

Self and identity in the color purple



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In African-American texts, blacks are seen as struggling with the patriarchal worlds they live in order to achieve a sense of Self and Identity. The texts I have chosen illustrate the hazards of Western religion, Rape, Patriarchal Dominance and Colonial notions of white supremacy; an intend to show how the protagonists of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as well as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, cope with or crumble due to these issues in their struggle to find their identities.

The search for self-identity and self-knowledge is not an easy task, even more so when you are a black woman and considered a mule and a piece of property. Providing an in depth analysis of these texts, this essay attempts to illustrate how both of these Afro American writers depict and resolve their respective protagonists' struggles.

Religion is believed by many to serve as a means to achieving or finding self or identity. However, in the Euro-influenced Christian religion especially, directly after ' finding one's self', one is called to deny one's self in the name of a white ' God'.

' Humble yourself and cast your burdens to God' they say, for ' He will make all wrongs right'. Logically however, one must ask...what interest does the white God (who is especially portrayed in Afro-American writings such as *The Color Purple* and *The Bluest Eye* as a further extension of Patriarchal values) have in black people? Moreso, if the Christian bible is so heavily influenced by white man, what interest does the God it portrays have in black women?

In *The Color Purple*, Celie's original intended audience is a white, male God who does not listen to her prayers, and her letters remain anonymous. Celie

explains that she stopped writing to God because he gave her ‘ a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister [she] probably won’t ever see again.’ Celie distrusts a white male God because he does not listen to ‘ poor colored women.’ Shug encourages Celie to reject ‘ religious beliefs which reinforce sexist and racist domination’ and insists on ‘ the primacy of a spiritual life’. If Celie looks for God in a white church or a white written Bible it is inevitable that she will encounter a white God, therefore she must look at her immediate environment for guidance. Celie then accepts and employs Shug’s ideology that ‘ God is inside you and inside everyone else.’

In her rejection of the Euro-central God who doesn’t listen to her prayers, Celie liberates her ‘ Self’ and finds identity – evident in her signing of her letters which she now addresses to Nettie. For the first time in Celie’s life, the colour people (purple) are recognized by God and she is liberated with the belief that the colour purple/people is/are noticed as a part in God’s majestic composition, and that this God is everything and everywhere. It is thus possible to identify Celie with the color purple by realizing that she has gone unnoticed and is finally being noticed as she asserts her existence. This existentialist epiphany becomes manifest when Celie writes, “ I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here.”

In *The Bluest Eye* however, the Eurocentric images and influences of the Western God have a lasting negative effect on many of the black characters. There is colour people playing a part in this God’s composition, instead, focus is on the colour blue – that his eyes are portrayed to be. This colour

suggests coldness and blindness towards people not sharing in His whiteness. Pecola Breedlove is the prime character that is influenced by these negative images of God, and the influence of the Western religion's 'values' shown in the novel pushes her into an unfortunate type of lack of 'Self'. This comes about in this novel due to the interactions with white and pseudo-white characters who have subscribed to the idealized notions of white superiority. The first instance of this is Pecola's encounter with Mr. Yacobowski – the shopkeeper, who basically ignores her existence because she is black, his attention instead focuses on a picture of the Virgin Mary.

This leaves Pecola with the view that it is the white God itself disregarding her existence through the symbolic Mr. Yacobowski, as he is said to be religious but ignores her very presence. This negative image of the Western God lends greatly to Pecola's self hatred and her eventual destruction. If she is not even acknowledged by the white people in her community then she must have no worth. She sees this as a situation in which she cannot prosper thus beginning to hate herself and her color, as, if these supposed 'representatives' or followers of this white God won't accept her, who is she to think that He will?

This view is strengthened when Pecola visits the pseudo-white character Geraldine's house, whereby she is cursed by this woman and chased from her farcical 'Dick and Jane' style home. Home is where the 'heart' is, but all Pecola sees as she flees from this place she admires is a "portrait of the [white] angelized Jesus looking down at her with sad and surprised eyes..." This white figure of Western religion is perhaps "unable to help her" as she

is not of his kind, thus giving substance to Pecola's belief that she has no worth nor hope for acceptance by this idealized white world and its ' God'.

This Euro-influenced religion with its patriarchal God may thus be found guilty of a discursive rape of the values of black people, and to a greater extent – black women. This is another critical aspect in these examples of Afro-American literature, as rape is no stranger to the black women in these texts – guilty of undermining their sense of self as well leading to a loss of identity, whether the rape is discursive, or actual. Bell Hooks holds that rape is portrayed as a positive force in *The Color Purple* because Celie ' accedes to the violation of her body in order to protect her sister Nettie from the sexual advances of their stepfather'.

Squeak also uses her body to help free Sofia from jail, sacrificing her body in efforts to aid Sofia's circumstances although Sofia knocked her teeth out. This rape in particular – of a black woman by a white man is depicted, according to Hooks, as a positive force because ' even though it acts to reinforce sexist domination of females and racist exploitation', it is also ' a catalyst for positive change'. Not only does the act free Sofia; it also empowers Squeak, as, when Harpo says " I love you, Squeak" (84) she stands up for her own identity by replying " My name Mary Agnes" (84).

In the case of *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's rape by her father leads to her becoming " the town's scapegoat and places her in company with the books other outcasts; the prostitute Miss Marie and the quack mystic Elihue Whitcomb, dubbed ' Soaphead Church'. It is through the whispers about Pecola and the spurning of her that the town ' justifies' the image of good and beautiful. It is because Pecola becomes pregnant with her father's child

that she no longer has the ability, if such ever even bore a remote chance of existing, to be beautiful in the eyes of society. The pregnancy has also destroyed any chances of her ever receiving her mother's love and approval forever, as she is now even dirtier than before in her community's eyes.

The rape by her father is the final evidence Pecola needs to completely believe that she is an ugly, unlovable girl. While in most modern cases a father figure is one to whom little girls should be able to look to for guidance and approval, Cholly is the exact opposite. He hurts Pecola in a physical way that in one attempt measures up to the years of hurtful mockery. He took away from her the one thing that was utterly and completely hers. After the rape, Pecola was never even remotely the same: her appearance was met with utmost disgust. Adults looked away; children, those of which who were not frightened by her, "laughed outright" (204). The damage done was immense and she spent her days, walking up and down her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird intent on the blue void it could not reach – could not even see – but which filled the valleys of the mind (204).

In short, after the rape, Pecola went insane. Her 'discursive rape' was delivered at the hands of the society in which she lived, where her blackness was met with disgust. This rape made her wish to be white – to possess blue eyes, as this was the accepted quality of 'beauty' in her society, the physical rape only serves to further push her completely over the edge. Pecola's society is in turn 'raped' by Colonialism and concepts of white supremacy,

leading them to act with ‘insane’ disgust towards their own blackness and to aspire for their own ‘bluest eyes’ i. e. Geraldine and her house/way of living.

Martha J. Cutter, in her article *Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker’s Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in The Color Purple*, argues that Like Pecola Breedlove, who ends the novel “flail[ing] her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly” (204), Celie also appears to have been “driven into semiotic collapse by the rape.” She notes that *The Color Purple* also uses bird imagery to “connect Celie with her mythic prototype, Philomela as well as to revise the mythic prototext.” Cutter is of the view that the ancient Greek story of Philomela has resonated in the imaginations of women writers for several thousand years ... mark[ing] the persistence of a powerful archetypal narrative explicitly connecting rape (a violent inscription of the female body), silencing, and the complete erasure of feminine subjectivity.

Cutter holds that in *The Color Purple*, Walker “paradoxically [uses] ... birds ... [in the following scene] ...[as a] positive symbol to Celie of how nature persists in displaying its beauty despite the despoiling patterns of humanity.”

The example Martha Cutter highlights is

where Celie tells Albert that she loves birds (223), and Albert comments, “you use to remind me of a bird. Way back when you first come to live with me.... And the least little thing happen, you looked about to fly away” (223).

Cutter concludes, “Unlike the archetypal narrative, then, Walker’s novel uses bird ... imagery to suggest Celie’s metamorphosis not from human to subhuman, but from victim to artist-heroine.” Thus the novel differs from the myth as well as from Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, as it commences rather than

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ends with the incident[s] of rape and that “ the rape becomes not an instrument of silencing, but the catalyst to Celie’s search for voice.” By writing about her rape, Celie externalizes her experiences thus escaping destruction whereas Pecola internalizes (in the form of a dialogue with an imaginary ‘ friend’) them and is thus inadvertently destroyed. Thereby Walker “ revises the archetypal paradigm [which] depict[s] rape as an event that encapsulates women in patriarchal plots as the site of silence, absence, and madness” thus giving her back her sense of agency and voice.

Also evident in the texts is the theme of migration, whereby characters emigrate to the North from the South in order to escape, or better themselves – thus further finding or losing their sense of identity and self. According to Elena Shakhovtseva in her article « The Heart of Darkness» in a Multicolored World, “ Walker retells a mythic story of the movement from the South to the North as an ideal embodiment of freedom, and back to the South for reconciliation.” Shakhovtseva argues that Celie’s eventual move to Memphis symbolically marks the black community’s twentieth century migration to the North with the emphasis both on the economic liberation the North provides (Celie’s “ folkpants” business) as well as the threat it presents to black cultural identity (attempts to change Celie’s dialect, etc.).

Thus, the return of Celie to the South through her successful business and attainment of a home, Shakhovtseva notes, “ represents Walker’s argument for black reclamation of a Southern homeland.”

Celie’s migration to the North represents both liberation and potential loss of identity. This is seen when her employee, Darlene, makes an effort to ‘ improve’ Celie’s dialect, to make a more ‘ refined’ (different – once again

views tainted by white supremacy) person out of her. However, Celie is mostly disinterested and maintains her creole way of speech, suggesting comfort in her sense of identity. When she returns to the South, Celie accomplishes a 'wholeness' of her physical and spiritual existence, and reclaims the family home, farm and store in Georgia, which she rightfully claims after her stepfather's death. In essence, Celie migrates from oppressed 'slave' to her husband, to strong, independent, black woman - land and store-owner nonetheless, Walker's obvious inversion of race and gender.

Walker is accused by many of subverting realist concepts, her novel's ending... lacking verisimilitude. It can be argued that she appears to have been influenced by Shakespeare's romances, possessing a like Utopian and somewhat unrealistic vision. The opposite is seen in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, where when Pecola's parents - Cholly and Pauline, moved North everything changed. The colours went out of Pauline's life. She states " I missed my people. I weren't used to so much white folks...Northern colored folk was different too."

Additionally, she continues by saying that their marriage became " shredded with quarrels" as she developed a desire for new clothes which Cholly disapproved of, money becoming the " focus of all their discussions, hers for clothes, his for drinks" (118). To make up for the neglect and her own insecurities, Pauline sought comfort through movies as she sat and watched the perfect " white" world of Hollywood. Here she attempted to re-find her colours on the " silver screen" (124). However, the colours she does find and

have a longing for end up having a negative effect on her life and the lives of her family until it destroys them, especially Pecola.

In conclusion, using the two texts studied, with emphasis placed on their respective protagonists, this essay has attempted to illustrate the treatment of Self and Identity in African-American works, showing the similarities as well as profound differences between the two writers used to illustrate the hazards to, and responses to black self and identity – namely that of the black woman whose struggle is most critical. Morrison holds strong to the Afro-American pattern of destruction of black female by Patriarchal society and the white supremacy ‘ values’ it holds dear, thus denying their self and losing their identity. Walker on the other hand, a little too fantastically, provides an inversion of these patterns in the form of an almost unbelievably (Utopian) happy ending for her black female protagonist, who overcomes all the hazards she undergoes, finding her ‘ Self’ and strong sense of identity – coming out on top in a brutal, patriarchal society. The Epistolary form Walker uses provides an “ instruction” to her readers as well as to her protagonist Celie, seen also in the epigraph by Stevie Wonder provided

Show me how to do like you

Show me how to do it (1).

Whereas Morrison utilizes the Eurocentric primer of a white nuclear family that is burned into the minds of black children, as she distorts and fragments it to illustrate the confusion white ideology causes in the minds of blacks as it contrasts sharply with their own lives. Removing the punctuation, then applying this primer to the story of blacks and namely Pecola’s lives, proves that the story is far from the truth and gibberish. In a sense, by speeding up <https://assignbuster.com/self-and-identity-in-the-color-purple/>

the machinery of the Dick and Jane story to show how it does not work, Walker proves that it degenerates into meaninglessness under any kind of scrutiny. But in the descent into senselessness, it also parallels Pecola's descent into madness – a sharp contrast to the similarly Euro-influenced and patriarchal epistolary form used by Walker – a sharp contrast because, Walker's protagonist uses this... the only form available for her, the voiceless, to overcome the patriarchal oppression and gradually find her 'Self'.