

## The African American Woman Struggle for Freedom in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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### Introduction

On February 9, 1944 was born Alice Walker in Eatonville, the eighth child of Willie Lee and Grant Walker, both sharecroppers. She attended College and in the sixties got involved in the civil right movement. Consequently she was labeled a womanist after a term created by herself. The Encyclopedia Universalis explains: "The term "womanist" created by Walker in 1983, asserts that not only gender oppression but also race oppression must be confronted, which affects and sharpens gender in inexorable way (1). In womanism, Walker synthesized various liberation ideologies" Since Alice Walker as a womanist was inspired by not only one liberation ideology, one can ask himself, which trend of feminism did she advocate? Does she defend a radical feminist view or a moderate one in her writings? To answer this question, we will take as a corpus Alice Walker's best-seller, *The Color Purple*. About the success that this novel has won, we read: "En 1982, Alice Walker fut la première femme afro-américaine à obtenir le Pulitzer Price pour son roman *La couleur pourpre*. Ses écrits ont été traduits dans plus de vingt-cinq langues et vendus à plus de dix millions d'exemplaires" (2) *The Color Purple* is then a best-seller. It is in fact the story of many African American women whose prototype is Celie, the heroine, who fight for her independence and for her freedom. About the character of Celie, Chantal Gagnon notices:

C'est le cas du roman *The Color Purple* d'Alice Walker. Ce roman a été publié en 1982 et il a été lauréat d'un prix Pulitzer. Il met en scène une femme élevée dans la misère, qui est à la fois maltraitée par son père et par son mari. Pourtant, elle garde en elle une grande force et une foi profonde, un mélange tout en onctuosité qui lui permet de s'émanciper en tant que femme du monde.<sup>3</sup>

The mistreatment and the economic poverty in which Celie and many black female characters of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are designed by the patriarchal system in order to maintain them in total submission to men. First, we will analyze how contradictions raise between female and male characters, then we will discuss how the poles of contradiction change as the story unfolds and finally, then we will evaluate the impact of the struggle for

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia Universalis*, corpus 12, Paris: EUF, 2008, P.280.

<sup>2</sup> In 1982, Alice Walker was the first African American woman to be awarded with the Pulitzer Price for her novel *The Color Purple*. Her writings have been translated into more than twenty-five languages and more than ten millions of copies have been sold. Campagne mondiale pour l'éducation, *La grande lecture*, Online, 20-26 Avril 2009.

<sup>3</sup> This is the case of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* which was published in 1982 and won the Pulitzer prize. It describes a woman brought up in misery, mistreated by her father as well as by her husband. However, she kept a great inner strength, a deep faith and a set of many other things that allow her to emancipate and become an universal woman. Chantal GAGNON, «La traduction Des Textes Womanist: Le Cas De La Couleur Pourpre D'Alice Walker », *numéro spécial Journées de linguistique*, 2011, p. 111.

freedom made by female characters in Alice Walker's *Color Purple*. We will make use of the tools provided by stylistic, narratology as well as Marxist theory criticism in order to analyze the kind of feminist position defend by Alice Walker.

### The Conflict Between Men and Women

About the place of contradictions in Marxist criticism, Koné Klohlinwele observes:

Toute contradiction suppose la liaison de deux pôles contradictoires. L'un de ces pôles est dit dominant et l'autre est appelé pôle dominé. L'on utilise également les termes d'aspect principal et d'aspect secondaire de la contradiction. Les signes mathématiques sont par moment utilisés et le (+) désigne le pôle dominant ou aspect principal de la contradiction et le (-) désigne le pôle dominé ou l'aspect secondaire de la contradiction. Ces deux pôles ne sont jamais égaux et se développent de façon inégale.<sup>4</sup>

For Koné Klohlinwele, Marxists find difficult to imagine a world without some people who dominate others and without some accept to be dominated, until they decide to struggle for their freedom and challenge the order established by the former. This leads then open conflict. In the beginning of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the men are the ones that dominate and the women are the ones who are dominated. To enforce their domination, men promote a patriarchal ideology that is intended to let people think that it is normal that men dominate women. Women are said to be useless, weak, a creature inferior to men. Harpo, Albert's son denies any humanity to his wife Sofia by comparing her to a mule in the metaphor "Oh, me and that mule". This metaphor conveys the fact that for Harpo a woman is just an animal like a mule that is only useful when it works for men. But Harpo is not the author of that downgrading ideology. He holds it from his father Albert. As an advocate of such sexist ideology, Albert, Celie's husband says, making reference to her: "Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all (í ). Say I'm evil and always up to no good."<sup>5</sup> In the apostrophe "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman", Celie is addressed without any respect. All the adjectives used by Albert in order to qualify Celie have negative connotations because according to Albert's conception of women,

<sup>4</sup> Every contradiction suppose a connection between two opposite poles : one is considered as dominant and the other as dominated. The poles of the contradiction can also be referred as main part and secondary part. When mathematic signs are used, the sign (+) makes reference to the main part while the secondary part is designated by the sign (-). Both are never equal and do not have the same kind of development. Koné KLOHINLWHELE, *Des contradictions et leurs résolutions: une lecture marxiste de la crise africaine dans la fiction romanesque* d'A.K.Armah, Abidjan: Ed RILE, 2013, p.56.

<sup>5</sup> Alice WALKER, *The color Purple*, HBJ :NY, 1982, p.209.

black women are ugly, despicable and cursed. This idea is stressed by the hyperbole 'you nothing at all' used by Albert in order bring Celie from the status of a beast to the one of a lifeless, valueless thing. In Albert's syllogism, black women are necessarily poor, ugly and must be considered as nothing. No wonder that his son treats women the same way. In the irony 'I am evil and always up to no good', Celie makes fun of that downgrading ideology designed by the patriarchal ideology and inspired from the puritan conception of women. According to such belief, women are evil, satanic because they resemble Eve, the first woman who sinned against God. Claudette Fillard and Colette Colomb-Boureau comment about that puritan ideology:

Les femmes qui ne se marient pas inspiraient de la pitié, et celles qui se mariaient perdaient tous leurs droits. La position sociale des femmes dépendait de celle de leur mari ou de leur père (1). Les pères Pèlerins, et les colons en général, apportèrent dans leurs bagages un arsenal de préjugés qui tous témoignaient de l'infériorité de la femme. L'innatisme (« innatism »), ensemble de théories non contestées jusqu'au lendemain de la Révolution américaine, consistait à affirmer que la femme était par nature inférieure de corps, d'esprit, de tempérament, et donc vouée à une soumission justifiée par tout un argumentaire (1). L'argument biblique rappelait que la femme était née de l'homme pour l'homme. Une interprétation littérale de l'Ancien comme du Nouveau Testament démontre que la femme devait se soumettre, qu'elle était une création de l'après-coup (« after image »), un cadeau de Dieu à l'homme sans qui et en dehors de qui elle n'aurait aucun sens. Eve reçut le nom de « La Vivante », mère de tout être vivant. Pour qu'elle puisse accomplir sa mission maternelle, le Tout-Puissant dota la femme de vertus comme la modestie, la douceur, la compassion, ce qui ne l'empêchait pas d'être dans le même temps créature de péché, tentatrice, responsable de la chute d'Adam.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Single women looked pitiful and those who got married lost all their rights. The women social position was the one of their husband or of their father. (1). The Pilgrim father and the colonizer generally speaking, brought with them a gear of prejudice which testify about women inferiority. The innatism, set of theories never challenged until the end of the American Revolution, affirmed that women naturally were having a body, mind and a temper that couldn't match men's own and were then doomed by all evidence to be rightly dominated (1). The biblical proof reminded that the women were made from men for the sake of men. The literal biblical interpretation of both the Old and the New Testament showed that women must be submissive, that they were an after image creation, a God given gift to men who would have become of no use when left alone. Eve was given the name of « The Living », all living men's mother. The Almighty endowed her with qualities such as modesty, mildness, compassion, needed for her motherhood. Nevertheless, this couldn't prevent her from becoming at the same time a sinful creature, a temptress, responsible of Adam's fall. Claudette FILLARD and Colette COLLOM-BOUREAU, *Les mouvements féministes américains*, Paris : Ed Ellipses, 2003, p.10,11.

For Claudette Claudette Fillard et Colette Colomb-Boureau, the development of the patriarch ideology started with promotion of the puritan ideology in America by both the Pilgrim father and the colonizer. Their sexist theories which were challenged for the first time only after the American Revolution, affirmed that women naturally were having a body, mind and a temper that couldn't match men's own and were then doomed by all evidence to be rightly dominated. They tried to prove this, with the Bible, by saying that since Eve was created from one Adam's rib, women were an after image creation, a God given gift to men which would have become of not use when left on their own. Nevertheless, they also painted women as evil, an ugly or a satanic creature because she tempted Adam and led him to eat the forbidden fruit. In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker makes reference to the fact that this patriarchal ideology has been passed over centuries, from one generation of American men to another. Pa has taught it to his son Albert, who have taught it to Harpo. Alice Walker highlights also the fact that this men's patriarchal ideology is not only specific to American men, for through the allusion to the Olinka tribe, she also connects it to African men's mentality. Through Nettie, she observes: "The Olinka do not believe girls should be educated. When I asked a mother why she thought this, she said: A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something. What can she become? I asked. Why, she said, the mother of his children."<sup>7</sup> By the sarcasm "A girl is nothing to herself", Nettie mocks at men's vanity that leads them to think that without them, women cannot live on their own. She is critical of this patriarchal ideology that views marriage and motherhood as the only option left for women. Through the rhetorical question: "What can she become?" Nettie adds to the burlesque effect by expressing her amazement that men could not think about any other way for women to succeed in life than to become a housewife. Alice Walker denounces the fact that being viewed by men as a sexual object, men's possession, Olinka women are mutilated as she bluntly states: "Although there are ritual they do have to celebrate womanhood is so bloody and painful. I forbid Olivia to even think about it"<sup>8</sup>. Nettie is putting here in evidence a paradox. She views as an inconstancy this ritual which is made to honor and celebrate mature women, make them suffer, cry because of the pain caused by genital mutilations. The complications generated by these mutilations even make them lose a lot of blood, get infected and even die. The narrator also tells about the tragic story of Anne Julia who is killed by her boyfriend:

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<sup>7</sup> Alice WALKER, *The color Purple*, HBJ :NY, 1982, p.156-157.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, p.9.

Mrô , the man they say her boyfriend, catch up with her. She got Harpo by the hand. They both running and running. He grab hold of her shoulder, say, you can't quit me now. You mine. She say, no I ain't. My place is with my children. He say, whore, you ain't got no place. He shoot her in the stomach. She fall down. The man run.<sup>9</sup>

By using the apostrophe, "Mrô" the narrator, alludes to the fact that the violence displayed by Anne Julia's boyfriend is not exception. It is so common that Mrô . can be referred to many men. By the sarcasm "You mine", the narrator makes fun of the fact that many men consider women as an object, as their unique possession, that only them can decide to keep, discard or even destroy. By telling this pathos, Alice Walker makes an emotional appeal to the reader and relate to men's sense of justice and love. On her part, the narrator also denounces the tyranny of men who think that they have the right because they are men to rape women. She wails: "First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he graps hold my titties. Then he put thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry"<sup>10</sup> The alliterations in "ö that is coming over and over again in expressions like "First, his, thing, gainst, my, hip, wiggle, it, titties, he, inside, pussy", mimic the painful cry that is shouted by a woman being raped. These alliterations remind the reader that a rape is not an act of love, it is a shameful act that rather make women suffer. The shameful character of rape is stressed again in the euphemism "his thing" which refers to the male sex as something despicable used to rape women. Alice Walker's *The color Purple* is an epistolary novel, for it is made mainly of a series of letters that Celie writes first to God, then to her sister Nettie who had travelled to, Africa. The two sisters exchanged letters between themselves. Nevertheless, these letters are the symbol of the intimacy existing between Celie and Nettie, for the former doesn't know, actually, how to read and write. She confesses: "No matter what happens, Nettie steady try to teach me what go in the world (í ) Most days I feel too tired to think."<sup>11</sup> In this foils, Celie praises her sister Nettie, for all the efforts that she has made in order to know how to read and write and she wails about her inability to do likewise. She mocks about her handicap "Most days I feel too tired to think". Writing a letter becomes the metaphor of intimate communication with the universe for Celie writes letter to everything basically. In the hyperbole she says: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples.

<sup>9</sup> Opcit , p.29.

<sup>10</sup> Opcit, p.1.

<sup>11</sup> Alice WALKER, *The color Purple*, HBJ :NY, 1982, p.17.

Dear everything. Dear God<sup>12</sup> The anaphora ÷Dear God stresses the fact that those letters take sometimes the form of a prayer made to God. Such intimacy that Celie shares with God is also shared with all God's creation, including her sister Nettie for she acknowledges it in the simile: ÷Anyway, when I don't write you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray.ö<sup>13</sup> A letter to Celie is just as intimate as a private prayer. Consequently, the kidnapping of Nettie's letters is compared to a violation of women's intimacy and even has a sexual connotation. The sexual connotation is clearly suggested by the secret place where those kidnapped letters are hidden by Mr. . Celie notices: ÷One night, when Mr. and Grady gone, us open the trunk. Us find a lot of Shug's underclothes. Some nasty pictures postcards, and way down under tobacco, Nettie's letters. Bunches and bunches of them. Some fat, some thin. Some open, some notö<sup>14</sup>. Mr. appears here as perverse man, a voyeur that takes delight in violating women's intimacy and looking at their nude body. The expression ÷nasty pictureö is an euphemism of porn magazines that Mr. keeps hidden in his trunk, in order to satisfy his libido. In the personification ÷Some fat, some thin. Some open, some notö the letters are given female body parts that can be whether fat or thin. In fact, Mr. resorts to that violation of intimacy, after trying to rape Nettie her literally for she confesses: ÷When I left you all house, walking, he followed me on his horse. (í ) You know how he do, you sure is looking fine, Miss Nettie, and stuff like that (í ). After while, I had to rest, and that's when he got down from his horse and started to try to kiss me, and drag me back in woods. Well, I started to fight him, and with God's help, I hurt him bad enough to make him let me alone.ö<sup>15</sup> By the euphemism ÷when he got down from his horse and started to try to kiss me, and drag me back in woodsö, Nettie expresses all her contempt for Mr.'s shameful attempt to rape her. He tries to comfort himself or make for this failure, by maintaining a firm grip on something coming from Nettie, a letter coming from her that represents that represents her in his subconscious. About Mr.'s voyeurism, Henry Louis Gates explains:

The very form of *The Color Purple*, then, produces an analogue to the female body within the text, as both are continually fragmented and remembered. Mr. conceals Nettie's letters because she refuses to be seduced by him; he rapes her language because she is denied her body. The location of these letters also reveals a link with the body; they are hidden in a trunk along with Shug's underwear, and pornographic

<sup>12</sup> Opcit, p.291.

<sup>13</sup> Opcit, p.130.

<sup>14</sup> Alice WALKER, *The color Purple*, HBJ :NY, 1982, p.126.

<sup>15</sup> Opcit, p.127



pictures. Mrô ð erotic desires are displaced onto letters as well as pornography. ðThe maleð desire to view femaleð letter is namelessly voyeuristic,ð Eagleton states. Both the female body and its texts become subject to violation by the males who retain the power to encroach upon these private spheres.<sup>16</sup>

For Henry Louis Gates, Alice Walker the restriction imposed by men on womenð freedom of expression equals to a rape. This image is used in order to stress the suffering that such tyranny cause to women. Moreover Mrô ð erotic desires are displaced onto letters as well as pornography in order to make the satire of menð lust for women, their conception of women as nothing than a sexual object. We can then conclude with Diarassouba Souleymane that like Ayi Kwei Armahð female characters, Alice Walkerð female characterð in *The Color Purple*, are like ðsexual object which are possessed by male characters because of their seemingly physical and intellectual passivity.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Alice Walker is not pessimistic. Her female characters mainly are convinced of the need to struggle for a change. To what their struggle for freedom lead them?

### **The Inversion of Pole of Contradiction**

In Alice Walkerð *The Color Purple*, the conflict between men and women is not static. As women fight for their freedom, they become stronger than men that were dominating them and the men that were dominating then become even weaker than them. As the story unfolds, the womenð fight for freedom regulates the social life. Consequently, the theme of fight is omnipresent. In Shug Averyð words ðYou got to fight them Celie, (í ). I canð do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself.ð The anaphora ðYou got to fightð sounds like a cry of rally shouted by Alice Walker, in order to gather all women to join the feminist movement. In the novel, almost all the female characters respond to that cry, by taking action intended to subvert menð tyranny over them. As the novel unfolds, females change their conception of womenð role in the society they live in and their attitude toward men. Music becomes a mode of subversion of the patriarchal system. Celie says:

First Shug sing a song by somebody name Bessie Smith. She say Bessie somebody she knows. Old friend. It call a Good Man Is Hard to Find. She look over at Mrô a little when she sing that (í ). Shug saying Celie.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Louis GATES, Jr and K. APPIAH, *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past And Present*. New York: ALS, 1993, p.264.

<sup>17</sup> Souleymane DIARASSOUBA, *Altérité et spiritualité dans KMT d'Ayi Kwei Armah*, Abidjan: RILE n°6, 2013, p.190.

Miss Celie (í ). She say this song. I am bout to sing is call Miss Celie's song (í ). It all about some no count man doing her wrong, again. (í ) I look at her and I hum along a little with the tune Shug singing a hot one, who should come prancing through the door of Harpo's but Sofia (í ). He smile pleasant and us keep listening to the music.<sup>18</sup>

The allusion: "First Shug sing a song by somebody name Bessie Smith" indicates that Shug Avery's music is not intended only to have fun or entertainment. Bessie Smith was a singer whose lyrics advocated for the improvement of black condition in America. The title of the song "It call a Good Man Is Hard to Find" is also relevant. It is an aphorism that denounces the fact that many men are not good or kind to their mate that they mistreat, rape or even kill. In her song, Shug Avery uses the sarcasm "It all about some no count man doing her wrong, again" in order to denounce Mró's mistreatments. Maybe by presenting music as a mode of subversion of the patriarchal system, Alice Walker is suggesting here that artists of any kind including musicians should be engaged in the fight for the improvement of women's condition. With Shug Avery's leadership, most female characters start viewing men as a rival that can be fought, as an alter ego and no longer as a master to serve. For example, Celie is no longer afraid to talk about Harpo, her husband's son, as lazy and weaker: "Harpo complain about all the plowing he have to do (í ) Me and him out in the field all day (í ) I am roasted coffee bean color now. He black as the inside of chimney (í ) His face begin to look like a woman face"<sup>19</sup> In this foil, man is pictured as so lazy and weak that, he is incapable of working hard like a woman. In the synecdoche "His face begin to look like a woman face", man is even given women's traits. The face of the woman is the symbol of all what makes a woman look as such. This figure of speech makes of a woman man's fellow and destroys the myth of men's superiority over the woman. Like Celie, Sofia and many female characters in *The Color Purple*, women stop condoning men's demeaning and tyrannical attitudes and question the social role given to men and women in the society. Commenting on female's struggle for freedom, Bernard Saladin D'Angure states:

Si l'on excepte les tentatives de quelques précurseurs pour sortir les rapports de sexe du déterminisme biologique tels Fourier, Engels et Freud, c'est l'anthropologue Margaret Mead qui la première remet en cause ce déterminisme dans les années 1930 (í ) Avec Simone de Beauvoir, la définition socioculturelle des sexes connut un

<sup>18</sup> Alice WALKER, *The color Purple*, HBJ :NY, 1982, p.73-74, 81.

<sup>19</sup> Opcit, p.28.



approfondissement majeur (í ). Le renouveau féministe des années 1970 suscita un grand développement de la réflexion théorique sur les rapports sociaux du sexe.<sup>20</sup>

For Bernard Saladin DøAnglure, though Fourier, Engels, Freud had made some attempts to evoke biological differences between men and women, it was Margaret Mead, the first feminist in America who really tackles the issue by putting into question the social role given by men to women have always question the society the role that men and women play in the society. Moreover, with the feminist trend revival of the seventies, feminist writers like Alice Walker have renewed with that tradition. Female characters reject the ideology, according to which, women are by nature, weak, prone to cry for casual things, stupid and should be dominated by men. Celie describes, for example, Harpo as crying like s women: òHarpo sitting out on the steps, crying like his heart you break. Oh, boo-hoo, and boo-hoo. He get his head in his hands, tears and snot running down his chin. I give him a hawsker (í )öAfter being beaten by his wife starts crying helplessly. In the irony òHarpo sitting out on the steps, crying like his heart you breakö, Celie mocks at Harpoø weakness. He is so weak that his heart can be easily broken by any single thing. The hyperbole paints Harpo as helpless as a woman beaten that is crying without letup. While the onomatopoeia òOh, boo-hoo, and boo-hooö adds the comic effect, by capturing the childish sounds made by Harpo when crying, the hyperbole ÷He get his head in his hands, tears and snot running down his chin.ö focus on the abundance of the tears shed by creating an analogy with the waters that fill the stream. This caricature is intended to present womenø sensitivity as something natural which is not specific to women and should not make of them less important creature than men. Shedding tears becomes something natural for, men too, can cry. Menø so-called supremacy over women is then put into question, for women appear as much resistant as men and even more powerful than men whose stamina decrease as the story unfolds.

The inversion of role is one of the motifs used by feminist writers. For Kone Klohnlwehe this phenomenon is known as the inversion of pole of contradiction in Marxist theory and is normal part of social dualism:

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<sup>20</sup> Apart from some attempts made by some pioneers in order to dissolve the amalgam made between the relationships between men and women and the biological differences, like Fourier, Engels et Freud, it was the anthropologist Margaret Mead who for the first time in the thirties put into question such determinism (í ) With Simone de Beauvoir, the sociocultural definition of gender underwent a serious change (í ). In the seventies, the feminist trend revival has triggered a lot of theories on the social role that men and women should respectively play. Bernard Saladin DøANGLURE, *Le troisième sexe*, ed: les classiques sociales, 30 Juin 2010, Québec, p.5-6.

A ce stade de l'évolution de la contradiction, la lutte entre les deux pôles contraires ne peut plus être résolue autrement que par l'élimination de l'un de ces pôles. L'unité dialectique se rompt donc pour laisser place à une nouvelle réalité et une nouvelle unité dialectique. Au niveau de la dialectique social, la résolution d'une telle contradiction prend la forme d'un conflit ouvert, d'une guerre, à dont le dénouement aboutit à une situation sociale nouvelle (1). La lutte des contraires est un principe absolu et universel.<sup>21</sup>

From point of view, for the society to advance, it is understandable that men and women fight, struggle. From such struggle, the social order can be put in crisis, and men's hegemony subverted. Alice Walker questions the patriarchal system put in place by men in the society, by expressing her discontent about the fact that, in most cases, women work more than men. She insinuates that men are naturally lazy, by making fun of Harpo's laziness:

Why do people eat, Miss celie tell me that. To stay alive, I say. What else? (1) Then some is gluttons. They love to feel they mouth work (1) Harpo? He eating more and more everyday. Maybe he got a tape worm? (1) Haro eat when he ain't even hungry (1) Last night for example he ate a whole pan of biscuits by himself (1) And had two big glasses of butter milk along with it (1) instead of washing plates, he cleaning æm with his mouth. Well maybe he was extra hungry (1). And this morning, for breakfast, darn if he didn't have six eggs. .<sup>22</sup>

In the rhetorical question, "Why do people eat", men are pictured as strange lazy creatures that unlike women too much. In the caricature "Maybe he got a tape worm", men's laziness is viewed as a sickness. The comic effect is stressed by the sarcasm "instead of washing plates, he cleaning æm with his mouth" that contrasts men's eagerness to eat food cooked by women with their mouth and their laziness or reluctance to use their hands to wash their plates after finishing eating. Later, Harpo observes that his father starts behaving like a woman towards the end of the novel: "He out there in the field from sunup to sundown. And clean that house just like a woman. Even cook, say Harpo. And what more, wash the dishes when he finish"<sup>23</sup> In the simile "And clean that house just like a woman" Harpo compares

<sup>21</sup> A this level of the contradiction, the fight between the antagonist entities can only be solved by their mutual elimination. The former dualism is then disrupted in order to give way to a new reality, another dualism. At the social level, the antagonism provokes an open conflict, a war à which will usher in a new social order (1). The perpetual fight between antagonist poles is an universal and absolute principle. .Koné KLOHINLWHELE, *Des contradictions et leurs résolutions: une lecture marxiste de la crise africaine dans la fiction romanesque* d'A.K.Armah, Abidjan: Ed RILE, 2013, p.74.

<sup>22</sup> Alice WALKER, *The color Purple*, HBJ :NY, 1982, p.63.

<sup>23</sup> Opcit, p.225.

ironically his father to a woman, in order to stress the fact that his father has now understood that cleaning the house and making other house chores are not only made for women and do not make of a man, be a woman. Masculinity appears then not as a biological trait, but rather as something defined by the social habits as Elyse Michon Winnicott puts it: «Le self c'est ce qui «advient», ou ce qui fait défaut, mais ce n'est jamais quelque chose d'installé, en un lieu psychique ou comme un lieu psychique. Le self c'est l'expérience d'être, expérience en train de se faire ou alors il n'est pas.»<sup>24</sup> What make men to be men according to such feminist ideology are no longer the physical traits with which God as already endowed them, like the bear, the strong muscles, the bass voice, etc. Masculinity can be experienced both by men and women. Such existentialist philosophy is basically advocated by Alice Walker's female characters. Some female characters are not concerned only about the condition of African Americans women. Nettie, Corinne and Doris Baines leave America and go to Africa in order to fight against women's mutilation, scarification, injustice, etc. They strive to build schools where little girls can learn how to read and write. For Thomas R. Frazier, it was crucial for feminists to fight for women's education because they believed that education allows a woman to «improve her marital choice, allow her and her husband to sleep more securely, and to demonstrate her moral worth through self-support under the most trying circumstances.»<sup>25</sup> In an eulogy intended to praise Corrine and Nettie's courage, Samuel notices:

These two ladies had been through marvelous things together (í ). They'd been attacked by lions, stampeded by elephants, flooded out by rain, made war on by natives. They were so staid looking. So proper. You really couldn't imagine them actually building- with their own hands- a school in the bush. Or battling reptiles.<sup>26</sup>

Here Nettie and Corrine behave like men. They fight against wild animals like lions and elephants and they make war against the native. The expressions «They'd been attacked by lions, stampeded by elephants, flooded out by rain, made war on by natives.» are a series of hyperboles intended to exalt the great courage that allow those women to overcome many obstacles that could have prevented those women from coming to Africa in order to struggle for African women freedom. These hyperboles subvert stereotypes according to which

<sup>24</sup> The self is what «happens», or what does not happen, but it is never something that is already existing there, in man's psyche or something which is part of the psyche. The self is being is being made by experience or otherwise is cease from existing. . Elyse Michon WINNICOTT, *Féminin-masculin*, p.108. Online.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas R.FRAZIER. *The private Side of American History Reading in Everyday Life*. USA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983, p.73-74.

<sup>26</sup> Opcit, p.237.

women are naturally weak and fearful. They rather appear here as heroes who do not fear fearsome animals like lions, elephants or as soldiers that have won a battle in the metaphor "They'd been (í ) made war on by natives". The style is epic. The image of war is used here in order to highlight the women's ability to withstand natives' resistance to the fight made by Nettie and Corrine for African women's struggle for freedom. Unlike Nettie and Corrine who are African American, Doris Baines is white. But she doesn't feel less for African women. Expressing her eagerness to fight for their freedom, she says: "I don't think, it was commonly believe, I was a woman (í ). Anyway, she said, when I get to England, I'll put a stop to the bloody encroachments (í ). I am a very wealthy woman, and I own the village of Akwee".<sup>27</sup> The euphemism "the bloody encroachments" refers to the genital mutilation of women as something shameful. Doris Baines doesn't think of herself as inferior to the men of the village of Akwee. She even considers herself as their chief, as the one that should take their lead in the metaphor "I own the village of Akwee". Consequently, she views all African people including women not only as her relatives but also as people that have to be protected by her. She thinks she is not a woman, but a man for she says in the paradox "I don't think, it was commonly believe, I was a woman". Toward the end of the novel, Sofia and Shug Avery, although women are also pictured as men. About the later, Celie says: "Shug act more manly than most men". Together, Celie and Shug Avery become partners in a pant plant. Shug Avery owns the land where the plant is established. There is a connection between feminism and women owning properties for "it should be remembered that one of the first feminist demands in the United States was for the right to own property and engage in trade".<sup>28</sup> The product made for sale by Celie, pants are then a symbol, for pants are commonly viewed as a sign of masculinity. Celie boasts:

I sit in the dining room making pants after pants. I got pants now in every color, and size under sun. Since us started making pants down home, I ain't able to stop I change the print, I change the waist, I change the pocket. I change the hem; I change the fullness of the leg (í ). Pants all over chairs; hanging in front of the china closet. Then finally, one day I make the perfect pant of pants.

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<sup>27</sup> Alice WALKER, *The color Purple*, HBJ :NY, 1982, p.232,234..

<sup>28</sup> Joseph E.HOLLOWAY. *Africanisms in American Culture*.USA: Indiana UP, p.233, 1990.

<sup>29</sup> Alice WALKER, *The color Purple*, HBJ :NY, 1982, p.215..

“I sit in the dining room making pants after pants.” is a paradox, for dining-rooms are not made to make cloth. A dining-room is rather a location when food cooked by women in the kitchen are served and eaten. The paradox creates a rupture and stresses the fact that women are not only made to cook and serve food in dining-rooms, but can also make money used to buy food, like men. Besides, Celie is determined to subvert men’s conception of pants. The anaphora “I change” expresses Celie’s strong determination to change men’s classification of feminine type and size of dresses. By manufacturing pants for fattest ones like Shug Avery, she is trying to let people know that pants are not made only for men or for slim women. Moreover, Celie hires both men and women. The business plant is a symbol of entrepreneurship as motor of a capitalism that offers to all including women a way to achieve emancipation and freedom from men. Nevertheless, though most female characters do not have any inferiority complex faced to men and openly show their opposition to men’s tyrannical treatment of women, they do not all share the same point of view, about how the struggle for freedom should be carried on.

### **The Conflict of Two Different Feminist Trends**

In Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, at least two feminist trends of conflicts. The radical one is embodied by Celie and Sofia who are ready to use violence (beating, killing of men, etc) in order to fight the patriarchal system. Summing up her point of view, Sofia says: “All my life, I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and uncles. A girl child ain’t safe in a family of men. But I never thought I’d to have fight in my own house (í ). I love Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I’d kill him dead before I let him beat me.”<sup>30</sup> In the antithesis “I love Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I’d kill him dead before I let him beat me”, the action of loving is put in contrast with the one of killing, in order to stress the fact that in the name of love for a man, a woman should not keep quiet and bear any kind of treatment inflicted on her by men. Sofia advocates for women’s right for self-defense. The amplification “I’d kill him dead” emphasizes the fact that killing is not for her a dreadful eventuality. Sofia doesn’t fear the punishment that could be inflicted on her because of her radical position. When the mayor and his wife summon her to work as their children’s baby-sitters she dares slapping the mayor and was sent to then jailed. On her part, After bearing many mistreatments from men (beatings, rapes, insults, etc),

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<sup>30</sup> Opcit, p.40..

Celie finally no longer wants her husband to touch him. He becomes so disgusting to her that she wants to kill him. She even changes her sexual orientation. She starts a lesbian relationship with Shug Avery, her husband's girlfriend. But, Shug Avery embodies a less moderate feminist trend. Though, she initiates Celie into lesbianism, unlike her, Shug Avery continues to have sexual relationships with men as well. She even change male partners. From Albert, Celie's husband, she falls in love with Grady and then with a boy who is three times less aged than her. When Celie wants to convinced her to put an end to that last relationship, she answers back without any hesitation:

And you know I'm a high natured woman (í ). And I know how you feel about men. But I don't feel that way. I would never be feel enough to take any of them seriously, she say, but some men can be a lots of fun (í ) Celie, she says. All I ast is six months. Just six months to have my Celie, she say. All I ast is six months. Just six months to have my last fling. I got to have it Celie. I'm too weak a woman not to (í ) I love this child and I'm scared to death.<sup>31</sup>

In the sarcasm "And you know I'm a high natured woman," Shug Avery makes fun of Celie's radicalism as she insinuated that despite all what Celie can do it is an utopia to think that she can be able to live in a world from where men can be excluded. Through understatement "I'm too weak a woman," Shrug Avery expresses her pride to be a woman and to feel like a woman. She makes an emotional appeals trying to make reference to women's natural feelings when she: "some men can be a lots of fun." She exalts and celebrates the love she feels for her boyfriend over the one she has for Celie in the hyperbole "I love this child and I'm scared to death"; In this hyperbole she insinuates that true love between men and women should last till death set them apart. How should we then understand Shug Avery and Celie's lesbianism? For Henry Louis Gate Jr and K.A.Appiah it is a parody for they observe:

Her intent is not to sexually titillate but to arouse disgust, outrage and anger at male sexual exploitation of females, to encourage appreciation and acceptance of same sex female sexual pleasure (í ). As the fictive autobiography of an oppressed black woman's journey from sexual slavery to freedom, *the Color Purple* parodies those primary tests of autobiographical writing which have shaped and influenced the direction of African American fiction- "the slave narrative" with the publication of

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<sup>31</sup> Alice WALKER, *The color Purple*, HBJ :NY, 1982, p.254.



slave autobiographic oppressed African-American slaves moved from object to subject, from slaves into creation, a revolutionary literature.<sup>32</sup>

Shug Avery has not totally changed her sexual orientation. She just initiates Celie into lesbianism. It in order provoke men's disgust, outrage and anger. The lesbianism between Shug Avery and Celie is a mode of subversion of the patriarchal system, a way of expressing women's revolt against the oppression and the sexual slavery in which men have been imprisoning women. Lesbianism is a rejection of men's conception of women as sexual object that is made only to produce children for men and take care of the household. Moreover, lesbianism creates an intimacy, a sisterhood between women who become more than ever aware of the necessity to unite their efforts in the fight against men's patriarchal system. In Alice Walker's *The color Purple*, the evolution of Celie's conception of motherhood and childbearing pictures also to some extent the one of many women that were influenced by the birth control feminist movement in America. For Ellen Chesler this movement, founded in 1848 at Seneca fall, has led many women gradually to reduce the number of their children, secure the right to abort and not to marry.<sup>33</sup> Like Celie, at *The color Purple* outset, the African American woman viewed sex as fundamental to procreation, and procreation as a religious duty to ensure the continuation of the family line<sup>34</sup>. Celie's gradual change of representation about sexuality can picture the gradual change that the African American women underwent with the help of feminist movements. Alice Walker has also experienced a change in her conception of motherhood for she confesses that she wanted to commit suicide because of a pregnancy.<sup>35</sup> While, before the seventies, when she was supporting the civil rights movement of Martin Luther King, she adopted a less radical position in her writing, from the seventies she becomes more radical and provoking in her writing. No wonder that in the *The Color Purple*, there is the presence of some characters like Celie and Sofia who, as the story unfolds become more radical in their representation of sexuality and motherhood. Those characters use sarcasm, irony, rhetorical questions, in order to unmask, make fun and put into question men's tyrannical and sexist attitudes. Alice Walker's conception of feminism is known as womanism. About this ideology she defends, Nicki Hitchcott notices: ÷÷

<sup>32</sup> Henry Louis GATES, Jr and K. APPIAH, *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past And Present*. New York: ALS, 1993, p.287,291.

<sup>33</sup> Ellen CHESLER, *Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America*, USA: Simon and Shuster, 1992, p. 34,59, 84-85.

<sup>34</sup> E.HOLLOWAY. *Africanisms in American Culture*.USA: Indiana UP, p.161-162, 1990.

<sup>35</sup> Idem, p.185.

L'équilibre entre l'individu et la communauté, la modernité et la tradition est toujours à renégocier. Cependant, il faut souligner que le féminisme qui ressort de ces écrits ressemble plus au féminisme anglo-saxon qu'à son homologue français. Ceci ne veut pas dire qu'il n'y a aucun problème pour appliquer une idéologie qui se veut internationale à une culture où l'on refuse carrément de l'accepter. D'ailleurs, le fait que le féminisme soit reconnu comme idéologie occidentale pose un problème politique sur un continent jadis colonisé par l'Occident. Cependant, il est bien possible que ce soit le terme lui-même qui est problématique, surtout dans le contexte francophone où le "néo-féminisme" paraît avoir subsumé toute autre interprétation. Pour répondre à cette question Alice Walker a inventé le terme "womanism," soit une adaptation du féminisme à la situation de la femme noire. Ce choix d'un nouveau mot renforce notre hypothèse que ce soit l'étiquette et non pas le concept qui est problématique. "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender," écrit Walker, suggérant que les deux termes ne s'excluent pas; plutôt que le womanisme est une version du féminisme plus intense et plus précise.<sup>36</sup>

For Nicki Hitchcott, Alice Walker in her writings is advocating for a typical form of feminism which is called womanism. This type of feminism is more close to Alice Walker's representation of women's status both in the American and the African context. As in *The Colour Purple* she cannot help but sharing with us the pain and the suffering of African women. Using the technique of pidginization, Alice Walker make her female characters speak like the African women. Commenting on the role played by pidginization, Joseph E. Holloway says: "Pidginization as a first step toward creolization occurs throughout the African's history in America. Morphological, phonological and grammatical principles underlying popular English have constantly played havoc with the African past."<sup>37</sup> It is then relevant to notice that pidginization in Alice Walker's novel *The Colour Purple* is a mode of expression of her pride to be an African American woman. By subverting the morphological, phonological and grammatical principles underlying English as taught by white people, Alice

<sup>36</sup> The balanced position between the individual and his community as well as between modernity and tradition has been always difficult to find. However, it must be noticed that the feminism that is omnipresent in those writings resembles more to the Anglo-Saxon than to the French one. This remark doesn't mean that it is quite easy to find a connection between an ideology coming from abroad and a culture which is at odds with it. Besides, the fact that feminism is viewed as a western ideology raises a political bone of contention on a continent, once colonized by Europeans. Nevertheless, it may be that, the only issue is the word used in order to refer to it, inasmuch the term commonly used by French colonized critics is "neo-féminisme". Alice Walker makes an attempt to solve that issue by framing "womanism," which reflects more African women's realities. The choice of that new term confirms the premise that the problem lies more with the term used than with the concept itself. By writing that "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender," Walker suggests that the two terms do not exclude each other; but rather that, womanism is a form of a feminism which is much more vivid and practical. Nicki Hitchcott. *La problématique du féminisme dans la littérature francophone des femmes africaines*. LittéRéalité UK: Pernin, 1986, p. 38-39.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph E. HOLLOWAY. *Africanisms in American Culture*. USA: Indiana UP, p.22, 1990.

Walker exalts the beauty of the African culture. For Chantal Gagnon, the womanism is not only a concept or a feminist ideology. It is a claim for the recognition of Africans women's unique place in the vast Anglo-Saxon feminist movement, for she admits:

Depuis quelques décennies, les femmes afro-américaines prennent leur place dans la société, une place qui leur a longtemps été niée. La parole womanist est l'une des formes de cette prise de pouvoir. Par exemple, des auteures comme Alice Walker et Toni Morrison créent des personnages féminins afro-américains qui survivent aux difficultés du quotidien grâce à leur grande force de caractère. Le terme womanism a été employé et défini pour la première fois par Alice Walker dans son livre *In Search of our Mother's Gardens*. En voici la définition: (Walker 1983 : 2) From womanish. (Opp. of 'girlish' i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of colour. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish' i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior.<sup>38</sup>

From Chantal Gagnon's viewpoint, the term womanist is a type of feminist ideology framed by Alice Walker and which is intended to promote African American women's power contest. It is inspired from African folk expression of mothers to female children and usually refers to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, Alice Walker was not only concerned by the improvement of African Americans women only, but also by the one of the African American women. Alice Walker's epistolary novel *The Color Purple* gives us insight into her conception of feminism. Her characters are mainly womanist. Though, Celie towards the ends of the novel and Sofia seem to be prone to use violence in order to fight for women's freedom, Alice Walker do not advocate for a world where males will be separated totally from men. Womanist characters reject men's conception of motherhood and sexuality. Pointing at Alice Walker's gradual change of vantage point, in her writings, Henry Louis Gates, Jr and K.A Appiah observes :

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<sup>38</sup> For some decades now, African american women are taking the right position that has always been denied to them at belongs to them and has always been denied to them. The womanist speech is a power contest. For example writers as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison design female African american characters who succeed in overcoming, daily challenges because of their tremendous inner strength. When the word womanism was firstly framed, it was defined by Alice Walker, in her novel *In Search of our Mother's Gardens*, as: (Walker 1983 : 2) From womanish. (Opp. of 'girlish' i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of colour. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish' i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Chantal GAGNON, «La traduction des Textes Womanist: le cas de la couleur pourpre D'Alice Walker », *numéro spécial Journées de linguistique*, 2011.

÷Alice Walker's haunting doubts about her position as a black person in the seventies have resulted in a number of poems which are more radical and provoking than the earlier civil right poems (í ). Sometimes it seems as if she wanted to compensate the lack of personal radicalism by writing about it.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the African mother's bold message to her female children, conveyed through Alice Walker's writings can be sum up by Nettie's words: "The world is changing, I said. It's no longer a world just for boys and men."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Henry Louis GATES, Jr and K. APPIAH, *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past And Present*. New York: ALS, 1993, p.188.

<sup>40</sup> Alice WALKER, *The color Purple*, HBJ :NY, 1982, p.161.