

Celebrating Womanism through Intertextuality in Sapphire's Push and Alice Walker's The Color Purple

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Abstract

The objects of this study are Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sapphire's *Push*. This study is trying to unveil the intertextuality between the two works of literature above in order to trace back Sapphire's attempt of celebrating Womanism in Black American women literature through intertextuality. In order to examine the similarity shared by Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sapphire's *Push*, Kristeva's Intertextuality is used as the theoretical framework of the study. The structural elements of the text such as themes, plots, character and language as well as background information such as social, historical, cultural and religious background of the novel are examined thoroughly. This study focuses on how Alice Walker's idea of Womanism in *The Color Purple* influences Sapphire to write a novel with a similar topic of discussion under the umbrella of Womanism. Supported by citations and quotations in both novel, this study uncover the absence of motherhood as well as the emergence of sisterhood in both novels. Those novels also shares similarity in portraying the importance of education as a site of struggle of Black American Woman. The similarity that these novels have when working on the issue of Womanism undergone by Black American women and also several quotes of Alice Walker's work of literature in *Push* manifested the Sapphire's celebration of womanism through intertextuality in her novel.

Keywords: Womanism; Alice Walker; intertextuality; black American women.

Bakhtin (1981) states that a prose is a complex process of appropriating someone else's conception of the world into our own conception of language and context (293). No word can be neutral in a prose, but rather every discourse is created as a response to the previous discourses in the particular text besides activating the production of other discourses in the rest of the text as a response to itself by "populating it with his own intentions,

his own accent" (293). Some literary work always share some similarities with the others literary work, either coincidentally or not. Every text is affected by all the texts that came before it, since those texts influenced the author's thinking and aesthetic choices. It is impossible to create a literary work which is totally different from any literary works in this world. The author of that kind of literary work may read another literary work and so

much influenced and inspired by it, so that the author devotes that idea into her/his own literary work.

In African American Literature, one of the most influential literary works is *The Color Purple*. It is one of the Alice Walker's masterpiece which becomes a symbol of remedy, enlightenment, and empowerment of African American young generation. Published in 1982, *The Color Purple* aroused a controversy because of its provoking black cultural representation. Many critics complained that the novel underlined the narrative's domestic perspective on old racist stereotypes about depravity in black communities and of black men in particular. Walker was accused of focusing firmly on sexism at the expense of addressing ideas of racism in America. The heated controversies surrounding *The Color Purple* are a statement of its influential effects that the work has emerged on cultural and racial discourse in the United States. Nonetheless, *The Color Purple* also had its keen supporters in black community, especially among black women, that glorified the novel as a black feminist fable.

Considered as a very controversial, yet influential novel at that time, *The Color Purple* became the window of African American Women's world which inspired the younger African American Women to write the same or similar topic in their writings. One of the novel which stole world's attention was Sapphire's *Push*. Published in 1996, the novel brought Sapphire compliment and much controversy for its depiction of an African-American young woman growing up in a toxic and abusive environment. The controversy emerges not only because of its theme, but also Sapphire's writing style. Sapphire's *Push* was told in Precious's rude and unpolished tone. From some people, the use of Black Vernacular English in this novel is considered to be quite offensive.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sapphire's *Push* both literary works written by African-American writer who explore and

expose the story of African-American women struggle in the condition that is very much unfortunate for them. Both main characters of the stories share some basic similarities. They are considered to be poor, ugly, and illiterate. Their miserable conditions make them experience very hard lives. Both of them suffer from the abuse done by people surround them. Although, it seems hard for them to get rid of their problem, both of them are able to survive and finally improve their own lives.

Sapphire's *Push* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* highlighted the life of African American women and their struggle to survive in a repressive society. Both of them not only have similarity in term of the origin of the writers who are African-American women, but also share similarity in many parts of the literary work. Considering that Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* was published earlier than Sapphire's *Push*, this study aims to trace the intertextuality between Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sapphire's *Push* and the depiction of Alice Walker's Womanism in both literary works.

Scholars tend to define womanism as a black feminism or feminism of color. Womanism has some distinct characteristics than feminism in general. "Lov[ing] individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually" (Walker, 1984: xi) is an apparent characteristic of a womanist. A womanist committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female without attacking black men. Womanism is a symbol of strength, survival and struggle of Black woman.

The intertextuality between Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sapphire's *Push*, does not merely show how similar they are, but also an attempt to understanding those novel into another level. Recognising and understanding texts through intertextuality leads to a much richer reading experience which invites new interpretations as it brings another context, idea, story into the text at hand. Intertextuality brings us to commemorate the earlier text in order to grasp its insight and

idea. Intertextuality also leads to a sense of continuity and connection of texts, ideas, and cultures.

An intertextual analysis is very helpful to identify which realm of sources an author relies on and how they do this as well as to understand how an author attempts to characterize, rely on, and advance prior work in their related fields of study. In this study, the major purpose for conducting the intertextual analysis was to examine how Sapphire captured womanism shown in *The Color Purple* and performed it in *Push*. That is, the analysis aimed to explore how Sapphire included other sources in their texts, what types of sources she used, what she used these sources for, and how she positioned herself in relation to Alice Walker's womanism.

Intertextuality

Derived from the Latin *intertexto*, intertextuality is a term first introduced by Julia Kristeva in the late sixties. In essays such as "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," Kristeva broke with traditional notions of the author's "influences" and the text's "sources," positing that all signifying systems, from table settings to poems, are constituted by the manner in which they transform earlier signifying systems. A literary work, then, is not simply the product of a single author, but of its relationship to other texts and to the structures of language itself. As quoted from Julia Kristeva, "each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read... any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double." (Kristeva, 1980).

According to Kristeva in Napiah (xv), intertextuality has its own rules, among others: (1) intertextuality realizes that the essence of a text contains a variety of texts. (2) intertextuality analyzes a work based on the aspects that govern the work, namely structural elements such as themes, plots, character and language, as well as elements outside the structure such

as historical, cultural, and religious elements that are part of the composition of the text. (3) intertextuality examines the balance between internal and external aspects by looking at the function and purpose of the presence of these texts. (4) intertextuality theory also states that a text is created based on other works. The study does not only focus on the text that is read, but examines other texts to see aspects that permeate the text that is written or read or studied. (5) what is emphasized in the intertextuality is respecting the taking, presence and inclusion of other elements into a work.

Womanism

Alice Walker coined the term "womanist" in her 1983 book "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose." Many women of color in the 1970s had quested to expand the feminism of the Women's Liberation Movement beyond its concern for the problems of white middle-class women. "Womanist" signified an inclusion of race and class issues in feminism. The term "womanist" is thus both an alternative to as well as an expansion of the term "feminist" itself.

The term "feminist" and "womanist" have to be separated because the struggle of white woman and black women to gain an equality is incomparable. The white women still have a privilege that a black women do not have. The black women were remained separate from the white woman in the eye of the feminists. The feminists were not embracing and treating colored women as women, but as a completely different species.

A key aspect of white women's privilege has been their ability to assume that when they talked about themselves they were talking about all women, and many white feminists have unthinkingly generalized from their own situation, ignoring the experiences of black women, or treating them as marginal and "different." Many have also projected western concerns and priorities onto the rest of the world, measuring

“progress” according to western liberal standards and identifying a global system of patriarchy through which “differences are treated as local variations on a universal theme” (Liu 1994:574)

Womanists wanted to decenter white feminists and challenge the ‘normality’ of their perspective (Bryson 2003:228). Womanism served as a notion of different modes of behavior and thinking, and retrieved the submerged history which led to the transformation and redefinition of existing norms and to the broadening of traditional views of “white” feminist movement. Alice Walker also used “womanist” to refer to a “black feminist or feminist of color” who loves other women and/or men sexually and/or nonsexually, appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility and women’s strength and is committed to “survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1983). Womanism is seen as a weapon for the black women to fight back the repressive and dominating society which place them at the bottom of social ladder.

Womanism celebrated of all cites of struggle in Black Women’s life. According to Collins, “Womanism seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender oppression without attacking black men.” (Collins, 11) Themes such as “motherhood, mother/daughter relationships, women’s friendships, and the relationship between sexuality and spirituality in African American cosmologies” (The Norton Anthology. African American Literature, 1997: 2016) are commonly portrayed as the symbols of womanism. Razak stated that Walker focuses on the “sharing and mentorship that are a traditional part of idealized Black mother-daughter relationships.” (Razak, 99) Biological mothers or bloodmothers are expected to care for their children. However, African and African-American communities have also recognized that motherhood is a collective responsibility and a part of communal lifestyle and interdependence of community (Collins,

45-47). So that, when the mother/daughter relationship does not go accordingly, the community can take over that responsibility of mothering and transform that into the other types of relationship such as sisterhood and friendship among Black communities.

Motherhood does the action of preserving, protecting, and empowering black children so that they could resist harmful racist practices as well as education. Education has played an important role in the history of Black people in the United States. Historically, education has been a recurring act of resistance across historical time periods for Blacks. Blacks continued to seek educational opportunities as a way up and a way out of slavery through the Civil Rights movement (Ricks 10). For Black girls, undergoing a proper education can be challenging yet promising. As stated by Thomas and Jackson (2007), “the educational advancements of African American women have clearly afforded them opportunities to play a critical role in the empowerment of African American communities and ‘uplift’ of the African American race” (p. 368)

Womanism coined by Alice Walker gave influential insight to the other black women authors to continue the the literary tradition of the African American literature in their writings. One of notable works of literature that tried to bring back the spirit of womanism is Sapphire’s *Push*. Intertextuality is considered as an important characteristic of *Push* because Sapphire mentioned some evidences all over her work in order to glorify and to celebrate Alice Walker and her womanism as the foundation of her inspiration to write *Push*.

Discussion

The Value of Literacy and/or Education

The value of literacy became the one of the concerns of most black women’s writing. Literacy and/or education becomes hope and solution to overcome their problem. Literacy and/or education can also be seen as an attempt to empower themselves to fight against

domination in the society. Collins (1991) defends the need to highlight the importance of education and knowledge within black women spheres, as she states:

Black feminist thought demonstrates Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge. By portraying African-American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression, Afrocentric³³ feminist thought speaks to the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people. (221)

Becoming the bottom part of social ladder, the black women were told to be silent and invisible. As an entirely passive party who has no power to express their feeling through actions or words freely, silence was seen as the only option they had to survive in the dominating society they were facing. However, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as well as Sapphire's *Push* take the value of literacy and/or education into account. They both agreed that literacy and/or education were crucial to the spirit of womanism.

In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* the main character, Celie, was illiterate. It was Nettie, her sister, who taught her how to read and write. From that now on, she started to read and write. When finally her husband forced her to be separated from her sister, the only thing she was able to do to communicate with her daughter was by letter. That is why, she liked to write letter. At the beginning, she continuously sent her sister a letter. However, when her husband knew what had happened between Celie and Nettie, he started to hide the letter that was sent by Nettie to Celie. From that moment, she also wrote a letter to God. Her letters to God, in which she begins to pour out her story, become her only outlet.

Through letters, Celie is able to express and confess anything to God and Nettie. Writing letters can be said as Cellie's only self expression. She knows for sure that God will never reply her letter. Considering that she

does not have right to speak at all, through writing letters, she just wants to have someone to talk to. Writing letter can be considered as the only catharsis that Celie is able to do. Celie writes letters to God, and Nettie writes letters to Celie. Both sisters gain strength from their letter writing, but they are saved only when they receive responses to their letters.

In Sapphire's *Push*, Precious cannot easily express herself because of her illiteracy. However, after Precious enters the Higher Education Alternative/ Each One Teach One, Precious shows progress in acquiring the ability to read and write. Her initial writing skill is actually a representation of her self-expression. When Miz Rain asks her to write one word for each letter, this list turns into an inventory of the pain and degradation she has experienced ("dog, evil like mama, fuck, gun, home, kill, North America, open, punks, stop, two ton, zonked"), but also, of her feelings of hope ("Africa, Baby, black colored, Farrakhan real man, home, I somebody, Jermaine, love, main man Malcolm, Queen Latifah, respect, vote, well").

In the journal that every student is supposed to have, Miz Rain communicates with Precious. This direct contact encourages her for not giving up. "I am happy to be writing. I am happy to be in school. Miz Rain say we gonna write everyday, that mean home too. 'N she gonna write back everyday. That great." (Sapphire 62) Writing her life story cannot change Precious's miserable past; but it can be an escape from her problems. What literacy brings is the exact opposite: a means of expression, a possible to create and to recreate herself, and to share her story with others. This novel captures Precious's struggle to make peace with her miserable past and unbearable present as well as to discover her new self.

Both Celie and Precious found that writing was a way out and an outlet to their problem. Through writing, they outspoke their problem. The journal that Precious wrote for Miss Rain and the letter that Celie wrote to God become the symbols of their strength

and self-esteem to get out of the oppression and domination which keep them silent for years.

The Absence of Motherhood, The Emergence of Sisterhood

The theme of child abuse is very much striking as a means to convey the doubly suppressed situation in which Black American women often found (and still find) themselves: Marginalized by the white majority and at best not taken seriously and at worst actively suppressed within the rigid patriarchic structures of black rural communities. This fact awakens many writers to create a literary work under the theme of child abuse. That is why the emergence of child abuse as a theme in 20th century Black American women's literature is very substantial. Black girls, moreover, are considered to be the most unfortunate level in social structure. They place in the lowest rank of social structure level. They are easy to experience abusive behavior from people in their environment.

Both *The Color Purple* and *Push* depicts the picture of a family failed to provide the safe and secure environment for the children. Celie in *The Color Purple* and Precious in *Push* experience abusive behavior from the person they believed as their 'Father Figure'. The absence of the motherhood during the hardest time of their lives constructs the way they perceive themselves as Black women who tend to be the object of oppression and domination. Mother plays an important role to instill the values that her daughter should have. As Nancy Chodorow mentions, "women's mothering is a central and defining feature of the social organization of gender and is implicated in the construction and reproduction of male dominance itself." (1978)

Celie has been repeatedly raped by the man she believes to be her father. The man Celie calls Pa rapes her repeatedly and has made her pregnant twice. In Celie's case, her mother is too ill and depressed that she does

not know what happens between her daughter and her husband. Later in her letter, Celie describes how her mother dies "cussing and screaming." Celie is pregnant, and her dying mother wonders who the father of Celie's baby is. Celie told her that the father of her child is God. Instead of protecting her child from the sexual abuse performed by her husband, Celie's mother hates and blames Celie for what happened between Celie and her husband instead.

"My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me. I'm big. I can't move fast enough. ... She ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God's. I don't know no other man or what else to say. ... Don't nobody come see us. She got sicker an sicker. Finally she ast Where it is? I say God took it. He took it. He took it while I was sleeping." (Walker 4)

Like Celie in *The Color Purple*, *Push*'s main character, Claireece P. Jones, is the survivor of a violent childhood and youth. At the age of 16, she has already had two children by the man she knows as her father. She gives birth to her first down syndrome child when she is twelve years old. Her ignorant mother has not only allowed these rapes to occur, but also beats and accuses Precious for stealing her man. Her mother even treats her as a maidservant around the house. In that house, Precious does not only suffer from sexual abuse done by her father, but also verbal and physical abuse done by her mother.

"...N she standing there 'n pain hit me, then pain go sit down, then pain git up 'n hi me harder! 'N she standing there screaming at me, "Slut! Goddam slut! You fuckin' cow! I don't believe this, right under my nose. You been high tailing it roud here. Pain hit me again, the she hit me. I'm on the floor groaning, "Mommy please, Mommy please, please Mommy! Mommy! Mommy! MOMMY!" then she KICK me side of my face! "Whore! Whore!" she screaming." (Sapphire 9)

Although the motherhood seems to be absent in both *The Color Purple* and *Push*, the novels portray the emergence of sisterhood among the female characters in the novel. The power of sisterhood takes over the responsibility of the motherhood for upholding and empowering the main character of the novel in order to find their self-esteem for fight against the domination. Hudson-Weems defines sisterhood as

“...a reciprocal one, one in which each gives and receives equally. In this community of women, all reach out in support of each other, demonstrating a tremendous sense of responsibility for each other by looking out for one another. They are joined emotionally, as they embody empathetic understanding of each other’s shared experiences. Everything is given out of love, criticism included, and in the end, the sharing of the common and individual experiences and ideas yields rewards.” (Hudson-Weems, 2004)

In a world where people are frequently pitted against each other, women need each other’s back to strengthen their position in society. Women are empowered when they share bonding with the each other. The bonds of sisterhood will get rid of the feelings of hatred and unnecessary competition between each other. According to Hooks (2000) in reference to this concept, “women come together, rather than pretend union, [they] would acknowledge that [they] are divided and must develop strategies to overcome fears, prejudices, resentments, competitiveness, etc” (65).

In *The Color of Purple*, at least there are two strong sisterhood bonding considered as the influential bondings that shape and reshape Celie’s self-esteem. The sisterhood to Nettie, her own sister, is influential to her early life as a wife of an abusive husband and rude stepchildren. Nettie motivates Celie to react decisively to the mistreatment of Mr. ____ and his children. Nettie also arms Celie

with the best weapon she could grant to her sister: knowledge and self-awareness. “Don’t let them run over you, Nettie say . . . You got to fight. You got to fight” (Walker 17). Therefore, Nettie tries to pass on her revolutionary spirit by encouraging Celie to speak up and begin to take action to overcome her misery. The decision of Nettie to fight back against Mr. ____ harassment and to leave that family behind is the best action that she could exemplify to her sister on how a woman should respond to the mistreatment of the society.

Not only have a strong sisterhood with her own sister, but Celie also has a strong bond with Shug Avery. Shug gives an enormous influence over Celie’s life. She demonstrates her a new way of exploring her sexuality and enjoying it. Moreover, she is a key character in raising Celie’s self-awareness about the violence that Celie has been through in her marriage that mostly irradiate the issue of sexual abuses and gender violence. Formerly, Celie has never talked the constant physical abuse she suffers from Mr. _____. However, when she begins to feel comfortable to Shug, she opens her heart to Shug and tells her: “He beat me when you not here. . . For being me and not you” (66). Although she is the total opposite of Celie in every way, Shug’s friendship and advice lead Celie to finally liberate herself, learn about her own sexuality and eroticism, and grows as a woman.

In *Sapphire’s Push*, Precious, the main character, also has a strong bonding to the other female character in the novel. Ms. Rain, Precious’ teacher, builds a connection to Precious to identify further the situation experienced by Precious which leads to her learning difficulty. Finding comfort in her relationship with Ms. Rain, Precious starts to rise from adversity and begins to find a peace in writing and learning. Ms. Rain’s class of writing becomes a healing therapy for Precious to express her problem. Initially, Precious tries to avoid any communication with Ms. Rain. Early in her writing class, Precious is always asked by Ms. Rain to say something bad about

herself. However, all she can answer is “nuffin”. Finally, after some time, Precious starts to open herself and express her thought. “Everybody do something good”, Ms Rain say in soft voice. I shake my head, can’t think of nuffin’ I’m staring at my shoes. “One thing.” Ms. Rain. “I can cook.” (Sapphire 46) Everyone but Miz Rain, always underestimated her and saw her as dumb and treated her as such. However, Ms. Rain recognized the potential in Precious and expected a lot from her because of it. She always encourages her love herself and help her to recognize her potential.

Precious’s decision to talk and write helps her to liberate her burden. Ms. Rain always reminds her that “writing could be the boat carry you to the other side.”(99) Precious trusted her teacher Ms. Rain and turned to her in her most helpless moment in life when she had nowhere to go. Even in the lowest point of her life, Precious trusts Ms. Rain for acknowledging that the power of writing is an escape of the problem she is experiencing. Not only Ms. Rain who becomes Precious’ sisterhood support system, the girls in her class were there for her and had similar experiences. They were able to share their stories and help each other heal. “They (the girls) and Ms. Rain is my friends and family. At least when I look at the girls I see them and when they look they see ME, not what I look like.”(Sapphire 95)

The Color Purple in Push

The Color Purple can be considered as one of the most influential literary work for both Precious and Ms Rain. The Color Purple and Alice Walker are mentioned several times in Push. Precious says: “We reading The Color Purple in school. Which is really hard for me” (Sapphire,81); by this she means that it is difficult technically because she is barely literate, but also emotionally because of the mirroring effect of Celie’s story.

“Things going good in my life, almost like The Color Purple.... Ms Rain say one of the criticisms of The Color Purple is it have fairy tale ending. I would say, well shit like that can be true. Life can work out for the best sometimes. Ms Rain love Color Purple too but say realism has its virtues too.” (Sapphire, 83)

The Color Purple becomes a mandatory reading book as a learning media taught in Ms. Rain’s classroom. The Color Purple is a witness that affirms how Precious transformed and empowered by her support system in the form of literacy/education and sisterhood during Ms. Rain’s class. Sapphire even confirms how influential Alice Walker and her book to Precious’ life in the last page of the book containing a collection of poems written by Ms. Rain’s students. From an illiterate girl beforehand, Precious transformed into someone who is capable of quoting some of African American literature best authors, especially Alice Walker.

“HOLD FAST TO DREAMS
Langston say.
GET UP OFF YOUR KNEES
Farrakhan say.
CHANGE
Alice Walker say”(Sapphire)

Conclusion

Push is written on the foundation of Alice Walker’s womanism. By comparing some parts of Push and The Color Purple, it can be seen that they share some significant similarities on the topic of womanism highlighted in both of the literary works. Both of the literary works underline the importance of literacy and/or education as a way out for the Black women to overcome the deterioration caused by the multiple oppression performed by the society. Alice walker’s womanism also emphasizes the role of Black women and the interaction with the society, even more with the other fellow Black women. Following her precursor, Sapphire also depicts the relationship of the female main character in Push and the other

female characters in the form of sisterhood as the essential part of the development of the self-esteem and the process of self-empowerment to fight against the patriarchal society. *Push* and *The Color Purple* do not only share some similar topic, but Sapphire also mentions Alice Walker and her work of literature blatantly in the novel. The intertextuality shown in the form of similarity and direct influence of *The Color Purple* to *Push* confirm the attempt of Sapphire to continue and celebrate the tradition of womanism in African American literature.

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