

An Epistolary Novel Revisited: Alice Walker's Womanist Parody of Richardson's Clarissa

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* use the epistolary form to directly tap into the psychology of the characters without the intervention of society's restrictions on voicing taboo events, feelings or thoughts. Richardson's use of this 'bourgeois' novel portrayed the inhibited desires of lovers to each other or to their confidants. Traditionally, the epistolary novel served to educate women on proper behavior. However, Walker's *The Color Purple* can be established as a feminist and racial parody of Richardson's *Clarissa*. Walker's novel is a womanist parody of *Clarissa*; Walker used the epistolary novel to emancipate women both sexually and culturally. She uses letter-writing to give voice to the double oppression of the African-American female and her personal and emotional emancipation. The basic idea of feminism has been discussed in both Richardson's and Walker's novels. Additionally, racial oppression and the challenges faced by the African American women has been evaluated through these novels. A thorough reading of both texts as well as extensive research was done for the purpose of data collection and analysis.

Keywords: Walker, Richardson, *The Color Purple*, *Clarissa*, womanist, other, epistolary voice, Oppression.

1. Introduction

The epistolary novel, or novel in letters, was virtually unknown as a literary genre before Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-8), which came later but considered the greatest and the most extended novel in the epistolary form. Letter-writing, in its eighteenth century form, was used because it "enables the author to present multiple points of view on the same event" (Holman and Harmon, 1992: 175). Since there is correspondence between two or more people, a single event may be narrated by more than one of the characters in order to present their opinions independent of the other characters. According to Natascha Wurzbach (1969), the action of the epistolary novel is immediate. The character does not know what is going to happen because in the time-span of the novel it hasn't happened yet. Furthermore, the author is able to delve into the psychological aspects of the characters' personalities while distancing his own authorial personality. This gives the reader the option of being able to form an objective conclusion of the actions taking place.

The epistolary novel is considered the female's novel since it focuses mainly on the emotional aspects of the female protagonist as well as on the cross-gender relationships which were then considered taboo. As maintained by Anne Bower, "...letters still proffer some sense of physical connection, enduring material substance and/or, individualized or private (confidential) language. Each letter is also a package of aesthetic, conceptual, and emotive qualities, derived from the writer's circumstances, but existing within the context still of his or her society and its values." (2014: 10). Females in the epistolary novel are able to break free from the constraints that society places on them. The letters exchanged between couples could be seen as a prelude to sexual relations similar to modern day courtship. Therefore, such correspondences were unapproved of and even prohibited. Richardson's use of the epistolary form illustrated women's lack of freedom and choice.

* German, Jordanian University, Jordan. Received on 10/4/2016 and Accepted for Publication on 6/11/2017.

The epistolary novel eventually died out only to be resurrected again by the modernist and postmodernist authors of the twentieth century. They have manipulated the traditional epistolary form to suit their individual needs and have adapted various literary techniques in accordance with the changes taking place in women's literature. To gain a better understanding of the situation of the modern epistolary a novel of the eighteenth century, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (ed. 1936), and a novel of the twentieth century, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) have been studied. Their relationship will be established as one of parody from a feminist perspective. Margaret Rose says that parody "may be described as first imitating and then changing either, and sometimes both, the 'form' and 'content', or style and subject-matter, or syntax and meaning of another work, or, most simply, its vocabulary" (1993: 45). Walker has given the African-American feminist a new coinage, calling herself a *womanist* because she "works for the survival and wholeness of her people, men and women both, and for the promotion of dialogue and community as well as for the valorization of women and of all the varieties of work women perform" (Tyson, 1999: 97). According to these definitions, Walker's novel *The Color Purple* can be read as a *womanist* parody of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*; therefore, the aim of this research is to examine both texts and discover to what extent Walker was inspired by Richardson's technique and in what ways she departs from it to reflect the double oppression which her novel portrays. In order to understand Walker's *The Color Purple* in relation to Richardson's *Clarissa*, it is important to first establish the critique on Richardson's *Clarissa* to serve as a point of reference.

Clarissa

Richardson's *Clarissa* is "given in a series of letters written principally in a double yet separate correspondence between two young ladies of virtue and honor... and between two gentlemen of free lives one of them glorying in his talents for stratagem and invention" (Richardson, ed.1962: 13). The title character is the beautiful, virtuous daughter of a wealthy family, who inherits her grandfather's estate and gains the jealousy of her brother and sister as well. Lovelace, who is her sister's possible suitor, falls in love with Clarissa and asks for her hand in marriage. Her family refuses and tries to force her into marrying Solmes, a man whom she does not desire. Following a series of events, Lovelace deceptively takes her with him and imprisons her in the brothel of Mrs. Sinclair. He makes several attempts to seduce Clarissa and she makes several attempts to escape, but all their attempts fail and Lovelace rapes her. She is disgraced to the point of physical deterioration and finally dies. All of the virtuous characters in the novel had successful marriages; however, those characters that were immoral or who dishonored their families were doomed to a fate of unhappiness or even death.

Richardson was very adept at creating Clarissa's character as both an icon for morality and an icon for early feminism. When Richardson wrote *Clarissa* he intended the novel to be an educational novel for the society by portraying Clarissa's character as a lesson in moral values. The image of the chaste, moral female is what Richardson opted for in order to "convey a moral education" (Probyn, 1987: 55). Clarissa's character was perfect in all aspects of femininity and morality. She was wealthy, beautiful, intelligent, religious, and even generous to the poor. Despite all of these exceptionally flawless characteristics, she made the dire mistake of corresponding with Lovelace. Ruth Perry asserts that "letter writing was seen as an inevitable prelude to sexual relations because writing permitted private intercourse between unmarried men and women in an era which never allowed such unsupervised communication in polite society" (1980: 132). Clarissa's exchanging letters with Lovelace was the beginning of her relationship with him. It naturally led to her agreeing to run away with him unaware that his intentions were not noble. During her stay with him, although she adamantly rejected the sexual advances and even the threats that Lovelace made, she was ultimately drugged then raped. Clarissa did not willingly compromise her virtue yet she was not forgiven by her family. She succumbed to the norms of society and allowed her health to deteriorate and eventually died. Her death reiterates the role of the male as an individual and that of the female as the victim of society.

Another important point in *Clarissa* is the moral lesson being taught to young girls. Girls are expected to avoid engaging in a relationship with a man at all costs since even the flawless Clarissa, despite all of her perfection, plummeted

to her demise because of a relationship. However, the other less perfect female counterparts who did not make such a mistake went on to have successful marriages.

On the other end of the spectrum, Clarissa can be considered a lesson in women's independence for the patriarchal society. Although his presentation of Clarissa as a prescribed icon for morality opposes modern day feminist ideology of the individuality of women, for the 18th century female it was considered breaking free from moral expectations and asserting oneself in a society which did not allow women to find their own love and marriage. This is a privilege which the modern day woman takes for granted considering it a natural part of life. Following the rape scene before Clarissa runs away from the brothel she says to Lovelace, "*Let me go, said she: I am but a woman—but a weak woman—but my life is in my own power, though my own person is not—I will not be thus constrained.*" (Richardson, ed. 1936: (6) 46) This quote can be analyzed on two levels. First on the literal level she is referring to her being imprisoned in the brothel. In the scene, she understands that she can take her own life but that she cannot willingly leave so she is asking him to let her go. Secondly, and more importantly, on a symbolic level she is referring to the constraints that society has on women. She admits that as a woman she is weak and that the patriarchal society controls women. Although she rejects being constrained in such a manner she still allows society rejection to cause her deterioration. What can be concluded is that society's view towards women at that time did not allow a female to engage in any form of correspondence with a man and when she did it only served to spiral her downwards from living a privileged life to living in a brothel, being raped and eventually dying.

An additional important point in *Clarissa* is the narrative technique. His technique mimics real life exchanges between individuals to draw the reader into the story and into the lives of its characters. His technique is what the author Lynne Shephard calls the "reality effect" (2009: 169). She adds that Richardson, "used both syntax and typography to mimic the ebb and flow of thought" (2009: 169). This was his way of using words to come as close as possible to expressing the emotions of the characters rather than just narrating the events. He also used different styles of expression and sentence structure for each character to bring each character to life as an individual we can relate to as readers. Another aspect of his narrative style that adds to the feeling of reality is the time span of the novel. His letters are at times written over the span of a few days and at other times several letters are written in the same day. Letters spanned over a few day add to the feeling of relaxed storytelling and slows the reader down in order to focus on the events or thoughts of the character. However, when the pace speeds up and several letters are written in a single day, the atmosphere in the novel intensifies similar to real speech when a speaker cannot seem to get the words out fast enough to express himself.

Furthermore, Richardson allows communication between the characters through the written correspondences. Clarissa is able to confide in her friend Miss Howe. She is her confidant and provides her with emotional release. Richardson allowed the characters in *Clarissa* to send and receive letters in order to have both parties present in the novel. In the Preface to *Clarissa*, Richardson says:

All the letters are written while the hearts of the writers must be supposed to be wholly engaged in their subjects (the events at the time generally dubious) so that they abound not only with critical situations, but with what may be called instantaneous descriptions and reflections. (11)

The letters capture the emotions and reflections of the characters unbiased by their interaction with each other; therefore, the expression will be more genuine. In addition, the reader's attention is focused on each letter independent of its response the reader will be able to learn from the mistakes in the characters themselves.

The Color Purple as Parody

The postmodernist form of the epistolary novel can be seen in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). Walker is an African-American author who is an important figure in feminine literature; she also addresses issues of race and class. Her novel deals with issues of female oppression, sexuality, and identity through the epistolary form. Walker exploits the traditionally Anglo Saxon form of the 18th century epistolary to address issues of African American discrimination and feminism. In her novel, unlike Richardson's traditional epistolary novel, she rewrites the life of the protagonist Celie

who finds her identity and self-worth in an oppressive family and oppressive society. The novel opens with Celie who is an African-American as she is writing her first letter to God. She writes to Him about her father, who is later revealed to be her stepfather, raping her and threatening her into silence. Throughout the novel, she continues to be sexually, physically and verbally abused by him. He impregnates her twice and sells her babies. He finally marries her off to Mr. ____ who also sexually, physically and verbally abuses her. She remains in this state of oppression until Shug Avery helps reunite her with her sister, Nettie, and helps her find her sexuality and independence. It is at the crucial point in the novel when Celie begins to find her identity that she discovers that Nettie is alive and begins to address her letters to her instead of to God. She goes on to start her own pants company, finds her children with the help of her sister and is finally liberated from the restraints of the male members of her family.

In contrast to Richardson's lesson in morality and virtue, the goal of many contemporary women's novels is for women to find their freedom and themselves in the act of writing. The French feminist and writer Helene Cixous in her famous work entitled *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) called upon women to write, to write themselves, to write other women and to let men only write men. She coined this writing *écriture féminine*. Campbell identifies *écriture féminine* as "writing in the feminine--that is, writing themselves in a way which reflects their experience as the "other" in a culture in which they have been traditionally voiceless and thus powerless" (1995: 332). Walker does not use the traditional form of correspondence between two people as Richardson does. Almost the first half of the novel consists of letters which Celie writes to God; she does not write to another human being until almost the middle of the novel. According to Waugh, "Celie's letters (written initially to herself, but there being no available concept of self to ground the process of introspection, actually addressed to God as an impersonal and Authoritative being) [sic] offer such an alternative 'universe of discourse'." (1992: 61)

The need for Celie to write 'to herself' stems from the case that she has no one in which she can confide. This symbolizes that she is essentially voiceless. "Celie's writing is not in itself an act of liberation or even self-expression, but rather an escape valve when all else fails." (Lauret, 2000: 103). God will not answer her letters so the result is a narration that is almost diary-like in form. Celie's letters to God are a medium to vent her feelings about the difficulties she is facing but more importantly to depict her weakness as that of the 'other'. She is a woman bound by the limitations of being female and African American in a society that is male-dominant and oppresses minorities. It is not until towards the middle of the novel when she begins to gain autonomy that she starts addressing her sister, Nettie and finally finding her 'voice'.

With her marriage to Mr. ____ and her sister Nettie growing up,

Celie's letters go from being simple letters of reported speech to more complicated and, in part, direct speech. The direct speech used in the novel isn't said directly by the character himself but through Celie as she narrates it. The first half of the novel is in this form, so Walker bypasses the addressee within the novel, hence making her 'letters' at this point still seem like entries in a diary.

In the second half of the novel Celie addresses her letters to her sister Nettie. This can be understood with a double goal. The first is the physical presence of Nettie in the novel. Mr. ____ had been hiding her previous letters and led Celie to believe that her sister was dead. With the help of Shug, Celie finds the letters and realizes that her sister is in fact alive and had been trying to contact her. According to a second definition of Walker's *womanism*, colored women must stand together against the oppressor in order to maintain women's strength (Lauret, 2000: 19). The oppressors in the novel are the male characters; the female characters have united to form a stronger force. The second goal in the change in addressee is the second narrator Nettie. Celie is beginning to find her independence and her own 'voice'. She even attempts to kill Mr. ____, saying "I watch him so close, I begin to feel a lightening in my head. Fore I know anything I'm standing hind his chair with his razor open" (Walker, 1982: 120). At this point, she begins corresponding with Nettie marking her transformation into the act of liberation.

When Celie was writing to God she didn't sign her name almost as if subconsciously she knew she had no identity. According to Lauret, this form of communication can be understood on two levels, "Celie's progress through her 'finding

a voice' is thus, in my construction, to be taken literally as referring to a speaking voice" (2000: 102). When she found her independence, she was able also to write to another human being. From this point in the novel on, Celie is actually 'telling' her story. "'Telling' is thus confined to spoken, human communication, whereas writing to God does not count as an act of self-empowerment" (Lauret, 2000: 103). Once she was able to let herself be heard telling her story, the reader notices a significant transformation in the character herself. The reader notices Celie maturing throughout the novel and gaining strength of character.

Patricia Waugh maintains that "the actual structure of the novel parodies the forms of early eighteenth-century European bourgeois novel" (1992: 62). According to Elaine Showalter, "If the epistolary novel is not exclusively a woman's form, it conforms (if such a word can be used in relation to a style of writing which is against conformation) to l'écriture féminine, which undermines the linguistic, syntactical, and metaphysical conventions of Western narrative" (qtd. in Campbell, 1995: 334).

Walker's narrative style in her epistolary novel is reflective of Celie's oppression rather than the psychology of the characters. Her novel does not mainly focus on the stream of consciousness because it is possible that it distracts the reader from the events of the text (Qatami, 1998). In *The Color Purple*, Walker focuses on the events themselves to highlight the abuse that Celie experiences as well to follow her emotional maturing throughout the novel. This contrasts with Richardson's style which mainly focused on the psychology of his characters. It was important for him to focus on the reasoning behind their actions in order to provide a lesson for the reading public since his goal was to write his characters as models of morality. The epistolary technique in *The Color Purple* "manifests itself as a liberal representation of a protagonist creating herself by finding this voice 'in the act of writing' (Gates, 1988: 131). The technique is used to reflect action and plot of how she found her voice rather than streams of consciousness. This allows Walker to present Celie's personal growth throughout her lifetime instead of her reflections on one incident and/or time period. Instead of using introspection and reflection on the events that take place in the novel, Walker uses language to exhibit Celie's emotional state. Her sentences go from very short, poorly written statements to more complex, well-written statements. This transformation symbolizes her growth from within as a woman who has found her voice because she has found herself.

In addition, Walker's chose to have Celie speak in the African-American vernacular while her sister Nettie uses Standard English. By using the African American vernacular Walker asserts her ethnicity and resists racial oppression. According to Linda Abbandonato,

The expressive flexibility of the Afro-American vernacular, a supposedly inferior speech, is measured against the repressed and rigid linguistic codes to which Nettie has conformed; the position of standard (white) English is challenged, and Celie's vitality is privileged over Nettie's dreary correctness. Nettie has been imaginatively stunted, her language bleached white and her ethnicity virtually erased (1991: 1108).

using this dialect of English Celie can be considered not only a symbol of female oppression but also a symbol of racial oppression. All of the hardships that she experienced, the sexual abuse, the selling of her babies, and not having a voice can be seen as being parallel to the hardships that African Americans faced at the hands of the white oppressors. On the other hand, regarding Nettie's use of Standard English, Walker seems to be contrasting the past with the present. Nettie's letters in standard English allude to the past; a past symbolic of white oppressors. Celie's letters, however, are the present, a present which asserts the 'black' vernacular and as such a form of ethnic empowerment.

Conclusion

Walker's novel can be considered a parody of Richardson's *Clarissa* in that she uses a genre that was dominated by the Anglo Saxon male in bourgeois society to write the story of a female by a female oppressed by males who are oppressed by the society they live in. Although Walker employs a structure that was originated by a male, her postmodernist approach makes her novel in accordance with the form of écriture féminine. She allows Celie to rewrite her life as 'other,' while breaking free from the constraints of the male dominance within the novel, as well as, the male

dominance outside the novel. Walker exploits the literary conventions that Richardson uses yet preserves her own literary heritage. By masterfully employing a genre traditionally reserved for Anglo Saxon males she has turned their own weapons against them and has asserted her own voice to overcome the African American woman's double oppression.

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نظرة أخرى في الرواية الرسائلية: باروديا أليس واكر النسوية لرواية كلاريسا للكاتبة ريتشاردسون

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ملخص

تستخدم كل من سامويل ريتشاردسون في روايتها كلاريسا وأليس واكر في روايتها اللون البنفسجي أسلوب الرواية الرسائلية بهدف التطرق المباشر لعلم نفس الشخصيات دون تدخل القيود المجتمعية في التعبير عن الأحداث أو المشاعر أو الأفكار المحرمة. صوّر استخدام ريتشاردسون لهذه الرواية "البرجوازية" الرغبات المكثومة للعشاق لبعضهم البعض أو للمقربين منهم. عادةً، يكون الهدف من الرواية الرسائلية تعليم المرأة حسن التصرف. أما رواية واكر فهي باروديا أو محاكاة ساخرة نسوية لكلاريسا، حيث تبنّت فيها أسلوب كتابة الرسائل لتمنح صوتاً للاضطهاد المضاعف للأنثى الإفريقية-الأمريكية وتحررها الشخصي والعاطفي. وقد تم شرح مفهوم الأنثوية لدى كل من ريتشاردسون وواكر كما ورد في رواياتهما بالإضافة إلى تحليل ما ورد فيهما بما يتعلق بالاضطهاد العرقي والتحديات التي واجهت المرأة الإفريقية-الأمريكية.

الكلمات الدالة: واكر، ريتشاردسون، اللون الأرجواني، كلاريسا، امرأة، أخرى، صوت إبيستولاري، القمع.

* الجامعة الألمانية الأردنية، الأردن. تاريخ استلام البحث 2016/4/10، وتاريخ قبوله 2017/11/6.