



KAMELIA TALEBIAN SEDEHI

**SEARCHING FOR
SUBJECTIVITY
IN MELANCHOLIC
FEMALE EUNUCHS
IN SELECTED NOVELS
BY ALICE WALKER**





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*To the pillars of my strength, to my
understanding mother and supportive
father*

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SEARCHING FOR SUBJECTIVITY IN MELANCHOLIC FEMALE EUNUCHS IN SELECTED NOVELS BY ALICE WALKER*

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According to Julia Kristeva, melancholic subject suffers from the sense of loss which results from the loss of mother. As a consequence of this loss, the melancholic subject is a stranger to language, isolates herself, and does not have any interest in actions or even life itself. However, in my study, I contend that the loss of mother is not the only reason for melancholia in the female characters, Celie, Tashi, Mem, and Magdalena in the Alice Walker novels *The Color Purple*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, which were selected for this study. These female characters not only lost their mother or mother figures but also their sexuality has been oppressed, and they have been harassed; therefore, they are led to melancholia. These female characters do not have any knowledge about their bodies; therefore, they easily accept whatever old rituals and men impose on them. This condition of women lacking knowledge and the misrepresentation of female sexuality has been referred to by Germaine Greer as that of being a female eunuch. The purpose of my study was to focus on the reasons behind my selected female characters' melancholia, and the ways they attempt to heal it; either successfully or not. Therefore, I merge the notions of Kristeva's melancholic subject and Greer's female eunuch to provide a new reading of melancholia for the selected female characters. Moreover, my thesis also explores Walker's selected novels in light of Kristeva's speaking subject to indicate how the use of language by the main selected female characters and other characters can make and unmake their subjectivity.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of The Study

Language and identity have been a main topic of research in recent years. Different critics, such as Foucault (1990), Derrida (1998), and Kristeva (1984), have focused on language and its effect on identity formation, which is the main objective of psychoanalysis. However, in some cases, a person is not able to form her identity as a result of a feeling of loss within herself. Throughout life, the subject can face different losses, but what has been lost that needs such mourning and leads to the inability to form an identity? The reason behind this sense of loss is melancholia. Melancholia has been studied in a range of different disciplines, such as psychoanalysis, philosophy, and literature. But why did this topic fascinate so many great minds, and, moreover, why has such a vast body of text been devoted to it? From ancient times to the modern era, different philosophers, literary figures, and psychoanalysts have devoted their time to discussing melancholia and its causes. In the following pages, I apply Julia Kristeva's concept of the melancholic subject to the main female characters in the selected Alice Walker novels *The Color Purple*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and *By the Light of My Father's Smile*.

Melancholia, based on Kristeva, is non-communicable grief, which, sometimes leads melancholic subjects to lose interest in everything, even life. Every one of us faces different misfortunes that make life unliveable, sorrowful, and made it into a living death situation. According to Kristeva, the melancholic subject has lost her mother and mourns for her; therefore, she is silent and cannot have verbal communication as not only is she a stranger to language, but also she considers this sense of loss as a private feeling that cannot be per-

ceived by others. As the melancholic subject is a stranger to the language, she may convey her intentions through “gestures, spasms or shouts” (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 15). Unlike many theses which have applied Kristeva’s concept of the melancholic subject to different literary and non-literary works, I do not restrict myself to Kristeva’s melancholic subject. Rather, I seek to merge Kristeva’s concept of the melancholic subject with Germaine Greer’s female eunuch in order to analyse Walker’s selected novels and provide another explanation for this state of mind, melancholia, based on my analysis. While Kristeva emphasises the loss of mother as the main reason behind the subject’s melancholia, by including the notion of Greer’s female eunuch in the analysis, I intend to indicate that many other reasons can complicate the situation.

Based on Greer, women have been oppressed by men throughout history. They have been victimised sexually, physically, and mentally. As women are not able to know their bodies or appreciate and fulfil their sexual needs. Thus, they have been turned into eunuchs, which is the meaning implied by Germaine Greer’s statement, “women’s sexual organs are shrouded in mystery” (*The Female Eunuch* 44). The only reason for them to be in society is to fulfill men’s sexual needs, bear children, and do household chores. Women were not even allowed to have prominent jobs or social status for much of human history.

In my study, by merging the notions of Kristeva’s melancholic subject and Greer’s female eunuch, I intend to indicate the effects of the loss of mother and being sexually victimised on Walker’s main female characters. However, I do not intend to blame men as the only reasons behind these female characters’ melancholia as women by following patriarchal traditions and supporting different ideologies that have also restricted women.

One can observe that, Alice Walker’s female characters are in despair, but not discern what has caused them to be in such pain and agony. These women sigh, complain, grieve, and mourn; however, they cannot share the reasons of their grief. It is my hope that this work will clarify the causes behind Walker’s female characters’ melancholia in light of Kristeva’s and Greer’s concepts. Furthermore, my work will highlight the reasons behind the success or failure of these female characters’ gaining unified psyches. Thus, I will offer close and detailed readings of individual texts, and, from each text, I have selected one female character to apply Kristeva’s and Greer’s concepts. As such, I have focused on four female characters, Celie, Tashi, Mem, and Magdalena as the subjects of this study. In addition, I have included discussion of Walker’s biography and its manifestation within her texts because, according to Kristeva,

only a melancholic writer can write about melancholia, and, as far as Walker's biography is concerned, she was a melancholic subject.

From her childhood, Walker noticed how black people were suppressed and oppressed within white racist societies. Moreover, she perceived how black women have been twice-repressed within white racist society and black patriarchal families. She became depressed, and she attributed "most of this depression to the oppression that blacks face from the white— a reality that was unmistakably still present in the south" (Robinson 297). Later, she confessed that "the threat of self-destruction plagued me as it never had before" (Royster 353). When she was a child, and she played with her two brothers, she was blinded in one eye and she considered this event as the sexual blinding of women. Later on, this "blinding motivates Walker's personal sense of sisterhood with women who have undergone genital operations" (Lauret 215). As a result of so many plights she experienced in her life, she became a depressed person. One of these plights was her father's mistreatment of his children, especially his daughters and his wife.

After being treated by psychologists, Walker returned to normal life and participated in different campaigns. She discussed various issues in her books that others did not dare to even mention. She fought against circumcision practiced on women and questioned their identity as human beings. As Taien mentioned, Walker has been active in campaigning and writing about female circumcision in Africa (17). Female circumcision is the subject of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, which I discuss in chapter three of the current study. Walker underwent bitter experiences and observed women's miserable situations, and she depicted them in her novels. In my analysis, the reader will notice how Walker depicts the negative influences of racism, female circumcision, restriction of free sexuality, and rape on black female characters, and the way all these matters, directly or indirectly, lead these women characters to melancholia. She chooses all this subject matter for her books as she intended to "heal some of the hurts of the past and to make it known to the world" (Robinson 309).

In chapter two of my study, I discuss Walker's biography in more detail. In fact, I have chosen Alice Walker as, to the extent of my knowledge; other African Americans did not deal with the issues that Walker discussed. She passed the melancholic state of mind, which is a requirement for Kristeva when a writer talks about melancholia. Moreover, she discussed female circumcision, which is an issue for Greer as a feminist. According to Greer:

Male mutilation is considered trivial, female genital mutilation is considered devastating even if it involves nothing more than nicking the prepuce of the clitoris to provoke ritual bleeding. (*The Whole Woman* 103)

Besides, melancholia and the female eunuch, I have gone further and discussed Kristeva's other concept, the speaking subject. Based on Kristeva, the subject is not fixed, but she is malleable. By the use of language, interacting others, expressing herself, and being judged by others, the subject's subjectivity is made and unmade. When the subject uses language, her relation to herself and others is changed, and through this change, her subjectivity is shaped (Kristeva, *Revolution* 15). My intention is to show how female characters view themselves and how other characters look at them; therefore, their subjectivity made fluid.

In addition, as I intend to focus on main female characters in Walker's selected novels, I will use female pronouns whenever I explain the concepts in the current chapter of my study, which is a conceptual framework; as the subjects of my study are female characters.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Alice Walker's female characters are melancholic subjects and they suffer from the sense of unsharable loss. Their sense of loss is not only related to the loss of their mother or mother figures, but is mostly related to their overlooked sexual desires. One can notice victimised women who are subjects of incest, circumcision, and overlooked sexual desires in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. Women's sexual desires have been overlooked by their husbands, who think of gratifying their sexual desires and ignore women's sexual needs. Even one can notice father figures as victimisers, who ignore their daughters' sexual needs. As such, these sexually ignored and castrated melancholic female characters cannot express their feelings of loss of sexual passion with other people as they consider it private. The melancholic female eunuchs intend to express this loss within language, and they have the desire to share their feelings, but they cannot find appropriate ways of doing so.

In my study, I intend to argue that Kristeva's melancholic subject is applicable to Walker's novels as the main female characters feel the loss of mother, which Kristeva emphasised in her concept of the melancholic subject. How-

ever, I intend to amalgamate it with Greer's female eunuch to highlight the fact that the loss of mother is not the only reason behind the female characters' melancholia. Some previous studies have been devoted to application of psychoanalysis and different critics' concepts to Walker's selected novels, such as Jones, Pifer and Slausser, and Proudfit. However, they did not merge Kristeva's melancholic subject and Greer's female eunuch to emphasise women's shattered identity as a result of melancholia and the main reasons behind their melancholia. Furthermore, some other studies pinpointed the theme of sexuality in Walker's novels, which include research by Abbandonato and Cutter; however, they did not consider women as eunuchs, pointing out other aspects of the novels based on the theme of sexuality. As a result, I intend to merge Kristeva's melancholic subject and Greer's female eunuch to provide a new reading of Walker's selected novels. Moreover, by applying Kristeva's other concept of the speaking subject, I will argue that the subjectivity of her female characters is not fixed, but they have malleable subjectivity, depending on their use of language and other characters' use of language. By bringing in three different concepts, I tackle the way Walker's female characters' subjectivity has been shattered and analyse the way they obtain their identities whether they are successful, or not.

As a result, this study highlights Alice Walker's melancholic female eunuchs in *The Color Purple*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *the Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and *By the Light of My Father's Smile* in the light of Kristeva's melancholic subject, speaking subject, and Greer's female eunuch.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

As the focus of my study is application of selected concepts by Kristeva and Greer to Alice Walker's selected novels, the first objective of my study was to investigate the way the female characters, Celie, Tashi, Mem, and Magdalena, are led to melancholia. To obtain my objective, I focused on the female characters' sense of loss, especially their loss of mother and mother figures and lack of sexual desire within their life as caused by suppression or abuse. As follows, the second objective of my study aimed at indicating how these melancholic female eunuchs, who are sexually maltreated, treat their melancholia. To obtain my second objective, I delved into the novels, focused on selected female characters, and indicated that either they were capable of getting rid of their melancholia by entering the realm of language, or not. The third objective of

my study was to shed light on the way the melancholic female eunuchs shape their subjectivity. To achieve my third objective, I will explore the way these melancholic female eunuchs use language and interact with others, which led to shaping and reshaping of their identities.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

In this study, I focus on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and *By the Light of My Father's Smile* in the light of Kristeva's melancholic subject and speaking subject and Greer's female eunuch. I have selected these four novels from among Walker's novels as they portray melancholic female eunuchs, who deal with the pain of loss, of love, and of individual and sometimes communal crises. The texts reflect these issues through commitment to pain and loss, which is considered melancholia. Furthermore, all these texts share an underlying sense of the need of supporters in women's lives as Greer believes that women should recognise their sisters and supporters to know their bodies and improve their situations within society. Moreover, based on my reading, I found that the melancholic female characters and the theme of being sexually castrated have not been covered by the critics of these four selected novels. I will not discuss Walker's other novels and her other literary works as they are not within the focus of my study. Moreover, among all of Kristeva's concepts, I have selected the melancholic subject and the speaking subject. Therefore, I will merge Kristeva's melancholic subject and Greer's female eunuch for detailed textual analysis.

1.5 Significance of the Study

A primary aim of my study is to contribute toward merging the two concepts of Kristeva's melancholic subject and Greer's female eunuch to analyse Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. I intend to find a new definition of melancholia based on merging Kristeva's and Greer's concepts. Therefore, I intend to emphasise the way suppression of female sexual needs and its abuse lead to their melancholia, which has not been covered by Kristeva. My review of literature, thus far, has not led to the discovery of any prominent studies which combine the concepts of the melancholic subject and fe-

male eunuch together as a conceptual framework in order to explore how the selected novels of Walker negotiate within such a framework in relation to the female identity.

Based on my review of literature from different data bases, I found that previous studies have focused on different aspects of Alice Walker's novels. For example, *Hysterical (r)Evolution: The Creation of Embodied Language in Alice Walker's "The Color Purple", Tori Amos's "Little Earthquakes", and Frances Dri-scoll's "The Rape Poems"* (2006) by Justine Elizabeth Maeve Gieni explores the effect of sexual violation, its psychological effects, and its healing process. The critic focused on the figure of the hysteric to delve into each literary text and explore the hysteric characters' struggles to reclaim or gain authority.

Unlike Gieni, whose focus is psychoanalysis, *A Womanist Way of Speaking: An Analysis of Language use in Alice Walker's "The Color Purple", Toni Morrison's "Tar Baby" and Gloria Naylor's "The Women of Brewster Place"* (1988) by Cheryl Lynn Johnson provides a linguistic analysis of three novels. She focuses on the way black women's language reveals their consciousness. The third chapter of her thesis deals with Walker's use of dialect in *The Color Purple*.

In addition to Johnson, Robert Stephen Mokaya Matunda in his doctoral thesis *A Linguistic Analysis of Rhetorical Strategies in Selected Narratives of Alice Walker* (2009) also focuses on the linguistics and relates it to literature. Matunda intended to reveal the way characters dominate each other and the way different issues such as religion, race, and gender are discussed through these rhetorical devices.

Different from the previous studies, which highlight female characters, Gwendolyn Nicole Hale's *"Tis Hard to Dance with One Shoe": The Failure of the Fathers in Walker's "The Color Purple" and McCourt's "Angela's Ashes"* (2001) seeks to unravel the effects of tyrannical society on fathers' failures within their families. The main male characters of Walker's *The Color Purple* search for the means to overcome failures and oppression. This study is important as it highlights the way society influences men, which causes them to behave irrationally toward women as a result of social pressure and injustice.

In addition to my contribution of merging two different concepts, I intend to apply Kristeva's concept of the speaking subject to the melancholic female eunuch as this concept by Kristeva has not been covered by Alice Walker scholars. As such, the significance of my study lies in its exploration of the way the sexually abused, mistreated, and overlooked melancholic female eunuchs behave, and how their use of language and other people's use of language shape their identity, and Kristeva's concept of the speaking subject.

1.6 Methodology

My study will shed light on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and *By the Light of My Father's Smile* in the light of Kristeva's melancholic subject, speaking subject, and Greer's female eunuch. I intend to merge Kristeva's melancholic subject with Greer's female eunuch and apply the notion of the melancholic female eunuch to emphasise the way men's sexual mistreatment of women leads them to feel a sense of loss of sexual desire, which causes melancholia. Later on, I will apply Kristeva's speaking subject in Walker's selected novels and focus on the narrative strategies to determine the way these melancholic female eunuchs' subjectivities are fluid and they are under the influence of their own desires, passions, and use of language and other characters' impressions of them.

1.7 Conceptual Framework

This section discusses the conceptual theories which were applied in the present study's analysis to Walker's *The Color Purple*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. One should notice that Kristeva's concepts, the melancholic subject and speaking subject, are selected for this study as "Kristeva persists in disturbing the already said" (Payne 169), she "always destroys the latest preconception, the one we thought we could be comforted by, the one we could be proud of" (Lodge 206). Further, Greer's female eunuch will be discussed.

1.7.1 *The Semiotic and the Symbolic*

Kristeva has theories about language, including the notions of the *chora*, the semiotic, and the symbolic. In her book, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva mentions that language has two aspects: the affective, called the semiotic, and the denotating aspect, referred to as the symbolic. However, these two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process (Kristeva, *Revolution* 34). Kristeva emphasises that "the semiotic aspect of language is not independent of language, but underpins it" (*Constellations* 324). In fact, Kristeva is interested in the manner in which the semiotic flows through the ordered form of meaning (symbolic), and, conversely, the symbolic canalised into the

semiotic, especially in Avant-garde literature. To express themselves, people use not only the denotating aspect, but also their inner desires; they make themselves via language. In fact, language and subjectivity have a dialectical relation. The following argument will focus on the *chora*, the semiotic, and the symbolic.

1.7.1.1 Semiotic Chora

Kristeva borrows the term *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus*, but she modifies it according to her theory and believes that from this space "the semiotic drives arise" (Kristeva, *Revolution* 35). In Plato's view, the *chora* is womb or receptacle; however, Kristeva considers it as a rhythm (and calls this rhythm the semiotic) that precedes language. In fact, Kristeva calls bodily drives and impulses semiotic. These drives move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as stable, and then the drives are arranged based on social and cultural constraints (Kristeva, *Revolution* 25). Kristeva sometimes refers to *chora* as semiotic *chora* because the *chora* is a site "from which the semiotic bursts forth" (Stokes-King 61). In Plato's theory, *chora* is a space in which the universe comes to existence. He explains how the universe was created, and, in Kristeva's theory, *chora* is a site for the infant's relation to her mother's body, and this kind of identification with the mother's body is one of the aspects of the semiotic. As the child has a tactile relation with her mother's body, the child's drives are oriented in a constructive way. However, these drives are destructive by themselves. A child's tactile relation to her mother's body leads them to a normal path. In the *chora*, their sexual drives are directed by the mother's body (Kristeva, *Revolution* 27). Also, "the kinetic functional stage of semiotic precedes the establishment of the sign" (Rivkin and Ryan 454). Kristeva considers the *chora* as a "non expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" and this motility precedes generating the meaning and the signifying practice (Kristeva, *Revolution* 25). Furthermore, Kristeva emphasised that its vocal and gestural organisation is subject to what we shall call an objective ordering, which is dictated by natural or socio-historical constraints such as the biological difference between the sexes or family structure (*Revolution* 27).

At first, the child uses gestures and sounds to express herself, but she is not aware that these utterances have their own distinctive meaning. Later on, the child realises that not only can she use language to indicate objects, but also she realises that she is separate from other people and her surroundings. Kris-

teva calls this stage the thetic break (*Revolution* 43). It is the first step in understanding the independent subjectivity through which the symbolic language which “posits discourse between subject and object comes into being” (Stokes–King 37). Through the thetic break, the child enters the social world, social norms and symbolic realm. In fact, “the thetic is the precondition for both enunciation and denotation” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 53). In order to come to the symbolic realm, the child unconsciously represses rhythmic drives. The more the child enters the symbolic, the more the subject represses the articulation of the spoken and written word. One can see that Kristeva’s theory of the thetic break is the same as Freud’s oedipal stage and Lacan’s mirror stage.

As Freud states, in the oedipal stage, the child understands that her mother is not as powerful as she thinks, and she understands that her mother lacks the male sexual organ. Therefore, her maternal attachment shifts to her father. At this stage “boys develop castration anxiety — a fear of losing the penis, but girls develop penis envy — a jealousy about not having a penis;” therefore, the child enters the realm of language in order to express this painful experience (Thurschwell 59). In other words, castration is separation of the subject from his mother and perception of this deficiency, which leads to the symbolic function (Kristeva, *Revolution* 47). In Lacanian theory, the same processes take place.

In the Lacanian concept, the mirror stage refers to the time when the child identifies herself with her image in the mirror. As she sees herself in the mirror, she understands that she is separate from her surroundings. Then the child uses language to indicate the Other beyond herself. Kristeva’s theories of the semiotic and the symbolic are almost the same as Lacan’s imaginary and the symbolic. In other words, the imaginary is the semiotic and the symbolic is Kristeva’s symbolic.

Influenced by Freudian and Lacanian theories, Kristeva assumes the thetic phase as the stage in which the child becomes able to learn grammar and syntax. In fact, the semiotic is a bridge to the symbolic. In the rhythmic space of the semiotic, which has no thesis and no position, “the signification is constituted” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 26). In other words, it is “a prerequisite for the development of the symbolic” (Stokes–King 39). Now the symbolic stage is shaped. The symbolic stage refers to the use of syntax and semantics. One should be aware that the symbolic and the semiotic aspects of language are not separable.

Kristeva differs from previous theoreticians and considers language as part of a dynamic signifying process. This means that not only bodily drives and