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Search for Feminine Spaces : Movement from "Feminism" in *The Awakening* to "Womanism" in *The Color Purple.*

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Abstract

In the present paper, an attempt is made to bring forth the availability and authenticity of the feminine spaces with reference to Edna's "pigeon house" and Celie's "Harpo's jukejoint" in *The Awakening* and *The Color Purple* respectively. It also deals with the frustration of having such spaces thwarted by the outside world. Furthermore, itfocuses on the concepts of "feminism" and "womanism" and how the feminine spaces created under both converge (an attempt to gain independence) and diverge (individual versus collective struggle) and their implications as derived from the different endings of the novels.

Key Words: Feminism, Womanism, Feminine Spaces, Oppression, Patriarchy, Social and Racial Barriers.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* share the universal feminist yearning for personal freedom and independence within an oppressive, patriarchal society. With regards to the texts' stylistic differences and disparate social contexts, their heroines seek to ideologically oppose social rules and conventions for women without achieving the same results. This difference lies in the fact that Chopin's text fosters the traditional feminism, while Walker's text makes use of womanism. The availability and authenticity of feminine space for the generation of women's culture also determine the extent of changes achieved. Edna constructs a feminine space of her own by looking inward and in essence abandoning the physical and social existence of her world whereas heroines of Walker's text accomplish both spiritual freedom and feminine reconstruction of the physical space. In both texts the path towards the creation of feminine space begins with the guidance of others or through self-exploration and they become more aware and conscious of their private and corporeal space. The awareness of their own female body sheds light on the various ways in which patriarchal society abuses it by subjecting it to reproduction and confines it within the home for carrying out domestic duties. In effect, self-awareness of one's body marks the beginning of a desire to reclaim the body and reorientate it towards a mode of self-centered determinism. While Edna learns to listen to the rhythm of her body, Celie and Shug demonstrate a more explicit engagement with the exploration of the female body that involves intimacy and mirror reflections of the body.

The feminist/womanist orientation of both texts gives expression to an ambivalent ambience that is informed by a desire to create a female world and the frustration of having such attempt disrupted by the outside world in the form of social imperative that calls for women to absorb themselves in the paired institutions of marriage and motherhood is personified most faithfully in the husbands' house. The husband's house, in both texts, figures significantly as a symbol of masculine power and is perceived as a sight of both grandeur and contempt. As the female characters gain and realize self-autonomy, the structure of the house parallels their liberation with its own gradual deconstruction or decay. For Edna, her family house represents a stage upon which she is compelled to perform society's precepts of femininity, motherhood and marriage. At home, she is supposed to fulfill the social requirement of reserving a day for receiving and entertaining whomsoever happens to call. She is compelled to maintain the appearance of a dutiful wife and mother who loves to stay home and look after her children and husband. When Edna decides to move into her own place –the pigeon house- Leon Pontellier, her husband, has their house broken down under the pretext of renovation. At Albert's house, Celie suffers a grimmer reality of patriarchal abuse as she works tirelessly around the house and in the field while being vulnerable to his verbal and physical abuses. At night, not caring how exhausted or disinterested Celie is, Albert nonetheless fulfills his sexual need. Hence, their subsequent mobilization from this space constitutes the expansion of their consciousness in relation to social as well as personal private space.

In *The Awakening*, Grand Isle may easily impress as a homosocial female world shaped by geographical isolation. It is a popular vacation destination for upper-class families and it seems to especially attract female visitors as it is owned and operated by a female, Madame Lebrun. The world of The Awakening draws together a group of disparate characters who are absorbed in different concerns and therefore fail to perceive each other's conditions. The lack of unity in predisposition or common causes deprives Edna as well as other female characters in the novel of the chance to coalesce in the effort of gaining social and political recognition. Indeed, Chopin initially entitled her novel A Solitary Soul perhaps to emphasize her protagonist's solitary struggle. The chilly absence of a female world in *The Awakening* contrasts with the empowering presence of the unity and strength of womanhood in *The Color Purple*. The progress of Celie's struggle for self-authority can be traced through the succession of physical spaces materializing to support and shelter her at different stages. The agency of a powerful woman such as Shug transforms these spaces into progressive alternative spheres that promote sexual equality, establish ties and reconfigure human relationships in ways unimaginable to the outside world.

Sandra Gilbert views the island as an "oasis of women's culture" and a "female colony" (Showalter 44). She arrives at this critical view by the fact that the small community of the isle consists of a woman who runs her own business, Madame Lebrun, a socially ostracized woman, Madame Reisz, and Adele and Edna, all of whom interact with one another in close proximity. In this space of supposed feminine sensibility, the female characters each bear the mark or the consequences of the masculinist traditions of society. Delbanco attributes the collectively driving force of the business world to men such as LeoncePontellier, whose business instinct makes him seize marital relationship as property and social relationships as means to promote and enhance his business prospects. Her business instinct is displayed in her command of the resort; especially when it seems to have reached maximum capacity she can be seen "bustling in and out, giving orders". Her pro-active lifestyle and her engagement in the thriving business world make her the most economically successful and independent woman of the novel. She assumes a responsibility that traditionally has been consigned to men. Madame Lebrun and Madame Reisz are the only two women living on independent means, yet rather than drawing Edna to Madame Lebrun who is more socially prominent and more successful, the narrative connects Edna to Madame Reisz, who is clearly made out to be an outcast. In *The Art of Dying* Deborah Gentry observes that the first three chapters refer to Edna as only Mrs. Pontellier, which, she argues, shows the objective way in which society sees her only in relation to her husband. The parrot is described as caged and speaking a "language which nobody understood" (Chopin 3). Edna's solitude substantially derives from the incommunicability of the things she wishes to express but cannot. Perhaps as equally significant as the parrot's confinement is its fanatical exclamation seemingly aimed at Mr. Pontellier: "Allezvous-en! Allezvous-en! Sapristi!"which translates to "Go away! Go away! For God's sake!" (Chopin 3). The parrot's intuitive aversion to Mr. Pontellier signifies its recognition of him as an oppressive force, foreshadows his perpetual absence and the unpleasantness of his company, and communicates Edna's subconscious wish to be away from him.

At Grand Isle only Adele encourages Edna to express herself with the inquiry "Of whom – of what are you thinking of?" (Chopin 19). The scene captures nostalgic reflections of Edna's childhood and is informed by an examination of her current state. This scene contains the first revelation of Edna's psychology and her first utterances regarding it. This self-contained moment of femalehood attempts to realize female contentment and connection but in actuality is underlined by disparity and disconnectedness. Soon this moment is arrested by "the sound of approaching voices". This external interruption illustrates an instance of societal demands that apparently leaves no room for individuality.

According to Church and Havener, the lady in black at Isle denies herself of sensual pleasures, subsuming it in her religious devotions. By keeping near the lovers, who manifest eros in their devotion to each other, the lady in black, like Mademoiselle with Edna, vicariously and even "voyeuristically" keeps herself within touch of the domain of eros. While Reisz may seem respectable by virtue of her talent and wisdom, she is socially alienated for renouncing marriage and by extension love and sensual pleasure. She is similar to the lady in black in that both represent a disposition for conscious identity (reason, mind). Her proximity to Edna mirrors the proximity of the lady in black to the lovers.

Edna begins to perceive her husband's home as an oppressive apparatus reinforcing unstimulating social traditions such as reserving one entire day for receiving guests at one's home. No longer at ease with such functions, Edna's exploration of her own independence and personal strength commences with her solitary venture outside of the restrictive domestic domain. It is appropriate that as she tries to develop her own identity Edna would seek the company of a woman whose life represents both the rewards and repercussions of female individuality of the period. Another structure with significant meaning to Edna's personal growth is the "pigeon-house". Recognizing that having her own abode represents freedom and independence, Edna arranges to execute the terms of her own survival by drawing from her inheritance and selling her own art works. The house represents the final culminating step of not only realizing her vision but also "relieving herself from obligations". Like Grand Isle and Mademoiselle Reisz's home, the "pigeon-house" could be easily perceived as a feminine space by virtue of its owner's intention; nonetheless, it also turns out to be misleading and false in its presentation. Edna's "pigeon-house" aspiration is perhaps in some sense bound to be frustrated by the suggestion of its nickname. Certainly, the metaphor of the pigeon falls in line with the several images of birds perceived by Edna throughout the novel. The most significant of such imagery is the bird Edna sees at the end "with a broken wing [that] was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (Chopin 133). The bird is viewed as symbol of Edna's defeat. At the end, she allows the water to carry her out into the far distance beyond the grasp of life on shore into the vast Gulf of Mexico. It must be concluded that she commits suicide or will end up dead.

For Celie in *The Color Purple* unlike her father's house, which is totalizing in its suffocation, Albert's residence allows for "gaps" of feminine discourse by virtue of his indifference to her and lack of interest in his children. Her married life expands her world and brings her into contact with different characters who make an impact in her

life one way or another. The porch of Albert's house serves as the text's first significant space for bearing witness to a kind of nascent female world that develops between Celie and Sofia. It also serves as a designated point of meeting, conversing and most significantly as Albert's symbolic choice for demonstrating his hegemony. Its ubiquity testifies to its signification as a defining feature of the world of the text and its struggles. It's inviting and conveniently situated nature against a background of rural setting marks it out as a commonplace for communal interaction and transaction of news, gossip and other trivials of everyday life. Its communal aspect sets it apart from the world of *The Awakening*. Its significance within the narrative becomes most clear in the end when it becomes the place of an emotional reunion between Celie and Nettie and the children. In the end, the porch undergoes transformation; from being a place for power struggle and dissenting discourse, it becomes a place of homogenous/homosocial relations, an extended family not bound by inherent ties but rather by life. Sofia confronts Celie on the porch who confesses that she was a "fool" and jealous of her power. Celie's confession turns the confrontation into a revelation of Sofia's own abusive upbringing. Laughter like a subtext of feminine discourse figures significantly as a kind of embankment for potentially destructive behavior. Collective laughter such as Sofia's and Celie's is embedded with the women's insight and knowledge of a truth not immediately accessible in the world of men. It only becomes apparent that this scene takes place on the porch when they both "laugh so hard [they] flop down on the step" (42). Their reconciliation generates an important component of the emerging female world: they decide to make "quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains". By making something even more beautiful and personal out of torn fabric - figuratively the torn fabric of their lives - they have solidified their sisterly bond, as suggested by their name for the quilt: Sister's Choice. Once again, the particularly feminine activity of bonding and quilting is linked to the open space of the porch.

Harpo's jukejoint becomes an important social establishment and a significant scene of power struggle and acquisition of self-autonomy for the female characters. In The Color Purple, Shug Avery represents the blues culture (which is ideologically opposed to mainstream culture promoted for women). Although she has three children with Albert, she blatantly rejects marriage and motherhood for an itinerary lifestyle as a well-known blues singer. Rejecting both domestic and sexual orthodoxy, Shug displays her resistance to definition and categorization and she flamboyantly flaunts her sexuality. Within the feminist context, Harpo's place is most memorable and significant for providing the occasion for Celie's burgeoning assertiveness and encouraging Mary Agnes to gain a speaking and singing voice. At the communal level, it brings everyone together in festive spirit; at the personal level, it broadens Celie's social context in which she comes

to recognize and identify the mutual silenced condition informing her life and those of others, most notably Mary Agnes whose nickname Squeak connotes her diffidence. It is in the jukejoint that Celie urges Mary Agnes to, "make Harpo call you by your real name". Her growing sense of self-autonomy parallels her singing voice and her transition from a passive personality to an aspiring blues singer on the strength of the support and encouragement from other women. She becomes empowered enough to assert self-ownership. The narrative ultimately accomplishes this task by "awakening" its female characters to the reality of their world, publicizing their struggles, and healing them through various media of expression all the while seeking to generate these experiences within spaces graced by strong female presence and witness. Thus, the jukejoint masquerades as a social arena of feminine space in order to publicize the scene of personal struggle.

The act of reading the letters is figuratively reconstructive because the revelations of Nettie's letters gives Celie the fortification necessary to remove herself from Albert and travel with Shug to Memphis. Shug's house in Memphis illustrates self-contained and self-determined world of women undisturbed by the brute behavior of men and also women's potential for productivity and creativity when left to their own device. Celie's designs of pants are innovative for shifting the emphasis from fashion and aesthetic, which divides and objectifies, to pragmatism and individualization. Priscilla L. Walton notes that her design "celebrates rather than restricts people; they become a symbol of the humanist/womanist utopia manifested at the end of the novel". These examples illustrate the communal aspect of the novel's journey towards a happy ending. Having recognized the communal and interconnected quality of *The Color Purple*, it becomes apparent that *The Awakening* not only lacks such quality but also has an aversion to it. Edna's aspiration to be an artist and deriving a living from it is never followed through, while Celie, who never intends to make a living from her talent, discovers the path towards independence. Despite many parallels between the texts, their outcome is different because Edna's lack of constructiveness sharply contrasts the mobility and reconstructionist ideology of *The Color Purple*. Nonetheless, both texts give expression to feminist concerns that transcend racial and social barriers by emphasizing on the personal in the hope of compelling political change because " the personal is political".

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