



African-American Women's Double Oppression in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Introduction

From slavery to the present time, life in America has been difficult for black people, mainly for black women. They were confronted to racism established by the white society which recognized no rights belonging to them. At the same time, they faced up to serious problems within the black community. This has always been an inexhaustible source of inspiration for African-American writers who depict the social conditions of black women in America. Alice Walker is one of the writers who recount the history of Blacks in America. She is acclaimed to be one of the American's novelists, having captured both the American Book Award and coveted Pulitzer Prize in 1983. She has produced a significant body of novels among which we have *The Color Purple*.

In that novel, she lays a particular stress on the double oppression of black women in America. She depicts black women in their relationships with Whites as well as with their fellow black men. Her particular angle of vision is black women's experience in southern America where they were enslaved. Her works portray the pain and struggle of black people's history. In articulating that vision, she finds that the creativity of black women, the extent to which they were permitted to exercise it, is a measure of the health of the entire society. She insists on the relationships between black women and the white society on the one hand, and between black women and the black community on the other hand. In this double relation, black women are oppressed.

Our purpose is to find how gender and racial oppression is deployed in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*?

To develop this theme, we will use as theoretical angle, gender study because many characters in the novel break the boundaries of traditional male or female gender roles. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, identities and expectations assigned to men and women. The idea of gender among African-American women is focused



on the abilities of the husband to care for the wife and family. The normative roles by men are viewed as the source of oppressive behavior.

To analyze the double oppression, we will first show the impact of the white society on black women. Racism that prevailed in the United States of America from slavery to the civil rights movements has set black women apart from American society. They are victims of any kind of violence and injustice.

Secondly, we will deal with the crises internal to the black community which prevent women from exercising their full rights. They were not only abused sexually by their husbands, but they are also victims of mistreatments which make them suffer from both physical and psychological pain.

I- Racial Oppression

Generally speaking, one of the forms of oppression black women meet in America is racism. It can be defined as political and social practices based on differences between races, and on the belief that one's own race is superior and is the best. In American context, Whites consider themselves as more valuable and superior to Blacks. Due to this principle of superiority Blacks, mainly black women are victim of discrimination.

A- Racial Discrimination

Discrimination is a theory based on the idea of treating someone as worse than others or telling the difference between things or people so as to choose the best¹. In America, Blacks are treated worse than Whites. The non-recognition of Blacks and their culture has always been a hindrance to the insertion of black women in American society. Alice Walker in her writings puts a particular stress on racial discrimination.

The Color Purple reveals the time when Whites ruled and Blacks survived. The novel deals with racism at its core and prejudice as well, especially against women. It describes the life of black women who were force to do things against their own will. In that novel, Alice Walker shows us the brutality with which black women are treated. Miss Millie (a white woman), the mayor's wife wants Sofia (a black woman) to work for her as her maid. Sofia replies by saying: "hell no", P.90. She is slapped by Miss Millie to have said that. She considers Sofia's answer as an offence. The mayor himself tries to intervene but Sofia knocks him down. She is



arrested for hitting a White man and is severely beaten by policemen. She is sent to jail and she is later sentenced to work for twelve years as the mayor's maid. Sofia describes her working conditions at the mayor's as slave since she is not authorized to go and see her children. After five years, she is allowed to go and see them once a year, even during Christmas, she is accepted to spend only fifteen minutes with them. Seeing all this, her oldest son considers her mother as a captive.

Through the behavior of the mayor's wife, Alice Walker shows us that white women through race dominate and exploit black women. White female racism is due to the fact that in America they know that their social status is different from that of black women. The only reason black females are invisible or oppressed is because they are not Whites. For white women, whiteness is a privilege which gives them notions that they are superior to black females, more informed, better educated and more suited to behave as exploiters and oppressors.

The mistreatment experienced by Sofia echoes in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison presents the main character, Sethe, a young black woman suffering on Mr Garner's plantation called "Sweet Home". One day, the children of her master brought her down to extract her mother's milk. She informs Mrs Garner about what happened to her. When the boys learn she has denounced them, she is beaten with impunity by Schoolteacher, Mr Garner's nephew.

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Miss Jane is an adolescent living on Mr Bone plantation. Called Tacey by her mistress, she changed her name to Jane. On that account, she is beaten by her mistress. From this beating, she becomes infertile.

Through the fate of black women, African-American writers like Alice Walker recall us that growing in America is painful for Blacks, mainly for black women. She dramatizes in her works the nature of racism as a mode of oppression that restricts the lives of black women.

In showing the difficult life of black women in America, Alice Walker emphasizes the impact of racism on them in *In Love and Trouble*. Her insistence on honesty, on the validity of her own experience as well as the experience of other southern black women, ran counter to the popular notion of the early seventies that racism was one of the evils that affected black women's lives. She demonstrates that American racism is based on the notion of dominance.



Indeed, Blacks are so dominated by Whites that they are alienated. They must behave and think as Whites do.

In *The Color Purple*, when Sofia was in jail, the black community decides to find ways to get her out of prison. They send Squeak, a young black girl to go and see the warden because he is one of her parents' acquaintances. To be successful and to influence the warden to free Sofia, the women from the black community dress Squeak like a white woman. Celie, in one of her letters to God reveals: " Us bathe Squeak so clean she smell like a good clean floor and Us dress her like she a white woman" P.98.

Through this sentence, Walker shows us the limits and the powerlessness of black people. They are compelled to behave as Whites do in order to be seen or understood by them. It is one of the conditions by which they can be listened to, otherwise they are ignored and marginalized. This marginalization is perceived in the novel through Nettie's third letter to her sister Celie. She told her that in the train there are beds, restaurants and toilets, but only Whites can ride in the beds and Blacks in the restaurants. Here, Walker alludes to racial segregation which prevents Blacks from using the same facilities as Whites.

Another form of oppression Whites exert on black women is privation and dispossession. The man Celie used to call Pa is not in fact their biological father. The man's real name is Alphonso and the house in which he lives is the legacy of the two small girls, Celie and Nettie. But Alphonso behaves as if it was his. The house belongs to the girls' departed parents, so it is their private legacy. Alphonso never told them the truth. Through Alphonso, Walker shows the ways Whites deprive Blacks of their advantages and are opposed to their social emergence. They want to maintain them in a permanent system of dependence and poverty.

In dealing with the oppressed life of black women in her novel, Alice Walker does not only point out racial discrimination, but she also describes gender violence exerted against them as another form of oppression.

B- Gender Violence

Violence undergone by Blacks in America is so recurrent that it is often used by writers as a literary theme. It has perhaps a more evocative power than other literary themes because it



seems to be the means by which black women face hard living conditions in America. Violence is found at any level of the American society.

In her bright images of the life of black women, Alice Walker shows their preoccupation: it consists in overcoming violence that invades their living environment. Black women are aware of this frightening and sinister presence of violence that is imposed to them. Literature deciphers this awareness and records then its psychological and sociological effects. It is in this terrifying environment that the theme of violence should be analyzed in the novel of Alice Walker. In *The Color Purple*, the phobia created by violence is perceived through the fear that black women have for their living environment. In dealing with violence, that novel has a link with Toni Morrison's novel, *Sula*. In that novel, the main character is a young black girl who is always ill-treated by white boys on her way to school. For this reason, going to school is a permanent fear for her. One day, on her way back home, she is surrounded by white boys who want to ill-treat her as usual. To challenge their brutality, she takes a knife from her school bag and tears her thumb. Seeing the blood on her finger, they ran away imagining what will happen to them if she is able to hurt herself. To survive, black women often respond to Whites' wrongdoings violently.

In Alice Walker's second book of poetry, *Revolutionary Petunias*, the main character, Samy Lou is presented as the image of the typical black woman. She insists on righteousness, on justice even to the point of dangerous action. She kills the white man who has killed her father, a rebellious act that inspires the folk to write songs about her to praise her courage.

The reaction of black women against the white supremacy has as goal to establish a racial equality. They want to bring an end to patriarchy and sexism. The way white domination and sexism are expressed in everyday life has created awareness in black women of the ways they are victimized, exploited, and in worse case scenarios, oppressed. On a basic level, many hurt and exploited black females declare their opposition to white domination. It is the site where they uncover and openly reveal the depths of their intimate wounds. This confessional aspect serves as a healing ritual: they gain the strength to challenge patriarchal forces of their society.

Walker shows that violence exerted on black woman is often expressed through capital punishment, lynching, suicide and murder. Because of these aspects which refer to violence and the way they are described, it is reasonable to say that Alice Walker shows that black



women are living in a hostile environment. She insists on the fact that the white society exerts a pressure so strong on black women that their freedom is restricted. Thus, the fictitious characters of Walker are imprisoned, not only because of their gender, but also because of their racial and economic problems in America. The frontiers which isolate them are not only the prejudices and the restrictions which prevent them from integrating American active life; there are also the psychological restrictions that they internalize in growing up within the society which excludes them. At the beginning of *The Color Purple*, Celie, the main character thought she was nothing because everyone who knows her told her that. Celie's way of thinking is the same as several women like Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. Pauline Breedlove is a young black woman who goes from South to North in the 1920's, finds a community with practices which are not familiar to her. Exposed to daily and unusual contacts with White people, she finds compensation by watching cinema films and she realizes her ugliness. This form of instruction imprisons her conscience. She works as a maid for a white family. One day, her daughter Pecola goes to see her and frightens a little white girl. For this, Pauline beats her pregnant daughter till to premature birth. Pauline has so a high level of alienation that she has no love for her own daughter and tends to replace her by a white girl who is not hers.

Alice Walker shows that the restriction of the individual's development is directly connected to some restrictive and oppressive cultural circumstances.

In her literary work, she presents racial discrimination and gender violence as forms of oppressions established by white society to prevent black women from being fully integrated in American society. They are cast down from this society and they seem to have a gloomy future. Negation, the fact of ignoring the presence of black women in America is another form of oppression exerted on them by the white society.

C- Gender Negation

Negation is a statement saying or meaning no, it is a refusal or a denial. In American context, black people in general and particularly black women are negated. The presence of black women is ignored since they are seldom seen in social and political instances. Negation is emphasized in Walker's fiction where the author calls a meeting of black women. The place is the South where they grow petunias. They struggle endlessly and are harmless because they



know no wrong; mostly just ordinary churchgoing or church-been women who sometimes, in their confused state, amalgamate voodoo and Christianity. Their tragedies are personal, very real and extraordinary bleak. They keep repaying their dues in their small isolated world fashioned by time and conditions. Eventually, they shape into hardened clay. Different though they may sometimes seem, they all push against the same barbed-wired wall of ignorance and despair. They are often reduced to a level lower than themselves (frequently analogous to animals and insects), become frustrated and operate on the level consistent with their reduced state. They are trapped by circumstances and this entrapment is the result of their sense of powerlessness against the structure of the white dominant society as well as the fact that they have little understanding of that structure. Therefore, in a day-to-day existence, they carry out a plot constructed by white society.

It is the life experienced by Celie, the main character in *The Color Purple*. Convinced that she is nothing and has no social importance, she decides to communicate only with God through letters. She thinks only God can understand her pain and her loneliness. She is not seen by the others in her living environment and this negation contributes to make her predicament worse. This negative perception destroys her life and her identity. Thus, according to Marjorie Pryse, the process of construction of identity and the personal disintegration involve a sensitive and constant change of balance between to see and to be seen, so that when a child sees himself through his mother's eyes, he can through his own eyes, match a presence to the others. Alice Walker gives an example of the way sex and race distort the visual balance *In The Color Purple*. This distortion happens between Miss Millie, the mayor's wife and Sofia. When Millie looks at Sofia, she only sees an object, a machine ready to be used when she asks her to be her maid.

Through the visual contact between Miss Millie and Sofia, Alice Walker shows that it is possible to dominate and deny the presence of the other. This visual distortion is one of the various practices used by Whites to ignore the existence of the black race. This social phenomenon is an obstacle to the stability and welfare of black women. By being denied, black women internalize negative values which destroy them. It is that internalization that Bell Hooks calls "the enemy within". It refers to the socialization of black women by the white supremacy which gives them the feeling that they are inferior to Whites and see



themselves as always and only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval. Then they look at themselves with self-hatred.

The scene in which Sofia's presence is ignored can be compared to what Pecola Breedlove experiences in *The Bluest Eye*. When she enters a store belonging to Yacobowski, a white man, he does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. From this negation of her presence in the shop and beyond in her existence, Pecola loses all her powers and gives up her struggle to be well seen and accepted in American society.

In addition to the visual distortion which denies the presence of black women in American society, Alice Walker also demonstrates that with rape, white men underline their absence. In portraying the effects of rape, Alice Walker sets in motion a series of associations which take into account the gender. White rapists assert their presence and black women who are raped suffer from absence.

In *The Color Purple*, she shows the effects of rape on black women. When Sofia was in jail, the black community sends Squeak to go and see Hodges, the warden to free her. But when she arrives in the Warden's office, she is beaten and raped by him. The black community did not react because it had no possibility and no power to do so. The rape committed by white men on black women is also depicted in *Beloved*.

In that novel, Vashti, Joshua's wife is frequently raped by her master. She advises her husband not to react. By raping Vashti, her master denies not only her presence, but also her rights as human being. More than that, the master ignores the presence of her husband, Joshua. He can neither react, nor protest because his humanity is called into question. His silence and his passivity are undeniable signs of his powerlessness.

With rape committed by Whites on black women, Alice Walker insists on the fact that black females' body is considered as the property of white men. They have no control of their sexuality, effective birth control and reproductive rights. They can't therefore put an end to rape and sexual harassment.

Black women in America meet serious difficulties which prevent them from being fully inserted in American society. Apart from the white society which establishes an oppressive system which recognizes no human rights belonging to black women, the black community appears also as an obstacle to their well-being.



II- Gender Oppression

The difficult life led by black women in America is due to the pressure that the whole society exerts on them. But they do not only undergo an external pressure; they are also confronted to internal problems specific to the black community. One of these problems is sexual abuse.

A- Sexual Abuse

In picking out the oppression that undermines the life of black women within the black community, Alice Walker shows that sexual abuse is often expressed through male domination over women.

In *The Color Purple*, black men have no real consideration for women who are treated as inferior beings, like animals. The frequent misunderstanding between Harpo and his wife Sofia is due to the fact that he treats her like an animal. In discussing with Celie, Sofia explains how she is neglected and humiliated by her husband: "I'm getting tired of Harpo. All he think about since us married is how to make me mind. He don't want a wife, he wants a dog". P.68

This is why she no longer wants to go to bed with him. Harpo considers this refusal as an offense. He always complains saying that Sofia does not respect him. He informs his father why he frequently beats his wife by saying: "I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say". P.37. For this reason, he decides to eat too much for the sole purpose to grow big. By growing big; he thinks he will able to beat his wife to prove his manhood.

Men benefit from patriarchy, from the assumption that they are superior to women and should rule over them. But those benefits have come with a price. In return for all the goodies men receive from patriarchy, they are required to dominate women, to exploit them using violence.

Black women's subjugation by men is frequent in Alice Walker's work. Celie, the main character in *the Color Purple* is a young girl who has been oppressed by men her whole life. As an adolescent, she is raped by her father and soon thereafter gives birth to two children. This sexual abuse is in fact incestuous since the rapist is her father.



In certain cultures such as western culture, incest is considered as promiscuity where individuals have sexual intercourse in the absence of social rules defining kinship ties. This is why incest is seen as contrary to proprieties.

According to Lucy Mair, incest is a disapproved sexual intercourse by the society in general, because the partners are related either by blood or by marriage. Sexual intercourses between father and daughter, mother and son, and between brothers and sisters are forbidden.

In some societies such as ancient Egypt, Peru and Hawaii, incest has been practiced because of the kingship. In those societies, the king was obliged to get married with his sister to maintain the “purity” of their blood. For Lucy Mair, incest is considered as a dreadful act in western civilization. He refers to Oedipus complex, where Oedipus blinds his eye when he discovers that he has married his mother. Writers often assign such roles to villain characters.

In fact, Celie’s father is a villain character, because after having raped and impregnated her at fourteen, he gives her away to be married to a man she used to call Mr. for she does not know his real name. This man mistreats her just as her father did. Thus, Celie’s life is sprinkled with child abuse, sex abuse and teenage marriage, a pain that no one should have to go through.

Like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison also deal with sex and child abuse to stress the oppressed life of women.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Chooly Breedlove rapes his daughter, Pecola. At twelve, Pecola is raped and impregnated by her father who breaks the standard code of family ties. Pecola loses her virginity, her identity is called into question and she suffers from an undesired transformation.

In *Invisible Man*, during winter, Matty Lou has to sleep with her parents in the same room. It is in this condition that she is raped and impregnated by her father Trueblood.

In describing the problems which constitute a hindrance to the stability of black women, African American writers like Alice Walker present incest as a factor particularly dangerous and devastating. It introduces the germs of destruction of the black community. One common form of sexual abuse of children incest, which has been defined as sexual contact occurs between family members. The major categories of incest include incest between blood relatives (consanguine incest); relatives by adoption or marriage (affine incest), and quasi-relatives (for example, a live-in partner or foster parent).



Sexual relations between the most closely related blood relatives, that is, within the nuclear family (between parent and child and between siblings), are the most forbidden because they have the most serious potential for harm and destruction. Parent-child incest, which in most cases means father- or stepfather-daughter involvement, is consistently reported as the most damaging type of incest.

In general, incest laws prohibit marriage, cohabitation, and sexual relations between individuals who are closely related by blood, marriage, or adoption.

Most of Walker's protagonists are southern black women who, often against their own conscious wills in the face of pain, abuse, and even death challenge the convictions of sex and age that attempt to restrict them. She presents the violent effects of sexual abuse as evils against which black women must struggle within the black community.

In picking out the various factors which disturb the life of black women in the literary work of Alice Walker, the restriction of freedom of black women appears as another harm that accentuates their oppression.

B- The Restriction of Black Women's Freedom

The lack of freedom of black women within their own community is often described as a form of oppression that prevents them from having a stable life. The pain they are subjected to is sometimes depicted as their impossibility to blossom within their social group. In *The Color Purple*, Celie, the main character feels a deep sense of unease with her husband. He is so cold, distant and inhuman to her that she can only refer to him as Mr. He has a mistress, Shug Avery who comes to live with Mr and his wife because of her poor health. Like Mr., she has little respect for Celie and the life she lives. Mr. deprives her of her sister, Nettie, the only one who ever loved her. One night Shug asks Celie about Nettie and she answers by saying that she believes her sister is dead, since she had promised to write her, but she has never received any letter from her. Shug informs Celie that she has seen Mr. hide numerous letters. After their investigation, they find dozens of letters written by Nettie over the years. Having read the letters and discovered the truth about her children as well as her biological father, Celie releases her anger at Mr., cursing him for the years of abuse she had endured. It is later she finds out that Mr's real name is Albert.



To escape this dreadful atmosphere, Celie decides to leave Mr's house for Memphis for more blossoming. But once more Mr is opposed to her departure, making worse her self-definition.

Through Albert's attitude towards Celie, Alice Walker highlights male violence against women. Patriarchal violence in the home is based on the belief that it is acceptable for a more powerful individual to control others by using various forms of coercive force. The home is connected to sexism, to male domination. For too long, the term domestic violence has been used as a soft term which suggests an intimate context that is private and somehow less threatening, less brutal than the violence that takes place outside the home. In fact, this is not the case, since more women are beaten and murdered in the home than on the outside. Domestic violence is the direct outcome of sexism.

Like Mr. in *The Color Purple*, Ajax in *Sula* also neglects and mistreats his wife, Hannah. He used to beat her and it is after years of marriage that she finds out his real name: Albert Ajacks. With this carelessness from him, Hannah feels a pain that cuts her almost as deep as Celie's pain.

Through men precluding their wives from having a blossoming life, Walker reveals the sadness of women living with their husband. Mutual incompatibility between husband and wife constitutes a major issue for women within the black community. This mutual incompatibility prevents black females from achieving their self-determination.

The Color Purple is a novel which is entirely written in a series of letters. Feminist historians find letters to be the principal source of information, of facts about the everyday lives of women and their own perceptions about life.

In using the epistolary style, Walker is able to have her main character Celie express the impact of oppression on her spirit. Celie's letters take us through her awful pregnancies, her children taken away from her and the abuses of a loveless marriage. Through the depiction of her character, Mr., known as Albert, Walker shows us that black men have neither respect nor consideration for black women.

In Walker's fiction, the oppression that black women undergo within the black community often ends in death. Death scenes are graphic. Without a doubt, Walker dramatizes the notion that death symbolizes the relief of her characters' guilt. In *the Color Purple*, Harpo's mother



is killed by her boy friend. In fact, she prefers dying than undergoing the mistreatments of her boyfriend.

In Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, she shows how the racist fabric of the South affects black families. Because the Copeland men are thwarted by the society in their drive for control over their lives, they vent their frustration by inflicting violence on their wives. Mrs. Margaret Copeland dies after much belaboring. Later, her body was found on the highway and people never knew what happened to her. They assumed she walked herself to death. As for Mem, after she married Brownfield, her fate was predictable. Her inability to disallow this man, her succumbing to his continued ruthless actions, were all routed toward a bitter end. She died the way she had lived: hard. The man who killed her considered her to be no more than animal and insect slurs he had so often hissed at.

The despicable behavior of black men towards black women is due to the fact that sexism continues to support male domination and the violence it generates. Since masses of unemployed and working-class black men do not feel powerful on their jobs within white supremacist patriarchy, they are encouraged to feel that the one place where they will have absolute authority and respect is in the home. Black men are socialized by ruling-class groups of white men to accept domination in the public world of work and to believe that the private world of home and intimate relationships will restore to them the sense of power they equate with masculinity. Black men think then that the use of violence is the only way they can establish and maintain power and domination. They consider male violence against women to be the norm.

In depicting the difficult life experienced by black women in America, Alice Walker does not only point out sexual abuse and the restriction of freedom, she also emphasizes troubled-relationships.

C- Troubled-Relationships

In Alice Walker's fiction, women oppression is also seen through loveless or full of conflicting relations between men and women. The loveless relation between black men and women is depicted throughout the novel which begins with Celie, a fourteen-year-old girl who is cut off everyone and her experience is so horrifying, even to herself, that she can only write it in to God. The letters explain her pregnancies, her children taken away and her



teenage marriage. Her presumed father gives her in marriage to Mr. who mistreats her. Harpo, Sofia's husband asks her why she marries such a man. She answers: "I marry him cause my daddy made me. I don't love Mr. and he don't love me." P.66

This loveless marriage is perceived through the behavior of Mr.. First, he is distant to her emotionally. They are married and Mr. seldom speaks to her. When he decides to do so, it is to give her orders. Next, Mr. hides the letters sent to her by her sister Nettie, the only person on earth who ever loved her. When she finds the letters with the help of Shug Avery, Mr.'s mistress, she decides to kill him. Finally, Mr. used to beat her so frequently that she finds herself in a desperate world. To sum up her miserable life with Mr., she tells him: "you make my life a hell on earth". P. 207

This way of mistreating women seems to be hereditary, for Harpo, Mr.'s son has also a troubled-relationship with his wife Sofia. He neglects her and has no respect for her. The reaction to this situation often ends in fight. Celie, the main character, who has been the eyewitness to one of their frequent fights relates: "They fighting like two mens. Every piece of furniture they got is turned over. Every plate look like it broke. The bed look like the stuffing pulled out. They don't notice." P.36

Beside his hating Sofia, Harpo is also unfaithful to her. His mistress, Squeak fights against Sofia and she loses two teeth.

Shug Avery, Mr.'s mistress is also victim of men's irresponsibility. She has never had a stable life, a long lasted relation with men, because she several children with different fathers.

Love-hate relationship is best expressed through Mem in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Her suffering is carried to the zillionth degree. She has an opportunity to observe Brownfield's actions with Josie and Lorene, and she knows he is ignorant, no-good and strangely fascinated by her college learning and sophistication. He is illiterate, so she teaches him how to write his name. The worse he treats her, the more she is compelled to save him. He blames her for his failures and inability to produce a crop at the end of a farming season and he beats her.

Most black women are from relationships where men are cruel, unkind, violent and unfaithful. These destructive relationships with men highlight the fact that male domination remains intact and black females are still exploited and oppressed. Many of these women feel betrayed



by the promise of love and living happily. But after they enter marriages, their husbands swiftly transform themselves from charming princes into patriarchal lords of the manor.

In describing female oppression in her fiction, Alice Walker has the same vision as Toni Morrison.

In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison presents Macon Dead II as a cruel and brutal man in his relations with his wife Ruth Foster Dead. He suspects his wife to have incestuous relations with her father. For this reason he wonders if his daughters, Lena and Corinthians are really his. When Ruth was pregnant for the third time, he wanted her to terminate her pregnancy. As she refuses to do so, he frequently beats her. Macon Dead rules his family like a tyrant and his scorn for his wife is perceived in the following sentence: “His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her”

In “*The Welcome Table*”, one of the short stories in *Love and Trouble*, Mrs. Jerome Franklin is presented as a beautician who is in love and trouble. She loves her husband even though he beat her before and after they were married. She tries to give her husband, who is a schoolteacher, everything he wants. He continues to read his books, excludes her from his secret meetings and beats her. One day, in an attempt to destroy the thing that enslaves her, she burnt herself to death. To flee the precarious living conditions, some black women prefer death as the solution to their suffering.

Love, as most people understand it in patriarchal culture makes one unaware, renders one powerless and out of control. This notion of love serves the interests of black men. It supports the notion that they can do everything in the name of love: beat black women, restrict their movements, and even kill them.

Alice Walker shows in her writing that black women are permanently humiliated and exploited by black men. The title of her novel, *The Color Purple* is a symbol. Celie had a difficult life as an adolescent. The color purple is equated with suffering and pain. Sofia’s swollen, beaten face is described as the color of eggplant. Purple is the color of Celie’s private parts: the site of her sexual violation.

Conclusion

Alice Walker’s substantial body of work, though it varies, is characterized by specific recurrent motifs. Most obvious is her attention to the black women as creator, and to how



their attempt to be whole relates to the health of her community. In her fiction, she focuses mostly on black women. The place is the South. For her, The South provides a spiritual balance and an ideological base from which she constructs her characters. This is why Addison Gayle points out that “to understand madness is to be a bit mad”. Then perhaps to understand the rhythm and rumble of the South is to be a bit Southern. Alice Walker is a Southern. She recounts the life of black women who are doubly oppressed.

On the one hand, the white society exerts such a pressure on them that they seem to be excluded from American society at large. They are victims of any kind racial oppression such as discrimination, violence and negation. They are so cruelly mistreated by Whites that they move about from day to day exposing their shame to themselves and to their world. They are helpless and weak.

The black community on the other hand, mostly black men understand this weakness and vulnerability and use black women as their punching card. They are easier to knock out than the dominant powers. Black women are a disturbing bunch indeed. For the most part, they do not understand the complexity of their problems, and because their community cannot assist them, they are destined to operate haphazardly. The distinctive feature of these women is the way with which they carry their suffering. Some are generous and proud. Some are forgiving even to the men who mistreat them. Others are trusting and patient.

In describing the oppression of black women in her fiction, Alice Walker uses imagery to connect her characters to the South: flowers, quilts, cotton stalks, wasps’ nests. Her sense of humor allows the reader to move through her fiction without becoming overburdened by the pain of social events. What is evident, however, is that there is a hope for these oppressed women, since they are still fighting to overcome the various obstacles to have peace in American society.

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