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Pat Fortin

University of Northern Iowa

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Celie and Hagar: Sisters in Time

by Pat Fortin

What separates the experiences of a Hebrew slave-woman from a 20th century black woman? Except for time, apparently, not much. As one compares and contrasts the lives of Hagar, an Egyptian slave described in Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror*, and Celie, a southern black woman presented in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, one finds similarities even though these women lived in different cultures thousands of years apart. These similarities include the authors' use of language, and the oppression, bondage, and flight to freedom these women share.

Celie is brought to life by Alice Walker and her unique use of turn-of-the-century black dialect. In the article “Finding Celie’s Voice,” Walker defends her unusual and sometimes shocking use of this language because she feels the story must come from Celie’s voice, that she must tell the story in her own words. Walker explains:

> For it is language more than anything else that reveals and validates one’s existence, and if the language we actually speak is denied us then it is inevitable that the form we are permitted to assume historically will be one of caricature, reflecting someone else’s literary or social fantasy. (72)

Hagar, the black slave of Abraham and Sarah, comes to us through the Old Testament. Her story is found in bits and pieces of Genesis 16:1-16 and 21:9-21. In contrast to Celie, whose story is told sympathetically by Walker, Hagar’s story is difficult to unravel because it is told from the perspective of her oppressors. Fortunately, through her work as a Biblical scholar, Phyllis Trible makes the recovery of Hagar’s story possible. Trible dissects the scripture inch by inch to find Hagar’s voice—to reveal her life of use, abuse and rejection. Trible describes Hagar’s gross victimization, “... she experiences exodus without liberation, revelation without salvation, wilderness without covenant, wanderings without land, promise without fulfillment, and unmerited exile without return” (28). Trible utilizes her expertise to interpret the biblical language to give us an unambiguous perspective of what Hagar felt and what she had to say. When the deity questions her about her departure, “Hagar, maid of Sarai, from where
have you come and where are you going?”, she replies, “From the face of Sarai, my mistress, I am fleeing” (Trible 15). Trible analyzes this short narrative and denotes several significant details. “For the first time a character speaks to Hagar and uses her name,” she notes. “Yet the app­ positive, ‘maid of Sarai,’ tempers the recognition, for Hagar remains a servant in the vocabulary of the divine” (15). In the remainder of this episode Hagar’s name is omitted entirely. Trible makes other observations: “Only feminine verb forms and pronouns identify Hagar . . . While she answers in the same syntactical order that the question was posed, she transforms the content of both the prepositional phrase and the verb” (15). This transformation and matching of sequence, according to Trible, “indicates the continuing power of the social structure. Exodus from oppression has not secured freedom for Hagar” (15). Throughout her text Trible continually examines the order, content, and structure of each passage to reconstruct and recover a new meaning of Hagar’s story.

Hearing both Celie’s and Hagar’s stories, we learn that their lives parallel each other in numerous ways. They both experience oppression. Celie is subjugated by her father who rapes and impregnates her; then by Albert, her husband, who exploits her as a household maid, cook, mother for his children, and as an instrument for sexual release. Hagar’s oppression originates with Sarah and her class and status. She serves as Sarah’s hand­ maid but is then given to Abraham as his wife with the sole purpose of bearing his descendents, which she does in her son Ishmael. Because of their vassalage, both Celie and Hagar lack control over their own lives; therefore they were forced to marry men not of their own choosing.

Because Celie and Hagar experience such oppression and exploitation, they become symbols of oppressed women, women we, the feminists of today, can relate to and visualize in contemporary times. Trible makes this analogy:

[Hagar] is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the run away youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant woman, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others. (28)
These women represent many of the rejected women of today, whose lives mirror the lives of Celie and Hagar.

Celite and Hagar both experience God. It is in this experience that we can ascertain substantial differences. Celie looks to God as a friend, someone on whom she can rely, someone to whom she writes her letters, someone who listens, someone she can love and who will love her back regardless of her color or sex. Hagar does not look for God; she even flees from God, but God seeks her out. When Hagar departs to the wilderness, the deity finds her and delivers her the birth annunciation, "Truly you are pregnant and will bear a son" (Trible 17). Hagar has not chosen to speak to God; God has chosen to speak to her. Hagar’s God also submits her to oppression and affliction under Sarah. The divine commands her, “Return to your mistress, and suffer affliction under her hand” (Trible 26). God only gives her hope through the descendants of her son Ishmael, but even this hope is dashed when the descendants promised her are passed to Abraham and then back to her son. “Hagar decreases as Ishmael increases” (Trible 26). Thus, patriarchal control is restored.

The God that Celie initially relates to is like Hagar’s God in that he stands in complicity with her oppressors; when Celie is raped by her stepfather he says to her, “You better not ever tell nobody but God” (Walker 1). Also later, when Celie is reflecting about being angry at people, she says, “Couldn’t be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what” (Walker 43-4). It is this mentality that leads Celie to accept her abuse from the men in her life because their authority seems to be from God. God does not intercede during her sufferings; her pleas go unanswered.

This God of Abraham, the God of the patriarchy, contrasts with the God Celie discovers through Shug Avery, who in Celie’s story liberates her and becomes the most important person in her life. Celie is shown a God through Shug that is, “... inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don’t know what you looking for” (Walker 202). Allegorically, Shug represents God to Celie as an It. Shug further explains, “I believe God is everything. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you feel that, and be happy to feel that, you’ve found It” (Walker 202). This God is explicitly different from the God Hagar experiences, one that appears to be unsympathetic and uncompassionate.

Celite and Hagar both flee from their bondage. The results for each, however, are also different. Celie does manage to free herself from her stepfather and Albert; Hagar, however, does not achieve manumission from
her captors. Celie acquires personal freedom through personal growth, and the love affectionately given by the women in her life. Hagar, again, is not so fortunate. God controls her life and is on Abraham's side. Trible observes that, "God supports, even orders, her departure to the wilderness, not to free her from her bondage but to protect the inheritance of her oppressors" (25). Hagar continues to be surrounded by desolation, loved and cared for by no one.

Celite is redeemed by the women around her who share in her affliction and love her unequivocally. In their community and communion together she is redeemed, made-right, rescued, cared for, and eventually transformed into a human being with an identity and feelings of self-worth and self-esteem.

Alice Walker uses the religious traditions of Afro-American Christianity to redeem Celie. Walker writes that her African ancestors communicate with her through her dreams. These dreams, she says, sustain her and help her to redeem women, such as Celie, who have gone before her. In her article "Finding Celie's Voice," she states: "I get to keep these dreams for what they mean to me, and I can tell you that I wake up smiling, or crying happily, as the case may be. It seems very simple: because I know I love them and understand their language, the old ones speak to me" (96).

Hagar is remembered by the Christians and Jews who read her story in the Old Testament, but they do not share the same communication that exists between Celie and Walker. So it is left to us, the daughters of Hagar, to redeem her and make her whole. Through our reading of her story, we remember her, love her, and redeem her.

What would Celie say to Hagar? I think she would give her the same advice she received from Shug: "You have to git man off your eyeball before you can see anything a'tall" (Walker 214). Hagar only knew a "male-dominated" world. She did not have a Shug to help her to realize that there exist different perspectives about God, man, and woman. Hagar's world held these perspectives in a hierarchy with God at the top, followed by man, and, in the bottommost slot, woman. Celie would tell Hagar that she needs to "chase that old white man out of your head. Cause thats the one thats in the white folks bible" (Walker 204, 210). Hagar's enslavement is in the white man's Bible and one from which she cannot free herself.

Hagar would tell Celie that she is not alone in her suffering and affliction, that there have been thousands of women throughout history who have been "kept in their place," who have been innocent victims of abuse and rejection. Hagar would express regret that she did not have a Celie or a Shug to help shoulder her burden, and that she had no community
to surround her with love. Hagar would ask Celie to help her understand that God does not have to be demanding, severe, and patriarchial. She could share the God that Celie came to know, the God that is in everything and everybody; the one that gets "pissed-off" if "you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it" (Walker 203).

It is evident that Walker and Trible are trying "to recover a neglected history, to remember a past the present embodies, and to pray that these terrors shall not come to pass again" (Trible 3). They are seeking to "redeem time." Walker and Trible feel a need to tell these stories so that women of today can learn from them and realize the injustices that have been cast upon our sex, to come in union with these victims so their stories will live through us and in us. As Walker has said, "I have found that where there is spiritual union with other people, the love we feel for them keeps the circle unbroken and the bond between us and them strong, whether they are dead or alive. Perhaps this is one of the manifestations of heaven on earth" ("Finding Celie’s Voice" 96).

Works Cited

