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Colonizers, Fathers and Daughters in *The Color Purple*

Characterizations, plot and inner landscapes in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* revolve around – are affected and defined by – a central occurrence that happens long before the major events of the narrative itself. Celie, one of the novel’s major epistolary narrators, believes her father to be someone he is not. Her entire vision of self and being are formed and continually reinforced and shaped by the lie. Hers is a history, hidden from her – her father’s lynching: “too sad a story to tell pitiful little growing girls” (Walker, 181). The narrative’s framework of unmentionable history is framed by its italicized, opening passage: “You better not tell nobody but God” (1).

Celie’s identity is formed in a multiplicity of ways. The lie as to who her father is, the abuse she is subjected to, indirectly as a result of the lie and the cultural displacement of her race on the grander scale, are all components affecting her. She is a victim of the lie itself and of its origin.

To see Celie clearly we must view her as a victim of living under what Homi Bhabha speaks of as a “fixity . . . of identities within the calcification of colonial culture” (323). Her experience, in many regards, is a “homogenizing the history of the present” (323), which can be seen clearly in her telling Harpo to beat his wife Sophie in order to make her “mind.” “Beat her I say” (36), she tells him. Clearly, Celie is calcified in the culture of the “colonizer,” her abusive and oppressive husband, who tells Harpo: “Wives is like children. You have to let em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating” (35).
The patriarchic world of *The Color Purple* is clearly that of an oppressor – one that transcends color, class or station. In the households of the “Other,” subjected people of the American Jim Crow South, the male rules as tyrant. Celie’s mirroring of Mr. ____’s behavior above is a parroting of Mr. ____ himself – parroting the dominant culture without.

The whole notion of the “Pa’s” lie, why he told it and, more importantly, his behavior after the central event (the lynching of Celie’s real father) is a result of the dominant culture. The effect of the colonizer’s culture manifests in Pa internally. “Your daddy didn’t know how to get along . . . white folks lynch him” (180), he says to Celie when he is confronted.

Stuart Hall explains the source of the internal experience of Other:

> It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that ‘knowledge’ not only as a matter of will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm. . . . This inner expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms (299).

The deformity is rampant in *The Color Purple*. The Celie who tells Harpo to beat his wife is a deformity of the Celie we see later in the novel when she begins to shed her skin borne of repression and grow wings of realization.

The entire upbringing by a sexually abusive man, marriage to the degrading Mr. _____, all takes place because of the lynching – which can be seen as a quintessential, oppressive act of the dominant culture in the world of the text. Had Celie been raised in the environment provided by a successful and loving family, one can speculate that she would have been insulated and fortified against complete, *total* domination by the oppressive culture abounding *within* -- Hall’s “inner compulsion.” Simultaneously, deformity results from such a culture that *sanctions* the lynching of a man who does not know how to “get along” with the dominant culture, that is to
say, is ignorant to the cultural code of extortion. Such a man is destined to arrive home one night “mutilated and burned” (175).

Male patriarchy as colonizer takes on bizarre connotation and shapes. Pa’s notion of know how (or not knowing how) to “get along” with the dominant oppressor can be seen in the narrative when he and Mr. ____ discuss a prospective wife for the latter. Conversation regarding the sisters resembles that of breeders and dealers of livestock and, in the broader, historical sense, that of slave traders. “I can let you have Celie. . . . She ain’t fresh tho, but I suspect you know that.” (7), Pa says. He goes on: “But you don’t need a fresh woman no how. I got a fresh woman in there myself and she sick all the time” (8). Mr. ____ goes home to mull the deal over because he is really set on the “fresh” young sister Nettie (who Pa is unwilling to “trade”). When he returns, Celie is subjected to a scene that could have been written of a slave trader’s market of the Ante-Bellum South:

Let me see her again.

Pa call me. Celie he say. Like it wasn’t nothin’. Mr. ____ want another look at you.

I go stand in the door. The sunshine 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 . . .

Turn round Pa say (10-11).

Mr. ____ checks out his “purchase,” front and rear, before deciding to take Celie, provided Pa throw into the deal, a cow that had been mentioned during earlier discussions.

The dominant white oppression abounds in *The Color Purple* overtly – outwardly – as well, not just in inward, mimetic instances as shown above. Celie frets that Nettie might end up
with a husband like Mr. ____ or end up “in some white lady kitchen” (16). This remark by Celie foreshadows the story of Sofia where we see the effect of White oppression in graphic detail.

Sofia embodies all that Celie is not. She beats her husband soundly rather than be beaten into submission by him. Her reaction to being slapped by the mayor is no surprise to her family when the story is being recounted: “No need to say no more, Mr. ____ say. You know what happen if somebody slap Sofia” (85). The mayor’s wife, “always going on over colored,” (85) is what sets the incident off; Sofia will have none of it, being patronized and then made to believe it would be such a fine honor to serve the mayor’s wife and her children in a maid’s capacity.

For this she is beaten by police officers right in the street while other policemen, with drawn guns, keep anyone from protecting her. Her skull is cracked; her ribs are cracked; she is blinded in one eye: “she swole from head to foot. Her tongue size of [an] arm . . . she can’t talk, and she just about the color of an eggplant” (87). The reference to her color is significant because, earlier in the narrative, Harpo raves about how “bright” Sofia is (29), eluding to a form of intraracism seem in most contemporary Afro-American literature. (One need only to be reminded of Toni Morrison’s Paradise, a novel which explicates an entire town founded on the racial purity of dark-skinned males deemed “Eight Rocks” to see depiction of African-American intraracism at its most graphic.)

Sophia’s darkened color (caused by her beating) further humiliates and denigrates her. Her light, yellow color, in the world of The Color Purple (and in most works of contemporary Afro-American fiction) makes her exceedingly desirable. It is this subcultural that Morrison’s “Eight Rock males” wish to eradicate with their dark-skinned purification.

Sophia becomes the model prisoner; and for her efforts, twelve years later, she is still in prison. “Good behavior ain’t good enough for them say Sophia. Nothing less than sliding on
your belly with your tongue on they boots can even get they attention” (89). For all of this though, the “Amazon” Sophia is not broken: “I dream of murder sleep or wake” (89).

It is the oppression we do not see directly, as stated earlier, that drives the narrative of *The Color Purple*: the lynching of Celie and Nettie’s father. Pa’s elaboration on his motive and methodology regarding the dominant oppressor gives light to survival in the Jim Crow South. “I know how they is. The key to all of them is money” (182), he says. “The trouble with our people is that as soon as they get out of slavery they don’t want to give the white man nothing else” (182), he continues. What Pa offers is one third of his crop, his profits to be paid to the white extorter.

The scene ends with Celie asking him where her real father is buried. When he replies that the lynched man is buried alongside her mother, Celie asks him if there is a marker: “He looked at me like I’m crazy. Lynched people don’t git no marker, he say. Like this something everybody know” (182). To be deprived of a marker erases history.

African-American history has been mostly non-history. Bhabha defers to Toni Morrison when, in his essay “Unhomely Lives: The Literature of Recognition” he speaks of identity being defined by what Morrison in *Beloved* explains as: “‘the holes – the things the fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask . . . the unnamed, the unmentioned’” (324). One could add to that the unmarked grave of a lynched man who had never thought to pay extortionists -- who only communicated with rope and fire. The lynched man is clearly “unmentioned.” And for that omission, Celie pays with a lifetime of abuse and torture.
Works Cited


Hall, Stuart, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.”
