



The Deep Semantics of Imagery in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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ABSTRACT

The construction of meaning in a literary work is coterminous with the interpretation of the metaphors of the text, metaphor being an encompassing term for any shift from literal to literary language. However, as the science of semantics does not account for metaphor, Ricoeur's theory of textuality propounds a different mode of analysis for literary text tagged 'Deep Semantics' which advocates a bipartite function of interpretation and explanation in the science of hermeneutics. Hinged on this theoretical framework, the paper assesses the deep semantics of imagery in Walker's *The Color Purple* and highlights the salient non-ostensive references of the text and the new world it proposes. The analysis reveals the key to a deeper and broader perception of God, the imperativeness of equality of sexes and economic empowerment of women as veritable tools for the liberation and restoration of the dignity of black women, the horror of racism, and the despicable nature of sexual abuse, child abuse and wife battering. The convergence of the imagery gives the sense of the text as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

Imagery is an encompassing term for different kinds of figurative expressions. It includes simile and metaphor in which case images are evoked by comparing one *referent* with another. Imageries evoke mental pictures of objects in words. They are not simply decoratively used in a text; rather, they *defamiliarize*. By so doing, they may reveal aspects of experience in a new dimension or reinforce theme, setting or characterization. Advancing the notion that imagery includes metaphor, Ricoeur sees metaphor as "any shift

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from literal to figurative sense". To him, this form of language use "includes synecdoche, metonymy, irony, and so on." (qtd in Akwanya 259).

The use of figurative language in a linguistic construction forms one of the major distinctions between literature and other forms of writing. In literature, the linguistic construction is done by employing "organized labour" with the result that words are estranged, marking a sharp departure from their everyday meaning, defying the mode of analysis provided by the science of semantics and inviting a different mode of analysis which both Akwanya and Ricoeur aptly tag "the science of hermeneutics" and "deep semantics" (255).

The need for the deep semantic mode of analysis arises from the fact that the science of semantics is concerned with single words and as such cannot account for metaphor which in this sense includes other figurative usages. An ordinary word can be replaced by a synonym unlike a metaphorical word, which has no synonym at the literal level; its meaning is realized in a paraphrase. Metaphor may be trivial in which case the paraphrase substitutes perfectly for the metaphor or poetic in which case the meaning goes beyond the paraphrase attracting to itself the quality of a work or brief discourse. Owing to this co-relation between a text and metaphor Akwanya asserts that "the hermeneutics of metaphor should serve as a model for the hermeneutics of the text" (260). Thus, the adequacy of interpretation given to a literary text is predicated on an adequate interpretation of its metaphors which imagery encapsulates.

This paper therefore examines the deep semantics of imagery in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* by analyzing the hermeneutics of metaphor employed in the text with a view to explaining as well as interpreting the salient imagery evoked.

The concept of deep semantics

Semantics, according to Yule, is the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. Meaning, in this regard, is viewed as conventional, not idiosyncratic (114). Thus, conventionality is embraced in accounting for the meaning conveyed by the use of the words and sentences of a language. Associative meaning is, therefore, beyond the purview of linguistic semantics. Conventionality presupposes that as words combine to form meaningful sentences, the literal meanings conveyed by each word combine to give rise to the sentence meaning. Consequently, sentence meaning is compositional given that "The meaning of an expression is determined by the meaning of its component parts and the way in which they are combined" (Saeed 11).

On the contrary, sentence meaning in a literary work is not compositional as words that constitute a sentence may possess meanings that extend beyond their potential applications. Palmer agrees that "there is some other meaning besides the 'literal' meaning of words" (4). Owing to the distinctive quality of literariness which characterizes works of literature, the linguistic constructions mark a sharp departure from their usual meanings.

The task of interpreting a literary work, thus, goes beyond the scope of linguistic semantics paving the way for a deeper mode of analysis which recognizes the irreducibility of the work to the meanings of the sentences that constitute it. This model of literary analysis is what Ricoeur identifies as 'deep semantics'.

Exploring the deep semantics of a literary work involves two approaches: *explanation and interpretation* (Akwanya 260). Both are complimentary for an adequate account of the text. Explanation in this sense involves "working out the sense of the text" and metaphor helps to do this effectively. However, whatever meaning we assign to a text is only a guess and, thus, is subjective as different readers come up with differing 'senses' of the text. Hirsch believes that since the meaning of a text is what a reader makes of it, the task of a critic is to "provide normative criteria to back up one's reading" albeit this normative criteria is not verifiable empirically. Thus, the meaning of a text is acceptable if it has a preponderance of facts that feature in the text as well as "offers a qualitative better convergence between the features which it takes into account" (qtd in Akwanya 262). That is to say that a critic's 'wager' may vary from person to person; it is shaped by the 'clues' found in the text.

Interpretation which is the second approach to the deep semantics of the text involves the "apprehension of the proposed worlds which are opened up by the non-ostensive references of the text" (Akwanya 263). More explicitly, the world presented in a text is not a 'real world' but a possible one. A reader appropriates or responds to this possible world by going beyond himself to participate in the world of the text.

A deep semantic analysis of imagery in *The Color Purple*

In *The Color Purple*, extensive imagery is used to reinforce the themes, settings and characterization making them come alive in the reader's mind, touching the reader in unimaginable ways and making him not just a reader but a partaker in the events quite remarkably.

The theme of racial segregation between Whites and Blacks is captured in copious imagery. The Whites live in fine houses in beautiful parts of the city. They drive fine cars, have different schools and churches from the ones attended by Blacks and are served first in stores. On the other hand, the Blacks are portrayed in words depicting abject poverty, lack of education and refinement. They are ill-educated, poorly housed and treated like slaves by the Whites even in their own land as experienced by the Olinka people. The level of education attained by the majority of the Blacks is evident in Celie's letters. Almost all her sentences have grammatical and spelling errors. The reader cannot help imagining her deplorable level of education. She even acknowledges her plight in one of her letters to Nettie in these words,

Darlene trying to teach me how to talk. She say us not so hot....
You say US where most folks say WE, she say, and peoples think

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you dumb, colored peoples think you a hick and white folks be amuse (222).

However in Nettie's letters, correct spellings and grammar are employed because she represents the few educated blacks. But the language of the illiterate characters which deviates from the norm should not be frowned at because the world of the text is self-sufficient and its language is adequate to it (Akwanya 263).

In fact, the language and the epistolary mode in which the work is cast are the vital "instruments" that reveal the innermost recesses of the characters minds and create powerful imagery that guide the reader in making *sense* of the work. The reader is able to capture vividly, at the outset of the work, the naivety, affliction and confusion of a fourteen-year-old girl grossly exploited and sexually abused by her stepfather. She desperately seeks solace and an answer to her predicament from God:

'Dear God',
Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening
to me' (1).

This 'sign' which later manifests itself as a desire for emancipation is gradually sought until the 'seeker' discovers the pleasurable world she yearns for. This is a world that abhors gender inequality, class distinction, abuse, racism, exploitation and selfishness. Consequently, the imagery of *man* which is synonymous with these vices is totally rejected: 'you have to git man off your eyeball before you can see anything a 'tall' (204).

They crack her skull, they crack her ribs, they tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of an egg plant. (91-92).

The height of racism is captured in the incident where Sofia, a vibrant and assertive black, is dehumanized for rejecting the mayor's wife's offer of a menial work with a "Hell, no" (90). The punishment meted out to her is disproportionate with her offence. This incident paints a picture of the unfair treatment and sentences Blacks receive from Whites in those days when racism was the norm. As if the above inhuman treatment is not enough, she was imprisoned and later subjected to many years of servitude. Although the white lady involved (the mayor's wife) is a very frail creature who was no match to Sofia, her color and not her 'substance' places her several levels over Sofia. Pairing a strong, energetic black woman with a spineless white lady depicts that the second fiddle perception of blacks induced by racism is baseless.

Much imagery is employed to draw the reader's attention to the patriarchal-male-dominated system, which runs through the novel as

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portrayed by three male characters: Alfonso, Mr.____ and Harpo. Alfonso, Celie's stepfather, is portrayed in the novel as a child molester and a wife batterer. He defiles Celie at the age of fourteen, impregnates her twice, gives out her children to another man and marries her off as if she were a mere object. The marriage is contracted in the most despicable way. As Celie puts it,

Pa call me. Celie, he say, like it wasn't nothing. Mr.____ want another look at you. I go stand in the door. The sun shine in my eyes. He's still up on his horse. He look me up and down (11).

One begins to imagine if Celie were an object displayed by its lucky owner for bidders that suit his fancy. The incident evokes the deplorable status of women and the girl-child in most male-dominated societies. Women are portrayed as mere sex objects and material possessions which can be acquired and disposed of at will. Like animals, they have no mind of their own and must be controlled with a cudgel by the 'sensible' men.

The patriarchal society is greatly defended by Mr.____, Celie's husband. He sees women as subordinate and inferior to men. He says to Celie,

Who you think you is? look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman Goddam," he says, "you nothing at all (213).

Thus, being a woman, a black one for that matter, is tantamount to being nobody. He treats her as a working machine, a slave and a sex object. His sexual aggression is captured in Celie's words: "Just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (81). No wonder Shrug, the most liberated black woman in the text, remarks, "Make it sound like he going to the toilet on you" (81). 'Toilet' being a metaphor for sex in the text depicts that sex is the man's business; the woman is only a passive receptacle or better still a dumping ground for the man's excreta. Mr. ____ sees beating as a respectable thing for a man to do to his wife. He sells this idea to his son Harpo, who in a bid to tow his father's line wrecks his marriage. Also, Celie's use of Mr.____ to refer to her husband evokes the image of one living with a stranger, an inhuman one at that, altogether. It depicts absence of genuine marital relationship. Furthermore, exploitative men are unworthy of personal identity hence they are simply referred to as Mr.____ (Alfonso, Alfred, Mayor). Men who make effort to imbibe the 'creed' of love, unity and gender equality are worthy of individual identity (Samuel, Jack and Grady).

However Mr.____'s image of a bad man changes towards the end of the novel when Celie deserts him and later returns economically independent only to discover that Mr.____ has changed and they can now communicate on an equal level. He changes his negative attitude towards women and begins to collect shells and sew pants with Celie. The collection of shells and sewing of pants by this male chauvinist symbolizes a stepping down that engenders

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equality of both sexes and marital harmony: "... us (Celie and Albert) was sewing out on the Porch" (289).

By using needles, Celie gains economic independence from Shug's support and ultimately wins Mr.____'s respect and admiration. Without fighting physically, she realizes equality with men to the extent that Albert who despises her before begins to cherish her and even admits that she is a good companion. Thus, her economic empowerment results in her emancipation and adds value to her personality. This buttresses the fact that although women deserve fair and equal recognition, they cannot get it by mere verbal fights with men without engaging themselves constructively in economic activities. They should rather team up with one another and embark on gainful economic ventures that will lend 'substance' to their voices and consequently put them on a level playing ground with men. In the novel, all the women characters support and sustain one another. Quite unlike what happens in real life, even women who have interest in the same men: Shug and Celie, Sofia and Mary Agnes still support each other, their common interest notwithstanding. The women are ready to sacrifice individual interest for collective interest. Shug resorts to lesbianism for Celie's love and sexual fulfillment. Sophia overlooks Miz- Millie's animosity, gives her driving lessons in order to liberate her from Mayor____'s insensitivity and mockery. Mary Agnes is raped, so that Sophia could regain her freedom. Reflecting on Olinka's Chief's wives relationship with one another, Nettie comments: "It is in work that women get to know and care about each other" (172). Shug sums up the women's communal relationship thus: "Us each other's people now Amen" (189). Shug enjoys freedom more than the other women and this earns her sharp criticisms from the church elders. Her relationship with Celie is that of sister, friend and lover. She succeeds in leading Celie into emotional, sexual and financial freedom, which is evident in Celie's remarks: "I am so happy. I got work, I got money, friends and time" (222).

The title of the novel *The Color Purple* itself is imagery. It says much more than the words that it is composed of. The expression is used by Shug when she is trying to liberate Celie from the narrowness of her religious beliefs. To her, it "pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in the field and don't notice it" (203). Prior to this statement made by Shug, Celie envisages God as a white, big, old, tall, barefooted and gray bearded man "... looking like some stout white man work at the bank" (96). She addresses all her letters to God in a childlike manner though she confesses being neglected by this God whom she has lived all her life for. With Shug's quite unconventional interpretation of God, Celie is brought to see God in the natural world and its beauty symbolized by the term "color purple". According to Shug, God is to be found inside everyone and not in church as people wrongly perceive. To Shug, He is not even a he or she but an 'it' and those who search for 'it' inside find it. To experience God, one should "lie back and just admire stuff. Be happy" (200). She equates being happy with worshiping God and even sees a co-relation between worship and sexual satisfaction, admitting that she and God "make love just fine."

This reorientation broadens Celie's perception of God. She embarks on a struggle to rid herself of the 'old white man' that hitherto represents God in her mind who is a silent and insensitive God that '... Don't think, sit up there, glorying in being deaf (200), '... trifling, forgetful and lower down' (199). She feels bad that she has been engrossed with thoughts about this 'false' God that she has failed to notice the real God in His creative works that embody Him: "Not a blade of corn, not the color purple, not the little wild flowers, Nothing" (204). Thus, in her last letter to her sister Nettie, she begins with "Dear God, Dear Stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples, dear everything. Dear God" (292). Her beginning and ending with 'Dear God' signifies that God indeed covers everything as the Beginning and the End. This view is contrary to her prior narrow perception of God as a deity with a specific distant location. Evidently, the narrowness of conventional beliefs and practices undermines a realistic relationship with God. Roofleaf is God to the Olinkan because it is able to shelter them. With this new religious disposition, Celie becomes totally free and, empowered by this new found liberty, she addresses her husband, who all the while she refers to as Mr___, by his real name Albert. It is not coincidence that she did this only in her last letter to Nettie in which she demonstrates her broadly modified religious disposition.

The colour 'purple' signifies love, beauty and dignity suggesting that people should live dignified, harmonious and complementary lives, irrespective of their gender, strengths and weaknesses. Shug's, Sophia's, and Nettie's roles in Celie's life are not accidental. These are three assertive women who serve as *rungs* with which Celie climbs to gain freedom. They encourage Celie to fight for emancipation and happiness. The metaphor of 'fight' paints a picture of the magnitude of effort that should be geared towards the realization of this 'possible world' of the text. This is a fight to establish a world free of class distinction, oppression and racism. As stated earlier, it transcends women's rivalry and jealousy.

Revenge is not considered important in this *novel world*. The message is that energy should be geared towards creating a tolerant and accommodating world. Hence, Celie's unrepentant stepfather who is the cause of her predicament is neither challenged nor punished. However, since he refuses to conform to the norms of the new world, his existence becomes unnecessary; consequently, he dies before the end of the work. When Celie nurses the feeling to kill Albert, Shug discourages her to forget revenge and ease off her tension by making pants. Celie comments: "A needle not a razor in my hand I think" (153). Thus, her success at winning Albert over portrays that, by working positively, we conquer our oppressors better than we do by carrying weapons of revenge.

The participation of two opposing characters in the work, Mr ____ (Alfonso) 'extremely bad' and Celie __ 'extremely good' is not possible in our real world. These characters are accommodated in the *work* for full realization of the possible world. The two characters are juxtaposed to portray what is acceptable or not acceptable in 'the ideal' world of the text.

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The imagery in the text helps to disclose a new and autonomous world that is '...better, higher and nobler than we find in the real world' (Akwanya 264). Celia's happy declaration at the end of the novel confirms this.

'... I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this is the young us ever felt' (295).

Her room is painted purple, red and yellow to reflect her passion, happiness, contentment. *The Color Purple* is not about Americans, Africans, the Whites or Blacks. It is about a beautiful world illuminated by characters with a common purpose - a world of love and harmonious existence. Hence, in the text, there is a family reunion of people who conform to the norms of this new world every 14th July, where the characters celebrate each other (294).

CONCLUSION

Enormous imagery is employed in the work to reinforce the themes explored. The convergence of the imagery gives us the sense of the text as a whole while, individually, each of the imagery provides a miniature sense of the text. The characters, objects, and incidents in *The Color Purple* acquire meanings beyond their potential reference. This discovery agrees with Akwanya's assertion that:

Written discourse, however, frees itself from the interlocutors and ... the present moment and place. The pronouns, determiners, and temporal modifications are still used, but they no longer have 'ostensive reference'.
Even in 'direct speech', as in the novel, characters, things, state of affairs, events are only evoked, but they are not there (262 - 263).

All in all, the use of imagery in *The Color Purple* leads the reader into 'appropriation' as the reader reaches out quite beyond himself to participate in the world of the text. This world is not real but a possible one. The reader realizes through the imagery the need for a harmonious and equal co-existence of men and woman, the imperativeness of economic empowerment as a means of liberating and restoring the dignity of black women, the horror of racism, and the odious nature of sexual abuse, child abuse and wife battering.

The language is clear and vivid evoking imagery that engenders in the reader a deep perception of the 'proposed world' of the text as well as makes him a participant in the scheme of things. The ability of Celie to hold on in the face of many tough challenges and her triumph at the end gives a positive value to the new and possible world created in the text. This is in agreement with Ricoeur's theory of literature which stipulates that "The persistence of

life and hope in the midst of death and destruction is what gives the world projected its positive value” (qtd in Akwanya 267).

Finally, the meaning of the text goes beyond the literal meanings of the individual words. Therefore, the task of interpreting the text goes deeper than what comes under the purview of semantics owing to the extensive use of imagery in the work which undoubtedly necessitates the use of a different mode of analysis: deep semantics.

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