



CHRISTIANITY AND PANTHEISM IN ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE

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ABSTRACT

Alice Malsenior Walker, born (February 9, 1944) in Eatonton, Georgia is the youngest of eight children to sharecroppers, Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Lou Tallulah Grant. After an early day's misfortune which blinded her in one eye, she went on to become valedictorian of her neighboring school, and attended Spellman College and Sarah Lawrence College on scholarship. Alice Walker volunteered in the voter registration drives of the 1960s in Georgia, and went to job after college in the Welfare Department in New York City. She was married in 1967, and unfortunately divorced in 1976. Her first volume of poems published in 1968 and her earliest novel was published just after her daughter's birth in 1970. Her poems, novels and short stories dealt with the themes of troubled relationships, violence, rape, multi-generational perspectives, isolation, sexism and racism etc. About the themes and issues Gilbert and Susan say:

“Not only does Walker portray the impact of racism on the relationships between black men and women and the importance of female networks of support, she also captures the humor and the pathos of her characters' erotic entanglements” (Gilbert and Susan - 2314)

INTRODUCTION

Her creations are known for their portrayals of the African American female's life. She depicts vibrantly the sexism, racism and poverty that make that life often a struggle. But she also portrays as part of that life, the strengths of family, society, self-esteem, and spirituality. A number of her novels portray women in further periods of history than our individual. Just as with non-fiction women's history writing, such portrayals give a sense of the differences and similarities of women's circumstance at present and in that other period. Alice Walker continues not only to write, but to be active in environmental, feminist causes, and issues.

Christianity is a monotheistic religion whose devotee believes that Jesus is the son of God and their savior. Christianity developed out of a division of Judaism that believed Jesus was the messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. Religion founded in Palestine by the followers of Jesus Christ, 1st-century Jewish teacher and prophet in whom Christians have traditionally seen the Messiah. Christianity is one of the world's major religions; it predominates in Europe and the Americas, where it has been an authoritative historical power and cultural influence. The Christianity believes that there is God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the world. “There is probably no pure pantheism”. (Flint 334)

The followers of Pantheism believe God and the world are one. The Church has repeatedly condemned the errors of Pantheism. There is no supreme, all-wise and all-provident Divine Being distinct from the universe; God is one with nature and therefore subject to change; He becomes God in man and the world; all things are God and have His substance; God is identical with the world, spirit with matter, necessity with freedom, truth with falsity, good with evil, justice with injustice. And the Vatican Council anathematizes those who assert that the substance or essence of God and of all things is one and the same, or that all things evolve from God's essence.

The search for religious reality is a great theme during the period *The Color Purple* was written. *The Color Purple* is a theological work examining the journey from the religious back to the spiritual. The protagonist, Celie, searches for God throughout the novel, finally arriving at a conclusion to what and who she believes God truly is. There are two other characters also in the novel that show symbols of a religious consciousness. These are Nettie, as she goes to work with the white missionaries, and Shug, as she tells Celie all about her pantheistic values.

In *The Color Purple* the religious theme becomes overshadowed throughout the story by other themes such as personal development, racism, sexism, female relationships with male etc. *The Color Purple* is an epistolary work of fiction, at the beginning of the novel letters written by Celie to God. She writes to the God in the following way: "Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me." (Walker - 6)

Celie is a fourteen-year-old, weak, poor, mistreated black teenager who addresses her letters to 'Dear God.' Thirty year later at the last part of the novel, she has forged her personal life because of a male dominated and racially prejudiced society. She fights her approach during life and questions everything she has been taught. Her most motivated challenge is to remark her inspiration of God as an old, white, bearded male, her antithesis into a God who encompasses everything and lives within her.

The religion in the novel that Walker presents as the first religious faith of Celie is Christianity. It is based upon the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the belief that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Although it is a monotheistic religion it is believed in Christianity that God is a trinity, while still being one being (God the father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit).

The further religious conviction presented is pantheism, which means that it is the belief that God is in all and everything. This means that everything has a fragment of God in them rather than him being a being who rules over them like a King or Emperor. Christianity is offered in a positive way in the beginning of the novel, but becomes progressively more pessimistic as Celie becomes more irritated with God, because all of the letters at the beginning of the book written by Celie are addressed to God. This shows that she believes in God and that she relies on him for support, as she has no one else to confide in. This is revealed when she recognizes with a dialogue that she can "tell nobody but God" (Walker - 2) about the rape by her stepfather. It

seems very apparent that in the novel Celia becomes the victim of male exploitation and suppression mainly because of her strict faith and devotion to Christianity. It is Celie's fear of offending God that stops her from standing up to the cruel patriarchal power which is inflicted upon her as by Mister, her stepfather, and others.

The novelist makes a statement on how conventional societies expected one to be a Christian in that time. This is revealed when Celie says that trying to do without him is a strain. Writer also shows how people expected one to help the preacher, take part in services etc. "You telling me God love you, and you are never done anything for him? I mean, not go to church, sing in the choir, and feed the preacher and all like that?" (Walker 40) This extract gives the impression that Celie could feel that she keeps giving to God, but God never gives anything to her.

Alice Walker presents how faith in religion seemed to lots of the dark community to be a thing reserved for fair citizens. When talking about Celie's image of God being in church Shug says, "Cause that's the one that's in the white folks white bible". (Walker-56) Celie however refutes this concept at first, when she says that God wrote the bible, and white people had nothing to do with it. This makes the reader sensitive towards Celie's condition, because it seems like God, the only person that she could turn to for support, had turned his back on her. From early teenage years into adulthood Celie associates the biblical God because her association with the men she knows seems oppressive and cruelly insensitive to her. The male-bullying and domination begin for Celie at fourteen when the man she thinks is 'Pa' rapes her on at least two occasions, rendering her unable to ever again bear children. The shock of this incident remains fixed in Celie's mind, causing her to still cry in her adulthood: "Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug's arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise. How it stung while I finish trimming his hair. How the blood drips down my leg and mess up my stocking. How he doesn't ever look at me straight after that?" (Walker 117).

The protagonist however later pays attention to this and realizes that she perceives God to be a big, old, tall, white man. So white persons did have something to do with the Bible, when she accepts this? She begins to inquiry her way of life and realizes that she is not blissful. She starts writing to the image of God and acts just like all the other men I know, trifling, forgetful and lowdown.

Shug points out that the basis Celia has gone astray her trust in God is because she has incorrect initiative about God. She believes that God is a white man and treats her just like white men do, like she's trash, like she's beneath him. Shug, though she believes in God, sees the Bible and organizes religion as just another way for white society to dominate black community.

This then leaves her emotion neglected by God. She no longer doubts offending him. She knows that God is present in this world and listen to the followers. He listens to poor colored women of the world. Alice Walker presents pantheism in the novel by characters of the story. A famous character Shug Avery (well wisher of the protagonist) introduces pantheism in the following ways:

“Here’s the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don’t know what you looking for. Troubles do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord. Feeling like shit.

It? I ast.

Yeah, It. God ain’t a he or a she, but a It.

But what do it look like? I ast.

Don’t look like nothing, she say. (Walkerb -50)

In the views of Shug Avery, God has no sexual category and no race. God is something inside of every person. Celie has really great friendliness for her, and certainly says that she has love for her. She has broken free from the traditional rules and regulations that hangs over black female characters in the novel. The readers of the book wonder by the action whether the conversion between Christianity to Pantheism is Celie's true divine expansion, or presently a technique for her to make an impact on Shug Avery for “the love inside Celie comes forth, breaking the spell that has bound her.” (Walker 90)

Shug Avery observes that Christianity as a system of controlling the peoples, and manipulating others. She likes deeply the teachings of pantheism because in it every person is equal as in Islam Religion. So males, who are deemed superior to females, are now set on the equal level as women. Writer introduces pantheism in a superior way than Christianity. This is exposed by the additional poetic way in which explanation of pantheism is made. The poetic manner however seems to make that thought of pantheism more like a fairytale than a figure of religion.

Walker makes the suggestion of pantheism a lot to Celie than Christianity is to her. This is revealed when Shug Avery says how she feels about God- when she was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, who she was, it comes to her: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. This is in direct contrast to the thoughts of inaccessibility of Christianity, which were exposed earlier. The fact is that during her life the community around her has set her down. It would provide her new optimism for the meaningful life. Signifying the role of Pantheism a well known critic says:

Analysis shows that the conversion from Christianity to Pantheism does seem to help her become happier with her life, as she gains the self-confidence to depart her husband Albert, situate up for what she believes in, and establish her own business. Nettie's spiritual growth runs similar to Celie's in the novel. Nettie went to work with the white missionaries in Africa. Alice Walker uses for Nettie's letters is almost evangelical, which shows her sturdy religious values. This is revealed when she talks about Celie's children that God sent the Olivia and Adam and it is a miracle of God.

Nettie marvels at the toil of the British missionary society, which she visits in London. Gradually she begins to understand how missionaries are used by the British and American governments

for colonialisation, and how white people are ruining the ways of the black people. As the lettering from Nettie continues, the readers are made to recognize that Nettie is becoming happier with the tribe's adaptation of Christianity, than of the white missionaries. She adopts the view of God exposed through nature, especially in the 'roof leaf' which is important to the tribe. She also seems to move from Christianity to Pantheism in the novel. This is revealed when she tells Celie : "We know a roof leaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?" (Walker 61)

And then it is again evident in the following lines:

"God is different to use now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than never before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone-a roofleaf or Christ-but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us". (Walker 86

Religion has become less honest to Nettie and Samuel, a missionary worker God's become less mortal, less material and that has made a massive difference for them. Like Celie feeling untied by disassociating God with the figure of a white man, Nettie is also freed by leaving assumptions about God behind.

Conclusion

It seems that the religious expansion of Nettie is more believable than that of the protagonist. The letters as of Nettie are disjointed, and do not present a complete story of her procedures, as Celie's achieve, it gives the feeling that there is more in Nettie's life than the person who finds out the matter from the letters. Therefore one only finds an impression of the personality rather than the complete picture which one gets with Celie. It is absolutely right if it concerns Celie, as her entire world seems to unexpectedly change for the better, which is completely unrealistic. The impression that I get of Celie's conversion to pantheism is that she only did it to impress Shug, rather than a conscious spiritual choice. We should believe that Nettie's conversion is much more convincing than that of Celie's. Nettie is well educated and cultured, and is bordered by religion-related possessions so some religious growth is usual. She makes a sophisticated judgment about her religious faith, as she is well-read in theology. She knows accurately what pantheism and Christianity are, so she can make a decision, which one she should be follow. Alice Walker could not complete her announcement from the preface of the novel, with the Protagonist, Celie, but did realize it well with famous secondary character, Nettie, The younger sister of the central character in the novel.

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