# Racial Concerns and Womanist Disruptions in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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**Abstract**

The struggle of a black feminist writer is to fight for her community as well as fight with her community. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* attempts to navigate this fine balance. In the process she invokes the many threads that constitute everyday black lives- racism, religion, economic imperatives, gendered expectations, black homes, childhood, humor, speech patterns, fashion et al. The paper attempts to examine these and more specifically the new gender horizons that the text indicates as a possibility. The various female characters in the text negotiate their prescribed status within the community variously. Some like Celie's mother and Harpo's mother practically die in the harness. Some like Sofia are shown contesting the racial and gendered configurations throughout the text at tremendous personal cost. Shug on the other hand, exhibits an electrifying defiance towards the gender norms of the community. The paper examines if Walker is able to deliver a more equitable world for black women or if the promise of a new world is merely a carnivalesque one. The paper examines how the 'reformation' of the male characters and the subsequent reclaiming of the black community that the text ends on constitute a kind of back tracking on important gender concerns that the text had committed itself to earlier.

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As a black womanist writer Alice Walker's battles are multiple. Her novel, *The Color Purple* does well in reminding the reader that various systems of oppression intersect and often sustain each other. Walker unmasks the black man's oppression of the black woman- a political truth lost in the clarion call for black solidarity in the face of white America's racist violence against the blacks. It does not mean that she gives up on the project of black solidarity and empowerment.

That *The Color Purple* was generally lapped up by a white readership and left a section of black readers squirming, does not establish a fault in the text's politics. If anything, it only indicates the cumulative baggage forced upon a black writer, as well as the black reader, through history. The text does two things simultaneously- it offers a trenchant critique of white power and politics that have systematically disempowered an entire continent and its people. It also, in the same breath, defends its right to call out the patriarchal lapses and excesses in black communal life.

The paper attempts to examine how Walker negotiates her commitment to fight both race and patriarchy. Slavery and racism are often blamed for inflecting the kind of masculinities that black men came to occupy vis-à-vis the black women. Walker reminds us that it was not just black men who suffered white violence but that black women suffered as much. It also reminds us that black women continue to struggle against virulent forms of racism. Lorded over by white men, white women and black men, these women had to suffer multiple forms of oppression. Against such a backdrop the paper examines the kinds of alliances that Walker's female characters are seen striking. Do racial concerns trump gender possibilities? Given that black women had little in common with white women, is Walker reluctant to imagine a separatist female community even as it hints at it through three-fourths

of the text? Does Walker make the limited choice of presenting 'reformed' black male characters to accommodate them before the text concludes? The paper examines the ways in which Walker's need to fight racism impacts the way gender issues are resolved in the text.

Let us look at the first aspect first. A preliminary reading of the text seems to offer a close, and an apparently closed, commentary on the life of African-Americans in the first half of 20th century Georgia. It is so much about their homes, families, churches and neighbors that the white presence seems sparse and incidental. The amount of narrative space allowed to the white presence is possibly one-eighth of that allowed to the blacks.

However that is also precisely the point. The white 'minority' in the text is powerful enough to impact the entire course of the text. The first white man to be named in the text is Columbus (discounting the white God, whose whiteness is only gradually unmasked through the course of the text) - the man who was the harbinger of misery and oppression for the native Americans. Once the continental profiteers had moved in, it was only a matter of time that the idea of race would be constructed to keep the capitalist machines rolling. What Columbus single handedly and representatively achieved for the white world, empowers the next white man in the text, the store clerk, to behave in the way that he does: "He snatch the cloth and thump down the bolt. He don't measure. When he thinks he got five yard he tare it off" (Walker 16). Mundane and insignificant as this exchange seems, it captures the essence of race relations built over the centuries. That the clerk feels licensed to snub and short change a customer who is as able as him, if not better (Corrrine is Spelman educated), and is as capable of paying as the other white customers, betrays a rancid amount of entitlement, ownership and racial arrogance. White God himself is collapsed into the white Mayor- who ensures that only the white man's interest are safeguarded and perpetuated. Celie believes, "I know white people never listen to colored, period. If they do, they only listen long enough to be able to tell you what to do" (Walker 176).

Practically every single time a white character makes an appearance in the text, it is marked by violence- political and psychological. The lynching of Celie's and Nettie's biological father, discovered somewhere in the middle of the text, is the hinge on which the entire structure of the text is poised. Had the whites not lynched the father, Celie and Nettie would have been leading entirely different lives. Their lives are as foreordained by this episode as the lives of the black people are, in general, by the fact of racism. Nettie writes:

> Once upon a time, there was a well- to- do- farmer who owned his property near town. . . . And as he did so well farming and everything he turned his hand to prospered, he decided to open a store, and try his luck selling dry goods as well. Well, his store did so well that he talked two of his brothers into helping him run it, and, as months went by, they were doing better and better. . . . The man had a wife whom he adored, and they had a little girl, barely two years old. (Walker 157)

All of this, and more, could have been Celie's life, just as it is Eleanor Jane's for example, *but for the whites.* Legally emancipated but practically enslaved the blacks moved from abject slavery to an era of Jim Crow laws segregating and discriminating between the two colors. The public spaces and resources made available to the African Americans were always separate and consistently unequal despite the claims made to the contrary.

For an Indian reader segregation carries the horrifying undertones of untouchability- where culturally and institutionally a huge section of the population is denied a life of equality, opportunity and dignity. Both untouchability and racism have their origin in economic calculations. The vast Indian middle class needs caste to fuel its economic growth, service its homes, nanny its children, and clean its septic tanks. If these jobs had to be paid for under organized labor practices, the caste structure would find it difficult to sustain itself. The whites need race so that Sofia's sons can fight the wars that will ensure the safety and continuance of Stanley Earl's and his daddy's cotton gin. Sofia's fate in fact is a repetition

and continuation of the primal act of Celie's father's lynching. She is punished for something even smaller than Celie's father. Celie's father had, through his sheer hard work and enterprise, become an economic threat to the white merchants. Sofia is lynched for refusing to attend to a white household's domestic chores. Of course both, Celie's father and Sofia, are punished primarily to be set up as an example for the other blacks. Celie wonders, "When I see Sofia I don't know why she still alive. 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 teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of a eggplant" (Walker 82). The other characters in the text might escape the day to day contact with the whites. But Sofia's lynching and enslavement reminds the reader that the black lives are forever circumscribed by potential white violence and claims. Her life comes completely unhinged not because her husband fails to look after her- Walker is keen to create a character who walks out on a demeaning marriage and is able to find happiness for herself. Sofia's life falls to pieces because she is no match for the whole machinery-legal, institutional and psychological- that the whites unleash on her. Her incarceration and subsequent 'mammification' as a domestic serf establish the ugly political fact that slavery has not come to an end. Squeak's rape, in her bid to help Sofia, is a tragic reminder of how white men will not be stopped from a bestial, predatory abuse of black women. In a town full of black children (Bub, Squeak, her two younger siblings) who resemble white uncles, black woman's rape and abuse are presented as mundane and routine. bell hooks' charge that the text offers a "benevolent portrayal" of rape by a white man is rather off the mark. She believes:

> Such a benevolent portrayal of the consequences of rape contrasts sharply with the images of black male rapists, images which highlight the violence and brutality of their acts. That the text graphically emphasizes the horror and pain of black male

> sexist exploitation of black females while de-emphasising the horror and pain of racist exploitation of black woman by white men that involves sexual violence is an unresolved contradiction of Walker's intent to expose the evils of sexual domination. ("Writing the Subject" 60)

Whatever Squeak may choose to make of her rape, the text does not in any way mitigate the "horror and pain" of the act itself. Squeak's sacrifice and trauma in her attempt to help another black woman is not invisibilized by Walker. What is celebrated rather is Squeak's coming into her own by breaking free from the only identity allowed her by the men of her race. From a mere squeaking, nodding attendant to Harpo and his emotional – domestic demands, Squeak becomes a comrade to another black woman. In one stroke she leaves behind her role of a nanny to hurt male pride and assumes her rightful place as a black political subject. Far too often and for far too long had black patriarchal aggression towards black women been explained away as psychological, cultural compensation for the political emasculation of the black man at the hands of the white regime. By depicting Sofia's lynching and Squeak's rape Walker reminds the reader that the black woman was as victimized by the white order, if not more, as the black male was.

Sofia's troubles do not come to an end even with her release from the Mayor's home. She is expected to continue in her role of a black nanny to a now grown up Eleanor Jane. Sofia is separated from her children- first by a white family's demands and later by the white man's war. Eleanor Jane expects free and ready access to Sofia's home each time she needs comforting from white sexism. Her marriage to Stanley Earl might be a typical exchange of women amongst men to secure and further their class interests. Stanley Earl spends more time with Eleanor Jane's brother discussing profits from the cotton gin and playing poker, than he does with his own wedded wife and child. However even if the text allows you to

pity Eleanor Jane it does not permit you to forget the life of privilege and entitlement that her marriage to Stanley Earl ensures her:

> Maybe you ought to leave him, say Sofia. You got kin in Atlanta, go stay with some of them. *Git a job.*
>
> Miss Eleanor Jane toss her hair back, act like she don't even hear this, it such a wild notion. (Walker 241; my emphasis)

It is on account of her marriage to a mill-owner that Eleanor Jane can walk into an African-American home, interrupt a family dinner and expect an erstwhile attendant to leave her meal midway and present herself on the porch. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* bell hooks makes an astute observation:

> There is much evidence substantiating the reality that race and class identity creates differences in quality of life, social status and lifestyle that takes precedence over the common experience women share- differences that are rarely transcended. The motives of materially privileged, educated white women with a variety of career and lifestyle options available to them must be questioned when they insist that "suffering cannot be measured". . . . It is a statement that I have never heard a poor woman of any race make. (4)

Eleanor Jane's sense of privilege and prerogative in her relationship with Sofia is echoed in Doris Baines' relationship with the Akwees. Baines chooses to go to Africa, not to subvert the colonial system which causes so much unhappiness and misery to the Akwees, but to escape the sexist impositions of the English class culture she was born into. Her foray into Africa is the simplest way to escape being reduced to a wife. Colonized Africa is a more convenient choice compared to being imprisoned in a castle or a convent or a married home. Soon enough she adopts a male pseudonym, is presented a couple of African wives and is all set to enjoy the luxury that is attendant upon being born into a class like hers. She brings up

and educates the two wives as her daughters but marries them off at the first opportunity- a fate she herself had sought to escape. The Akwee village is reduced to a piece of resort property with a built in swimming pool. Baines informs us that, “Within a year everything as far as me and the heathens were concerned ran like clockwork. I told them right off that their souls were no concern of mine, that I wanted to write books and not be disturbed. For this pleasure I was prepared to pay. Rather handsomely” (Walker 208). The world wars which the Western nations fought primarily to safeguard their colonial property from each other, and by staking the lives of many from the non western world, is nothing more than a source of recreation for Baines. She chooses to return to England so as not to miss the War, much as one tries not to miss a soap opera or a cricket match. Her class privileges ensure that she is never very seriously impacted by the war, except as a spectator.

The European colonial intrusion into Africa is cryptically symbolized as the advent of the road into the life of the Akwees. Doris Baines is expectedly exasperated at the advent of the road right up to her African doorstep as it disturbs the quietude that she had come to Africa for in the first place. Baines fumes, “I’ll tell them what to do with their bloody road and their bloody rubber plantations and their sunburned but still bloody boring English planters and engineers. I am a very wealthy woman, and I own the village of Akwee” (Walker 209). Later, she owns her grandson in much the same way as she owns the rest of the Akwees. The advent of the English colonizers means nothing beyond a temporary annoyance and disturbance in her life of ennui. There is not a thought spared for the loss of life, livelihood, dignity of the Africans themselves.

Walker does not spare the whites for the violence they have committed and continue to commit against the blacks- institutionally and culturally. White man, white woman, white child and white God are all implicated in the systemic disempowerment of the Afro-American communities. The text calls for a united black front in the face of unending and

unrelenting racism. Various characters are seen arriving at self growth by standing up for each other, even as some learn to stand up for themselves. Alfonso's economic rise will not help but only compromise the black community's strength, predicated as it is on self interest and on appeasing the white man. The black individual will have to integrate better with the larger black collective. The text believes the concerns of the black community will be safeguarded only when it evolves ways to counter and challenge the stranglehold of white oppression as a whole. This can only be done by consolidating the strength of the black community.

However the other part of the text's twin agenda is to expose the price at which black solidarity might be arrived at. The investment of the black community in a future of unity and togetherness, as the text indicates, is very often routed through the black women's silence and subordination. Celie's life as a daughter and wife lays bare the convenient patriarchal arrangements within the black community through which black women are denied any control over their lives and bodies. Candice M. Jenkins decries the dangerous entrapment, that such "salvific" wish implies for the women of the African American community. She observes:

> The salvific wish is best understood as an aspiration, most often but not only middle class and female, to save or rescue the black community from white racist accusations of sexual and domestic pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety. . . . In other words, middle- and upper-class African Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s sought to improve the reputation and the status of the race as a whole through their "respectable" actions and influence. . . . I contend that the salvific wish has most influenced female behavior because it has historically placed a high value on maintaining a protective illusion of black sexual and familial sobriety. This illusion is particularly dependent upon (and prohibitive for) black

> women because the black female body has so often been characterized as the sole source of black intimate or domestic irregularity. (973)

Celie's biological father's lynching is woven in as a private memory. There is no record of communal anger for or communal support to the mother after the father and his brothers have been killed by white men. The community looks the other way as Alfonso steps in, takes complete control over the widow's assets and practically preys upon her to death. One of the primary causes of her death is the unending cycle of pregnancies she is pushed into. The community chooses not to intervene in much the same way that Samuel refuses to, when petitioned by Nettie: "I asked Samuel if he would visit you and Mr_ just to see how you are. But he says he can't risk putting himself between man and wife, especially when he don't know them" (Walker 116). The black man, as the father or the husband, gets to exercise complete and unchallenged lordship over the domestic sphere. Celie's mother dies practically in the harness while, "Don't nobody come see us" (Walker 4). Although her mother seems to have a sister doctor in Macon, Celie's life is defined by its absence of choices. She is sold into marriage (or rather comes free with the cow) to a man who is a fit replacement to Pa. Incestual rape is followed by marital rape. Abject domestic servitude at the natal home is replaced by a life of physical abuse and sexual drudgery. Mr__, much like Pa before him, ensures that Celie and Nettie do not get a chance to draw strength from each other. Pa had sold Celie off to be able to abuse Nettie better. Mr__ shuts the doors on his own sister when she tries to speak up for Celie. Celie's economic dependence on her husband is clearly offered as one of the prime reasons for her life of misery. She looks after his children, his house, his fields, services him sexually, in return for mere sustenance. Much like an industrial worker, she is allowed only that much, as will ensure her services the next day. Sylvia Walby insightfully observes:

> I am going to argue that housewives and husbands can be conceptualized as classes, when class is defined in terms of a distinctive work and market position, but that gender should not be reduced to a class. That is, while husbands and housewives are classes, women and men are not. . . . The domestic labour of the housewife comprises the production of a labour power of the husband, herself and children and other dependents (if any). . . .The content of housework changes over time and varies according to the income and wealth of the household, yet the essential nature of the relations of production hold constant despite this. (93-4)

In a typical move Albert tries to break Sophia's spirit too. He rejects Sofia primarily because Harpo loves her. Marriage is one of the primary ways through which parental control is exercised and perpetuated. He asks Sofia, big with Harpo's child, "Who the father? . . . Young womens no good these days, he say. Got they legs open to every Tom, Dick and Harry" (Walker 31). He humiliates Harpo through the easiest way available to patriarchy – shaming him on account of his mother: "Why I'm not good enough? Harpo ast Mr__. Mr__ say, Your mammy. Harpo say what wrong with my mammy? Mr__ say, somebody kill her" (Walker 29). Albert tries to insult Harpo for his mother's death- a death that Albert is responsible for in the first place. In abandoning Annie Julia to run after Shug, he pushes her into looking for love elsewhere and is thus squarely responsible for her death. Once Harpo has married Sofia, Albert attempts his best to influence him into replicating his own marital relations with his Celie.

Harpo's subsequent efforts to beef up to confront Sofia are humorous in a dark, tragic way. His attempts to make Sofia fit into Celie's shoes are sad and disturbing, especially since he loves Sofia. The scenes of physical violence between the two, funny as they might seem, come at a great emotional cost to Sofia. Even though the text is unrelenting in its critique of the whites, it does not forgive Harpo for his role in Sofia's misery. Celie reminds Harpo, "If

you hadn't tried to rule over Sofia the white folks never would have caught her" (Walker 181). He expects the same marital submission from Squeak- denying her economic independence through a career in music and reducing her to a nanny to his children- much like his father had done to Celie. Patriarchy can be transferred seamlessly from one generation to the other.

Corrine seems to have escaped the toxic forms of patriarchy. However even she has internalized some of its other equally debilitating aspects. Her suspicions regarding Nettie and Samuel are typical insecurities that patriarchy breeds in women. Women are brought up to understand and value themselves merely in relation to the men in their lives, at the cost of all other, possibly more empowering relationships. bell hooks makes an interesting observation:

> Between women and men sexism is most often expressed in the form of male domination which leads to discrimination, exploitation, or oppression. Between women, male supremacist values are expressed through suspicions, defensive, competitive behavior. It is sexism that leads women to feel threatened by one another without cause. (*Feminist Theory* 47)

Corrine is the bearer of a particular kind of class based elitism within the black community- one which betrays another kind of patriarchal configuration. Celie and Shug are able to develop a comradeship that topples Albert from his position of primacy in a heterosexual marriage. Sofia and Squeak's support to each other in parenting their kids renders Harpo the least significant coordinate in the triad. Corrine on the other hand, Spelman educated and schooled in bourgeois, salvific ideas of marital propriety is insecure and suspicious. Are these single unit marriages, with the husband presiding over wife and children an instance of African American appropriation of the white man's marriage? Were these cultivated in a bid to earn white respect and acceptance? Marriage amongst the Akwees

is insistently polygamous. It is interesting to note how the text draws attention to the possible fellowship between the wives of the same husband: "[T]he women share a husband but the husband does not share their friendships. . ." (Walker 150). Polygamy is not upheld as an ideal, but is employed nevertheless to comment on the unquestioned sanctimoniousness of Western monogamous marriage- ridden as it is with marital rape and the servitude of women.

The text however at no point tries to romanticize African patterns of social-familial relationships. Walker is quick to note that patriarchy and misogyny are rampant amongst the Akwees too. The Akwee husband reigns supreme as does the husband in Georgia: "[A]mong the Olinka, the husband has life and death power over the wife. If he accuses one of his wives of witchcraft or infidelity, she can be killed" (Walker 151). Male centric social arrangements predictably lead to structurally flawed relationships between the women too: "And God forbid that the child of a favourite wife should fall ill! That is the point at which even the women's friendships break down, as each woman fears the accusation of sorcery, from the other, or from husband" (Walker 151).

In fact the Akwees play an important role in adding another dimension to the discussion of patriarchy in the text. One of the lessons it offers is that the African man needed no education in misogyny from the American man. Both are equally competent. Nettie writes, "There is a way that the (Akwee) men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions." The relationship of hierarchy and authority that is practiced by white men against black people is replicated by the black men in their relationship with black women. The text's bitterest stroke is reserved for the ease with which black misogyny is seen both facilitating *and* drawing strength from white colonialism- Tashi's Aunt, "who was sold to a trader because she no longer fit into village life. This aunt refused to marry the man chosen for her. Refused to bow to the chief. Did nothing but lay up, crack cola nuts between her teeth and *giggle"* (Walker 145; my emphasis).

The text portrays how threatening a woman's laughter is to masculine pride. Tashi's aunt's giggling is woven into our first introduction to Shug- "Her face rouge. Her hair something tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motocar' (Walker 8). Shug is depicted "showing all her teef" on many occasions subsequently. Even Corrine and Celie's innocent banter aboard a horse cart is enough to enrage Mr__ , "What you sitting here laughing like a fool fer?" One of the most endearing scenes in the entire text is that of all the women sharing a full throated, deep chested, system threatening laugh at the men in their lives- "Shug look at me and us giggle. Then us laugh sure nuff. Then Squeak start to laugh. Then Sofia. All us laugh and laugh." All the men sit squirming and challenged, till a red-faced Harpo reminds the women- "Shut up Squeak, he say. It bad luck for women to laugh at men" (Walker 181).

The text employs humor and brazenness to repeatedly challenge patriarchy and its totems. Traditional image of the black –eyed wife beaten up for non-compliance is inverted to a Harpo with "his face a mess of bruises. His lip cut. One of his eyes shut like a fist. He walk stiff and say his teef ache" (Walker 36). The suffocating institution of motherhood- often imposed on women across cultures- is revealed for what it is. It is unmasked as a structure through which men liberate themselves from the tedious task of daily, every hourly parenting while women are reduced to the job of a perpetual caregiver. Sofia's terse reply to Mr__ is a hard blow on men who attempt to shame women for negotiating mothering with a life of relative freedom and dignity: "Mr__ whisper to Sofia. Where your children at? She whisper back, My children at home, where yours?" (Walker 76). Mothering needs to be distinguished from motherhood. While the former is a day to day care giving (both physical and emotional) that the mother is typically seen offering the child, the latter is a strangulating ideal of Motherly self abnegation that all mothers are measured against and found wanting. It is also noteworthy how 'fathering' and 'mothering' have come to represent two completely

different kinds of work- one a mere sexual act and the other a lifetime of unacknowledged sweat and labor.

Even ideas of virginity and honor are divested of their traditional gravitas by Shug's roguish reference to Celie's lack of pleasure in marital sex, "You never enjoy it at all? She ast, puzzle. Not even with your children daddy? Never, I say. Why Miss Celie, she say, you still a virgin" (Walker 74). Molly Hite makes an insightful point here:

> Shug begins by replacing conventional terminology for the female genitals, shifting emphasis from the lack or hole of patriarchal representation to a "little button" that "git hotter and hotter and then it melt"- a mixed metaphor from the point of view of a dominant discursive practice, which of course has only recently begun to acknowledge the existence of buttons that behave this way. The consequence is immediately clear to Celie: if the important organ is not a hole but a button, then stimulation can come from such androgynous appendages as "finger and tongue", and intercourse is not only insufficient but unnecessary for female sexual pleasure. Shug's redefinition of the word 'virgin' in this passage is equally threatening to patriarchal control over women's bodies, in that it places priority not on penetration, and thus on the social mechanism for guaranteeing ownership of children, but on enjoyment, making the woman's own response the index of her experience. (98)

Shug's replacement of what patriarchy deems a hole with what she chooses to call a button changes the terms of the debate completely. Women need not passively wait for men to plug the hole, but they themselves need to take charge of their pleasures, their bodies, their careers. It's interesting how Walker targets patrilocality as one of the easiest ways through which patriarchy inscribes itself. Patrilocality, the shifting of a woman to her husband's home upon marriage, leads to the woman's homelessness. She enters the man's house, not as an equal partner, but as a worker who slaves from morning to night for mere subsistence.

Walker ensures that practically all her women- Celie, Shug, Sofia, Squeak leave their married homes to find themselves. Sofia chooses to stay in Jack and Odessa's home because Jack ensures that she is never made to feel like a dependent. Jack and Odessa's marriage is upheld as an ideal which other men characters can just about approximate. Jack welcomes Sofia, his wife's sister into his home in her hour of need, while Mr__ throws his own sister out for standing up for Celie.

Not just man-woman, but God- human relationships are also teasingly broached through humor. Instead of being a vengeful deity presiding over people's life, god is re-envisioned as a lover eager to please you: "But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back" (Walker 177). Or better still, god's grace is experienced as an orgasm that you cannot miss. From a set of prescriptions, much like the ones issued by patriarchy, god is reimaged as the flowing of womanist spirit which lets you choose your own path. Shug declares, "God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like" (Walker 176). Just as god and his functionaries (the preacher who "got his mouth on Shug Avery, now that she down") are toppled from their position of unchallenged reverence, even the written word is bared for what it is- a vehicle of power that works primarily by exclusion. Valerie Babb offers an insightful analysis:

> During American slavery, blacks were denied access to the written word by law. It was a crime to teach a slave to read or write and literacy was used effectively to perpetuate a strict racial and subsequently sexual hierarchy. Who would receive the power of literacy was initially at the discretion of whites; and when they did extend literacy to blacks, it became a province of black men to decide which black women

> would have access to literacy by being afforded formal education or which black women would be bartered directly into child bearing and marriage. (108)

The text might validate Nettie's education as an empowering force. It might also laud her efforts to write down children's stories in Olinka and English- a project that informs the politics of many writers with hyphenated identities. Clearly Walker herself uses the written word to put out before the world what had remained untold in the past. However the text does not privilege the written word over the spoken, Nettie's standard English over Celie's African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Black English (BE). Nettie's standard English does not really empower her, much like the way her position as a missionary does not really help the Olinkas or their cause. While Fanon had his misgivings about the literary potential of Creole, Walker is unembarrassed and unapologetic about writing in Black English. This is not to suggest that Black English is another monolithic, standardized language. There are bound to be class based and gendered variations even to the language that African Americans use. What is noteworthy however is Walker organic employment of it to fuel practically every important conversation in the text. In fact readers often complain how Nettie's text book English pales before Celie's riotous english. Shug's rubbishing of the project to 'educate' and 'civilize' Celie- "She can talk in sign language for all I care"- is a simple, yet powerful manifesto of Walker's politics regarding 'literary language'. Jerene and Darline erroneously believe that Celie's language needs remedying, just because her economic condition needed improvement. The two, as the text points out, are not necessarily related.

Folkspants becomes an emblem of what a female community can achieve. It does not in any way compromise the text's fight against capitalism based structures of oppression, like slavery. Folkspants cannot be compared to white capitalism merely because it becomes a profitable venture. I disagree with Lauren Berlant when she declares:

> But Folkspants, Unlimited also participates in the profit motive: the image of the commodity as the subject's most perfect self-expression is the classic fantasy bribe of capitalism. This illogic of a textual system in which the very force that disenfranchises Afro-Americans provides the material for their national reconstruction is neither "solved" by the novel nor raised as a paradox. (27)

Folkspants does not participate in the "force that disenfranchises Afro-Americans". Unlike Doris Baines who inherits the privileges and perks that come with her class and color, Celie builds up a way to sustain herself and help empower others. It needs to be viewed as an entrepreneurial attempt to rescue African American characters, more specifically black women, from predatory systems set up by white and black men alike. To grudge Celie the means to arrive at economic empowerment is nothing but an attempt to glorify poverty. One wonders why Berlant does not have the same reservations and fears about profit making and capital when it came to Celie's biological father's store or Harpo's jukejoint. How can we be nostalgic about the father's venture and be critical of Celie's? Are we going to replace material goods with spiritual platitudes in the name of female empowerment? Surely economic self-reliance is an important prerequisite if women- black or white- intend to give patriarchy a real fight.

I believe it is trenchant irony on Walker's part that Celie should move from a grateful receiver of blue colored fabric, because Albert would not pay for any other ("Plenty red but she (Kate) say, Naw he won't want to pay for red. Too happy lookin" (Walker 21)), to a supplier of pants for Sofia with one leg purple and the other red. All of this can only happen if Celie is rescued from her life of unpaid domestic enslavement in the husband's house. Jessie Bernard makes an insightful observation regarding the labor put in by women with in the home:

> Her work is menial labor. Even more status degrading is the unpaid nature of her job. Few deny the economic as well as the sociological importance of housework and home making. Housework is part of the great infrastructure on which . . . the entire superstructure of the economy and the government rests. If women did not supply the service of taking care of living arrangements of workers, industry would have to do so as in the case of lumber camps, ships and the military. But the housewives are not in the labor force. They are not paid for the services that they perform. (214)

It is only apt that a text that had constantly foregrounded women's unpaid labor within the house- cleaning, cooking, washing, childbearing, child rearing, field work- should direct the same labor towards reward and remuneration.

The problem for us is not that Celie attains some measure of economic autonomy. The problem for us is that it should be routed through or rather made contingent on another character like Shug. Nobody can refute that Shug is a fountainhead of feminist wisdom and energy in the text. She is dazzling in her defense of women's right over their bodies (she uses a sponge to ward off unwanted pregnancies), or of their pleasure and desire, in her reformulation of God and his place in human life, in her refusal to be hemmed in by patriarchy and its prescriptions (she is a serious challenge to the idealized mother figure), in her rock solid support to Celie (rescues her from a bad marriage and helps her build a career), to Sofia (she comes from Memphis specially to visit Sofia in jail and helps plot her escape from it) or to Squeak (sets her off on her career). The problem however is that whatever Shug declares for Celie is miraculously made to come true. Albert throws his own sister out of his house for daring to side with Celie. However when Shug reprimands Albert for his behavior towards Celie, he obeys in meek surrender. Shug's power is temptingly and dangerously uncontested. But for the fact that she is rejected by Albert's father as a prospective wife for his son, Shug's authority remains largely unchallenged. Albert, or for that matter nobody,

defies Shug. So keen is Walker to make Shug all powerful that she drops history for romance as her mode of storytelling. Shug and Celie's very erotic love, which can even be celebrated by Shug in a crowded jukejoint, meets with no resistance from any quarter. Their love blossoms and grows in a parallel universe without inconveniencing anyone. However the text chooses to employ homoerotic relationship between Shug and Celie not to subvert hetero-normative familial social relations but merely to improve them. Celie confesses, "What the world got to do with anything, I think. Then I see myself sitting there quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr__. Us three sit together gainst Tobias and his fly speck box of chocolate. For the first time in my life, I feel just right" (Walker 55). Even Albert who takes a perverse pleasure in withholding Nettie's letters from Celie, because he knows they will give her some strength and joy, seems completely unperturbed about Celie and Shug's relationship, "I'm real sorry she left you, Celie, I remember how I felt when she left me" (Walker 246). Neither Albert nor the rest of the community betrays any trace of homophobia- in stark contrast to the historical reception of the text itself. The text would have us believe that homosexuality is an accepted, unquestioned norm within black culture. Such heady optimism was of course belied by some angry early black readers of *The Color Purple* who charged Walker with having brought ill repute to the community by her depictions of homosexuality. Walker's commitment seems less to the political possibility and potential of homosexuality than to Shug as a lone character. She has invested in creating a character that seems unbounded in her power. Shug is parachuted into the text, unsoiled by too much history.

What is the source of Shug's power? One begins to fear Walker places it in her beauty. But has not patriarchy always fetishised pretty female bodies? After all Albert hates and punishes Celie for being 'ugly'. Has not beauty always been rewarded by patriarchy with a bogus, short lived and illusory power? Is Shug merely reaping the rewards of a traditional siren- money, power, sex, suitors? And is she not meted out the traditional punishment

reserved for the stock strumpet? Shug's old age is stricken with, if not remorse then surely, with fear and anxiety at the loss of her youth and beauty: "I'm gitting old. I'm fat. Nobody think I'm good looking no more, but you. . . . All I ast is six months. Just six months to have my last fling. I got to have it Celie. I'm too weak a woman not to" (Walker 226). Nettie on the other hand is made to declare with full Christian confidence, "From a skinny, hard little something I've become quite plump. And some of my hair is gray! But Samuel tells me he loves me plump and graying" (Walker 204). If Shug is allowed to reformulate God himself, why is she not allowed to find a new self-definition beyond patriarchy's ever defeating matrix of lookism and ageism. For a woman who had seemed to be in control of her identity and economics, Shug suddenly becomes a woman at the mercy of her hormones. Predictably enough, Shug turns out to be a carnivalesque character, who riots around with power equations and is then safely tucked away on the eve of the great restoration.

It is worth remembering here that unlike Shug, Sofia's agency is not awarded from outside or above, but is wrested out of history by Sofia herself. When Shug demands, things are re-arranged for her convenience. When Sofia demands she is punished for it. It does not help when Walker says, as a way of explanation, "I liberated Celie from her own history. I wanted her to be happy" (qtd. in Harris 1984). Why should Celie's life, through its magical, benedictory contact with Shug be transformed and not Sofia's? Sofia offers the only real combat in the text. And she never stops paying for it. Celie, on the other hand, once rescued by Shug, is propelled into another uncontested cosmos altogether. Sofia's continuing struggles render Celie's happiness at the close of the text a bit spurious. Walker wrongly assumes that Celie's happy ending is imperative to the reader's pleasurable reading of her "Moral Tale"- the original subtitle of the text, when it was first published. If at all, it only makes for a schizophrenic, fractured politics that tries to straddle history and fantasy in one leap. It ends up belying both.

## Conclusion

By the last page of the text familial patterns, somewhat reorganized, are reinstituted. Husbands and wives have found peace again. Adam has won Tashi over by scarring his face. The text's outrage over female genital mutilation and facial scarification suddenly seems mere noise when Adam's scars are glorified as marks of love. Will two wrongs make a right? Will rituals like FGM and sati find justification once men start undertaking them? The text's volte face leaves the reader red faced with shame.

The strength of the text lay in contesting white racial politics and also in unmasking the silences and violence within the black community. The second half of the agenda lies abandoned by the end of the text. It seems that Walker chooses to whitewash the internal fissures within the black communal life to present, in the final analysis, a unified community. It seems cleansed of all conflicts and contestations. Patriarchy has been unraveled. Children have been rescued from heteronormative upbringing. They can now be communally owned and celebrated. We need but Daisy, Alphonso's teenaged widow, to join in the jubilation, for class issues within the black community to be washed away too. She anyway has become the beneficiary of Alfonso's largesse, instead of the class victim that she originally was. From a relation of brute class exploitation and entitlement (Daisy is married to Alfonso because her people stay on his land), Walker makes it into a union of love. We are told, "Alphonso left her all his money" (Walker 221). In this genderless, classless black community that gathers to conclude the text, it is Sophia's continued victimhood and loneliness that jars as the only discordant, or may one say, the only honest note.

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