

## Estrategias discursivas e interseccionalidad en el cuento «Roselily» de Alice Walker

### *Discursive Strategies and Intersectionality in "Roselily" by Alice Walker*

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#### RESUMEN

**Introducción:** El pensamiento feminista negro surgió en una época en que se encontraban en difícil intersección el abolicionismo y el sufragismo. De ahí surge el pensamiento interseccional, que tiene en cuenta raza, género, clase, orientación sexual, etnicidad; además, el contexto cultural y las experiencias concretas de las mujeres como sitios de dominación y sitios potenciales de resistencia.

**Objetivo:** El trabajo tiene como objetivo develar algunas estrategias utilizadas por la emisora del discurso que revelan la interseccionalidad de raza, género y clase en un cuento de Alice Walker.

**Métodos:** Se utilizaron los métodos de análisis crítico del discurso ideológico, histórico-lógico, inducción y deducción para el análisis de los enunciados que revelan las estrategias utilizadas por el emisor de discurso.

**Resultados:** En el cuento seleccionado se muestra cómo la enunciativa, una mujer negra y pobre del sur debe someterse y cambiar todo su universo imaginario y casarse con un hombre de diferente religión para ser considerada «respectable» y subsistir con su familia. Se evidencian en su discurso diferentes estrategias argumentativas para hacer su discurso más efectivo y las consideraciones del contexto situacional y personal que la llevan a actuar como lo hizo.

**Conclusiones:** Se revelan en su discurso estrategias léxicas, retóricas (metáforas, alusiones, repeticiones, entre otras), así como la sintaxis narrativa para hacer más efectivo su mensaje, que refleja el contexto cultural, sus experiencias de vida, de raza y género asociadas a la clase, en un entramado de dominación patriarcal.

**Palabras clave:** feminismo; feminismo negro; género; interseccionalidad; estrategias discursivas.

#### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Black feminism thought emerged at the difficult intersection between abolitionism and suffragism. From this arises the term intersectionality, which takes into account race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity; in addition, the cultural context and the concrete experiences of women as sites of domination and potential sites of resistance. Ideologies are systems of ideas that organize and legitimate the actions of that group.

**Objective:** The paper aims to unveil some strategies of the enunciator's discourse that reveal intersectionality in a story by Alice Walker.

**Methods:** Through the methods of critical analysis of ideological discourse, historical-logical, induction and deduction, the discursive strategies used by the narrator's discourse to reveal the intersection of race, class and gender.

**Results:** The selected story shows how the enunciator, a black southern woman, must submit herself and change her entire imaginary universe and marry a man from a different religion to be considered "respectable" in order to survive with her family. Her discourse reveal the strategies used to convey her context and reasons to act.

**Conclusions:** Lexical and rhetorical strategies are evidenced in her discourse (metaphors, simile and allusions, among others) as well as narrative strategies to make her message more effective, which reflect the cultural context, her life experiences, race and gender in an interplay of patriarchal domination.

**Keywords:** feminism; black feminism; gender; intersectionality; discursive strategies.

## Introduction

Black feminism thought emerged at the difficult intersection between abolitionism and suffragism. From this arises the term intersectionality, which takes into account race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity; in addition, the cultural context and the concrete experiences of women as sites of domination and potential sites of resistance.

Since the last decades of the last century, several trends and approaches have been merging, and we now speak of ideologies as political and/or social systems of ideas, values or prescriptions of groups or other collectives, which have the function of organizing or legitimizing the actions of that group. (Van Dijk, 1998).

We subscribe to the postulates of Van Dijk in his book *Ideology* (1998) who insists that a definition of ideologies as systems of ideas must also be multidisciplinary. His conception of the notion of ideology locates it in the conceptual and disciplinary triangle that relates cognition, society and discourse. Ideologies belong to the symbolic field of thought and belief, that is, to cognition. Ideologies, undoubtedly social, are almost always associated with the interests, conflicts or struggles of a group, so may be used to legitimize or oppose power, or to symbolize social contradictions, involving classes or other social groups, institutions, organizations and other parts of the social structure. Many contemporary approaches to ideology associate, and sometimes identify, the concept of discourse with the way in which such ideologies are expressed and reproduced in society (Van Dijk, 1998).

As part of one of the lines of research of the Discourse and Semantic Studies Group of the School of Foreign Languages at the University of Havana, this article contributes to the presentation of the paper with the same title at the *Saber UH 2023*, International Scientific Convention on May 31, 2023. The paper's objective is to reveal some strategies of the discourse of the main feminine character that reveal intersectionality in a story by Alice Walker. Intersectionality aims to bring to light the different forms of oppression that women have faced and still face nowadays.

## Methods

Discourse plays a specific role, among other social practices, in the reproduction of ideologies. But at the same time, ideologies are bearers of *social, political and cultural contents*, and therefore must be accounted for in terms of the study of social representations and their functions for social cognition. These ideologies must be expressed or acted out by the members of such social groups, that is, expressed in concrete situations of social practice. So, if we want to know how ideologies function in social practice, we need to study their discursive manifestations closely (Van Dijk, 2012).

The participants of discourse are considered as social actors, members of social groups and cultures. The conditions, functions and effects of discourse are social, and discursive competence



is socially acquired. In short, discourse and its mental dimensions are multiply embedded in social situations and structures (Van Dijk, 2006).

Through socio-historical, critical discourse and dimensional modal analyses the strategies used in the main character's discourse will be revealed.

For the purposes of studying the meanings of discourse within dimensional modal analysis, the essence of appreciation (one of the valuative modes), according to Caballero (2014), lies in the components of meaning, signs and messages, which can be taken as modal in the structure of any language. Within the modalized discourse, appreciations are oriented towards understanding and expressing:

Beliefs, points of view, opinions which are not promoted as norms, guidelines or transcendent conclusions for the valued object, but which remain linked to the subject who carries them out as a manifestation of their personality, attitude and social positioning. They belong to opinions or points of view that socialise the discourse agent without placing them above other participants (Caballero, 2014, p. 104).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) focuses on dominance and inequality, and is primarily interested and motivated by pressing social issues, hoping to better understand them, to bring out the different aspects of social power and dominance. Power, of course, entails dominance using cognition of the others, in one's own interests. Thus, CDA focuses on the discursive strategies used to bring forth and reveal the ways in which control is attained (Van Dijk, 1993).

## Results and Discussion

Discursive strategy is the strategy used by a subject of enunciation when he proceeds to employ discursive structures. A narrative strategy is aimed at elaborating the narrative schemes from which it is possible to organize the generation of discourses (Albano, Levit & Rosenberg, 2005, p. 95, cited by Sal & Maldonado, 2009).

Discourse strategies may be argumentative, may use rhetorical resources (figures of speech, allusions, metaphors and the like), especially in narrative discourse, and are manifested by different tactics, including valuation, or by using the interlocutor's cognition of his local universe, to assemble the overall semantic coherence. Hence, to analyze discourse we need to take into account local and global semantic and pragmatic strategies, and an account of stylistic and rhetorical strategies that include the various other levels of the discourse. At the same time, the



language user must take into consideration the types of contexts in which such discourse is uttered (Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983).

Feminism as an ideology emerged as women's need for liberation from patriarchal oppression. Within the feminist movement, Black feminist thought emerged at "the confluence (and tension) between two movements, abolitionism and suffragism, at a difficult intersection" (Jabardo 2012:27).<sup>1</sup> Proposing a feminist approach to the economic/class basis for the democratization of African women's rights, an editorial entitled "Women on the March" states about women's rights in these terms:

Feminism strives for the broadest and deepest development of society and human beings free of all systems of domination. [...]. Our vision of feminism has at its very core a process of economic and social development geared to human needs through wider access to economic and political power. Equality, peace and development by and for the poor and oppressed are inextricably interlinked with equality, peace and development by and for women (Development of Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), 1986, cited by Boyce, 2015, p. 1).

As a critical social theory, Black feminist thought aims to empower Black women in a context of social injustice sustained by intersectional oppressions (Collins, 2000, pp. 101-102). Western and European feminist thought tended in the 1970s to speak of feminism as a monolithic ideology. The women's issue is universal. The black feminist movement declares that sexism, class oppression, and racism are inextricably linked; notice in the previous quote a challenge to "all systems of domination" linked to the development of a full humanity in which political and economic power is shared (Boyce Davies, 2015). Moreover, black feminism deals with forms of feminism that struggle to overcome sexism and class oppression. Black feminists, including Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, among others, pointed out that Black women experienced a different and more intense type of oppression. For example, Alice Walker refers to herself as a womanist. Alice Walker's preference for the term womanism points to this notion of human solidarity. For Walker, one is a womanist when she is "committed to the survival and wholeness of all people, male and female" (Walker, 1983, p. xi). By redefining all people as "people of color," Walker universalizes what is usually seen as an individual struggle, while creating a space for autonomous movements of self-determination (Jabardo 2012, p.132).

In Black feminist epistemology, history is told and preserved in the form of narrative. This Afrocentric feminist approach allows African American women to bring the Black women's point of view into larger epistemological dialogues concerning the matrix of domination (Jabardo, 2012, p. 35).

The term intersectionality was coined K. Crenshaw (1989) referring to the multiple forms of oppressions suffered by the same individual, such as oppressions due to race, class, gender and

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<sup>1</sup> Translations made by the author of the paper.



sexual orientation. Inasmuch as these cannot be fully empowered unless the intersectional oppressions themselves are eliminated; Black feminist thought supports general principles of social justice that transcend the particular needs of this group. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are linked to and influenced by society's intersectional systems. Examples include classification by race, gender, class and ethnicity (Collins, 2000, p. 42).

Intersectionality faces a particular definitional dilemma: it participates in the very power relations it examines and must therefore pay particular attention to the conditions that make its knowledge claims comprehensible. Since the analysis of the relations between knowledge and power are the traditional domain of the sociology of knowledge, this field provides an important theoretical vocabulary for conceptualizing intersectionality as reflecting and shaping the power relations that host it. The sociology of knowledge framework suggests that knowledge –including that aimed at better understanding intersectionality– is socially constructed and transmitted, legitimized and reproduced (Collins, 2015:3).

An individual's intersectional status will form part of their ideology and discourse of resistance. As a result, their intersectional position has meant that their problems, concerns and needs are different from those of white women and black men; therefore, black women must fight for gender equality and liberation. Because the black experience has offered them a unique view of the world, this struggle includes other forms of discrimination that affect humanity as well.

Any discursive analysis must be done contextually; we must analyze these categories not in a rigid way, but in a hybrid way, with the shaping of hybrid categories such as "class-ethnicity, class-race, class-gender" (Collins 2000, p. 18). To expose specifically women of color's experiences of oppression, their explanatory approach to the articulation and execution of social structures of oppression: placing the history and narratives of Black women's deferral at the center of analysis. Women stories do exist (Danticat, 1996).

## **The story: Roselily**

In the story analyzed, "Roselily" (Walker, 1973) we find a southern black woman with four children, who is marrying a northern man who is not of the same religion, not a Christian; but who will give her "respect a chance to build" (Walker, 1973, p. 3) In addition, they are in a Christian ceremony and he is distant, detached. He does not belong.

In the interesting narrative syntax of the story, we find two enunciators/narrators: a participant enunciator, the pastor who recites the known words during the act of marriage. At the same time, we hear the voice of a 3rd person, omniscient, editorial narrator, who enters Roselily's mind, and presents only the main character's point of view in relation to the statement previously made by the pastor. The latter is the voice this analysis will focus on.

As for the discursive macro-strategy, which functions as a vehicle for the expression of macro-structures or themes and cognitive models of situation (Van Dijk, 1984, pp. 115-116), we find the



theme of a poor, southern, black woman with several children, who seeks social and economic stability by marrying a man from the north, even though she does not share his religion.

The enunciator-narrator analyzes the situation in which she finds herself and uses several strategies in her discourse to make the perlocution more effective.

In each speech act of the enunciator-pastor (A), the enunciator-narrator (B) relates her thoughts to that previous utterance, to the situational context. Some excerpts of the story will be analyzed here.

1. A: We are gathered here

B: Like cotton to be weighed

The enunciator uses a simile referring to cotton, one of the most important crops harvested by slaves in the South of the United States, to present the valuation made by the protagonist, in the voice of the narrator. She uses a figure of speech, in this case a simile, a strategy to emphasize the negative characteristics of southern blacks. She also uses irony about something that is still a scar in the southern Black people's mental structure: slavery, in the deeper structure of the utterance; and the main crop that slaves used to work in. Thus, she thinks of her as an object, as "cotton to be weighed" as a commodity that is going to go into new hands. Moreover, she is helplessly witnessing something which, like slave work, must be done. Besides, uses a cognitive strategy, by using a contextual situation known by readers in her context and beyond.

2. A: For him they usurp the wedding

This statement refers to appreciation of the groom about the participants in the wedding. The narrator in this case focuses on the attitude of the husband, who maintains an attitude of detachment, of disgust, wanting to end all this to leave, because he does not share the religious culture of the inhabitants of the south. In this case the enunciator emphasizes through the lexicon (*usurp*) the negative characteristics of the inhabitants of the south, because in his religion (Islam) a wedding is not performed in this way. She is emphasizing the fact that he may see her and the rest as intruders, as usurping his space. The patriarchal feeling that things must be done in his way.

3. A: To join this man and this woman

B: She thinks of ropes, chains, handcuffs, his religion. His place of worship. Where she will be required to sit apart with covered head.



The narrator focuses on the thoughts of the main character, who in the surface structure thinks of this marriage as being chained, handcuffed to this man, not simply "joined" as the pastor announces in the ritual words of marriage. For her it means captivity, servitude (ropes, chains, handcuffs). In a deeper level, she envisions the slaves who were brought to this world in chains, and that is how she sees herself in this marriage. In this case, a woman who is chained for life to this man, in the patriarchal way. In addition, she compares the man's form of religion with ancestral ties, in which women are separated and below the man. A rhetorical strategy is evident by using the lexicon related to servitude to emphasize the negative characteristics of his religion. And how women have to be separated, with their heads covered, not free. Again, in servitude. The oppression of women, controlling their selves by separation, by hiding their identity.

#### 4. A: Together

B: Not to have to go to a job. [...] Her place will be in the home, he has said, repeatedly [...] But now she wonders. When she is rested, what will she do? They will make babies. [...] Her hands will be full. Full of what? Babies. She is not comforted. [...] She feels old. Yoked.

Here the strategies used are lexical, rhetorical (rhetorical questions), allusions to what her life will be like from now on. She will not have to work for a living. He insisted that her universe will be the house, children, husband from then on. However, despite the fact that her social status as a married woman, a "woman of respect" will improve, she is not gladdened. She will become "the angel in the house". All this to emphasize the status of a woman reduced to her biological condition, to bring children into the world, and care for them and for her husband. We see the articulation and execution of the patterns and social structures of oppression for women. These patterns of oppression are interwoven, analyzed in the hybrid notions of class-gender, class-race, class-ethnicity (Collins, 2000) evident in the story.

#### 5. A: Let him speak

B: She wishes she had asked him more of what he meant. But she was impatient. Impatient to be done with sewing. With doing everything for three children, alone. [...] The fathers of her children driving by, waving, not waving; reminders of times she would just as soon forget. Impatient to see the South Side, where they would live and build and be respectable and respected and free. Her husband would free her. A romantic hush. Proposal. Promises. A new life! Respectable, reclaimed, renewed. Free! In robe and veil.

In this utterance several argumentative strategies are evidenced. The future husband manipulated her with promises of a new life, of respectability, of freedom from all her troubles. The relation of power and knowledge as a tool for manipulation, of using the mental structures of the manipulated. Promises of a new life for her children, since their fathers had abandoned them. Of a new life in a different city, in the North, far from the cultural ties of the South. The enunciator



used lexical strategies (romantic hush, proposal, promises) that carry a lot of meaning for the listener. In the same way, argumentative strategies of implicitness (freedom, a new life, respectable, renewed). Moreover, in robe and veil, what any woman in her position would want. However, at a deeper structure, a veil would prevent her from seeing what lies ahead of her. And the robe, the ancient use of dressing the bride in a pure robe, as if coming to the matrimony unknowingly. Notice that the narrator emphasizes the fact that "she wishes she had asked him more...". But the fulfilment of promises, of doing away with a miserable life, made her rush into a new situation, to endure. Again, the intersection of class-gender comes to play an important role. In addition, the economic situation is relevant too. He would free her of her dire situation of tending to three children by herself. The notion of class-gender, the social structures of domination are at play.

6. A: Or forever hold

B: She does not even know if she loves him. [...] She loves his pride. His blackness and his gray car. She loves his understanding of her condition. She thinks she loves the effort he will make to redo her into what he truly wants. She is finally being married, like other girls. [...] She thinks of something like a rat trapped, cornered, scurrying to and fro in her head, peering through the windows of her eyes.

The narrator continues to assess the feelings of the protagonist, who expresses a degree of uncertainty about her "love" for her future husband. She loves some of his characteristics, but at the same time, she knows that she is in his hands, that he will try to "redo" her into what he wants her to be, not who she is. She will be forever trapped in her new condition. What he truly wants. On the one hand, she feels something positive because she is finally married, something that is important in her social environment, what is expected from a woman. The old career of a woman, to be married. But at the same time, she values her state in a negatively contained overflow, and uses a rhetorical figure of simile, comparing herself to a trapped rat, with no way out. Once married, she will not be able to get out of this trap. Mostly in the new setting where she will be inserted, where she will be "peering through her eyes". The patriarchal behavior expected of a woman. The class-race and class-gender intersection is evident.

7. A: His peace

B: The rest she does not hear. She feels a kiss, passionate, rousing, within the general pandemonium. Cars drive by blowing their horns. Firecrackers go off. [...] Her husband's hand is like the clasp of an iron gate. People congratulate. Her children press against her. They look with awe and distaste mixed with hope at their new father. He stands curiously apart, in spite of the people crowding to grasp his free hand. He smiles at them all but his eyes are as if turned inward. He knows they cannot understand that he is not a Christian. He will not explain himself. He feels different, he looks it.



She thinks how it will be later in the night in the silvery gray car. How they will spin through the darkness of Mississippi and in the morning be in Chicago, Illinois. She thinks of Lincoln, the president. That is all she knows about the place. She feels ignorant, *wrong*, backward. She presses her worried fingers into his palm. He is standing in front of her. In the crush of well-wishing people, he does not look back.

The narrator-enunciator describes the setting and all the noises and excitement that goes on at the end of a wedding. By using lexical strategies when describing the scenery, she does not have time to think of her new situation. She knows that he is just being polite, he feels alien in the midst of all this joy. She thinks only that when they are alone, in the car, she will really acknowledge her new statue, her new situation. The fact that she mentions Lincoln reveals that maybe she feels like a slave taken to her destination. The intersection of race/gender/class. Using the cognition of the readers, the enunciator uses the strategies of history as a lesson (Lincoln, the president); the known difference between these two regions (Mississippi/Chicago); polarization to reveal the differences between what her life was and what it will be. The differences between her husband's environment and hers (Us/Them). And how she feels about it (wrong, ignorant, backward). Lexical and argumentative strategies that carry lots of meaning.

## Conclusions

So far a few excerpts from the story that reveal the terrible intersection of race, class and gender. A black woman, whose only solution to her condition as a single mother of four children from different fathers, marries a man who will give her 'respect'. And she does so with a man with whom she does not share religion. That she will be separated, in the house, with no way out. Again, the intersection of race-class-gender-ethnicity.

The omniscient editorial narrator appraises the protagonist's thoughts and feelings, and we see everything through her perspective. She makes effective appreciative ethical-psychological, aesthetic and ideological valuations about her and about the man she is going to marry, about the situational context. The main strategies used in her discourse are rhetorical (simile, metaphor, metonymy) and argumentative strategies about her condition as a southern, black, single mother who marries a northerner, of a different religion, but who will finally give her a 'respectable' position in society. Thus, we witness how the intersection of class-gender, class-race, class-ethnicity, and a woman's experiences in her context interact in her discourse, a woman who sees no way out but submit to the man who offers her a new position in life. Black women are still fighting for eliminating all systems of dominance that prevents them from achieving a full development in life. The struggle must go on.



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## Conflict of interests

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.



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