



Research Paper

Resistance Methods and Self-Liberation in the work of African-American Female Writers

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After slavery African-American women began to experience another form of slavery under the dominance of African-American men. The ideologies and stereotypes that were created by the slaves' owners have continued to be used by the African-American society to justify oppressing African-American women. These ideologies and stereotypes label African-American women as worthless and naturally inferior to white people and African-American men. With no solidarity from their own community and no justice from the prejudiced justice system, African-American women have had to create their own survival methods. These methods vary according to each woman's situation. Some of these methods include sisterhood, self-expression, turning pain to power, and rebelling against the society's ideologies and stereotypes. This paper aims to detect resistance and solidarity dynamics among African-American female characters in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Walker's *The Color Purple*.

One of the main ways to gain power is to have a support system in one's family or friends. As for marginalized African-American women their support system is each other. In the novels under discussion, sisterhood is the basic tool or method for their survival. It is extremely important because it establishes the sense of self-worth in the spirit of a degraded and dehumanized woman, and the sense of self-worth is the first step towards self-liberation. However, it is extremely difficult to express solidarity in a society that naturalizes degradation of American black women as a norm. Collins remarks that the biggest difficulty in African-American women's relationships with each other is affirming one another's humanity (104). If we compare between female characters with support system or solidarity and those without it, the results will be shocking. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline does not have support or appreciation from other African-American women. She feels marginalized by them for not belonging to the same social status, and she is mocked by other African-American women who "were amused by her because she did not straighten her hair" (118). The lack of solidarity and support turns Pauline into an abusive mother who believes in whites' superiority and blacks' inferiority. It is the sexist and racist society that inculcates this sense of physical and economic inferiority in black women, which makes them develop forms of internalized-sexism. By establishing internalized-sexism, the racist and sexist society limits the chances of solidarity and sisterhood bonding among African American women. Korobov et al. note that internalized sexism is created by the groups in power to prevent women from creating a power that might threaten or surpass theirs, and that it divides women by keeping them in constant competition (16). For this reason, both the whites and African-American men encourage the competition among African-American women, which is based on skin color and class, to prevent any chance for solidarity. Pauline is marginalized by other women, and this leads her to marginalize and degrade her own daughter Pecola. As a result, Pecola becomes a voiceless and an outcast child with a severe inferiority complex and ends up losing her mind. Needless to say, only African-American women fortunate enough to have solidarity and support have been able to break free and express their individuality.

Having solidarity and sisterhood is the force that pushes one ahead to make a change for the better. As Amy Sickles believes, women's independence and liberation cannot be achieved without the support of other women (80). In *The Color Purple*, Sophia, unlike Pauline, is strong and brave because she has her sisters who work as a strong supportive system to help her. When she is kicked out of her parents' house for being pregnant, it is her sister who invites her to stay at her place. In Celie's case, meeting Shug is a turning point in her life because Shug is the one who makes her feel worthy of love and respect. Although Shug admits that she has insulted Celie by describing her as ugly out of jealousy, the fact is that she thinks Celie is really beautiful. Besides, it is Shug who connects Celie to her sister after years of separation by finding Nettie's hidden letters and giving them to Celie. Those letters work as a kind of salvation for Celie because they liberate her from some of the biggest tragedies in her life. The two events that have inflicted the most pain on Celie are being raped by her own father and losing

her children, Adam and Olivia. In the letters, Nettie informs her sister that Alphonso is actually their step-father and that she is currently taking care of her children. Those revelations lift a tremendous weight off Celie's chest and encourage her to seek a better life. As a matter of fact, only after Shug's support and Nettie's letters does Celie find the strength and courage to leave Albert and start her own business.

The concepts of sisterhood are passed from one generation to another like the concepts of patriarchy. Patriarchy teaches young men to oppress women as inferior to them. Albert, for example, teaches his son Harpo that "Wives like children. You have to let 'em know how got the upper hand" (42). However, sisterhood teaches young girls to stand against means of injustice and to help one another. For example, Nettie teaches Olivia about sisterhood, and Olivia helps her friend Tashi to learn reading and writing, as Nettie has once taught Celie. When Olivia knows that girls in Olinka are deprived of education, her response shocks Nettie: "they're like white people at home who don't want colored people to learn" (162). It seems that young African-American girls as an oppressed group can identify sexism and racism as similar forms of injustice at such a young age and realize that the concept of support or sisterhood is the path for justice and freedom. Nevertheless, females' solidarity or sisterhood is not intended to fight men but the sexist ideologies those men are victims of. In fact, Sophia welcomes Harpo with open arms after he ditches the idea of beating her into submission, and Celie forgives Albert and embraces him as a dear friend at the end.

Another form of female solidarity exists in language, communication, and self-expression. Communication and conversations among women work as a form of indirect consolation because conversations and communications help to know that someone else understands what one is going through. Collins believes that communication and connection among African-American women affirm "one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist" (102). The first form of self-expression and communication among African-American women is direct conversation with one another that might include wordplay and witty remarks. Lauren Berlant thinks that conversations among women and the deployment of language in irony and wordplay can release negativity and help women deal with pain (846). One of Celie's first experiences with connecting to another woman through wordplay is when she invites Corrine to sit with her in the wagon to escape white men's racist gazes in the market. Corrine expresses gratitude in form of wordplay on the word "hospitality," saying "Horsepitality" (24). It is one of the rare moments after losing Nettie and before meeting Shug that Celie communicates with somebody and feels worthy.

The second form of self-expression and communication between African-American women is the blues. It is basically a liberation tactic and a tool for financial independence. Mrs. Macteer sings the blues when she feels down to release some of her frustration. Whenever she gets harsh towards her kids, she sings the blues to ease out the pressure of being a poor African-American woman. Likewise, Shug's talent in composing and singing the blues gives her freedom and financial independence. The blues is her tool or weapon against being a victim of sexism, as her mother. By being a blues singer, she breaks the society's gender roles, proves that she has feelings and talents as an African-American woman, and makes her own money. Celie's story and support inspire Shug to write a song about her and about how wonderful she is as a person. Inspiring Shug gives Celie a strong sense of self-worth, which plays a major role in Celie's development towards self-fulfillment and independence. The cramping of Celie's heart when she listens to the song symbolizes coming back to life after years of emotional numbness. On her part, Mary Agnes uses the blues as a platform to share her story and communicate with other African-American women about dealing with internalized racism. According to George, Mary decides to be a singer, so that she can express her frustration with being marginalized within her own community (140). Another key point is that the blues gives its creator a voice to reflect one's true identity, values, and beliefs. Tucker thinks that Mary Agnes is now "able to deny both her nickname and her color name by creating a new and authentic text of herself" (87). Similarly, Collins believes that the blues composed and sung by many African-American women "challenge the externally defined controlling images used to justify Black women's objectification" (106). These controlling images represent them as savages – less feminine, less intelligent, and animal-like – but the blues proves that they are talented, creative, and have emotions.

The third form of self-expression and communication is writing. After Nettie's departure, Celie writes to God to share some of the burdens and worries: "I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was" (122). Cheung believes that "without the unburdening that comes with expression, the traumatic experience Celie has undergone would drive her mad" (165). Wendy Wall agrees and sees Celie's writing as a "means for her to define herself against the patriarchy" (83). The letters that Nettie writes for Celie also liberate Celie from many burdens and help her overcome traumatic experiences. Similarly important is the fact that writing further helps them document and share their experiences and show their mental and spiritual developments. For instance, Nettie's writings document her development from a lost and a bused girl to an admired teacher and missionary. They also document her experience in Africa and show how Black women in different regions share similar burdens and have similar experiences with sexism consisting of violence, sexploitation, and objectification.

The most remarkable thing about the experiences of African-American women is how they change these women and their beliefs. Instead of crying over the tragedies they have encountered, they use the same tools that

the oppressor used to degrade them in order to liberate themselves. For instance, it is undeniable that one of the main tools that whites and men have used to dominate African-American women is religion. It is true that African-American women as Celie and Janie do not reject religion outright; instead, they search for the truth within themselves. Patricia Andujo states that African-American women have "redefined religion (traditional Christianity) to empower themselves" (61). As such, they have connected with their spirituality and could finally see clearly that religion has been manipulated for others' personal interests. In other words, they have proved to be capable of turning the tools of degradation into tools for inspiration.

In like manner, African-American women use their pain as a motive to improve their lives. Through characters as Squeak and Celie, Walker gives the readers examples of and lessons on how they should deal with pain and agonizing experiences. After being raped, Squeak returns home with the determination to empower herself. First, she confronts Harpo about the nickname he has given her – Squeak – which is humiliating and degrading for her. In other words, the nickname reflects what Harpo wants her to be, that is, a fragile girl with low and irritated voice, one who does not reflect Agnes's reality or identity. Second, she demands to be called by her real name "Mary Agnes," a name that reflects her true identity and pride. Further, when Celie discovers that her husband Albert has been hiding her sister's letters from her for years, she thinks of it as the cruelest thing he has ever done to her. This incident is the turning point for Celie that gives her the courage to confront him with her true feelings and eventually leave him. Walker aims to show that pain can be transformed from a destructive force to a positive one for empowering and encouraging women to reclaim their rights and learn from their previous experiences. In a word, African-American women have turned pain into power.

One can use a previous tragic or sad experience as a source of shame that one must avoid. But one can also use them to learn and grow. Experiences and overcoming the impossible would make any individual wonder and reconsider the society's norms that have made life a living hell, and eventually rebel against them. According to Wolf, women will never believe they are beautiful as they are "until they start to take the first steps beyond the beauty myth" (271). Neither will they believe that they are intelligent and worthy as they are until they look beyond the society's sexist and racist norms, values, and ideologies. For this reason, they need to develop their own independent thinking to break free from the society and its expectations. However, these norms and values are extremely difficult to distinguish and oppose as they are the rules the society lives by, and are taken for granted by almost everyone. In fact, the victim's consciousness does not necessarily provoke her to rebel against the oppression she struggles with because the society has naturalized such an oppression as a part of being an African-American wife, daughter, or an employee. Ironically, African-American women might even feel guilty to rebel against their oppressor having been programmed for many years to view oppression as the norm.

In the novels under discussion, characters as Janie and Celie use their experiences to develop a better understanding of themselves, the world, and the people around them. For instance, Janie finally confronts Jody in the store after twenty years of silence and tells him her true opinions on who he is and on how he has treated her. Haurykiewiz points out that the confrontation marks the rebirth of a new Janie (59). Her new self shines when she takes off her head scarf as a sign for restoring identity after Jody's death. Then she burns all of the head rags that he has forced her to wear, as she no longer cares what people would think of her letting her hair loose again. Maria Frais Rudolphi thinks that burning the head rag symbolizes the liberation of both Janie's body and mind (40). Janie then meets Tea Cake who is a much younger man and falls in love with him. Janie would never have the courage to form a relationship that breaks all of the society's norms and values if she has not already discovered her self-worth and believed in her individuality. The fact that they can connect to one another and fall in love despite the age gap between them indicates that the natural connection between a man and a woman is free from the society's standards of the ideal relationship. Another interesting point is their willingness to commit to one another in an unusual relationship, which symbolizes their independent thinking from the rest of the society. In the court scene after Tea Cake's death, Janie only says few sentences when she is asked to talk, but those sentences are more effective and convincing than the others' testimonies. Heather Duerre Humann states that "Janie, despite being silenced for so long, can express herself and stand her ground" (35). The way Janie handles herself in the courtroom proves that she has mastered how to use her voice as an independent and wise woman. Janie is found not guilty, and she returns to her house in Eatonville wearing overalls after the burial of Tea Cake. People are shocked by her return and they start to criticize her for her appearance immediately: "What she doin' coming back here in dem overalls? Can't she find no dress to put on?" (2). The fact that Janie walks into a patriarchal society wearing overalls symbolizes her rebellious spirit that does not fear the society's sexist codes or care about its tendency to criticize independent women. Janie narrates her story to her friend Pheoby to empower and inspire her. Henry Louis Gate Jr thinks that Janie's ability to use her voice proudly and tell her story to inspire other African-American women after being silenced for decades marks her transition from an abused object to a speaking subject (197). Telling her story is her way of communicating with other African-American women and showing solidarity.

In Cellie's case, her sense of individuality appears when she refuses to speak standard-English as her co-workers tell her to do so. She thinks that "only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind" (184). This indicates that she now has her own independent voice and that she is not ashamed of her

blackness or her identity. She no longer feels self-contempt. When Shug leaves Celie and runs away with a nineteen-years-old musician, Celie is not devastated or lost without her. Lynn Pifer believes that at this point Celie is able to recognize and appreciate herself without Shug's support (48). Moreover, Celie stands in front of the mirror after Shug's departure and thinks that "Nothing special here for nobody to love" (266). This proves that Celie is finally able to see herself beyond the beauty myth or any ideological standards for one's appearance. At the same time, she diminishes both sexism and racism that equate females' worth with their physical appearance and thus regard African-American women as naturally worthless. Andujo believes that Celie's new found self-esteem is what makes her able to finally love herself and demand respect from Albert (71). After leaving Albert, she starts her own knitting business. Sickels believes it reflects intelligence to become self-sufficient by "taking a traditionally domestic chore for women and turning it into a profitable business" (81). It also indicates the importance of financial success as a significant force to achieve independence. As such, one cannot agree fully with hooks who describes Celie's success story as subordinate to a myth (*Ain't I a Woman* 291-92), or with Raphael Lambert who describes *The Color Purple* as a capitalist fairy tale. Lambert asserts that Celie's destiny is what transforms her from an oppressed being to a successful business woman after inheriting her father's shop from Alphonso. Thus, Celie's situation is transformed without her making any effort to change it. However, if it were not for Celie's courage to walk away from an abusive relationship, she would never be able to start her own business. Moreover, a business needs work and tremendous amount of effort to succeed. Without Celie's skills in knitting and her potential to run a business, the store would never bloom. In brief, it is Celie's talent, wit, determination, and a little bit of luck that are the reasons behind her business success.

A simple comparison between the characters who enjoy females' solidarity and those who do not indicates that women need one another's help to reclaim their independence. In other words, sisterhood is a significant force in women's liberation and independence. It establishes the sense of self-worth, and the rebellion can only be achieved after believing that one is worth more and deserves better. On the other hand, it is traumatic experiences which make these female characters question the society's norms and rebel against them. Through experience they transform slowly from dependence to independence and from submission to self-assertion. They view these experiences in a positive manner through turning pain to power and turning tools of degradation into sources for inspiration. With their newly gained confidence and power, they can examine their potentials and achieve financial independence. For dependent women staying in abusive relationships, financial independence is a necessity for starting a new life. Further, self-expression "whether it is through writing, storytelling, or the blues" is a significant method that they use to reflect their individuality and to communicate with other African-American women. For instance, speaking transforms characters like Janie and Celie from being someone's objects into subjects. Finally, there are several benefits that come from sharing one's survival story or experience. First, the victim knows that there is someone she relates to, someone who understands how it feels to be lonely, afraid, and hurt. Secondly, survivors' stories inspire those who are less fortunate knowing that they can overcome the hardships that others have conquered.

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