and degradation by her husband, she poisons her son, whose 'father might have been every one of its mother's many lovers'. Brownfield uses abusive and threatening language while speaking to Mem "Who the hell you think'd hire a snaggle- toothed old plow mule like you ... you ain't just ugly and beat-up looking yous old"<sup>7</sup>. Brownfield, with "his crushed pride, his battered ego, made him drag Mem away from her school teaching ...Her knowledge reflected badly on a husband who could scarcely read and write",<sup>8</sup> "The tender woman he married he set out to destroy...He was her Pygmalion in reverse".<sup>9</sup> Brownfield's degeneracy is seen when "for fun he poured oil into the streams to kill the fish and tickled his vanity by drowning cats".<sup>10</sup> Blaming the whites and others for the failures of his life, "he felt an indescribable worthlessness, a certain ineffectual smallness, a pygmy's frustration in a world of giants".<sup>11</sup>

*Silence* in the relationships between the whites and the blacks, and amongst the blacks serves as a definite medium of discord. "Brownfield was afraid of his father's silence when the truck came... his father's face froze into an unnaturally bland mask, curious and unsettling to see. It

<sup>1</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, London: Phoenix, 2004, p. 52

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.252

<sup>3</sup> Alice Walker, *Meridian*, London: Phoenix, 1976, p.131

<sup>4</sup> Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, New York: Pocket Books, 1970. p.11

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.84

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.6

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.116

<sup>8</sup> Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, New York: Pocket Books, 1970. p.74

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 74

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.78

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 231

was as if his father had become a stone or a robot ... and Brownfield smelled something smothered and tense that came from his father's body... an odor of sweat and fear and something indefinite... a bitter odor of something whose source was forcibly contained in flesh".<sup>12</sup> This odour is the blackness of the blacks that sends Grange out to seek a new life in the North where he is reduced to invisibility. "He was no longer regarded as merely a "thing"...he was not even in existence. Each day he had to say his name to himself over and over again to shut out the silence".<sup>13</sup> Walker's remarkable choice of words brings out the agony and frustration of her characters. She portrays most of her black male characters as the "low down dirty dog" who in the novel *Meridian* impregnated the thirteen-year-old tragic Wild Child. Haunted by guilt at her inability to embrace a nurturing role as daughter, wife and mother, Meridian agonizes "for shattering her mother's emerging self", and gives away her child, equating motherhood with slavery. "So this, she mumbled, lurching toward his crib in the middle of the night, is what slavery is like".<sup>14</sup>

Walker's fiction is imbued with an *atmosphere of violence* inherent in the traditions and conflicts present in the history of the South. She uses violence to stress the depth of the problems she explores and to illustrate the deep-seated despair that arises from unfulfilled desires of her characters. Grange vents his aggressiveness on the whites. "And in this fighting too he tasted the sweet surge of blood rightfully directed in its wrath that proclaimed his freedom, his manhood. Every white face he cracked, he cracked in his sweet wife's name".<sup>15</sup> In *The Temple of my Familiar*, Miss Lissie recalls how the practice of mother worship died out during hundreds of years of slave trade in Africa, "They were in their earliest days, raids on the women's temples which existed in sacred groves of trees, with the women and children dragged out by the hair and forced to marry into male-dominated tribes. ... The men had decided they would be creator, and they went about dethroning women systematically".<sup>16</sup>

*Incest and sexual violence* are other aspects of black life that cause untold misery and discord to her female characters. Abusive fathers and cruel husbands have been part of their lives. Walker begins her story of *The Color Purple* with a description of an incestuous attack on Celie from the man she believes to be her father. "He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't, better not never tell nobody but God. ... When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and get used to it".<sup>17</sup> Rape becomes a defining metaphor of patriarchal oppression and is characterized by silencing its victims.

The institution of marriage to most black women turns out to be a futile activity. " Mr \_\_\_\_\_ marry me to take care of his children. I marry him cause my daddy made me. I don't love Mr \_\_\_\_\_ and he don't love me".<sup>18</sup> Recalling the savage treatment meted out to her by her husband, she says: "He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, celie, git the belt.... It is 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".<sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.p. 9-11

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 207

<sup>14</sup> Alice Walker, *Meridian*, London: Phoenix, 1976, p. 63

<sup>15</sup> Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, New York: Pocket Books, 1970, p.221

<sup>16</sup> Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*, London: Phoenix, 2004, p.p. 63-64

<sup>17</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, London: Phoenix, 2004, p.1-2

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p.61

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.p.23

Walker writes with a strong sense of place. Her fictional locale is Georgia. She selects rural settings and encodes them with images of despair and decay. The everyday monotonous routines of the Copeland house and with its repeated images of adversity express a great sense of hopelessness and marginalization.

To bring about the impression of realism in her fiction, Walker uses *Black English*, a linguistic system operating parallel to standard American English, which has its own set of grammatical and phonological rules as well as a special glossary and rhetorical style to give it a unique character. The black rural dialect used by Celie transforms the illiterate speech as an effective medium in conveying her sense of her world and reveals her inner core. Celie's letters are marked by several features of Black English:

... for instance by omission of third-person singular present tense-s ('she say'), omission of the -ed suffix to mark the past tense ('he grab'), ('he good to her'), use of uninflected be implying a habit ('every time I be the one to cook'), double negation ('I don't never'), omission of final -s from possessive nouns ('her sister doctor'). As for features of pronunciation we note for example, loss of a final -d sound ('a kine word), and reduction of a consonant cluster ('children').<sup>20</sup>

Walker also uses distortion of words ('horsepitality for hospitality') etc. "they" for "their", "us" for "we" etc., to intensify the reality of the character. The epistolary discourses written by Celie in *The Color Purple* are like dramatic soliloquies and intimate revelations of herself. The letters are undated and unsigned to suggest that she has no oral voice but exists only in her letters.

By introducing various *symbols and motifs*, Walker restores her women to their Self. Her resolutions are introduced through a universality of themes of forgiveness and reconciliation, redemptive love, spiritual consciousness, creativity and sisterhood of black women. In *The Color Purple*, Celie is sexually attracted to Shug Avery, her husband's lover and the lesbian relationship proves very recuperative.

The use of "clothing as iconography" is central to writings by Black women. *Clothing* is an important symbol for expressing not only the psychological state of women but also to symbolize freedom for the female protagonists. The creation of clothing becomes an artistic as well as liberating expression for Celie. Turning her talent into a successful business venture, she calls her creations "Folkpants", thus, rejecting her past and her traditional role. Meridian's clothing is also symbolic of her freedom from patriarchal oppression. "Meridian's railroad cap and dungarees... are emblems of her rejection of conventional notions of womanhood."<sup>21</sup>

Walker uses the rich metaphor of *quilting* to help her women transcend discord. These women expressed their creativity in making quilts and decorated with flowers the dilapidated houses they had to live in. "*Songs*" are also a means by which Walker fights patriarchy. In *The Color Purple*, Shug Avery, a blues singer is an embodiment of female liberation and Mary Agnes, a woman who liberated through song, changes her identity as a sexual object to a singer in her own right.

The motif of the *journey* was derived from the slave narratives, but Walker has transformed her protagonists' lives through such journeys. One of the central images in Black literature is the movement of the blacks searching for stability and respectability. Grange Copeland's journey to the North in search of identity and freedom helps him develop a therapeutic viewpoint of life.

<sup>20</sup> Lindberg-Seyersted, Brita. 1992. "Who is Nettie? And what is She doing in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. American Studies in Scandinavia 24, p.87

<sup>21</sup> Alice Walker, *Meridian*, London: Phoenix, 1976, p.242

Celie’s journey is totally psychological. She moves from a ‘seemingly silent object to speaking subject’. Meridian’s journey is both external, as she travels about the South, and internal, as she tries to answer the question, “Could she kill?”

Walker’s concept of the Christian God and religion and the subsequent split to *paganism* is evident in the novel *The Color Purple*. Celie stops writing to God whom she perceives as “just like all other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown. A God who glorifies in being deaf for if he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place”.<sup>22</sup> An “emotional diary, or couch confession to oneself”, Celie begins her letters addressed as, “Dear God” and asking for help in “letting me know what is happening to me”. The irony is that these letters do not expect a response. They are private discourses and not presented to the public by an external agent. Celie tells God, “I am fourteen years old. I am. I have always been a good girl”.

<sup>23</sup> By drawing a line through the words, ‘I am’, a change in her self-perception is noticed. Unaware of her husband’s name, and due to the nature of the epistolary form, he is addressed as Mr\_\_\_ which also highlights the distance leading to the instinct of psychological discord between them, and her position of servitude.

Celie addresses her last letter as: “Dear God, Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything, Dear God”.<sup>24</sup> In signing her letters as ‘Your loving sister’ and ‘Your sister, Celie, Folkspants, Unlimited’, Celie becomes symbolic as a product of ‘womanist consciousness’. In *The Color Purple*, Celie is sexually attracted to Shug Avery, her husband’s lover and the lesbian relationship proves very restorative. Their physical intimacy is an act ‘that breaks down all barriers between lovers’ and an ‘initiative towards freedom almost approaching divinity’. This therapeutic love makes Celie state: “If she come, I be happy. If she doesn’t, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn”.<sup>25</sup> It also enables Celie and her husband to transform and renew their hetero-sexual bonding. Reunited they stand together as “two old fools, left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars”.<sup>26</sup>

Walker uses several techniques like authorial commentary, extended sections of dialogue where a character tells another the story of his involvement in the Emergency, Revolutions and Movements. Walker adopts the stream of consciousness technique to effectively depict the thoughts of the characters. Using flashbacks, and through her powerful usage of language she constantly shifts her point of view and provides a mirror to the chaos of the period highlighting all the conflicts experienced at the multi-dimensional levels.

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<sup>22</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, London: Phoenix, 2004 p.p.173-175

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p.3

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p.259

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p.257

<sup>26</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, London: Phoenix, 2004, p. 246

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**All textual references are given in the foot notes along with the page numbers.**