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If I Write You Are Not Dead¹

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Forcefully silenced into submission and subject to continuous abuse by the man she thought was her father, Celie adopts the private mode of letter writing to express her grievances. Growing up in a southern working class household, Celie is exposed to the full force of sexism in a primarily black society. Addressing her concerns to God, the first letter immediately brings to light the plight of the innocent girl child who is rudely forced to acknowledge her womanhood at the age of fourteen when she is constantly raped and impregnated by her step father. The letters are written in the first person but even though she assumes the “I”, she does not sign the letters as she is perhaps aware that her private life is still dictated by the patriarch of the household. This can also be read as conscious attempt on Walker’s part to suggest that the plight of Celie is the plight of most black women of her age, hence the deliberate omission. The novel opens with the silencing of the girl child, “You better tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (Walker 8), so that what emerges is the figure of the obedient slave, “*the mule of the world...carrying the burden that everyone else refused to carry*”(Walker, “In Search Of” 237), who assumes the gender role thrust upon her by a society which seems to sanction abuse.

The letters in the first half of the novel, though addressed to God are more of a dialogue with the self. They are open, honest and provide a black woman’s reality where notions of race and sex intersect as oppressive forces in a predominantly patriarchal set up. Her abuse is limited to the domestic space and continues even when she is married to Mr._ who marries her but for convenience and looks her up and down as he would a farm animal, in this case a cow. The allusion to women as toiling farm animals is also referred to by Harpo, after his fight with Sofia, who like his father is brought up within the ambit of patriarchy. Celie is forced to assume the role of both wife and mother. She has no right even to her own body and the womb which is seen as a receptacle for future generations becomes a burden. The letters lay bare her condition and through them can be traced the gradual transformation of the protagonist from a creature “so abused and mutilated in pain” to one who is later initiated into a loving and sustaining relationship with Shug Avery. Assuming the role of a dutiful wife, she learns that passivity is the only way to survive and emotions are shunned. The only way to survive is by making herself wood like, “I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie you a tree.” (Walker 23)

By shutting out the world she associates herself with a tree, which though ignored and devoid of attention continues to live and grow, drawing sustenance from the earth, while at the same time acting as a witness to passing events. She is also the labouring woman, drawn perhaps from the slave narratives and the man is no longer one who is revered as the male and patriarch of the household by providing for the family but one who asserts his masculinity through domination

¹ A phrase borrowed from “La Venue a l’écriture”, by Helene Cixous

and physical force. To Celie, all men are the same, hence her reluctance perhaps to distinguish them by their names. While maternity is regarded as an unquestionable fact in, *The Color Purple*, paternity is constructed as fiction. Naming hence gains significance in the novel, for none of the characters are credited with last names and it is only the father who has the power to determine the paternity of the child. While women like Celie adhere to prescribed gender roles, until a catalyst like Shug Avery wakes her out of her complacency, Sofia and Shug are seen as women who are a threat to black masculinity, Sofia for not playing the doting and dutiful wife and Shug for choosing instead to leave her children and live on her own terms outside of the dictates of patriarchal control. Mr._ aptly remarks, “Sofia and Shug not like men...but they not like women either”(Walker 244). Sofia’s encounter with the mayor’s wife which lands her in jail and Mary Agnes’s rape are two instances where women who dare to assume a right to speak are punished. It is also significant to note perhaps that financial autonomy gives the women a sense of freedom in *The Color Purple* and it is only when Celie has financial autonomy, after having established her tailoring house and later owns a house of her own that she finds herself on the porch as an equal with Albert. The sense of a renewed self, defined in terms of her new found autonomy, distinct from the one in previous letters is made evident when she signs one of her letters addressed to Nettie as,

Your Sister, Celie

Folkspants, Unlimited.

Sugar Avery Drive

Memphis, Tennessee (Walker 193)

Shugs refusal to be silenced is evident from the fact that she is a blues singer who helps Mary Agnes realize that she too has a voice and the potential to earn. It is Shug who enforces into Celie and Squeak, a sense of self. It is Shug who delivers to Celie her letters from Nettie.

Writing had always been vital to Celie, something which she holds close and away from patriarchal control. This can be deciphered from Nettie’s letter towards the end of the novel where she says,

I remember you one time you said your life made you feel ashamed you couldn’t even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was. Well now I know what you meant. And whether God will read your letters or no, I know you will go on writing them; which is guidance enough for me (Walker 117)

It is writing which helps her maintain her sanity, a voice which helps her contemplate and through which she learns to mould and critique the role accorded to women like her. The letters paint a bold picture of the everyday issues Black women face in a society where sexist oppression is glossed over by the institution of the family and marriage. It is through writing that she charts not only her coming to terms with herself, her body, which had till then been called ugly, as she did not fit the European notion of beauty and her sexuality but bears witness to the strength of women like Sofia who stand up not only against patriarchy but racist oppression, who though ultimately broken down and reduced, “only to a shape”, is still alive which is a feat in itself. bell hooks rightly quotes Elizabeth Hardwick saying, “The letter is, by its natural shape, self-justifying; it is one’s own evidence, deposition, a self-serving testimony”(hooks 466). It is

through this confessional mode of letter writing that she also finds the freedom to “write the body” and acknowledge her sexuality. In writing she refutes the identity imposed on her by men who see the women through their association with men, a notion prevalent not only in the south but also in Africa as is evident through Nettie’s letters.

Celie’s letter is written in a distinct idiom of what Walker in an interview says, is Black Folk English. Refusing to adopt standard English even when Darlene tries to correct her, Celie’s language like her writing is shaped and conditioned by her experiences and perceptions of life. If writing becomes a mode of making tangible her reality and leads to self discovery, her refusal to fall within the norm portrays the emergence of a woman who has let herself be shaped and defined through her writing. It is in writing that she relinquishes the idea of God, choosing instead to write to her long lost sister. It is her communion with women like Shug who questions the written word and Nettie’s letters which brings her to let go the idea of God which is conditioned by a white supremacist patriarchal society. While Celie tells of a nightmare of a black woman in the south, Nettie’s life is something out of a fairytale, where she is rescued and whisked away to Africa and marries her prince charming. Though not without her share of problems, Nettie’s life is shaped by her education which in a way helps her get away. For Nettie, writing becomes an important tool which helps her cope with her loneliness and resist the stifling hand of patriarchy. She says, “Anyway when I don’t write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don’t pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart”(Walker 117)

If Celie has addressed her letters to Nettie instead of God then Nettie feels equally strongly about her communication with her sister. Writing then becomes significant not only for the reader but for the writer who has the need to communicate, even if it is with a transcendental being so as to make sense of an otherwise chaotic world, where even history and religion are products of a specific masculine order. Nettie’s letters serve to bring to light not only the problems which are inherent in African society where gender difference and patriarchy is as pronounced but also of the imperialist designs of a dominant group which in the name of religion seeks to distort history.

The longing on Nettie’s part to tell her story and the process of documentation which she urges Olivia and Tashi to develop, is a mode to put in writing oral African history (which had even found its way to America). Her encounter with the white woman missionary on a ship who assumes the pen name of Jared Hunt moreover, points towards the stifling of the creative spirit in women, something the Walker talks about at length in her essay *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens*. The white woman’s refusal to be married and imbibed into the fold of patriarchal control is evident but it at the same time poses the question of the authority which she claims she has in documenting the history and the lives of the people, claiming to write “in their behalf”, does not exactly operate outside societal confines of oppression, for she is not just a part of the people, “she owns the village of Akwee”. Financial autonomy alone seems to synonymous with freedom from patriarchal control.

The lashing out of Celie towards the end of the novel who has come to terms with herself and her sexuality, and who acknowledges that, “I’m pore, I’m Black, I may be ugly and Can’t cook...But I’m here” (Walker 187), is the voice of a woman who sees herself as a part of creation, a woman who understands fully the way oppression operates. Her discovery of her body goes hand in hand with her self realization that she is part and parcel of creation. She is able to see herself in a different light and though she still does not like “frogs”, she acknowledges the fact that she and Albert share a history, which is portrayed through the

tradition of sewing and quilt making, which like writing makes concrete and visible, memories and histories or in this case her story, which to use bell hooks phrase, invokes a “sense of reunion and release,” where she creates a world, “where one can have it all” (hooks 464).

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