Making the Invisible Visible: Black Lesbianism in The Color Purple

Ana Maria BASARABĂ

Universitatea de Limbi Străine, Tianjin, China
Tianjin Foreign Studies University
Personal e-mail: basaraba_anam@yahoo.com

Making the Invisible Visible: Black Lesbianism in The Color Purple

Abstract: The paper aims to disclose the factors behind Celie's preference of transition from an involuntary heterosexual relationship to a homosexual one. I pursue this path due to multiple factors that occur in the novel and which nevertheless lead to Celie's final homosexual identity. Homosexuality is far too often regarded as a mental illness and people have far too many times misjudged people with other sexual orientation than what the society perceives as "normal". The findings of my research intend to show that homosexuality implies a variety of psychological, emotional and physical issues and that it is nothing to be ashamed or afraid of. Since racism has always been associated with Black men and sexism with White females, the paper brings the invisible Black lesbians to light.
Keywords: Alice Walker, The Color Purple, Celie, lesbianism.

Citation suggestion: Basarabă, Ana Maria. "Making the Invisible Visible: Black Lesbianism in The Color Purple". *Transilvania*, no. 3 (2021): 58-63.
https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2021.03.08.

Sexuality, in all its forms and varieties, is beautiful. Sexual orientation defines human behavior, shapes human personality and gives birth to a unique identity. It is only natural that people identify themselves as having a certain sexual orientation based on who they are attracted to or with whom they fall in love with, be it a sexual partner of the same or other sex. However, either because of the lack of information and understanding or belief that heterosexuality is the only "normal" sexual orientation, the homosexuals and bisexuals face constant criticism and are marginalized as "abnormal". It is to be noted that heterosexual is a label used for a person who prefers partners of the other sex, homosexual is the label applied for a person attracted to the same sex, while bisexual labels the persons attracted to partners of both sexes. As a feminist and lesbian herself, Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize winner *The Color Purple*, won considerable praise and much criticism for its controversial themes, such as the Black female lesbianism. Due to constant misjudgment, this study proposes an in-depth research on Celie's search of identity, focusing especially on the factors that causes Celie to become a lesbian. But before commencing upon the body of this study, I call the attention upon the Black Feminist Movement.

"The Black Feminist Movement grew in response to the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement. In an effort to meet the needs of Black women who felt racially oppressed in the Women's Movement and sexually oppressed in the Black Liberation Movement, the Black Feminist Movement was formed" ("Brave"). The Black

Liberation Movement was intended for the liberation of the Black race, however it was mainly for the liberation of the Black male. Therefore "freedom was equated with manhood and the freedom of blacks with the redemption of black masculinity" ("Brave"). As a result, many Black men in the movement were interested in controlling the Black women's body leading to the sexual discrimination of Black women. The term "womanist" coined by Alice Walker was of immense contribution to the movement of the sexually and racially oppressed Black women. Marc-A Christophe in the essay "'The Color Purple': An Existential Novel" provides Walker's definition of the term "womanist", first mentioned in *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (1983):

> From womanish (opp. Of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior... Responsible. In charge. Serious. (Christophe 288-9)

The term brings immediately forth high relevance and quality in the literary studies and goes unnoticed for Napikoski Linda who makes the issue of womanism the cornerstone of her short essay. More specifically, Napikoski explains that through womanism the Black women beauty and strength is appreciated, but what is more important is that womanism also seeks connections and solidarity with Black men (Napikoski). The term is an expansion of the former term "feminism" and stands as an important foundation of the inclusion of race and class issues in African American feminism. Drawing on a common stock of ideas, the Black Feminist Movement focuses mainly on issues such as violence against women, rape, sexual harassment, lesbian and gay rights, anti-racist organizing as well as other sexually or racially concerns, nonetheless as already known, the utmost goal is the end of sexism. Alice Walker highlights the upper mentioned problems in her epistolary novel, and although she received devastating critiques regarding the negative portrayal of the male characters, Walker was admired for the powerful portraits of the Black women. The theme of double repression of the Black women strengthens the ideology of the Black Feminist Movement. In essence, Walker contends that Black women suffer from discrimination by the White community and from a second repression from the Black males, though what is arguably the most important is that Celie, the central character, triumphs over adversity and forgives those who oppressed her. Her sexual transition from heterosexual to homosexual aids in her triumph.

Upon Professor's Guo Deyan course lecture which I attended as a graduate student and the article published disclosing the allegory behind Walker's novel, it is to be acknowledged that the novel focuses upon the growth and development of Celie in ″four time frames″ (Guo). In her first period of life, Celie experiences the misery of poverty and cruelty at the hands of her stepfather. She was raped by her own stepfather and gave birth to two children, who were sold to another family. In the second closely-related period, Celie experiences continued cruelty from her husband Albert. He beats Celie, sexually abuses her and most important, kicks Nettie out of the house because he failed to rape her, therefore Albert hides the letters Celie received from Nettie. In the third period, Celie awakens to the possibility of self-realization through her relationship with Shug Avery and her renewed contact with her sister Nettie. Shug's involvement in Celie's life is tremendous, as she helps Celie rediscover her inner and outside beauty, fact that will lead to a romantic relationship between them. Finally, Celie has found the happiness and contentment that comes from self-realization. She has transformed herself from a passive female to an independent woman by opening her own business and forgiving Albert. The climax of the novel is the end, when Nettie returns to Celie with her son and daughter (Guo).

Through the character of Celie, Walker presents the power of sexual liberation and self-determination for women. Through Celie's voice, which is in Black folk English, the reader learns the inner thoughts and misery of what it means to be "poor, black and ugly", with no ability to stand against the male sexual oppression. In the patriarchal society, only a woman can help a woman. Only Shug could help the invisible Celie become visible. Unable to satisfy her husband's sexual needs, Alphonso rapes Celie, sells her two children, then sells her to another man, only to be mistreated, emotionally manipulated and sexually abused. One could go even as far as to consider that Celie had no other option than to become a lesbian. In an essay dedicated to the analysis of representations of identity and sexuality of the character Celie from the movie The Color Purple (1985) directed by Steven Spielberg, Boer Raphael and Gatti Jose analyze the dialogue between the two women, where Celie told Shug that she never felt pleasure in a sexual relationship and Shug tells Celie that she is still a virgin. The conclusion Boer and Gatti make is that their discussion is male centered, therefore, to their credit there are two possible interpretations:

> first, it expresses the idea that Shug does not have a lesbian desire for Celie, namely she only wants to help Celie to discover her sexuality as she did by making Celie smile to the mirror; second, it indicates that Celie might not have a lesbian desire for Shug as well, due to the fact that men have always mistreated her. (Boer 138)

Boer and Gatti totally deny the fact that Celie's turn to lesbianism is due to her dissatisfaction toward men, because they believe that Celie lacks any form of desire and passion, that she is not aware of her sexuality and that homosexuality

is not a matter of preferance. I strongly oppose their opinion and I pursue the idea that Celie was self-conscious of her becoming a lesbian. By way of illustrating my point, the following section will focus on the factors that causes Celie turn from heterosexual to homosexual.

Some consideration should be given to Risanti Intan Al Baluni's paper on Celie's sexual orientation and to Linda Wilson and Phyllis Robertson for providing a presentation whose aims are to improve the understanding of ethical guidelines for working with LGBTQ youth. From a psychological point of view, homosexuality and bisexuality are not indicative of mental illness. Celie turns from an involuntary heterosexual – before having a relationship with Shug she had nonconsensual sex with her stepfather and her father—to a homosexual – where she embraces her new identity of lesbian. Both the sources under present discussion, introduce the Troiden model of sexual identity development according to which the development occurs in four steps: sensitization, identity confusion, identity assumption and commitment, while Baluni surveys that the factors leading Celie to lesbianism are psychological and social/ environmental. In order to shed some light over Celie's transformation, the above-mentioned theories are applied to the novel by the use of quotation example in form of the following schema:

			Explanation	**Quotes from the novel**
FROM HETEROSEXUALITY TO HOMOSEXALITY	FACTORS	PSYCHOLOGICAL	1. Celie's fear of men as a result from her abusive father and husband	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 mommy 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. (Walker 11)
			2. The comfortable feeling with another woman as recalling mother-daughter connections	I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia -- or like she mama. I comb and pat, comb and pat. First she say, hurry up and git finish. Then she melt down a little and lean back gainst my knees. That felt just right, she say. That feel like mama used to. Or maybe not mama. Maybe grandma. She reach for another cigarette. Start hum a little tune. (Walker 57)
		SOCIAL	1. Abusive father and husband as a result of patriarchal society	She ugly. He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it. (Walker 18)
			2. The existence of Shug in Celie's life	Shug saying Celie. Miss Celie. And I look up where she at. She say my name again. She say this song I'm bout to sing is call Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick. First she hum it a little, like she do at home. Then she sing the words. It all about some no count man doing her wrong, again. But I don't listen to that part. I look at her and I hum along a little with the tune. First time somebody made something and name it after me. (Walker 75)

	IDENTITY FORMATION	Sensitization	*Occurs prior to puberty *Feelings of marginality *Perception of being different *The difference is usually not sexual	He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got something in my eye but I didn't wink. I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them. Maybe cause my mama cuss me you think I kept mad at her. But I ain't. I felt sorry for mama. Trying to believe bis story kilt her. (Walker 15)
		Identity Confusion	*Same-sex arousal *Absence of heterosexual arousal *Inner turmoil *Anxiety	Before I know it, tears meet under my chin. And I'm confuse. He love looking at Shug. I love looking at Shug. But Shug don't love looking at but one of us. Him. But that the way it spose to be. I know that. But if that so, why my heart hurt me so? (Walker 74-5)
		Identity Assumption	*Homosexual identity is established *Self-definition as homosexual *Tolerance or lesbian identity *Sexual experimentation	All the men got they eyes glued to Shug's bosom. I got my eyes glued there too. I feel my nipples harden under my dress. My little button sort of perk up too. Shug, I say to her hi my mind, Girl, you looks like a real good time, the Good Lord knows you do. (Walker 82)
		Commitment / First Relationship	*Homosexuality adopted as a way of life *Integration of sexuality and emotionality *Commitment to a same-sex love relationship *Disclosure of homosexual identity to non-homosexuals	• The dream world phase I wanted to build me a round house, say Shug, but everybody act like that's backward. You can't put windows in a round house, they say. But I made me up some plans, anyway. One of these days... she say, showing me the papers. It a big round pink house, look sort of like some kind of fruit. It got windows and doors and a lot of trees round it. What it made of? I ast. Mud, she say. But I wouldn't mind concrete. I figure you could make the molds for each section, pour the concrete in, let it get hard, knock off the mold, glue the parts together somehow and you'd have your house. (Walker 188-9) • Misery Phase My heart broke. Shug love somebody else. Maybe if I had stayed in Memphis last summer it never would have happen. But I spent the summer fixing up the house. I thought if you come anytime soon, I want it to be ready. And it is real pretty, now, and comfortable. And I found me a nice lady to live in it and look after it. Then I come home to Shug. (Walker 218) • Enlightenment The only thing bother me is she don't never say nothing bout coming back. And I miss her. I miss her friendship so much that if she want to come back here dragging Germaine I'd make them both welcome, or die trying. Who am I to tell her who to love? My job just to love her good and true myself. (Walker 236)

At this point I shall permit myself to refer to Celie's transition from a heterosexual to a homosexual as a transformation based solely on the impact the negative patriarchal society has imposed upon her. The habitual psychological, emotional and physical abuse received by her stepfather and her husband over the years, have led Celie into accepting an invalid evaluation of herself. She drowned in the idea of nothingness by believing that she is ugly and unworthy. Being sexually abused by two men since her childhood, it was only natural for her to develop a fear of men. Her stepfather took away her womanhood and confidence by raping her and her husband continued into this morbid tradition. Wang Ling makes a point worthy to be noted. According to Wang, by selling Celie's children, her stepfather deprived her of her identity as a mother, while Celie's husband through beating and sexually abusing Celie, he deprived her of her identity as a wife (Wang 63). I would extend Wang's theory of identity deprivation and mention that above the identity of mother and wife is the identity of human being. When the stepfather tries to convince Mr.__ to take Celie as a wife, he says: "she ain't gonna make you feed *it* or clothe *it* [emphasis is mine]" (Walker 18). It is thereby to be understood, that the stepfather views Celie as something close to an animal since it does not need food or clothes and since he does not call Celie by her name, but choses instead to call her "it". Deprived of identity and experiencing unhappy heterosexual experiences, it was only natural and normal to seek understanding and comfort in a woman.

Celie's passivity towards the male oppression enabled the stepfather and her husband into treating her even worse than an animal, but as a slave. April McCray is suggesting that Celie lives a life of "marital slavery" (McCray 26). Although Celie is not a slave, her stepfather sells her to another man as if she were a slave, suggesting the transfer from one master to another. Instead of being treated as a married woman, she is treated as a slave woman. McCray strengthens this point by referring that Celie does not enjoy the marriage privileges such as: "property ownership and a mutually satisfying and healthy sexual and emotional relationship" (McCray 26).

The stepfather uses her body in a similar manner that slaveholders used their female slaves, for pleasure and for profit. Her stepfather is no different than a slaveholder (McCray 27). Once he has no other use of her, he sells her away to another man in a most horrible way:

> *Mr.__ finally come right out and ast for Nettie hand in marriage. But He won't let her go. He say she too young, no experience. [...]But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She* ***ain't fresh*** *tho, but I spect you know that. She* ***spoiled. Twice****. But you don't need a fresh woman no how. [...] She* ***ugly.*** *He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she* ***clean****. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it. [...] I go stand in the door. The sun shine in my eyes. He's still up on his horse. He look me up and down. Pa rattle his newspaper. Move up, he won't bite, he say. I go closer to the steps, but not to close cause I'm a little scared of his horse. Turn around, Pa say. I turn around*. (Walker 16-20)

One of the troubling "disadvantages" of this "product" resides in the fact that Celie "ain't fresh", meaning that she is not a virgin anymore and that she was "spoiled twice", meaning she was already two times pregnant. But due to constant sexual trauma Celie's unfortunate "disadvantage" lies in her infertility. McCray suggests that because Celie has been repeatedly raped by her stepfather in her childhood, Celie entered an early stage of menopause, thus making her vulnerable to Mr.__ , because he knows that there will be no repercussions when he will abuse her too. What strengthens the idea of Celie being sold as a slave even more is that Mr.__ did not even come down of his horse. He stays on his horse, while he admires the "product" turning from one side to the other under the command of her stepfather. Using Celie's labor ability as an advantage, she successfully became the "legal property" of Mr.__.

Celie's letters to God symbolize what McCray believes to be her escape from the patriarchal system, but when she finds out that Mr.__ hid the letters from Nettie, she lost faith in God. (The loss of faith in God could also be interpreted as the final step in abandoning her heterosexuality—since she perceived God as a white man—and being self-conscious on her decision to become a homosexual). One point in McCray's essay that left the greatest impact on my consciousness is the suggestion that Mr.__ by reading the letters committed another kind of rape to Celie and even though it may not be physical is was probably more painful. Considering that the entire novel is epistolary, did we as readers not participated in Celie's continuous rape?

Paradoxical as it may sound, there is a beautiful thing coming out from her shared life with Mr.__, that is, meeting and falling in love with Shug. It is not until Shug enters Celie's life, that she learns to love herself, to recognize her beauty and feel sexual pleasure. Maria Frias proposes that Celie's transition from heterosexual to homosexual is a process taking place step-by-step, giving Celie time to adjust to her body (Frias 52). Walker does not position Celie in a lesbian relationship with Shug right from the beginning, but allows Shug to help Celie first explore and acknowledge her body without inducing any more psychological or physical damage, than the male counterparts have already done. Once Shug becomes a positive influence in Celie's life and Celie gains control over her life, she escapes the last form of slavery. Christophe points out that "Celie's subservience to Mr.__ was so complete that she could not bring herself to pronounce his name" (Christophe 284). Celie had to endure a negative sexual experience

before she could realize the beauty of sexual and emotional exchange with another person. "In Shug's lesbian embrace, Celie finds not only a refuge but also the crystallization of an otherwise unformulated wish: the wish to be other that what society wants her to be. It is Shug who helps her transcend her objectification by Mr.__ and to finally accede to the rank of subject" (Christophe 288). If homosexuality involves narcissism, as Freud believes and Linda Abbandonato writes, then learning to love herself was the best thing Celie could ever do. "In loving Shug, Celie becomes a desiring subject, and in being loved by Shug, she is made visible to herself as an object of desire" (Linda 1112).

After a history of incest, abuse, rape and lack of love, Celie achieves a sense of wholeness which is the cornerstone of the womanist ideology. Walker encourages people with different sexual orientation to be themselves, to stand for their choice and fight against the tradition. A womanist text aims to reach a sense of wholeness and Walker succeeds it by bringing in the foreground the oppressed Black women whose sexual desire are against the communities' norms. Making the invisible visible and beautiful is what I call a good story.

Bibliography:

Abbandonato, Linda. "A View from 'Elsewhere': Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine's Story" *PMLA* 106.5 (1991):1106-1115. Web.

Baluni, Risanti Intan Al. *The Sexual Orientation of Celie in Alice Walker's The Color Purple. A Thesis Summary*. Yogyakarta State University, 2012. Web.

Boer,R., Gatti,J. "Lesbian Images and the Color (ed) Love in The Color Purple" *Estudos Anglo Americanos* 44 (2015):126-145. Web.

"But Some of Us Are Brave: A History of Black Feminism in the United States." Vol. 9.1 A

History of Black Feminism in the U.S. Web. <http://www.mit.edu/~thistle/v9/9.01/6blackf.html>

Christophe, Marc-A. "'The Color Purple': An Existential Novel" *CLA Journal* 36.3 (1993): 280-290. Web.

Frias, Maria. "The Walker-Spielberg Tandem and Lesbianism in The Color Purple: '[Spielberg] Don't Like it Dirty'" Universidad de Alcala de Henares. Web.

Guo, Deyan. "A Modern Allegory of The Color Purple" *Canadian Social Science* 1.1 (2005): 84-9. Web.

Guo, Deyan. Tianjin Foreign Studies University.2019. Lecture

Lewis, Christopher S. "Cultivating Black Lesbianism Shamelessness: Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'" *RMMLA* 66.2 (2012): 158-175

McCray, April. "Woman-Loving Women: Representations of Gender, Identity, and Womanism in Alice Walker's The Color Purple" Web.

Napikoski, Linda. "Womanist. Alice Walker's Term for Black Feminism" (2019) Web. < thoughtco.com/womanist-feminism-definition-3528993>

Rusharyani, Aprilia Aldear. *The Aspect of Lesbianism of Celie Reflected in Alice Walker's The Color Purple Novel*. Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta, 2017. Web.

Wang, Ling. "Gender Trouble in The Color Purple" *Studies in Literature and Language* 13.4 (2016): 62-65. Web.

Wilson,L.,Robertson,P. "Counseling LGBTQ Youth" (2011) Web. < http://www.doc88.com/p-7748269380237.html >

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1983. Print.