



CELIE'S WOMANIST VOICE: IS LIVING, FIGHTING AND BELIEVING IN A BETTER WORLD A UTOPIA?

LA VOIX DE FEMME DE CELIE: VIVRE, SE BATTRE ET CROIRE EM UM MONDE MEILLEUR EST-IL UNE UTOPIE?

Maria de Fátima Falcão ¹


Naiana Siqueira Galvão ²

Abstract: In 1983, Alice Walker published *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, a collection of non-fiction articles with the main purpose of highlighting the importance of being a woman in a racialized world, full of judgments that bring race, class, and gender as a scope. The term womanism was developed in this collection and expanded in the work *The Color Purple*, represented by the main character Celie. In these circumstances, the author seeks, through her protagonist, to expand the dialogue with the essence of being a womanist to the detriment of the other women in the narrative. It is relevant to note that the practice of such a perspective, being a womanist, focuses on revealing the resistance and resilience of these marginalized women by the social system. Walker's literature is an 'open door' to freedom filled with compassion and respect, which is not an idea of Moore's conventional utopia.

Keywords: Womanist. Literature. Female. Contemporary. Resistance.

Résumé: En 1983, Alice Walker a publié *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, une collection d'articles de non-fiction dont le but principal est de souligner l'importance d'être une femme dans un monde racialisé, plein de jugements qui amènent la race, la classe et le genre. Le terme womanism a été développé dans cette collection et développé dans l'œuvre *The Color Purple*, représentée par le personnage principal Celie. Dans ces circonstances, l'auteur cherche, à travers son protagoniste, à élargir le dialogue avec l'essence d'être une femme au détriment des autres femmes du récit. Il est pertinent de noter que la pratique d'une telle perspective, étant féministe, s'attache à révéler la résistance et la résilience de ces femmes marginalisées par le système social. La littérature de Walker est une 'porte ouverte' vers la liberté remplie de compassion et de respect, ce qui n'est pas une idée de l'utopie conventionnelle de Moore.

Mots-clés: Femme. Littérature. Femelle. Contemporain. La Résistance.

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- ¹ Graduação em Letras pela Universidade Federal do Tocantins (2012). Mestrado em Letras: Ensino de Língua e Literatura (2015) pela Universidade Federal do Tocantins. Atua principalmente nos seguintes temas: literatura e língua inglesa, e tradução de língua inglesa. Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/1730098908504561>. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4468-1154>. E-mail: fatimafalcao@hotmail.com
 - ² Professora de Língua Inglesa e Literatura Anglo-Americana pela Universidade Federal do Estado do Tocantins. Especialista em Língua Inglesa e Literatura Anglo-Americana pela UFT, Câmpus de Porto Nacional. Mestrado em Ensino de Língua e Literatura pela UFT, Câmpus de Araguaína. Doutoranda em Estudos Literários com especificação em Literatura Americana pela Escola de Ciências Humanas da Universidade Trás-os-Montes-e-Alto-Douro (UTAD-Portugal). Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/3507712237173226>. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7745-8173>. E-mail: anaiangalvao@hotmail.com
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Introduction

We start from the keystone Utopia, a term created by the English humanist writer, diplomat, and lawyer Thomas More (1478-1535), in two tomes. In the first, More criticizes European society, especially English society. In his text, there is a denunciation of the misfortunes of the layers of disadvantaged populations, the accumulation of capital by the minority, the abuses of state power, the concentration of power, and the outbreak of conflicts and wars. In the second volume, the author uses the scenario of the voyage of discovery of transoceanic lands. In this New World there are groups of people who live together in an egalitarian way; their philosophy is based on the ideal of reason, so that no misdemeanor action or disharmony among the inhabitants is possible.

Utopia, this imagined happy place, resonates in the perception of its adherents as the perfect society, promotes of critical thinking, capable of realizing culture, of being anticipatory agents of social construction. Therefore, this connection of real with utopia is causal. There are values that foster this thinking in search of an ethical and moral behavior.

The question that involves the subject is precisely this becoming that utopia establishes and it has been converted into value judgments. A kind of constructive and jointing ideal that is based on the logical reality of striking facts that are unsatisfactory for this individual or nation community.

When we analyze the etymology of the word utopia, it means - nowhere - and carries the idea of a transposition of reality to an undefined place, without coordinates and an exact location. Therefore, we postulate that exists in this initial point of the discussion of this essay the conjugation articulated with fiction, fantasy, and the real, motivated by a valued projection of an ethical commitment.

Kant addresses, within the domain of the theory of knowledge, the possibility, the reality, and the necessity of the regime of thought that the subject makes during the existential perception in the world. Thus, the author who searches through the utopian imaginary carries a vision for the ethical deficiency, the discontentment, the present evil that sickens the being and projects such a longing for happiness or ways to attain it without assigning a precise place where the man can find this perfect state of contentment and satisfaction.

This is the reason why many people, when they talk about utopia, almost instantly associate to their minds the idea of something perfect, without tribulations. A society in full harmony, which for many scholars mean the end of any political form.

But we know that in the face of the constants of globalization and its variants, utopia is being re-signified, overlaying [new meanings on] its original definition and conventional usage. First, there is an imaginary island created by Thomas More where there is a system of governance that seeks, in light of his political philosophy, to be righteous.

Secondly, the term designates an imaginary and remote place; next, it is associated with a state, a condition of perfection conducive to good political coexistence; and finally, it refers to an ideal project aimed at social improvement. For Lyman Tower Sargent, utopia is “the general set of values – Unity, simplicity, wholeness a comfortable fitting of person and life” (Sargent, 1994, p. 78).

The intention is to demonstrate how the conventional concept of utopia becomes, in a certain way, insufficient to encompass the contemporary feminist utopianism addressed by Lucy Sargisson who, in her work, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*, seeks to stimulate the debate that involves the current dilemmas of womanism and utopia of the contemporary feminine. Tracing this dialogue, we use the novel *The Color Purple*¹ (1982) by Alice Walker.

In the United States, around 1925, with the Harlem Renaissance, artistic production advanced considerably, mixing blues and jazz music styles, so much that their musical concerts became true

¹ It is an epistolary novel, written and published in 1982, in which Celie, the main character, writes letters to her sister Nettie and to God. As for language, throughout the novel, the use of two varieties of the English language: Celie uses a rural variant of black English from the Georgia region, while Nettie uses standard English, as she was literate. Separated due to the onslaughts of Sinhô's abuse, Nettie heads to Africa with a missionary couple who have two adopted children. In the outcome these children are the ones Celie had at the age of 14, children of her stepfather. Celie married Sinhô to take care of his house and his children, living under the constant violence. In accordance with the narratives, characters emerge - Shug, Sofia, Agnes, and the return of Nettie, near the end of the work. All play a fundamental role in the development of Celie's social, political, emotional, and psychological growth.

classics. Musicians like Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson gave their performances in nightclubs and discos, gaining worldwide acclaim, testifying to the musical skills of the black communities. In painting, Aaron Douglas stood out with his cubist strokes, depicting black history with brushstrokes of warm, vibrant colors. In literature there was the rise of black writing headed by W.E.B. DuBois, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, and Alice Walker. Of these, Hurston stood out as the leading figure, the only woman of the Harlem Renaissance having exerted a great influence on other women writers, including Walker.

Experiencing the womanism with Celie's perseverance

In Walker's writing outlines the becoming of her female characters in accordance with the plot of the focus work, the spaces they inhabit, live together and in which they gradually (un)root themselves, as can be inferred from the letters that Celie addresses to God and to Nettie, her beloved sister. The male characters, in a way, also undergo transformations, through which they star in actions that reduce the abyssal distance between genders in the narrative, even though the reference to marginalized spaces, it is maintained the asymmetry between genders and their power relationships in the racist southern society of the United States.

Walker uses literature to address dense and tense themes that instigate social and political revolutions in the struggle for the ideals and values of feminism. She creates a theory of black feminist thought, called Womanism. It is a contemporary concept because it is created after the great waves of the women's movement. According to Melaine L. Harris, the term womanism is a essential tasks of how human should have been in mind about respect and the strenght of living.

Walker's work often encourages communities to create wholeness even in the midst of facing multiple oppressions. Since the agonies of interrelated oppressions have attempted to dig into the foundation of self-worth, self-esteem, agency, and the very value of the humanity of African peoples, the moral goal of living into, being committed to and fighting for individual, communal, and Earth wholeness ("wholeness of entire people") is an essential task for walker's womanism (HARRIS, 2010, p. 69).

Womanism is often perceived in this work of essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, as the development and maturation of the present thought-concept. A priori, it is used to specify feminism for black women or feminists of color. Its goals are opposed to irresponsible and frivolous attitudes and its womanish acting is to be assumed as an exclusive behavior befitting a woman; on a second level of narrative signification, the author communicates the universalistic view that to be a womanist is to be connected to the survival and integrity of all people, male and female. On a third level she alludes to and takes into consideration lovers of the arts, people's nature, music and dance, people connected to artistic-cultural productions who yearn to build a better world.

According to Melanie Harris (2010), Alice Walker tried to explain her theory of womanism basing on some important aspects of the subject's ethics, in other words, she tells us about how was born the definition of womamism: "Similar to the feminism that Walker learned about in college, her definition of "womanist", in other words Independence from patriarch constructions and racist definitions" (Harris, 2010, p. 85).

From this perspective, Sargisson does not seek to affirm perfection as a key element for the elaboration of utopian thought. Because if there is this idealization for the perfect, this could incur in didacticism. When we approach the feminist utopia, we aim to highlight the political component without being in the emphasizing of this didacticism of the beautiful, absolute construction of a subject or a society. Power, class, and gender relations imply the use of the category of feminist utopian politics, regardless of its anchoring in social groups, as we may observe in the following passage.

Modern literary criticism has been much concerned with a debate on whether there is a separate literature of women and whether its existence in case that can be shown, has a feminist or anti-feminist meaning. Is there a difference between a male and a female poet that can be discerned out of their poetry? The question is unanswerable, because different women have made vastly different choices (LERNER, 1993, p. 167).

In the feminist literature there is certain utopian elaboration that represents certain distinctions involving theory and fiction by alluding to fluid identities. Diverse and incoherent worlds, which evoke more the literary fantastic and the intention of parody, of irony that may cause the reader or the recipient caution, generate distrust in relation to the concept of perfection.

Thus, bringing Walker and her confrontational literature is to provide an opportunity and consent to the rescue of multiple repressed voices, their oblivion or erasure, muzzled by stating injustice, racism, cultural discrimination, and subjection at various institutional levels.

The novel, *The Color Purple*, tells the story of two sisters who, upon the death of their mother, suffered because they were black, poor and women. In the plot of the narrative, Celie is the protector of her sister, Nettie. She 'accepts' the 'new life' that her supposed father has 'prepared' with Mr. ____, as it can be observed in the following passage:

She ugly. He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it. Mr. still don't say nothing. I take out the picture of Shug Avery. I look into her eyes. Her eyes say Yeah, it bees that way sometimes (WALKER, 2016, p. 15).

Celie marries the widower, Mr. ____. She is abused, beaten by him, by his three children, and she is separated from her sister Nettie for thirty years. During these years the pain of loneliness instills in her the doubt of the deaths of her two children who were taken from her after birth, and the uncertainty of whether her sister Nettie received her letters, since Celie never gets an answer, no return, nothing from her loved one.

This situation is changed when the artist Shug Avery and Sofia Butler, her daughter-in-law, appear. In one of the lines of the character Mr. ____. He adopts a phallogocentric discourse, when he says to his wife that, "Sofia and Shug are not like men too, he say, but they are not like woman too[...]" (Walker, 2016, p. 314), since they should act according to the stereotype of being women, submissive, quiet and hardworking. In the first pages, these two women question certain limits placed by the patriarchal discourse of the community in which Celie grew up only hearing that "they are like cows, the women".

These two characters represent what Homi Bhabha (2009, p. 301) defines as a subject that "is neither the One nor the Other, but something beyond, interval", and that coincides with the novel strategy of Walker who promotes a questioning and political thought, defending the thesis that there should be no cultivation of fixed identities operationalized by the other. Something advocated by Judith Butler (2003) who supports the idea that gender is a contextual and inconstant phenomenon and that the recognition of otherness allows for the recognition of the existence of new identities.

We notice that Walker's writing, as the reading of the work progresses, prioritizes the speculation of tense themes: racism, prejudice, and subversion that delegitimize old universal moral standards - of rejection, for example, of lesbianism - and especially patriarchy, sustained by the Judeo-Christian religion reinforced by phallogocentrism. When Shug and Sofia appear in Celie's story, these characters act representing the political opposition to the status quo and the transgression of socially dominant ideological models, putting in evidence the functionality of Sargisson's (1996, p. 21) utopian social theory.

He states that “new concepts of utopia form radically different ways of being imagined”, dealing in a reverse logic to institutionalized molds and subverting standards, norms and certain restrictions imposed by Western culture and such positions of rejection of this culture:

Don't let them run over you, Nettie say. You got to let them know who got the upper hand. They got it, I say. But she keep on. You got to fight. You got to fight. But I don't know to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive. (WALKER, 2016, p. 31).

Nettie encourages Celie to act before they separate due to Mr. ___'s incisive threats. In this sense, she encourages her sister to search 'within herself' for alternatives to move, for the sake of her survival, her human dignity, and urges Celie to be rational and active. To use her body not passively and at the mercy of the circumstances that dominated her, but by assuming “you got to fight” as a response to the endless aggression she had been continuously suffering from her husband, her stepchildren, and anyone else who came near her.

Nettie knew that in the environment, the only resistance strategy was to stay alive. She should always act with mind and body acting together. Demonstrating the link of survival in a community ruled by the motto that beating a woman was a sign of domestication, a good deed, since, according to this logic, women only 'learned' this hard lesson with inaudible moans. Therefore, “[...] helping me with spelling and everything else she thinks I need to know. No matter what happens, Nettie steady try to teach me what go on in the world. And she a good teacher too”. (Idem, p. 24). Besides learning to read, write, and fight with impetus, it was also necessary to master the emotions, the mind, to take control of the body, and interpret signs that stigmatized her.

Patriarchy is a worldwide system, and takes slightly varying forms in different countries and times, but is essentially the same. Patriarchal beliefs and practices are at the core of all the world religions, including the Contemporary Western World's Equivalent of Medical Science. In all these ideological system or discourses, there is a tradition of domination of women by men (WALBY, 1990, p. 101).

In some theoretical positions of feminist theory the binary separation between men and women and even among women themselves is defended when skin color operates as an element of race identification (indigenous, black, latino). Collins addresses this uncomfortable separatist situation assumed by some white feminist women and black feminists urging them to confront their own sexism which, according to this author, is responsible for a backlash to the liberation ideas of feminism.

Bringing the crucial issue of women into the debate in the current context it is important to adopt a single, politicized agenda founded on gender solidarity and not stick to the categorization of race. This is the only way to avoid even feminist currents coming into 'conflict' with their ethics and politics of action. It is therefore important to highlight the womanism thought - womanism - of Alice Walker, which does not contemplate the gender distinction between subjects (men and women), nor racial discrimination (black, Latino, Asian, indigenous), and defends political philosophies of national growth favorable to life in collectivity and the defense of its heterogeneity. This can be observed by Harris's point of view about how important the book, *The Color Purple*, implies to the reader.

She [Alice Walker] writes that the real reason *The Color Purple* caused so Much controversy was because it exposed the reality of sexual brutality in black communities and

portrayed black women as capable of being independent and of supporting themselves outside of any viable connection with men. [...] Refusing to accept these established hierarchies and in resistance to them Walker reengages her argument that black women are agents of power who can survive sexist brutalities and still love themselves, regardless (HARRIS, 2010, p. 79).

Returning to the narrative thread of the novel, it should be noticed that Celie made notes about her life in an old, worn-out notebook, the only possession - after her love for her sister Nettie - which she had left, since her stepfather had given her children to a black missionary couple. Celie needed the writing, this was an intimate way to reveal to God what she felt and imagined.

[...] Stead of being mad, she glad to go. Say she hate to leave me is all. Us fall on each other neck when she say that. I sure hate to leave you here with these rotten children, she say. Not to mention with Mr. . It's like seeing you buried, she say. It's worse than that, I think. If I was buried, I wouldn't have to work. But I just say. Never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along.[...] I say. Write. She say. What?I say. Write.She say. Nothing but death can keep me from it.She never write (Idem, p. 26).

The sisters, Celie and Nettie, found in writing letters the only way to express their feelings, dreams, and wishes for a liberating future, for a renewed, bright dawn with a taste of victory and hope. These sisters did not aspire to possess material goods, to be elegant and recognized in the community, or to have a traditional family, they just wanted to embrace each other again: "Oh, Celie! Will I ever be able to tell you all? I dare not ask, I know. But leave it all to God. Your everloving sister, Nettie (Idem, p.153).

Spivak (2010) details that writing is a mean of subversion, not a simplistic - ordinary - act comparable to a mere bureaucratic writing exercise. In this sense that Walker, through her resistance literature emanates the current of black women's thought, uses the discourse of inferiorization and marginalization to refer to the progress of political, cultural ascension and thus resignify the history of minority groups.

One of the characteristics of the womanist ideal is to promote one's own self-esteem, and thus stimulates others to achieve integrity, to pursue dignity, even if the environment is hostile. This is how Sofia - Celie's daughter-in-law - is taught to self-position herself, to stand up for herself in a context contrary to the defense of women's integrity.

She say. All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. Now if you want a dead son-in-law you just keep on advising him like you doing. She put her hand on her hip. I used to hunt game with a bow and anow, she say. (WALKER, 2016, p.46-47).

In the previous quote, it is evident how Sofia declares to her mother-in-law the extreme need for a woman to assert herself as a self-sufficient being and fight for her self-esteem by watching over her physical integrity and motivated by the reason for being who she is, a woman. The character Celie is represented in a state of permanent denial, negating all possibilities of feeling free from Mr. ____ fists, his words of disaffection, and those of her stepchildren, always repeating to herself

the formula of resignation, “I let him do it. This life just end a day”. However, and contrary to what she expected, Sofia awoke in her the will to act, not to save for the future something as uncertain and ephemeral as life is.

Sargisson explains how utopianism with a transformative character allows conceptual changes in institutionalized situations dominated by patriarchy, and refractory to the subjects’ freedom of action and thought. In some way, the path of the characters in *The Color Purple* illustrates this path of metamorphosis and changes in their individual and cultural identities.

In Walker’s novel under analysis, this metamorphosis in the protagonist Celie begins in a timid way. There are stages, moments of maturation and disruption with the traditional customs in which the character was molded over the years, this figure experienced practices of abuse and violence against her feminine condition, of being a woman.

In her article entitled “Women’s Fantasies and Feminist Utopias” (1977), Carol Pearson demonstrates that it is by critiquing patriarchy that these utopias imagine a better place for women; they seek to represent a regime of life in which the dominant political model is overcome and female potential emerges resigned.

In this light, Walker leads the reader through the epistolary regime of the novel, presenting Celie as the transmuting and defiant conscience of the oppressive behavior imposed on black women of the time, the first decade of the twentieth century, in Georgia, in the southern United States. Walker thus seeks, with her novel, to illustrate the conception of womanism in which the exercise of power appears grounded in a critical knowledge of those despised by dominant institutions.

It is after exchanging a few words with Sofia that Celie ‘awakens’ to the need of acting, even though insecure, because it is something challenging for conscience in a process of transformation. This challenge becomes more intense when Shug Avery, a blues singer [and Mr. ____’s lover], was sick and she went to live under the same roof our protagonist used to be explores by her ‘lord’. The singer’s behavior subverted the stereotyped expectation of the naturalized and typified female gender identity.

The ethical implications within Walker’s writings suggest that honoring black women’s sexuality can allow women to express the wholeness of their humanity and in so doing resist oppression; but her point also reminds one of the constant vigilance necessary to be sure that deeply entrenched invisible, internalized forms of oppression do not strangle the wisdom of wholeness and commitment to honor one another’s humanity regardless of the relationship (HARRIS, 2010, p. 85).

Shug was a pastor’s daughter and a member of her father’s church choir, however, she decided to live her life by singing in bars, wearing bright and low-cut clothes and enjoying her lovers season by season. Shug represents a transgressive female identity, the body that does not accept repression; she is synonymous with the search for freedom of action, as it can be seen in her answer to Celie’s question: “My kids are with grandma, she says. She can take care, I had to go. You miss them? I ast. No, she say. I miss nothing”. (WALKER, 2016, p.66).

Led by Shug, Celie begins her self-exploration of the practice of freedom by using the knowledge of her body as an instrument of self-worth. The transgression of sexual experiences appears as a way to freely express love, to make room for the desire to feel alive: “I kiss her back, say, us, too. Us kiss and kis still us ain’t hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other.” (WALKER, 2016, p.136).

In this passage, Celie deliberately transgresses oppressive concepts and standards, freeing herself from a resigned identity to become someone, to feel like a desired and fulfilled woman. The freedom to initiate her choices starts from the loving entanglements she has with the singer, Shug Avery who has enchanted her heart:

Us eat and eat, and drink a little sweet wine and beer too. Then Shug and me go fall out in her room to listen to music till all that food have a chance to settle. It cool and dark in her room. Her bed soft and nice. Us lay with our arms round each other [...] Besides, she say. You not my maid. I didn't bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you help you get on your feet. (WALKER, 2016, p. 225-226).

We can verify, then, that these female characters, Celie, Sofia, Nettie, Shug, created a liberating language marked by sorority. The writing in Walker's work is marked by the African-American dialect, a resource of cultural legitimization and resistance of the black class. This resource serves to corroborate the subversion of the dominant cultural linguistic system in the United States, as well as the hetero normative cultural standards, founded on a patriarchal and capitalist conception of the world.

Conclusion

They are characters who are fully aware of their identities and social roles, acting from a perspective of transforming society, out of a desire for unity, empathy, and companionship. They are characters who, transcending a conventional vision of female utopian desire, practice the culture of womanist thinking to create possibilities to rearticulate their political and social positioning.

The Color Purple does not impose an ideal model of black womanhood, nor a traditional concept of a utopian North American society, nor does it delineates correctives to the bad actions of white and black male characters. In the view of contemporary feminist utopianism, based on black feminist thought - womanism - the novel, especially through the character Celie, questions supposed truths and norms regarding women's identity; it portrays a political form of belonging and approaches to gender, class, and race without neglecting the problem of otherness, and therefore, Walker's work is an opportunity for the reader to enter a welcoming environment, to experience womanism as a social factor of otherness and perseverance.

According to Henry James, a novel is a personal definition because it reveals a direct impression of life. This impression is full of emotions; sometimes they are stronger than a hurricane or even weak like breeze. However, it must have some value in this way of view and feeling the freedom through its reading. We think the right objective when Alice Walker prepared the first steps of *The Color Purple*, everything in it was created to rethink the global aspects of how someone may get his or her freedom, and also believing that he/she may access the empowerment through the writing. Manifesting the contemplation of the self liberation of a specific group of people who suffered for so long with the slavery history. Hope everyone may have this novel by his/her side to conquer and feel free to choose everything in this beautiful world as Nelle Harper Lee (1926 – 2016) states in his book, *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1960): "The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience" (LEE, 1960, p. 14).

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