Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 4 (53) No.1 - 2011

PERICULTURE AND POSTCOLONIALISM. INSIDE THE *COLOR PURPLE*

Ecaterina PAVEL[1]

Abstract: *This paper is based on the study of postcolonial theories in order to analyze and extend their characteristics, by applying them to Alice Walker's novel, "The Color Purple". There have been many approaches on the concept of hybridity, but in this paper I create a system meant to illustrate different nuances related to the opposition of Self and Other, named the pericultural system. Results show that the opposition between the Self and the Other, translated as the opposition colonized/colonizer, leads to a classification reflecting the association or the dissociation of colliding cultures. This classification is applied to the analysis of Alice Walker's narrative. The conclusions point out that no culture remains as it is and the only constant thing is the continual changing.*

Keywords: *postcolonialism, translational, cross-cultural, Alice Walker.*

1. Introduction

Much has been said about Alice Walker's epistolary novel, *The Color Purple*, and its feminist dimension; nevertheless, this characteristic represents only the tip of the iceberg, the eye-striking feature, as this book is also a representative example of postcolonial literature. By illustrating Afro-American life both of the colonized and of the colonizers, the narrative becomes the literature of otherness and resistance, built up around a triple oppression (cultural, racial and sexual) and around the inner evolution of culture. In the next chapter I will leave aside the literary text and focus upon the theory that will constitute the fundament of this novel's analysis.

There has been much arguing among postcolonial scholars regarding the structure of the postcolonial canon. There has also been much debating on the term "postcolonial" itself. Which are the meanings of this term and which relevant concepts is it built around? What qualifies *The Color Purple* as postcolonial literature? These are the main questions I will try to answer, by questioning and redefining some of the widespread notions of the postcolonial literature, by comparing, contrasting and analyzing them in connection to Alice Walker's narrative.

2. New directions in the hybridity theory

The term "post(-)colonialism" has been used by scholars in confusing and sometimes inconsistent, incompatible ways, which made it difficult to fix its meaning.

[1] Doctoral studies, Faculty of Letters, *Transylvania* University of Brasov.

BDD-A20195 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:04 UTC)

First of all, should it be spelled with or without a hyphen? I tend to agree with John McLeod who opts for the latter only when it comes to denoting "*disparate forms of representations, reading practices and values*," whereas "post-colonialism" refers strictly to "*a particular historical period or epoch, like those suggested by phrases such as 'after colonialism', 'after independence' or 'after the end of the Empire'*."(McLeod, 5) The explication tends to avoid ambiguity, enouncing that the term "post-colonial" implies solely a diachronic perspective, a simple attempt to provide another historical periodisation. But even by trying to make this distinction between the two ways of spelling this word, and each implication that they bring about, ambiguity still remains; this is why we deal today with labels like "trans-national" or "trans-colonial", as there are some aspects and nuances which have remained unexplored or unexpressed when it comes to postcolonial theories.

Certainly, the aiming of postcolonial theory is the "trans-", if not the trance, namely the movement itself of crossing, of passage. And it is due to postcolonial theories that scholars tried to contemplate the relations between self and other, the connections among worlds, disciplines, cultures, leaving behind the old humanist method of "inter-" (internationalism, interdisciplinary), but by means of trans/ trance (internal modification or difference, trans-nationalism, trans-disciplinary). To quote Homi Bhabha, "*Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. […]The act of signification ...must always ...have within them a kind of self-alienating limit. Meaning is constructed across the bar of difference and separation between the signifier and the signified. So it follows that no culture is full unto itself, no culture is plainly ...not only because there are other cultures which contradict its authority, but also because its own symbol*-forming activity, ...always underscores the claim to an originary, holistic, organic identity." (Bhabha, 1990, 208-209) When two cultures meet or collide, identities lose their consistency, they are in a continuous movement, migration one towards another, they are in constant change until they enter a new stage, called new identity. Some theorists consider that such spaces of mixing cultures, such mingling values, traditions and beliefs are spaces of hybridity, where truth and authenticity become shapeless and no one can stand for an absolute value. Homi Bhabha relaunches the term "hybridity" and pleads for this space of interference, as one that offers the most profound and satisfactory challenge to colonialism. (Bhabha, 1994, 113)

Whether the space of hybridity is a source of cultural richness and contentment or not, the question has remained unanswered and I think it will remain so, since absolute truth is not this zone's characteristic. However, the term "hybridity" itself seems not satisfactory, and neither are "translational" or "transnational", as I find them rather poor in depicting nuances and differences. Therefore, in order to have a background theory relevant for my analysis, I tried to create another theoretical system regarding the relation between two meeting cultures, between self and other. I took as a point of departure and as a root for my system the word "culture", since "culture" and "colony" come both from the same Latin verb "colo, colere, cultus", especially taking into consideration the perfect participle "cultus", which has also a religious dimension. The various Latin prefixes added to this root will constitute the basis for a classification meant to underline the different types of hybridity

BDD-A20195 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:04 UTC)

and the way cultures perceive one another. I will call this classification **the pericultural system,** as it is elaborated around the culture of the colonized/ colonizers.

It is only in contact to a different culture that the individual becomes aware of the self. Since otherness includes doubleness, both identity and difference, I would translate the two concepts of identity, Self and Other, in terms of **exoculture** (the culture of the Other, the exterior one) and **endoculture** (the culture of Self, one's own culture, the one that one belongs to, an "innate nature"). The endoculture becomes the **apoculture**, namely one that is left behind, a culture that one separates from, in order to join the exoculture, which becomes **adoculture** (the culture toward one moves, although it is still unfamiliar). Before integration takes place and a new identity is formed, before the exoculture becomes endoculture, there is an intermediary phase, allowing the assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices. This stage is what postcolonial scholars define as hybridity and I will define as **ambiculture**, since the subject tends to incorporate cultural signs from both ways and to make room from elements belonging both to adoculture and to apoculture. There is, though, an aspect related to this phase of hybridity – the loss of direction, the sentiment of alienation, the nervous condition where the subject felt split up between two worlds and belonging to neither of them: the **schizoculture**. And, finally, there is the **opisthoculture**, meaning a culture that one belonged to once and now turns back to, even though only temporarily. I don't insist on this classification now, as I will try in the next chapter to make a connection and an analysis of these categories, in relation to Alice Walker's novel.

3. The pericultural system in *The Color Purple*

In his work, *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, Jacques Derrida affirms that every culture is, by definition, colonial, appropriating and expropriating at the same time; therefore, colonialism cannot be left behind, or, at least, not by means of postcolonialism. [4] This idea is particularly relevant when discussing upon the world created by Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*: America's identity (both of a colonizer and of a colonized nation), is illustrated by means of the double destiny of black people living in USA, who, as former slaves, are neither free nor close to their African roots. The novel is a vivid panorama and an eloquent example on how cultures may intermingle or remain in incongruity, on how individuals or groups migrate towards one cultural identity from another in order to discover or to create one of their own. There are, in this, book, all categories of the above-mentioned cultures: there are main characters, black people from the South, still oppressed and discriminated, there are the black people in the North who amaze Nettie, since they have "normal lives", cheerful and free. There are the black American missionaries (Samuel, Corrine, Nettie, Adam and Olivia) who go to Africa, where they do not find themselves at home at all. In Africa we encounter the Olinka tribe, uncolonized yet, and their tragedy of meeting the "civilized world". And, of course, there is Celie, the protagonist, who reiterates, who remakes the journey of colonized Africans, from their selling into slavery to their liberation and gaining their independence. And there are strong, independent back women who have already reached this phase in a way or another (like Shug). In what follows I will quote from Alice Walker's novel and I

BDD-A20195 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:04 UTC)

will make the reference only for the first quotation. For the ones that will appear afterwards in this paper I will only write the page number where the fragment is cited from.

3.1. Exoculture vs. endoculture

The opposition between exoculture and endoculture is the opposition between Self and Other, between the colonized and the colonizer. On the one hand, when the colonizers form the endoculture, the differences between them and the colonized (the exoculture) give birth to racism, oppression and prejudice. When asked by a white man where they were going, the black missionaries face an offensive, discriminative reaction: "*Niggers going to Africa, he said to his wife. Now I have seen everything."* (Walker, 141)

Another example of such prejudices in the mentality of a dominant culture, which looks down at the colonized and consider them to form an inferior and primitive, even barbarous culture, is Nettie's remark regarding Africa's tribes: "*Miss Beasley used to say it was a place overrun with savages who didn't wear clothes. Even Corrine and Samuel thought like this at times*." (p.137)

The conflict between endo- and exoculture takes in the novel dramatic proportions; it is the case of Celie's natural father, who is considered an outsider and so, one night, the man's store is burned down by the white merchants, his smithy destroyed, and the black man and his two brothers "*dragged out of their homes in the middle of the night and hanged*." (p. 180)

The exploitation and slavery represent another facet of the collision between a dominant power and a colonized nation. In England, Nettie encounters the vestiges of this abuse the colonizers subjected her ancestors to: "'*Hard times' is a phrase the English love to use, when speaking of Africa. And it is easy to forget that Africa's 'hard times' were made harder by them*." (p. 145.)

Nevertheless, when Sofia refuses to work for the Mayor's wife and beats him, she is imprisoned for her behaviour to the white people. Afterwards, she feels like a slave in her American village, at the Mayor's house, where she works after she gets out of the prison on parole:

"*They got me in a little storeroom up under the house, hardly bigger than Odessa's porch, and just about as warm in the winter time. I'm at they beck and call all night and all day. They won't let me see my children. They won't let me see no mens. Well, after five years they let me see you once a year. I'm a slave, she say. What would you call it? A captive, he say.*" (p.108)

On the other hand, when the endoculture is constituted by the dominated nation or group, being under the pressure of the exoculture, the effects are either the obedient silence, or the outburst of revolt. Resistance becomes subversion, opposition or mimicry. For instance, when the Mayor's wife asks Sofia to work for her, she refuses in a rough tone: "*she say, would you like to work for me, be my maid? Sofia say, Hell no. Mayor look at Sofia, push his wife out the way. Stick out his chest. Girl, what you say to Miss Millie? Sofia say, I say, Hell no. He slap her. ... Sofia knock the man down.*" (p.90)

When asked to marry Adam, Tashi goes through the female initiation and accepts to be mutilated and also to scar tribal marks on her face, only to make it clear that she belongs to a culture that she is not willing to turn her back to. In order to be accepted in marriage, Adam scars his face too, although he is aware that they are not to remain in the Olinka village and that he will never belong there.

Unlike Adam's case, where he copies Tashi and the cultural sign of the

BDD-A20195 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:04 UTC)

exoculture, Celie appeals to a different type of mimicry. She behaves like Sofia in order to survive the impulse of killing her husband. She doesn't raise her voice; she stays silent and takes revenge on him at a symbolical level: "*All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. In my mind, he falling dead every which a way."* (p.125)

Celie's silence in front of men who abuse her open new perspectives regarding the antagonism between the endoculture and the exoculture, but also reminds us of Spivak's subaltern who persists in remaining silent. First of all, it is not only about the power in terms of a nation, but also regarding two worlds: the men's and the women's. Postcolonial theories have had a particular effect on the approach on feminism. There was a strong bound between the two, which gave birth to the post-feminism. As Spivak notices, in a phallocentric culture, "*the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves; race and class differences are subsumed under that charge. Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. […] If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.* (Spivak, 82-83)

The simple yet efficient way to keep women in shadow, even in darkness, to have total control over them, is by refusing them the access to education and although an exoculture may came with better aspects, women of the endoculture will refuse education themselves, as their bonding to the patriarchal tradition is too strong: "*The Olinka do not believe girls should be educated. …She said: a girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something*." (p.161)

In these circumstances, "can the female subaltern speak", when facing a bigger force than the one that subjugates them daily? "*The question of 'woman' seems most problematic in this context. Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways*," [8, p.90] answers Spivak.

And if they speak? The men in their tribe "*don't even look at women when women are speaking. … The women also do not 'look in a man's face' as they say. To 'look in a man's face' is a brazen thing to do*."(p.168)

"*When I told her the Olinka don't believe in educating girls she said, quick as a flash, They're like white people at home, who don't want colored people to learn*." (p.162)

Therefore, Olinka females have to face and resist the double hostility of two exocultures: the patriarchal culture and the culture of the colonizers, whereby they were discriminated against.

But not only Olinka women have to endure this double oppression: Celie and Sofia struggle against a patriarchal system, dominated by the hegemonic white male, and fight against the violent authority of the black men at home. Celie makes it through by keeping her voice down: "*I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here*." (p.214). Therefore, Celie chooses the fight of silence, whereas Sofia learns how to retort: "*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*." (p.42)

The endoculture of women resist in front of the violent assaults of the two exocultures (the patriarchal and the imperialist) through their strong solidarity: Sofia learns how to fight from her sisters and they all fight men back at home; Olinka women make polygamy bearable by sticking to each other. However, As Anne McClintock states, "*the cult of domesticity was a crucial, if concealed,*

BDD-A20195 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:04 UTC)

dimension of male as well as female identities – shifting and unstable as these were." [5] This in why disruption of gender roles causes problems of identity, but it is a step forward, towards breaking the circle of abuse: Harpo's insecurity about his masculine power and role in the family leads to marital problems and to his attempts upon Sofia., until he realizes that violence is not a solution.

3.2. Apoculture vs. Adoculture

Spivak requires that the subaltern should be given voice and be listened to, so that those who have historically occupied the place of Other as an object may also access the status of subject of discourse, thus of History. A monologic historiographical model of would be followed by dialogical and polylogical ones. Language is the first step towards migration from one culture to another and it seen as a way of getting acceptance: Grady "*do try to talk like somebody from the North.*" (p.119)

The subalterns can speak as long as they speak in a language that is already recognized by the dominant culture, although it is not certain that by learning it the subaltern will also be given a voice. The endoculture/exoculture distinction is tied up in the tension between "speaking" and "being heard": "*I know white people never listen to colored, period. If they do, they only listen long enough to be able to tell you what to do.*" (p.202)

Once the colonized start learning and speaking the colonizers language, they begin migrating to the adoculture and to leave behind the endoculture, which becomes apoculture. Sometimes, this is rapidly forgot and even denied: Nettie is surprised to hear the president on Monrovia having assimilated a term used only by the white, when referring to Africans as "natives": "*I knew that to white people all colored people are natives. But he cleared his throat and said he only meant "native" to Liberia. I did not see any of these "natives" in his cabinet. And none of the cabinet members' wives could pass for natives.*" (p.148)

Still, some bewail the dynamics of the English language influenced by these non-native speakers and see it as an involution. Elleke Boehmer, for example, writes about this "*development which has ...blown the English language, as it once was, in the four winds*". (Boehmer, 7)

Another way of reaching adoculture is by dislocation and relocation. There is a strong bond between the self and place, and displacement may follow after the crisis of identity brought by the collision with a dominant culture. In order to avoid being subjected to denigration, oppression and even extermination, the Olinka leave their village and seek for a new place and identity, by joining the *mbeles*.

Caren Kaplan interprets Deleuze and Guattari's theory of deterritorialization pointing out the requirements and implications of this theory: "*we must leave home, as it were, since our homes are often the sites of racism, sexism and other damaging social practices. Where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our specific histories and differences must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new*." (Kaplan, 35) In order to escape male domination and to move towards the free, powerful adoculture of Shug, Celie goes to Memphis and rediscovers herself and her long-neglected identity and self-esteem and only when she feels strong enough does she return home.

3.3. Ambiculture. Schizoculture. Opisthoculture

The rapport of the subject with the adoculture comes from the need to communicate: the language of the

BDD-A20195 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:04 UTC)

adoculture in learned. Soon enough the language of the apoculture is lost. This is where the depletion of apoculture begins. Natives stop practicing their religion and convert to Christianity. But elements of the apoculture are not entirely lost: they mingle with those of the adoculture; the the cross-fertilization of cultures gives birth to the ambiculture: Celia prays to God but also "*sprinkle little witch hazel on my pillow and curtain out all the moonlight*" (p.42) to chase insomnia away. Her image of God is that of a white man: "*God all white too, looking like some stout white man work at the bank*." (p.96)

The Olinka, on the other hand, combine Christianity with the cult for the rootleaf.

Ambiculture can be seen as positive, enriching, and dynamic: Black people from New York "***love** Africa. They defend it at the drop of a hat*" although they have perfectly adapted to the metropolitan life style. But there is a less bright and more violent facet of this mingling. The love of the Afro-Americans is not shared by the Africans who despise them for belonging to both cultures: "*The Africans don't even **see** us. They don't even recognize us as brothers and sisters they sold. ... We love them. But they reject us. They never even listen on how we suffered. Why don't you speak your own language? they ask. Why can't you remember the old days? Why aren't you happy in America if everyone drives motorcars?"* (p.243)

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon argues that previously colonized peoples would remain hybrids with a miserably schizophrenic identity unless they revolt violently against their oppressors in order to free them of their inferiority complexes. But revolt does not necessarily mean a way out of the schizoculture. By turning to the African opisthoculture, Nettie retrieves her own history and she has conflicting feelings when she learns about the past: "*Millions and millions of Africans were captured and sold into slavery – you and me, Celie! Why did they sell us? How could they have done it? And why do we still love them?*" (p.145). This cultural schizophrenia is described by Elleke Boehmer as "*a process of both 'reincarnation' and self-splitting*" [3, p.228]: the black missionaries lose, and yet retain loyalty to African world. The Afro-Americans feel as if they belonged to neither of the two worlds. Behind them there is slavery, discrimination and oppression of the American apoculture. Ahead, in African opisthoculture, they realize the depth of this gap and experience the rejection from the people they used to consider as their own. The gap between the two cultures is the gap between the present and the past; the latter can be reclaimed or revisited. But the colonized have no home to go back to in their native territory.

The solution lays in the evolution and development: "*We are not white. We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves. And that we and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere*." (p.143)

4. Conclusions

As well as a change in power, colonization and decolonization involve symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of meanings, mentalities, place, relations and (re)interpretation of all cultural signs, in order to be accepted or rejected. There is no immutable culture, especially when articulated on another culture. Social and cultural change implies evolution or erosion, what is now endoculture can become apoculture, to end up as what yesterday was exoculture and so on. The

BDD-A20195 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:04 UTC)

integration of cultural signs and practices from the colonizing and the colonized cultures can lead to a long period of hybridity with all the phases described in this article (the way from endoculture towards adoculture and then to ambiculture can also end up in schizoculture, instead of arriving at the integration in what was, at the beginning, the exoculture). Alice Walker's characters illustrate the complexity of this transformation at each stage. Black people are both colonizers and colonized, adapt themselves, their language and religion, their speaking and hearing to the necessities and the opportunities of more or less oppressive or invasive cultures where they try to remain and build a new identity. They fit into alien cultural patterns, thus producing something familiar but new or they feel torn apart between their roots and the new embraced world.

Further questions still remain: what is the new cultural identity? Who really remains in power and how independence can be really attained and, more important, for how long?

Acknowledgment

This paper is supported by the Sectoral Operation Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), ID76945 financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government.

References

1. Bhabha, H.K.: Multiculturalism, Cultural Diversity and Cultural Difference. In: *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Rutherford, J. (ed). London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990.
2. Bhabha, H.K.: *The Location of Culture*. New York, Routledge, 1994.
3. Boehmer, E: *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature,* Oxford University Press Inc, New York, USA, 2005.
4. Derrida, J.: *Le monolinguisme de l'autre (The Monoligualism of the Other)*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996
5. McClintock, A.: *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, Routledge, New York, 1995.
6. McLeod J.: *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Manchester, University Press, 2000.
7. Kaplan, C: *Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse*, Oxford University Press, Mississippi, USA, 2002, p.35
8. Spivak, G. C.: *Can The Subaltern Speak?* In: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Nelson C. and Grossberg L. (ed.). University of Illinois Press, Urbana/Chiicago, USA, 1988
9. Walker, A.: *The Color Purple*, Pocket Books, New York, 1985.

BDD-A20195 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:04 UTC)