

“A struggle to assert difference”

Sex, gender and race in *Little Women* (ALCOTT, 1868)
and *The Colour Purple* (WALKER, 1982)

“Uma luta para assegurar diferença”: Sexo, gênero
e raça em *Little Women* (ALCOTT, 1868)
e *The Colour Purple* (WALKER, 1982)

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Abstract

I structure this study upon the following specific context: Alcott's novel *Little Women* (1868) and Walker's novel *The Colour Purple* (1982). My analysis of these narratives demonstrates how the construction and development of female sexuality occurs as influenced by and responsive to what surrounds the body of the woman. The literary evidence collected point to the fact that, while Celie moves from conformed acquiescence to a rebellious redemption, Jo's development takes the opposite direction.

Keywords: *Little Women* (ALCOTT, 1868); *The Colour Purple* (WALKER, 1982); Feminism; Race.

Resumo

Este estudo possui o seguinte contexto específico: Os romances *Little Women* (ALCOTT, 1868) e *The ColourPurple* (1982). A minha análise dessas narrativas demonstra como a construção e desenvolvimento da sexualidade ocorre como influenciada e responsiva àquilo que circunda o corpo da mulher. As evidências literárias apontam para o fato de que, enquanto Celie parte da aceitação conformada para uma redenção rebelde, o desenvolvimento de Jo caminha na direção contrária.

Palavras-chave: *Little Women* (1868); *The Colour Purple* (WALKER, 1982); Feminismo; Raça.

Wouldn't it be fun if all the castles in the air which we make could come true and we could live in them? (Alcott, *Little Women*, 1868, p. 268)

Introduction: “The Possibility of Historiography as a Strategy”

The contemporary subject has been living in a time when it is possible to reckon the emergence of a vast array of valiant discourses that

problematise official and hegemonic narratives. Within such picture, one cannot ignore that “sex – not just gender, not just homosexuality – has finally been posed as a political question” (RUBIN, 1981, p. 224). Posed as a political question, sex has thus served to inform us about many issues that would pass unnoticed otherwise; this is why fostering a less predictable and biased approach on it has proved to be much more fruitful in terms of epistemological (re)positionings. When it goes to sex, the inferiority of women or their purported foundational difference compared to men are no longer taken as an acceptable allegation – at least for a considerable part of the globe. Nevertheless, and although we might be fostering a more democratic view on the matter, hierarchies, prejudices, and chauvinism persist. And they do both in what regards the relation of women to men and/or the inner functioning of the female world per se. For this study, therefore, the problem I shall investigate concerns the fact that normative obsessive worries concerning female morality not only fail to acknowledge marginalised women, but also presuppose that such possibility is available to every subject, regardless of class and race, which is far from being the case. One should not forget that, within the literary tradition, “the category woman writer was subsumed into that of the universal genderless writer (whose prototype, by the way, was male), creating much painful uneasiness for the always exceptional woman who ‘attempted the pen’” (FUNCK, 1998, p. 9). Women who are able, on the other hand, to effectively attempt the pen are by the same token never the writers of a single story – their point of departure are not alike, so neither could their stories be.

Having said that, I get us then to the overall context of my research, which consists in the conflicting dialogue established between first and second waves of the feminist movement. I say conflicting dialogue because, even though both waves have much to contribute to one another, sometimes what they are telling one another might not be necessarily universally consistent – especially when one thinks of biased issues such as “women nature”, “female character”, etc. Through the process of literary analysis my text approaches the inherent problems of such maxims,

focusing on women's voice and/or their self-representation. Even though speaking for the other might seem to be a token of largess, such process is far from serving such purpose; the self can never speak for the other – if empathy and identification take place, in the end, than the result is that the other shall also be invited to speak. Thereby, identity would become recognition – and not prescription. After all, “the problem with gender has always been that it prescribes how we should be, rather than recognising who we are” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 72). Not a long time ago, if a female writer tried to address issues belonging to the male world, her text would be received with hoots of derision; and, even though that does not seem to be the case any longer, women writers are still forced to see their narratives being prejudged and categorised through male chauvinist lenses. Conscious of that, I structure my analysis upon the following specific context: Alcott's novel *Little Women* (1868) and Walker's novel *The Colour Purple* (1982). Focusing specifically on how gender relations are constructed through the experiences of these novels' characters, I rely on such context to compare and contrast the female experiences that are developed thereby – knowledgeable of the temporal void that separates them.

Such void is nonetheless not only about time and space, but also about race – inasmuch as even though racial issues are not even superficially addressed in Alcott's (1868) narrative, they provide the cornerstone for the construction of Walker's (1982) one. The latter's text is a confirmation that, within a male and white literary tradition and by dint of hard work, “black feminists sought to articulate the relationship between gendered and racial oppression and assert a positive and empowering identity for black women” (WOLF, 2008, p. 260). Bringing together all fictional artefacts a narrative can muster, writers have in many occasions the opportunity to – through literature – assert indeed a positive and empowering identity for subjects weakened by their historical (and unfair) negativity. To some extent, and in diverging levels, both my objects of research are effective in doing so – since the two of them are assumingly about forgotten identities: that of the woman, and

that of the black woman. The reading of Alcott (1868) and Walker (1982)'s narrative, taking into consideration the conditions of their emergence and reception, therefore hereby inform the purposes of my study. Hence my overall goal: to problematise the supposedly inherent and universal character of femaleness – a set of rules, guidelines, and characteristics purportedly innate to every woman. Such readymade set is erroneously taken for granted when it goes to the analysis of female identity – so this study attempts at paying special attention to how literature might serve to reinforce and/or put such representation into question. Nevertheless, it is not easy to effectively question and transform the issue of female identity as something that has been overtly assimilated by the master narrative – which, on its turn serves hegemonic interests. This is why providing another story is not per se enough: it is also important to situate such story vis-à-vis the already credited ones – those stories that have become second nature, and that, willingly or not, we already tend to take for granted. The act of looking back, seeing with fresh eyes, and entering an old tradition with a distinct critical lenses is the process of historical revision that is for women, according to Rich (1972, p. 23), “more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society”.

There is still much to be done for this male-dominated society to have its basis (re)claimed and redesigned; and, if such enterprise is not taken seriously, women are in serious danger of facing self-destructiveness – process which tradition tends to deem natural and inevitable. Within this picture, literature as revision emerges as a pivotal tool since, “against strategic essentialisms, the possibility of historiography as a strategy forces a wedge into the edifice” (SPIVAK, 2010, p. 178). Given the seriousness of the matter, I attempt in this study to analyse the development of *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868) and *The Colour Purple* (Walker, 1982) main characters – especially Celie and Jo – as to identify how issues of gender relations and/or sexuality are articulated therein. It is clear, then, if my proposal is considered in ideological terms, that notwithstanding the position of some critics, who seem to believe that

contextual issues have nothing to do with the literary genre, I pose here the precise opposite. After all, when one thinks of literature, “attention to history, context, and genre is necessitated, and not contradicted” (DERRIDA, 1992, p. 67). Theretofore, hoping then not to contradict the attention that history, context, and genre require, I raise the following hypotheses for my analysis: 1) Sexuality, its construction and development, does not operate in isolation – as if it were devoid of any interference from the external world; it is, on the contrary, continuously affected by the social environment wherein it is inserted. 2) The behaviours of both novels’ main characters, more specifically of Jo and Celie, are regulated by social norms of gender relations; nevertheless, while the latter succeeds in surpassing such norms, the former fails to do so. What my reading of both my objects has informed me is that we have been living a time whereby consciousness – slowly, but continuously – has finally been directly to the realm of gender relations and sexuality; no matter how long it took (or has been taking) for such issues to be tackled, it is never too late. In the end, “a massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war” (ANAZALDÚA, 1987, p. 53).

Discussion: “I am Something”

Before taking us to the effective onset of my analysis, it is important for one to raise awareness concerning the period when my objects were produced – especially when it goes to the role played by women in both these moments. “In 1868, family remained the chief patriarchal institution and [...] excluded from this public sphere of patriarchy, where male values were exercised, women were united within the matriarchal domestic sphere of housekeeping and childrearing” (TUCK, 2006, p. 83). That is the year when Alcott writes *Little Women* (1868) – a novel telling the story of this mother and her daughters, whose adventures take place during their childhood away from the male figure of the house (whose return from the war they are all anxiously looking forward to).

The narrative is filled in with moral messages, most of them from the mother, who tries to teach her children the values of womanhood and the secrets to be successful in the society girls shall face after leaving home. Conscious of the importance of having fun, but also conscious about the importance of having and taking responsibilities seriously, Marmee – the mother – is developed as a centred and well balanced character. “Love Jo all your days, if you choose, but don’t let it spoil you, for it’s wicked to throw away so many good gifts because you can’t have the one you want” (ALCOTT, 1868, p. 10). Readers learn that, in many occasions, Marmee daughters do not properly consider their many good gifts, as they behave egotistically and undermine what God (the personification of male fatherhood and dominance) has selflessly given them. The novel, in a nutshell, describes the process of these little women fighting to overcome their bosom enemies: “Meg’s vanity, Jo’s anger, Amy’s selfishness, and Beth’s shyness. While this morality seems racially unmarked, the novel describes a type of womanhood that was only accessible to middle-class white women” (DAVIS, 1981, p. 12). During this fight, indeed, both class and race are taken for granted; Meg’s vanity, Jo’s anger, Amy’s selfishness, and Beth’s shyness are unmarked in this sense – and that is precisely the point.

The direction that *The Colour Purple* (WALKER, 1982, p. 59) takes is the very opposite. Telling the story of Celie, a black and poor American kid, who grows without half the financial, emotional, and psychological structure that the little women can count with, the novel is no longer about a universal notion of “female” identity. The narrative, now, is about female identity as severely marked by class and race, inasmuch as all statuses coexist and cannot be deemed as if they were separate from one another. That is, what a woman can do (to put it bluntly) also depends to a large extent on her social and performative possibilities of success – and, when female class and race do not help them out, the possibilities of failure are the one that increase considerably. “Conceptions of failure are tied up with preconceived and dominant criteria of success. No one is immune from the recursive structure of the sanctioned ignorance that

incites us to see success despite the co-presence of failure” (SPIVAK, 2010, p. 76). Raped by her stepfather and later by her husband, beaten by both, there is no time for Celie to fight her moral enemies (what morality could mean for her, anyways?). “Well, sometime Mrgit on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways. You ought to bash Mr head open, Shug say. Think bout heaven later” (WALKER, 1982, p. 59). Celie’s relationship to Shug shall be further discussed in a few moments, but what is important here is her lack of discursive strength – the fact that her only hope about seeing her situation being resolved is to die. Her ambition, then, is not to solve the problems that mitigate her possibilities of happiness – but for her life to be as short as possible. Many women whose abusive marriage depress them end up nurturing the very same logic, whereupon male chauvinism becomes so crystallised that there is, for them, no picture of “another life” – only the picture of death (and this, the withdrawal of agency, is perhaps the most consistent difficulty one might face). That, of course, does not take place by chance. “For the subaltern any sense of the future is tied discursively to a moment of current sacrifice. Futurity has never been given to children of color, or other marginalized communities that live under the violence of state and social erasure” (RODRIGUÉZ, 2010, p. 331).

Hence the feebleness of the subaltern and of his/her strength; given discursively no voice and materially no action, s/he is convinced to believe there is no sense in trying to delineate some possibility of future – such possibility is not available to him/her. For some there is hope, for some others there is only utmost acceptance. “The troubles and temptations of your life are beginning, and may be many; but you can overcome and outlive them all if you learn to feel the strength and tenderness of your Heavenly Father as you do that of your earthly one” (ALCOTT, 1868, p. 136). Marmee here once again provides her children with an almost biblical advice; and what is interesting in her religious reference in this specific case is the fact that she compares heavenly father with the one in the earth. That summarises right well how, under

the guise of protection, all these female characters – practically living on their own within a narrative that is virtually dispossessed of male characters – are developed with the shadow of a male (albeit absent) figure. Their earthly and heavenly fathers are but an incorporation of their dependence – they exist to give their lives meaning, inasmuch as, without their protection, needs, and requirements, these little women would have no one to serve. Although Marmee is able to construct a loving image of god for her children, Celie, on the other hand, does not go through a comparable experience with religion. After being raped by her step father at the beginning of the novel, she exposes his threat to readers: “You better not never tell nobody but God [...]; I can’t understand why us have life at all if all it can do is make you feel bad” (WALKER, 1982, p. 13). Celie’s words regarding God and religion (at least during most of the narrative) are never as kind as the ones uttered in *Little Women* (ALCOTT, 1868). Black, poor, and woman, she knows there is nothing to thank for – if there is a God, the life he has given her is, for her, closer to a sin than to a gift. Nevertheless, many other situations open up a considerable epistemological distance between these two narratives. To sum them up, if *Little Women* (ALCOTT, 1868) addresses the issue of female identity as haunted by universal notions of morality, heterosexuality, and European (white) descent, *The Colour Purple* (WALTER, 1982) constructs a character haunted by universal notions of inferiority, race, poverty, and sexuality.

In Alcott’s (1868) narrative women seem to have no sexuality whatsoever, while in Walker’s (1982) one we learn how Celie’s sexuality is constructed, destroyed, and (re)constructed – as she finds out, at the end, that sex might be a pleasant thing. If the former has no moments of sexual intercourses, the latter is circumscribed by them – right from the very onset. “Pa never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t. First he [...] grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it” (WALKER, 1982, p. 5). Hence Celie’s impression regarding her fathers (heavenly and

earthly) as evil subjects whose only task is to exert violence and to rape women (here a little girl) like her – in the end, the benevolence of both indeed only emerges in isolated cases. After getting married she finally gets rid of her father and imagines that her life might be different, only to find it is actually going to be worse – since she keeps being raped and beaten, with the difference that now she has to take care of her house, of Albert and of his children with another woman. The world belongs to men, and therein women are left with no space to be happy: “Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain’t” (WALKER, 1982, p. 87). When Shug Avery – the jazz singer that would alter Celie’s ideas of sex completely – tells Celie she has to fight male dominance she is left with no answer; only readers know the reason for the latter’s silence. “I don’t say nothing. I think bout Nettie [her sister], dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive” (WALKER, 1982, p. 88).

For Celie, there is no living, only survival – and, so far, nobody and nothing have convinced her that fighting would be a good move. As we learn from a scene when the protagonist and Shug Avery talk about Albert, the violence of rape is ultimately assimilated by the former, as she learns how deal with it in the apparently most comfortable manner. “Most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep. Shug say, why Miss Celie, you make it sound like he is going to the toilet on you. That what I feel like I say” (WALKER, 1982, p. 79). Such vicious scenes might be perhaps considerably unpleasant for readers to imagine, especially the first one, which is described in the first pages of the novel. However, in Bhabha’s (1995, p. 175) words, if that is the case it is because the literary text is working as it should: “Literature is an uncomfortable, disturbing practice of survival and supplementarity, between art and politics, past and present, the public and the private”. As a disturbing practice of survival, that intersects art with politics, past

with present, and public with private, literature alerts us to the fact that no listless movements are devoid of a story – for every hopeful efforts there is motivation, and, for every hopelessness, there is also a reason. Marmee’s children never suffered the effective violence of the state and/or male dominance as it has occurred o Celie – they also live in a male chauvinist society, but the detriment impinged upon them is not comparable to the latter’s case. Celie’s life is one that teaches her to hate men, to hate God, to hate sex and the fact of her being black – it is only by the end of the narrative that she learns to be proud of her racial identity.

Nevertheless, before Celie meets Shug and starts thinking of her identity more positively, she has no reason to feel proud about anything – as a matter of fact she has no reason to feel anything whatsoever. “He [Albert] say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie you a tree. That’s how come I know that trees fear man” (WALKER, 1982, p. 30). Making herself wood, Celie convinces herself that trying not to feel is her best alternative not to suffer the violence that surround her, which impinges upon the preconceived idea that women are naturally more sensitive than women – that in their inner self there is the need and ability to “feel” more profoundly and effectively than men. Reading Celie’s story, readers notice they cannot think universally about such matter. Apropos, if the task of literature is to, through otherness, provide the self with an image of the other, then “the task of criticism is to document the ‘embarrassing’ presence of this ‘Other’ in cultural places where one least expects to find it, to historicize, rather than to deny the cultural exchanges that produce American identity” (MORRISON, 1996, p. 14). It is clear by now that, in what regards American identity, in this case American female identity, a modicum of heedfulness is required for one not to universalise issues that vary from one woman to another. Another of this issues, problematised by the embarrassing presence of this other, is motherhood – and all meanings associated to it. In *The Colour Purple* (1982, p. 12), Celie bears one child who later turns up missing. When her mother asks her where it is,

she – unaware that her child has been sold – replies: “I say God took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too if he can”. Traditionally taken by the white hegemonic society as a dreamlike experience, the magic of motherhood is closer to a nightmare to Celie. Her seemingly cruel attitude towards her babies, who she would like to be killed by God, is actually an act of compassion: she does not want them to suffer as she did throughout her life. The fact that Alcott’s (1868) narrative tackles motherhood only from the hegemonic perspective, endorsing the white tradition in vogue, evinces the high range of male dominance. “Women are affected by many intersecting modes of oppression [...]. Too often, feminist discourse does not negotiate social inequities between groups of women, as if gender relations exist independently of racial relations” (MOHLER, 2009, p. 61).

If girls in *Little Women* (ALCOTT, 1868) face, basically, the oppression of not being able to have a career and live independently as boys can choose to do, in *The Colour Purple* (WALKER, 1982, p. 42) all female characters close to Celie are affected by many other intersecting modes of oppression. One of them, Sophia, teaches our protagonist the importance of sorority. Having a much stronger personality than Celie, one could say Sophia is a feminist: for she does not accept rape and violence, which seem to be common events for a woman in her condition. Her husband Harpo does not understand why he cannot control her and tell her what to do while the orders of his father Albert are never questioned by Celie. Albert’s suggestion is for Harpo to beat his wife. “Wives is like Children [...]. You have to let ‘em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a sound beating” (WALKER, 1982, p. 42). Wishing to listen to a second opinion, Harpo also asks Celie (in the end she is the woman who has raised him) what she thinks he could do, and, surprisingly, her advice is the same. However, being a strong-willed woman, Sophia fights back, and later goes to see Celie and have some little chat with her. She learns that both Albert and Celie have given such advice, but it is Celie’s position that bothers her (inasmuch as Albert’s opinion is predictable and understandable). Learning that

Celie is envious of her strength, Sophia teaches her that, even though, women cannot betray one another – their only hope is to stick together if they want things to get better. She says she is not going to become “controllable” because that is not how a marriage is supposed to work. “I’m getting tired of Harpo. All he think about since us married is how to make me mind. He don’t want a wife, he want a dog” (WALKER, 1982, p. 67). Different from Celie, who seems unable to rebel against male chauvinism, Sophia informs her that, having to fight all her life with people she did not want by her side, she would never accept her union to Harpo – which also depended on her choice – to be turned into something close to that. “I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me” (WALKER, 1982, p. 68).

The relationship between Harpo and Sophia has no solution and eventually they split up. Before leaving home, she forgives Celie and seems to understand why she has done what she did. Her attitude is simply a response to the torture she has been suffering throughout her life, a sort of torture that Sophia’s fearlessness prevented her from going through (at least until the end of the novel, when she punches the mayor’s wife and ends up arrested). “Apart from being the target of rape, the subaltern female was subjected to forms of torture one would have thought the prerogative of men; as a means for reproduction, she was more a piece of property than a wife or a mother” (HARTMAN, 1997, p. 21). Women were deemed pieces of property and men were deemed their owners – and both should perform the task of making such system operate effectively. In some moments of the narrative, apropos, evidences imply that Harpo is a good person; he is only trying to solve things as he thinks they should be solved. Albert, on his turn, regrets everything he has done to Celie (by the end of the narrative) and is left completely destroyed and abandoned – while his ex-wife is able to find, in new friendships and a job, the surprising possibility of redemption. I say “surprising” because Celie’s futurity is inconsistent with her timorousness – going through the risk of taking a step towards rebuilding one’s life is not something for the fainthearted, and during

the narrative we are led to believe she would never be able of doing such a thing. *The Colour Purple* (WALKER, 1982), thereby, is also grappling with readers' prejudices; we are given no emotional, psychological, and/or intellectual indication of Celie's potential to draw a distinct destiny for her – and this is so because there is indeed no emotional, psychological, and intellectual indication, she is informed, molded and grown due to her physical experiences. “We are taught that the body is an ignorant animal intelligence dwells only in the head; but the body is smart” (ANZALDÚA, 1987, p. 39). The abuse she suffers and the values she learn with experiencing especially rape and violence – from her stepfather and from Albert – and later love – from her physical attraction to Shug – is what makes Celie's body strong; what makes her mind and her body smart.

Curious (or not), all her life she had been abused by men and forced to go through several sexual intercourses with them for, at the end, falling in love with a woman. A curiosity or a provocation? Readers might see themselves asking: is Celie a lesbian, a bisexual, or what? There is no simple (or right) answer to such questions – not only in what concerns her, but actually in what concerns sexuality as a whole. Among the many issues *The Colour Purple* (WALKER, 1982) problematise, one of them is the fact that we are bound by a deep sense of universal dichotomy when it goes to sex – one that not always proves to be functional. There is no way to separate Celie's attraction to Shug from her attraction to a protective possibility, to the first person who gives her indications that sex might indeed be an enjoyable (amusing) thing; not raped by Shug, she goes through experiences with her that she is not forced to – and that is, for her, a novelty. “For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behaviour. She goes against two prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality” (ANZALDÚA, 1987, p. 18). Sieged by this huge sea of sexual attraction and deep admiration as she goes through the prohibitions of sexuality and homosexuality, one cannot isolate what is about sex and what is about friendship – or if she enjoys kissing women or just this great person she meets. Our epistemes regarding sex are also theretofore

put into question, both in Walker's (1982) and – surprisingly – Alcott's (1868) narrative. Jo, one of Marmee's daughters, gets tired of watching how the male chauvinist world she lives in is threatening to destroy her family – as all girls are supposed to get married and serve their future husbands. Before leaving home, Beth tells all her sisters: "I'm not like the rest of you; I never made any plans about what I'd do when I grew up. I never thought of being married, as you did [...]; I never wanted to go away, and the hard part now is leaving you all" (ALCOTT, 1868, p. 303). After that, Jo admits she wishes she could protect the youngest among them in an unexpected manner: "Sometimes I wanted to marry Meg myself, and keep her safe in the family" (ALCOTT, 1868, p. 306). Jo's ideal world would be one where women could also embark on a professional career, so that getting married would not be necessary – families could stick together until daughters wished to go live by themselves. Some critics believe there are indications about Jo's homosexuality; but, as in the case of Shug (here even less), any assertions regarding such issue would be irresponsible. When Jo says that "it's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy's games, and work, and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy" (ALCOTT, 1868, p. 3), her disappointment in not being a boy is more about her envying boys freedom than her lack of "femaleness" (for whatever that means).

Unfortunately, by the end of *Little Women* (ALCOTT, 1868), sexual boundaries "are no longer blurred and the hegemonic social order is fully restored" (TUCK, 2006, p. 87). In *The Colour Purple* (WALKER, 1982, p. 53), on the other hand, as soon as Celie meets Shug hegemonic social order is never fully restored. "First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery [...] I thought I had turned into a man. I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short". Celie admits that, at the same time all men looked unashamedly at the singer's body, "I got my eyes glued there too. I feel my nipples harden under my dress" (WALKER, 1982, p. 66). As mentioned, such admiration would later grow into these women's friendship, union and sorority, also resulting in Shug's wish to show Celie sexuality can also be about desire and

pleasure, even though the latter (due to her life background) tends to associate the practice solely to violence and pain. “She [Shug] kiss me on the mouth. Um, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say, um, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can’t hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other” (WALKER, 1982, p. 83). During this process of self-discovery, Celie never seems to be bothered by the fact that Shug is a woman (and that what they are doing together is wrong in the eyes of God – the same God that rapes her). Celie gradually learns that her servitude, inferiority, and passiveness are nothing but her performing her female and “weak” gender – such as Albert’s beating and raping her are also, to some extent, performances of his male and “strong” gender. If “gender performance could be seen as a metaphorical type of theatrical performance” (BUTLER, 1990, p. 161), what Shug and Celie are doing here is to invert the roles played by the characters of the play – raising the audience awareness to the fact that everything is artificially performed (both central and peripheral gender behaviours). Conscious that “wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out” (ANZALDÚA, 1987, p. 49), those endorsing hegemonic notions on gender performance are fast to choke other manifestations of it – which results in the false impression of universal gender prototypes where everyone shall fit in.

“I’ll try and be what he [papa] loves to call me, ‘a little woman,’ and not be rough and wild; but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else” (ALCOTT, 1868, p. 53). Even though she hates the clothes, games, ambitions, and behaviour women are supposed to present, after hearing the letter from her father, who is serving in the Civil War, Jo stops rebelling against her condition. As Eagleton puts (2002, p. 101) it, “that is the magic of ideology: to make us do things that may be against our interests and to do them as if they were entirely self-willed”. Before receiving such letter, Jo had says that, instead of sitting at home, she would prefer women could fight in the Civil War; she also wanted to go through adventures and to make a difference, as she believes her father is doing. Here she nonetheless accepts to act stereotypically female as to make her father happy. Mr. March’s letter

comes immediately after the girls' complaint about everything they would like to have in life (and here we are mainly talking about material things). After hearing his letter, however, all of them demonstrate that the renunciation of their material dreams – the letter works then almost as a prophecy from this earthly God, whose participation in raising the children is mediocre, but who takes all the credit for most of their values and lessons. Readers are never really given enough evidence to ponder upon the relationship established between Mr. and Mrs. March – the former almost never is listened (only in the few letters he sends) and the latter never addresses her marriage or even herself, she only talks about the children, about their duties, and about the values they are supposed to foster. Marmee says an interesting thing, though: “I am angry nearly every day of my life” (ALCOTT, 1868, p. 140). Trying to teach Jo how to deal with her quick temper, suggests she had also had a rebellious character once. Serene and composed in the whole narrative, what this implies is that her behaviour might be a façade – perhaps she does not believe in the values she tries to teach her children. Curiously, Alcott's (1868) narrative might be here telling us much more than she wanted it to – which shall not shock anyone since “the concealed order of the work is thus less significant than its real determinate disorder (its disarray)” (ALTHUSSER, 1971, p. 205).

Regardless of this disorder and its potential, Marmee is successful in her instructions, and her girls become soldiers of morality: skilled mistresses of the domestic sphere. Even Jo, the most rebellious of them, learns to be sorry about her difference and regret about her attitudes. “I always say the wrong things. I fly around throwing away perfectly good marriage proposals. I'm sorry, Marmee. There's just something really wrong with me. I want to change, but I can't. And I just know I'll never fit in anywhere” (ALCOTT, 1868, p. 288). Convinced that what makes her different from other women is also what is wrong about her, Jo – who was a potential feminist – is not strong enough to resist. That is precisely why feminist thinking is required: for resistance to become available. After all, “feminism's struggle can perhaps best be understood

not simply as a struggle to assert identity but as a struggle to assert difference” (BUTLER, 1993, p. 209). Asserting identity and overlooking difference, true and universal womanhood is not problematised, but achieved by all the little women. They are all in the end turned into the wives of white males and the mothers of beautiful and healthy children (fulfilling their role in the world). Marmee’s daughters accept the myth of “the question of identification”. Bhabha (1994, p. 44) asserts that such question “is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image”. Taking place during Civil War, in Alcott’s (1868) story there is no reference to slavery and/or to black women living in worse circumstances than the March family – even though that was a time of extreme racial tension over the issue of black slavery. Femaleness is thereby constructed as a pre-given identity – a self-fulfilling prophecy – synonymic to whiteness (as if American women were all white and middle-class), and as resulting in a pattern wherein all women are supposed to fit in. (Re)reading such narrative from a postcolonial and queer perspective is crucial because one needs to rescue female identity from its traditional universalisation. That might only be done through the analysis of master discourses that “unquestioningly or accidentally naturalize women’s experience as white and, in effect, reinforce the absence or erasure of racial and social inequities” (MOHLER, 2009, p. 76).

Little Women (ALCOTT, 1868) advocates, to some extent, in favour of women freedom to embark on a professional careers; it makes readers compelled to agree with Jo’s rebellion, as she just wanted to be a writer and take on an autonomous life with no house, husband, or kid to take care of. Nevertheless, at the end Jo restrain from carrying on with her rebellion (as her mother also did in the past) and understands that her difference would also result in her exclusion. Her characterisation reminds us that “identities are both imagined/invented (linguistically, politically, socially, theoretically, etc.) and lived/experienced. What we have to transcend, then, is not difference per se, but the notion of

difference as unsurpassable separation and exclusion” (WALTER, 2005, p. 119). *The Colour Purple* (WALKER, 1982, p. 90), written more than a century later, is – also as a result of this temporal distance – more ambitious: Celie’s experiences go deep into the core of female identity, sexuality, and race suggesting that before the world can allow women to do something, it must first allow them to be something. Here Celie describes a conversation with her mother: “A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something. What can she become? I asked. Why, she [her mother] said, the mother of his children. But I am not the mother of anybody’s children, I said, and I am something” (WALKER, 1982, p. 90). As she grows from a silent and weak character to a strong and single-minded one, Celie stops talking about suicide and about life as if bereft of any worth and start fighting for her freedom. The first step is her breaking up with Alfred and leaving his house; which becomes a possibility when Shug invites her to accompany her back to her town – Memphis. Celie stands up only to pass forward the information to Albert and the result is the following ““Over my dead body! What’s wrong with you?”“You a low down dirty dog, that’s what’s wrong. Time for me to get away from you, and your dead body’d be just the welcome mat I need”” (WALKER, 1982, p. 115). As she had never answered back to her husband, such sharp-tongued response leaves Albert with no answer; and Celie leaves, free, in the direction of a futurity she thought would never be available for her. Her fictional and personal achievement is a warning for the real and collective achievements that are right there – waiting to materialise, in the lives of many women. Rich (1972, p. 19) admits it is simply “exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness [...] and for the first time this awakening has a collective reality; it is no longer such a lonely thing to open one’s eyes”

Final Remarks: Thinking the Present Historically

In the words of Frye (1971, p. 25), “criticism will always have two aspects, one turned toward the structure of literature and one turned toward the other cultural phenomena that form the social environment

of literature”. My research findings evince not only the existence of both these aspects, but also their inevitable intersection – i.e. even though it is judicious to ponder upon the specificities of the structural and contextual elements of a literary production, it would not prudent (nor possible) to isolate them from one another, for they engage in constant dialogue. Considering such dialogue is pivotal for any critical lenses since it opens one’s eyes to the fact that invisible hands are a fantasy: “History is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and rewritten, always with various silences and elisions” (SAID, 1978, p. 311). Literature and history both have a face (a white, heterosexual, and male face), and the former might challenge such face by amending all silences and elisions it entails. This would be, apropos, the very premise of my hypotheses. In what regards them, the analysis carried out within this study effectively demonstrate how the construction and development of sexuality occurs as influenced by and responsive to what surrounds the female body. The little women, whose values and ambitions are invigilated by present (Marmee) and absent proctors (Mr. March and God), incorporate the universalness of white female identity at the very same time that they – paradoxically – give us all clues that indicate such universalness is completely and artificially programmed by contextual pressure. My second hypotheses is also confirmed, inasmuch as the literary evidence collected from both narratives point to the fact that, while Celie moves from conformed acquiescence to a rebellious redemption, Jo’s development takes the opposite direction, as, at the onset of the story, she moves from rebellion and insurgence towards acceptance and submission.

Hall (1996, p. 245) alleges that, in our postcolonial moment, “it is essential to think the present historically and [...] summon the return of a seemingly eliminated space”. This seemingly eliminated space is the space of silences and elisions, the space that dispossessed the female characters in *Little Women* (ALCOTT, 1868) from their critical abilities, which enveloped them within the private sphere of a house, a husband, and an unavoidable dependence on male chauvinist values. If Alcott

(1868) tells us a story of female acquiescence and submission to the master narrative of antifeminist thinking, Walker (1982) deploys *The Colour Purple* as a channel for her to descry a more hopeful message regarding women and their hybrid, constructed, and mutable identities. That is nonetheless far from being an easy task, but if it is important to think historically of literature historically, it is essential to think of history sexually. What I mean here is that writing as a tool to confirm common sense is no big deal; the challenge is to put into question what is second nature to the society in vogue – which is precisely what *The Colour Purple* (WALKER, 1982) succeeds in doing. “Sexual politics is more political than sexual. By putting into question relations of power in areas hitherto largely unrecognized – such as motherhood and female sexuality – feminism contributes to the integration between individual and social” (FUNCK, 1998, p. 74). Celie’s experiences as she is characterised in the narrative provides us with innovative ontologies concerning motherhood and female sexuality – issues that appear dimly in Jo’s story, without being further developed. Analysing both my objects results in my feeling that, even though the sun of feminism peers today through the fog of male dominance, there is still much to be done – and my hope is that this study materialises into one more contribution for such tradition to be ultimately broken.

The master narrative that permeates the organisation of society and its ideal prototype of manhood, heterosexuality, whiteness, and Eurocentric values – accompanied by its imagined antagonist archetype (womanhood, homosexuality, blackness, and 3rd world values – has never really left us. This ubiquitous and counterfeit fable still pesters us to fit in readymade molds, as we are framed by far-reaching ideas regarding our own attributes that refrain to take into account how such attributes have always been socially constructed. Most institutions that encompass our body operate as to reaffirm this narrative, to guarantee it is going to hold us in the places we purportedly belong. Nevertheless, “literature is an institution which consists in transgressing and transforming” (DERRIDA, 1992, p. 72). In this sense, when pursued by

the hegemonic needs and constructed narratives, peripheral subjects, values, and ideas find in the literary text the shelter they are looking for. As an institution that consists in transgressing and transforming, it is therein that the experience of black, homosexual, poor, and female (fictional, but representative) subjects can dodge from assimilation and exoticisation – it is therein that they might historicise what history has forgotten. “Why am I compelled to write? Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me [...]. I write because I’m scared of writing, but I’m more scared of not writing” (ANZALDÚA, 1987, p. 61). The story of the March family and the story of Celie are fictional ones – these characters do not exist outside the paper. Controversially, it is for the precise reason that Marmee’s children and Celie do not stand for one real figure in particular that they can be taken as representations of a vast array of figures – they are no women, and every women at the same time (especially the latter). Stories of rape, violence, of prejudice based on skin colour and/or sexuality, racism, male chauvinism, and death shall never be read as pleasing narratives – what pleases me nonetheless is the fact that these stories are no longer being left aside. After all, closing one’s eyes to the problem does not result in its disappearance – on the contrary, it eliminates our abilities to face such problem accordingly. That is the role of literature as an institution – but it is also our role as individuals.

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