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**Racial and Gender Oppression Against Women  
in Alice Walker's Novel *The Color Purple***

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## **Dedication**

I would like to express my endless thank to my lovely mother who helped and encourage me a lot like no one ever and to my beloved father.

I dedicate this work to my brother Abdelghani, my sisters :Nedjma, Feriel, and Selsebil.

I would like also to dedicate this work to my soul mate, sister and best friend Deriouch Wahiba. Great thanks also go to my friend Nabil for his support.

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## **Abstract**

*The Color Purple* novel is written by one of the most prominent figures of Afro-American women writers, 'Alice Walker', her work presents the life of a young colored woman in the patriarch society of the early twentieth century in America. The protagonist of the novel tries to challenge the circumstances of her society by the support of other female characters that helps her to resist the oppression and dominance she experiences in her life, searching for freedom and discovering herself when she controls her life by her own. The aim of this dissertation is to shed light on what kinds of oppression African-American women faces and shows how their oppression is different from African-American men. Additionally, it shows how black women work for the emergence of the black feminism movement in order to find their own voice and to represent themselves in their society.

**Key words :** black women, Oppression, male Dominance, feminism.

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## General Introduction

Slavery had been ended in the American society by the Civil War and the 13th amendment, however racism and oppression issues were still present even after the slavery period, in which black man and women were not considered as human but rather as property without any rights. Even though black males were victims, black females experienced double and different kind of oppression by both black males and white people. Discrimination against women of color existed in terms of race, class, and ethnicity. They were eliminated from their rights in all domains like economic, political and even ideological. In addition to the created images by white Americans in order to defame black women's reputation.

In order to defeat women oppression, the feminist movement appeared firstly in Europe to recover women rights and seek for gender equality. Black women joined the feminist movement, but after they separated from the movement, when they realized that their desires were different from white women. Black feminists stressed the issues of race and womanhood and their interrelatedness, making their own particular movement known as black feminism.

Supporters of black feminism defended the status of black women, and argued that they were positioned within structures of power in fundamentally different ways from white women. Among the fighters against black female oppression, the famous writer Alice Walker, who founded Womanism; the theory that evolved out of the black feminist movement.

This study will tackle themes of racism and gender discrimination against black women in America, taking *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker's well known novel as a sample. The novel was published in 1982 in form of letters; describing

the suffering of women of color from segregation and violence by both black males and white society, the writer gave truthful image through black characters.

The purpose behind this work is to seek the representation of racism behaviors and oppression against black females in the American society throughout *The Color Purple*, in addition to their feminist struggle for freedom and equality fighting the patriarchal community during the twentieth century.

- ❖ What kind of oppression black women experiences in the American society during the twentieth century ?
- ❖ How does *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker portray racism and man domination?
- ❖ How did the role female character change in the novel and overcame oppression?

This study is divided into two chapters. Using the literary analysis approach, in order to analyse the major themes like race, gender, sexuality, oppression and black feminism that were depicted in the novel of *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker.

The First chapter is devoted to the theoretical foundations; it gives an overview about social issues of Black females in the American society and discusses the ways, where African-American women have been oppressed. Then talks about the emergence of the fiminist movement. Besides the rise of the black feminisim, it moves to the concept of womanism and how black female writers defend the right of black women.

The second chapter, is the practical part. It looks at Alice Walker as an author, and looks at her own life, in addition to the plot summary for Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* . In addition to discussing the major themes the writer persents in the novel which is derived from the lives of the black females of the south. Hence, the feminist theory is applied in the analysis in order to

examine the role of female characters in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* in portraying the African American women status in the American society.

## **Chapter One**

# **Black Women in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in America**

## **1.1 Introduction**

Historically, African American people have faced racism since their existence in the USA. Black women in America faced double oppression where she suffered from racial and gender inequality, cruel activities were practiced toward her such as physical and sexual abuse, these issues pushed women of color to struggle against the harsh reality they lived during that period. Therefore, they entered the world of literature through their writings, additionally, the feminist movement of black women helped them to carry courage to write down their experiences with race, color roots, identity, female role and representation, which helped black women to voice themselves and came out of the marginalized life.

## **1.2 Women of Color in the 20 th Century**

Throughout the history of USA, a great number of African Americans were oppressed. Oppression is defined as: “any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society” (Collins 5).

In the United States before the Civil War, enslaved black women were not considered as humans or women, but were considered immovable, as Carby declared that African-American women were excluded from the definition of women (Collins 6). In fact, prior to 1865, abolitionists and the feminist movement were inextricably intertwined, with some famous black women abolitionists such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth who were defenders of women's rights, from the beginning of free life, black women were not allowed to live on the same standards as white women in the eyes of both northern and southern people, the four major Victorian attributes were not applied to women of color but in contrast, there was a pressure on women of color. When black women did not support any of these principles that overwhelming number of black women who could hardly follow," they were considered 'immoral,' true 'women'. (Giding 47). Then this exclusion continued long time after the Civil War. For Kirby, "It should be

remembered that the worship of true women did not continue to be the dominant ideological norm, but the exclusion of black women from the dominant moral norms continued throughout the century” . (qtd. in Elise Vallier<sup>39</sup>).

When investigating the life of African American women, it was necessary to examine the relation between race and gender. It was also important to put black women sexuality in context too, and found what related between sexuality, race, and gender. Female of color experienced different types of oppression in the American society since their existence there. They were eliminated from the definition of the term ‘lady’ constructed by general norms of US society, which said “as much about sexuality as it did about class” (Higginbotham 262).

Sexuality could neither be defined by biological elements, nor by reality. Sexuality was rather “an evolving conception applied to the body but given meaning and identity by economic, cultural, and historical context” (Higginbotham 263). Sexuality was partly defined by society, just like race. As It was evident that race and sexuality overlap; African-American women’s sexuality was defined in economic, political and cultural context. Patricia Hill Collins classified black female oppression into three dimensions: economic, political and ideological dimension of oppression.

First, to the US capitalism black women’s labor had been something essential , and the exploitation of this labor represented the economic dimension of oppression, as this was also one of the reasons behind the lack of black women intellectuals. According to Collins, the priority for African-American women had always been existed, which did not leave much opportunity for intellectual work.(5)

Second, the political dimension of oppression could be found in the exclusion of African-American women from their right to vote; Both African-American men and women had no rights in the public office, as they receive unequal treatment in the criminal justice system. For instance, Emmett Till, a

fourteen-year old boy who had been lynched because he whistled to a white woman. The two men who were responsible were not prisoned. Furthermore, slaves were not allowed to be literate, as the educational system was unfair with African-Americans; In which black women were sent to isolated Southern schools that receive improper funding. In this context collins said :“this was to ensure that a quality education for Black women remained the exception rather than the rule” (Collins 5).

Third, the oppression dimension touched the ideological side by making specific stereotypical images of black women during the slave period. Collins explained ideology as it “refers to the body of ideas reflecting the interests of a group of people”(Collins 5). The USA culture adopted different racist ideologies in ways to be seem normal. White Americans used some assumptions to justify their oppression, for example by saying that women of color had negative qualities and characteristics, white Americans could make black women under their control because of these types of oppression which kept them in position of power.

In addition to the white male oppression, white women had also contributed to persecution of black females. The white feminism movement excluded black women from the fight for their rights, It was concerned with white,middle class issues rather than race issues, this meant that they continued the fight of black women to be represented in the women’s suffrage movement (Carby 4). Unlike African-American scholars on black feminism had stressed the fact that gender, race and class were interrelated and could not be seen separately from each other, black females were different in their struggle and since white women did not faced the same oppression like them, they did not feel to be qualified to speak for a race that was not their own. This made their feminist theory one-sided (Collins 6). African-American women experienced different kinds of oppression in comparison to African-American men, and white women.

### **1.3. Controlling Images of Black Women**

Since the beginning of slavery period, negative stereotypes of black women were created, this controlling stereotypes of African-American women existed to show colored women sexuality in impure images such as the 'jezebel' and the 'mammy.' These stereotypes spread in both the North and the South of the country. These images were ever changing and sometimes conflicting. However, black women's sexuality seemed to keep the same over time (Higginbotham 263). Slavery was the main source of these sexual ideologies, which had high cultural and political power that they became normative. Collins further said : "socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination" (72). Even white women dealt with traditional ideal image that had four aspects, "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Collins 72). Yet black women faced different controlling images.

The first image was the 'mammy' which was a servant who obey her white rich masters, worked in their houses and cared about their children. This image was "created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves," as it "symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power" (Collins 72). The problem within 'mammy', was that black women started submitting to this image and accepted their subjection to the whites, they also taught their own children about the racial hierarchy and how white people were superior than them, unintentionally participating in the perpetuation of this social images (Collins 73). In comparison to the dominant images of white women, this image characterized African American women from the rest. The 'mammy' had gender significance, besides its physical function. Additionally, Collins wrote:

The mammy image buttresses the ideology of the cult of true womanhood, one in which sexuality and fertility are severed. ‘Good’ White mothers are expected to deny their female sexuality. In contrast, the mammy image is one of an asexual woman, a surrogate mother in blackface whose historical devotion to her White family is now giving way to new expectations (74).

The image of the mammy was seen as an asexual, since she devoted her life for white family children and fulfilled their needs.

Another controlling image was the ‘matriarch’, which represented the bad black mother in black homes. This image showed black women, who worked hard outside as careless mothers because they did not stay home to raise their children and do their house works . Women of color as a head of the household were seen bad, this image “became a figure of oppressive proportions with unnatural attributes of masculine power. Independent black women were destined to become labeled black matriarchs” (Carby 39). Collins confirmed that women of this image who work outside were the main reason of their children failure at schools, since they kept away from them all time (75). This stereotype was demonstrating women as aggressive, unfeminine woman, failed to to be good as the mammy “dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant” (Collins 75).

The matriarch women also faced oppression in different ways, although black women worked for long hours and and spent lot of their energy away from their children, they did not get the same outcome as white women. In addition, black children did not get the same rights as white middle-class children, at the end they became poor and unsuccessful in school. Collins clarified that poor African-Americans were the reason of their own victimization, saying :

In this context, portraying African-American women as matriarchs allows White men and women to blame Black women for their children's failures in school and with the law, as well as Black children's subsequent poverty ( 76).

The matriarch was viewed as offensive, masculine and too strong, unlike the traditional images of white women piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. These differences caused a division between the two, it created a gap too within the fight for equality by women.

The third controlling image of black women was the 'welfare mother', which represented women of color as 'breeders' from the slavery period , it described poor, uneducated and single Black woman who did not work but had many children in order to take benefits from public assistance (Collins 78) . This stereotype appeared when black women gained some political rights, when getting the same access to state services as white Americans. Black woman or the 'breeder woman' was seen to be more suitable for giving birth than white women, as their white masters gained more property when they bred their slaves. Unlike the matriarch, the welfare mother was seen as lazy ; sat all the time without work and taking financial help from the state. In this image the welfare mother was living alone gained her worth and financial security, which went against the white and male-dominated ideology (Collins 79).

The last stereotype of black women was the the 'jezebel,' whore, or hoochie. was called for sexually available, immoral and sexually promiscuous black females, the main issue here was that both African-American men and women did not react to challenge these dominating images in their society, which became part of the popular American culture. Collins exemplified this by the song 'hoochie mama' by 2 Live Crew, where they sing: "Mama just don't understand/ Why I love your hoochie ass/ Sex is what I need you for/I gotta good girl but I

need a whore”(82). It could be said that black women’s sexuality was the key in black women’s oppression on this controlling image.

These controlling images of black women existed in the American society since slavery by the whites in order to justify their oppression, and other actions like sexual harassment against black females. They wanted to control black women lives; how they should behave, how fertile they were, how sexually aggressive they should be, how they should raise their children. Carby further said “These portraits of black women did not eliminate association with illicit sexuality, nor did they contradict conventional interpretations of black female sexuality. Rather, the cult of true womanhood drew its ideological boundaries to exclude another definition of black women from ‘woman.’ ” (39)

#### **1.4. Feminism and Womanism**

This part of the thesis will present the feminism movement with its waves, explaining how it worked in arising women's awareness. Then talking about black women and their portion with their own black feminism which became later on known by womanism.

##### **1.4.1 Feminism**

Feminism became a global movement in the 20th century, although the late 19th century marked the beginning and worldwide spread of feminism, in 1892, the first international convention to use the word feminist in its title was held in Paris, from the very beginning feminism was more of a Western phenomenon and the connection between European and North American feminists was crucial to its spread. Feminism was defined in some dictionaries as a doctrine aimed at the advancement of women, if gender equality was at the heart of this goal, then it attempted to categorize feminism and take into account that it embraced ideas of equality and difference. Therefore different people had defined feminism in different ways. Barbara Berg, in her introduction to *The Remembered Gate:*

*Origins of American Feminism*, defined feminism as a “broad movement embracing numerous phases of women’s emancipation.” (24) She further wrote:

It is the freedom to decide her own identity; freedom from sex-determined role; freedom from society’s oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely to actions. Feminism demands the acceptance of woman’s right to individual conscience and judgement. It postulates that woman’s essential worth stems from her common humanity and does not depend on the other relationship of her life. (24)

Moreover, Sally J. Scholz said, “Feminist methodology takes the lives of women as central” (3). Krishan Das and Deepch and wrote, “Feminist methodology aims to understand gender inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality” ( qtd. in Bedkar 9). Thus from these definitions it could seen that feminism was an ideology, that searched for gender equality in economic, social, or cultural domains, as it searched for women’s freedom and self-expression, besides the removal of the patriarchal ideologie, and male subjugation of women.

Fiminism had been identified by historians through three waves of feminist thoughts and activities. The first wave occurred in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and was largely focused on securing legal rights, political power, and the right of suffrage for women. Feminists saw the right to vote something essential both symbolically and practically, which would provide them full citizenship and bring practical changes in women’s lives. Walters in his work remarked :

Men and woman had been drawn closer together by the suffering and sacrifice of the war. Awed and humbled by the great catastrophe, and by the huge economic problems it had thrown into naked prominence, the women of the suffrage movement had learnt that social regeneration is a long and mighty work. (qtd. in Bedkar 85)

The contribution of women during the First World War, and their struggle for the right of vote gave them the chance to work in factories, hospitals, as led women enter many domains beside males. Although the success that feminism movement achieved on its first wave, the Great Depression between 1920 and 1960 noticed the decline of feminism.

The second wave was in the 1960s and 1970s, it appeared as a reaction to the fall of the first phase. Women became courageous to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and to broadly address other equality issues, such as gender inequality, sexuality, family, work, reproductive rights. From the most influential characters in the second wave feminist phase, were Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett.

Additionally, the third wave which appeared in the early 1990s in response to the failure of the second wave, and as backlash against the initiatives launched by the second wave. For most of its history, the majority of leaders and feminist theorists of feminism, social and political movements were middle-class white women, primarily in the UK, France, and the US. Bedkar confirmed that the third wave worked to change the stereotypical images of women. Feminists were gathering from various colours, religions, ethnicities, races, discussing different issues, this resulted the term 'Consciousness-raising' by Kathie Sarachild, which meant women would met and discussed their own personal experiences. (Bedkar 11).

### 1.4.1.1 Black Feminism

Women of color experienced different kinds of oppression both from the white people and black men, what made black women writers talked and analysed their complicated social issues of pain, injustice, and horror of slavery. Bell Hooks portrayed the status of the black women in her book *Ain't I A Woman* saying :

Black women are one of the most devalued female groups in American society, and they have been the recipients of a male abuse and cruelty that has known no bounds or limits. Since the black woman has been stereotyped by both white and black men as the 'bad' woman, she has not been able to ally herself with men from either group to get protection from the other. Neither group feels that she deserves protection . . . most young black men see their female companions solely as objects to be exploited . . . referred to black female as 'that bitch' or 'that whore.' Their perception of the black female as a degraded sexual object is similar to white male perceptions of the black female. (108)

Black feminism was a school of thought believed that sexism, class oppression, gender identity and racism are inextricably linked . Black women joined feminist movement for sexism and racism they faced, Soon they grasp the harsh reality that white women rarely face Various issues faced by non-white women, parties came to a conclusion that Feminist movement cares about organized minorities, their role in the movement and their efforts supported participants only . The segregation of black women was so unscrupulous in which The word 'female' means 'white female' and the word 'black' means 'black male'. Bedkar clarified that black Women were always destined to suffer from stereotypes and be portrayed negatively and suffered persecution, beatings, torture and many other atrocities, the cruel racist attitude of white women towards black

women resulted the emergence of women's organizations whose sole aim was to end racism. ( 25).

Black feminism emphasized on the fact that sexism, racism and class oppression are very intertwined. Black feminists face various challenges in order to show other black women that feminism is not a white women's movement, persuading and ordering white women to share power with them, and fighting to end the movement misogynistic tendencies of black nationalism, white feminist theorists have failed to acknowledge issues related to racism, sexism and class conflict and the urgency black women experienced. The exclusion of black women from feminist theory and anti-racist discourse first became apparent in the social movements for racial and gender equality in the 1960s and 1970s, this task was carried out by black theorists such as Bell Hooks, Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins emphasized on the marginalization of black women based on race, gender, class and gender. In his study the black feminist scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, stated , “black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender” (qtd. in Bedkar 26).

Moreover, the president of the National association of colored women Mary Shurch Trrell played an important role to involve black women in women's struggle for their rights and brought them at par with men in the educational system. Josephine St. Pierree Ruffin, also another black activist who separated from white woman's organisations to work with black females organization, to establish a women's movement that would generally address the concerns of all women, she wrote:

Our women's movement is a women's movement that is led and directed by women for the good of women and men, for the benefit of humanity, which is more than any one branch or section of it . . . we are not drawing the color line; we are women, American women, as intensely interested in all that pertains to us as such as all other American women, we are not alienating or withdrawing, we are only coming to the front, willing to join any others in the same work and cordially inviting and welcoming any others to join us. (qtd. in Bedkar 164).

Black woman was the most marginalized category in the American society and have been treated in an unfair way for long period of time, then by the emergence of the black feminism movement, black women were not calling for their right and freedom only, but rather were working to achieve equality between all women and even were talking about men, the movement wanted benefits for all human being, although they faced discrimination from all people of the society. Anna Julia Cooper another activist as well tackled issues of black women in her writing. In her book, *A Voice from the South* (1892), she said :

The colored woman of today occupies, one might say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which makes for our civilization. She is confronted by a woman question and a race problem, and is yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both. (27)

The writer talked about the right of black women in high education, since black women at that time were unlettered and had no right to be educated, she also convinced them to fight against the subordination of men, and all kinds of racism and unaccepted abuse they suffered from, as they should struggle for their

freedom and serve as leaders, in order to be effective and made a good status in their society.

Women's Voice started in 1919, extended the belief—'by women—of women—for women.' Then in 1920 all women were given the right to vote except blacks. From 1930s and 40s Women's organisation focused on racial segregation, they came together to improve their social status, as they stressed on their freedom, after the civil right movement which called for the fight against racism. Black women of the U.S formed the National Black Feminist Organisation (NBFO) in New York in 1973, Bedkar further explained that its purpose was to empower black women against racist, sexist, and classist oppression, as the main aim of the Black Feminist Movement was to accredit black women mentally, spiritually, and economically to fight against this oppression. ( 28,29).

#### **1.4.1.2 Black feminist critics**

Black feminist critics took initiative to revitalize the forgotten black women writers and revise negative critical views about them. Black feminist critics developed their own feminist theories, they focused entirely on the writings and histories of black women, not only in the United States, but in other countries as well, their main consensus was to understand how race, class and sexuality affected women's lives. One of the most prominent and important principles of black feminist thought was to make clear that black feminism was addressing the economic survival, racial discrimination, and patriarchy that the white women's movement had failed to achieve. Dubey clarified that black feminist criticism was mainly obsessed with "its discourse on stereotype versus character, which bespeaks the strong political investment of black feminist critic in the notion of a whole self; and its affirmation of oral folk culture as the source of uniquely black feminine literary authority" (qtd. in Bedkar 30).

African-American feminist critics aimed to speak out about the double invisibility and double oppression that black females suffered from. Black feminist thoughts emphasized on male bias and racism, two major contributors to that oppression on the black women's community. In addition to other important themes black feminist thought tackled such as black women's sexual politics, black women and motherhood, black women's lesbian relationships and their activism.

The emergence of important Afro-American women activists, was a necessary support for the whole community. Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* remarked :

African women writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, and Ellen Kuzwayo have used their voices to raise important issues that affect Black African women (James 1990). Like the work of Maria W. Stewart and that of Black women transnationally, African-American women's intellectual work has aimed to foster Black women's activism. (qtd. in Bedkar 31).

The 1980s and 1990s saw a huge increase in black feminist writers. They openly criticized gender, white male patriarchy, and other types of control and dominance. Furthermore many black women novelists used in their works themes of oppression based on race, sex or class, black female protagonists, their spiritual journey from victimization to self-realization, as they also spread the awareness of black culture.

#### **1.4.2 Womanism**

The term womanism could be placed within a cultural framework most clearly as expressed by activist and writer Alice Walker in the 1983, Her point was that women of color could be considered 'womanish.' Womanish, the root of Womanism, this concept captured the cultural expression of the lives of black

women. Black girls were described as Womanish if they acted grown, as adult women. ( Brewer 93).

Brewer clarified in his study that womanism found its way to be developed through the politics and writings of the Crunk Feminist Collective, established by Moya Bailey and Brittany Cooper as well as in the Womanist Theology found in the writings of Black women theologians such as Cannon (1988), Grant (1989), and Williams (2013). Womanism was included in various fields as their black popular culture , language, music, and writing. (93, 94).

The main purpose of womanism is to make their own choices when it came to opposing this xenophobic stance of white feminists. As a unique movement, womanism worked to defeat male domination and oppression of black women since they created a paradigm that gave them significant values. womanism came out stronger, more original, and distanced itself from white feminism, and also challenged white feminists and their views.

Unlike feminism, womanism did not concentrated just on gender inequality, while ignoring issues of race and class, it rather emphasized on the need of a strong community, and women who would help each other and provided the support to resist patriarchal dominance and stereotypes, as well as transform traditional systems into new ones in which they would have more possibilities to express themselves, in order to provide women with the positive values that would sustain them. Womanism insisted on the selfsufficiency and self-confidence of women since they had to deal with racism and denigration (Izgarjan, Markov 309).

## **1.5 Conclusion**

This theoretical chapter tackles the double oppression toward black women since their existence in the USA society, where they experienced racism and gender stereotype by both black males and white society. Therefore, women of color rebelled against the harsh reality they were living in, as the emergence of their own black feminism helped them to change their status, and being no more marginalized.

## **Chapter Two**

**Struggle Against Oppression in Alice Walker's Novel**

*The Color Purple*

## **2. Introduction**

This practical part of the dissertation will analyse the novel of *The Color Purple*, starting with an overview about the writer of the novel Alice Walker by talking about her life and her achievements during her career, then will move to give a summary about the plot of the novel in order to clarify the development of the events in the story. Besides, it will demonstrate the major themes of racism and sexism against black women in the south of the American society, in addition to the courage that female characters assumed in the story in order to struggle against male oppression.

### **2. 1 Overview of Alice Walker's Life and Works**

Alice Malsenior Walker was born on February 9, 1944 as the eighth child of Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker. She grew up in a sharecropper family in Eatonton, Georgia, Walker experienced the southern atmosphere which helped her to achieve many of her future works.

After Walker reached eight years old, she accidentally got shot in her right eye by one of her brothers when he was playing with his BB gun. The incident left her blind in her eye and turned the young Alice into a timid and introvert child. The incident helped her to develop her writing skills in an early age. Walker clarified herself "the blinding makes her feel like an outcast, but it also causes her to grow up fast and to study the relationships she sees around her, through observation and reading, but also through writing poems" (qtd. in Lauret 7)

In her first writings, she got inspiration from the character of her mother since she was close to her, as Lauret explained "in her little-known children's writing, Walker in many ways takes on her mother's role as a storyteller and preserver of the cultural heritage of the Black South". Regardless their good relationship, Walker faced sexism and violence from her father and brothers.

Moreover, her essays and works had been always related to her experiences in her life, Lauret declared "in the early essays it appears that the domestic abuse she exposes in her fiction had its parallels at home, but the negative portrayal of male family members shifts to more conciliatory tone in the later essays" ( Lauret 6).

She graduated from high school as the valedictorian, and she began her higher education at Spellman College in Atlanta. The period (1961-1963) she spent in the College were marked by an awareness to intellectual and social issues, as she got more and more involved in the Civil Rights Movement. In addition Walker During these years was active in the Georgia voter registration movement of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In 1963 she was one of the six black students in Sarah Lawrence college in New York after being transferred there.

In 1969 she got married the white civil rights lawyer Melvyn Rosenman Leventhal, Walker gave birth to her daughter Rebecca, on November 17, 1969. Another reason that raised her creativeness, which resulted the publication of her first collection poems '*Once*', when Walker said : "that week I wrote without stopping....almost all of the poems in *Once*" (qtd. in Lauret 7).

During the seventies Walker's career started both as a writer and a teacher. She was giving courses talking about black women writers, her courses were among the first of its kind where she dealt with previously neglected authors like Phillis Wheatley, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Brooks and Paule Marshall. Walker worked for the recovery of Zora Neale Hurston especially catches the eye for example she edited a collection of Hurston's work; *I Love Myself when I'm Laughing...* and *Then Again when I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* (1979) so it could be available again (Lauret 9).

Walker in her works tackled important themes such as racism and sexism, she also combined autobiographical concepts in her work and depicted the political, social and moral conditions of the South. After publishing her first novel in 1970 entitled *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker became part of what critics call 'The Second Black Renaissance' in which she played a leading role with other black authors, in order to help black women writers to share their ideas, works, and discuss political events.

In 1982, Walker published her well-known novel *The Color Purple*. The novel was written in terms of letters sent to God by a black abused girl, the novel was very successful and secured her reputation as a writer once and for all, winning her both the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize in 1983. Moreover, in 1985 the story turned into a movie by Steven Spielberg.

### **2.3 Plot Summary of *The Color Purple***

*The Color Purple* novel was a well-known novel, that was written by Alice Walker in 1982, in which narrated the suffering of the black girl Celie in the south of the American society, and how she fought for her rights. The novel was told in a form of a series of letters, from the poor girl Celie to God and to her sister Nettie, then from the sister back to Celie. In order to conceal the oppression of her stepfather after his injunction "You better never tell nobody but God." (Walker 11)

A fourteen-year-old girl, Celie had lived a harsh life, after her mother got very sick she found herself responsible about her siblings and alone with her stepfather Alphonso, who raped her many times subsequent her mother's death, saying "You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't" (Walker 1). Celie was feeling guilty about all the wrong that was done to her, wondering "I am I have always been a good girl" (Walker 1). Celie had two children by her father which both

disappeared right after she gave birth, she assumed that Alphonso killed them but in reality he sold them. One day a widower with four children came to ask for the hand of Celie's younger sister, Nettie. Their stepfather refused to let Nettie go, he rather offered Celie in order to get rid of her since she was a constant reminder of his sexual abuse. Alpert accepted the offer although his children were angry because of his remarrying, as Celie wanted to protect her young sister Nettie only.

Life with Mr Albert for Celie was not better than life with her stepfather before, her husband used to beat her very often, as he was using her just to serve him and to take care of his children. Also because he was in love with Shug Avery whole his life a singer who travel around countries and sing in bars. Albert's father did not allow him to marry the girl he wanted, so he married Annie Julia the mother of his children, but he continued his affairs with Shug.

Celie's sister Nettie, was the only person she trusted and truly loved. Nettie run from Alphonso's house and moved to live with her sister, she was a beautiful girl and Albert got attracted to her but she was ignoring him, he started then harrasing her and eventually trying to rape her. Cellie saved her sister and sent her away, after they vowed to write to each other. Nettie kept her pledge and keep writing to her sister but Albert didn't let Celie saw the letters, this later presumed that her sister died or moved elsewhere, though she remained living her days and taking all abuse from her husband without saying a word.

Meanwhile, Albert's son Harpo fell in love with a young brave women called Sofia. Her father did not accpet their marriage, as his father also forbade him to marry her, because he didn't like that girl, then after they knew with her pregnancy they allowed their marriage, Sofia was not a traditional girl and had strong personality. Harpo couldn't make her under his control so his father advised him to beat her, Sofia however fought back. Celie liked the courage of Sofia and

started to be influenced by her. The girls soon became friends, Sofia encouraged Celie to fight back against her husband and his injustice saying :

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 my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. (Walker40)

Albert's lover, Shug Avery fell very sick as a result of her wild lifestyle, as she had no home she stayed in Albert's house. Celie took care of Shug and nursed her till she got healthier, despite her nasty comments “She weak as a kitten. But her mouth just pack with claws” ( Walker 49). Nevertheless, Celie got to know Shug better and found herself falling in love with her, “Lord, I wants to go so bad. Not to dance. Not to drink. Not to play card. Not even to hear Shug Avery sing. I just be thankful to lay eyes on her.” (49). Shug and Celie became friends, closed to each other. In return, Shug decided to nurse Celie back to emotional health. One day, before Albert had the chance to check the mail Shug discovered letters from Nettie and told her, then the girls searched in his bedroom and found a whole stack of letters, Celie was overjoyed to know that her sister was still alive.

In her letters, Nettie told her sister that she run to the house of the minister Samuel, and his wife. They educated her and took care of her very well till she joined a Christian missionary, group of people which was led by the minister and his wife, in order to move to Africa to Christianize the natives. The minister and his wife had two adopted children whom Nettie could know they were Celie's kids just by looking at them. She also wrote to her sister that the man were considering him their father was actually not, but their real father died in an early age, Celie was so glad to know her sister was living good and her children were alive, at the same time was so angry because Albert hid the letters of her sister.

Celie finally got the courage to face Albert, she had a fight with him ended by thrusting him with a knife, she decided then to leave him but his response was that he would let her go over his dead body Celie surprised him with her answer saying : "It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body is just the welcome mat I need" (Walker 207).

Celie moved from Georgia to Memphis, starting her new business in sewing pants with the help of Shug, she became very successful in her new life and writing to her sister rather than writing to God.

Celie passed all her life in pain because of men, the thing that let her love women. At the end of the novel Shug fell in love with a young man, what broke Celie's heart this later then developed a friendship relation with Albert, who became good after Celie left him saying " I start to wonder why us need love. Why us suffer. Why us black. Why us men and women. Where do children really come from. It didn't take long to realize I didn't hardly know nothing...The more I wonder, he say, the more I love". (Walker 289)

Nettie returned to America with Celie's children, they lived in the house of their stepfather after his death, finally Celie's family reunited, she was so happy and feeling the love as never experienced before, her last words in the novel despite her old age were : "I think this the youngest us ever felt" (Walker 295).

## 2.4 Major Themes of *The Color Purple* Novel

*The Color Purple* novel is one of the revolutionary African American works by Alice Walker who presented many interesting themes such as : racism, black females solidarity, male domination and sexuality.

### 2.4.1 Racism in *The Color Purple*

Racism was one of the main topics the writer tackled within the novel, Alice did not talk only about racism of the whites toward the blacks, but also about racism between blacks in the same community as an internal kind of racism. As a black writer Alice was aware of all racist behaviors, which she pictured in the novel starting with the sub standard housing of the most black characters who were living away from the white community, they had their own cemetery, church, and schools. Black people were not considered as humans they were considered as slaves and animals, white people were always superior even the poorest of them. To begin with Celie's real father who was killed because of his success in a world blacks should not be successful, Celie said "My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me" (Walker 197). Sofia was another main character in the novel, also a victim of violence because she rejected to be a maid in the house of a white man saying "hell no" (90).

Sofia was forbidden to see her children, she was beaten and suffered in the jail from all worst types of torture till Celie thought that she died since they "crack her skull, ... ribs. ... tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye" (Walker 93). She was accepting all the orders were said to her comparing herself to Celie "Every time they ask me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you I jump right up and do just what they say" (94).

Sofia before the incident was a brave and independent woman, after the long period she spent in the jail because of the mayor's action and his wife. Experiencing all the physical and emotional abuse made her so weak and feeling hopeless as she would never react against the whites, there was another scene in the beginning of the novel when the store owner treated Pauline's mother impolitely and asked her to leave quickly (15) showing that white people were not accepting the existence of blacks.

In the other hand, the novel presented also racism between blacks themselves, as much as people were dark they became slave to others. Celie the protagonist through the events proved that she was a slave first to her father who was cruel with her then her husband, once introduced to him he was on a horse which meant to be higher than her, "I go stand in the door. The sun shine in my eyes. He's still up on his horse. He look me up and down. Pa rattle his newspaper. Move up, he won't bite, he say. I go closer to the steps, but not too close cause I'm a little scared of his horse. Turn round, Pa say" . (Walker 12-13)

#### **2.4.2 Male Domination in *The Color Purple* :**

The novel widely tackled the issue of male domination and control over women, starting with Celie and her stepfather's warning saying : " You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" ( Walker 11) the girl was in need to talk about her rape experience and to express herself, but she found no way. Celie's fear made her wrote letters to god to speak out her thoughts "Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I-aa I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (4).

Celie suffered from sexual abuse and violence from her stepfather for a long time, he was so savage and cruel telling her "You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't.... I cry, He start to choke me, saying you better shut up" (Walker 5). In

addition, he took away her baby right after she gave birth while she was sleeping then also her second baby :

He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can.... He took my other little baby, a boy this time. But I don't think he kilt it. I think he sold it to a man an his wife over Monticello (Walker 6).

Albert bought Celie from her stepfather to be his maid and took care of his children, he didn't treat her good as well. Even Harpo her husband's son used physical violence against her, she said "He pick up the rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breasts" (Walker 14) Celie didn't make any respond or reaction to defend herself because she got used to accept the aggressive treatment.

Black male thought that the only way to keep a woman under control is to beat her. For instance when Albert incited his son to beat his wife in order to obey him since she was an independent and not traditional girl, his father told him :

You ever hit her? Mr. ??? ast. Harpo look down at his hands. Naw sub, he say low, embarrass. Well, how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating (Walker 36-37).

Male domination could be seen in the whole novel by using violence against women, as Celie described the sexual violence by Albert in the following scene :

He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, like? He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference.

Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep (Walker 78-79).

However, at the end of the novel there was an acceptance of male domination by the writer, showing Celie the main character forgiving Albert. Although the physical abuse and the horrible things he did to her, she appreciated that he was changing himself to be better, Celie said :

After all the evil he done, I know you wonder why I don't hate him. I don't hate him for two reasons. One, he love Shug. And two, Shug use to love him. Plus, look like he trying to make something out of himself (Walker 312).

Celie was convinced that it was their society norms an traditions, where men should controle women and tell them what to do.

#### **2.4.3 Black Feminism in *The Color Purple* :**

Alice Walker in her well known novel , *The Color Purple* which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for Fiction, presented the life of Celie a dark young lady, who in spite of destitution, uneducated , rised under oppression and lack of attention, till she decided to battle in life for survival and rebelled against the injust norms of her society.

The main character of the novel Celie was the most person who suffered from persecution, but the novel didn't presente Celie as the only female tortured. All the females in the novel had the same experience in which Nettie, Sofia and Shug were also black women who bore double oppresion, first from the white society then from black males since they lived in a male dominating society.

Walker focused on the violence scene in order to portray the protagonist's status, Celie suffered from every male she met in her life starting from the rape of her father, and took her kids away from her. Even worse, he prohibited her from telling anyone about her suffering. He took away her voice and kept her silenced.

Then he sold her to Albert, who also beat her and treated her in a bad way. her role was to be his maid and please him in bed. He considered his wife as machine like other men saying in the novel : “a good sound of beating” (Walker 37).

Nettie also ran away from rape twice; first time from her stepfather and the second time from Alpert, She refused to have the same fate that her sister had so she left the house twice searching for a new life .

Sofia another female character in the story, who was a victim of black and white man violence too. But Sofia didn't accept that, and used to fight back against her husband who was beaten her saying "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 want a dog" (Walker 67) , although she had a strong personality as was described by Celie :

Look cross the yard. I see Sofia dragging a ladder and then lean it up against the house. She wearing a old pair of Harpo pants. Got her head tied up in a headrag. She clam up the ladder to the roof, begin to hammer in nails. Sound echo the yard like shots. (Walker 58).

Celie also said that they fight " like two mens" (39 ), because She used to fight for her right to be heard.

Celie's life took a different route when she met Sofia, Hrpo's wife and Shug Avery, Alpert's previous lover. Both girls were very independent woman who enjoyed themselves as a womem, as they showed male characteristics, they used the male diction which needed a woman to be dared in order to enter male's area. Because they can't be independent until they proved that they had some masculine behaviors . Celie commented on Shug saying:

Shug say, girl you look like a good time, you do. That when I notice how Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl you look like a good time. Women always talk about hair and heath. How many babies living or dead, or got teef. Not bout how some woman they hugging on look like a good time . (Walker 72)

Shug confessed to Celie that she was independent physically but inside her she was chained. Shug became Celie's lover then taught her many things about her body and her spirituality. She also taught her the meaning of God saying :

God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God ... Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't no picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be a happy to feel that, you've found it. She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then other people. But one day when I was feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. (Walker 176)

She helped her to find her own way away from males domination. Celie showed her liberation in two ways : first as a woman who was mentally slave and broke that slavery when she told Shug about her father's raping. Second, Nettie's letters which exposed the truth and made Celie decided to leave her husband and went back to her stepfather to take the home from him. Celie became voiced surprising her husband when she spoke in a strong voice and expressed her anger. At the end she left him and established her own financial independence by finding a work in sewing pants.

After all suffering and humiliation that *The Color Purple's* female characters experienced, they showed a solidarity between them and found a way for their happiness and to a cheerful life. In her novel Alice Walker pictured the status of black women in the south. Walker's Womanism encouraged women to stand for their rights and help each other to prove their identities, as she fought the patriarchal society which excluded, dehumanized, defamed their reputation, oppressed and made women felt unstable not only in the black society but also in the other societies as well.

### **2.5 Symbolism in *The Color Purple* :**

Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple* was a unique piece of work which is seen as a potential source of empowerment for women, where the writer emphasized on the importance of self reliance for women so they could realize their ability to stand independent.

Walker represented the story of a victimizes women, who regained her spirit. Celie, the protagonist of the novel passed a series of changes from despised, abused and living a miserable life to an independent and liberated woman. (Diwakar 136)

The colour 'Purple' in the novel showed all the beautiful and precious things that God has created for his people to appreciate and enjoy in life. Although the hard condition that Celie was enduring in made her losing all the sense of appreciation for things that surrounded her, Shug Avery the lover of Celie's husband helped Celie to improved herself in her society and motivated her to enjoy life which was exactly what God wanted them to do. She enlightened Celie by saying that God created little things like the color 'Purple' for his people just to make them happy. Celie realized that she had never truly noticed God's creations saying : “not a blade of corn, not the color purple. Not the little wildflowers. Nothing. Now that my eyes opening, I feel like a fool.” (Walker 198)

Celie also loved to wear purple color, but she was feeling it would not suit her, when she went out for shopping with Kate, she said :

She go with me in the store. I think what color Shug Avery would wear. She like a queen to me so I say to Kate, Somethin purple, maybe little red in it too. But us look an look and no purple. Plenty red but she say, Naw, he won't want to pay for red. Too happy lookin. We got choice of brown, maroon or navy blue. I say blue. (Walker 24)

Celie's transformation changed her whole perspective to life, which made her realized her identity. Purple color became for her became a symbol of life, creativity and individual thinking. As she painted her room with purple and red, she further added :

Well, here it is, I say, standing in the door. Everything in my room purple and red cept the floor, that painted bright yellow. She go right to the little purple frog perch on my mantlepiece.(Walker 29)

*The color Purple* symbolised royalty and piety. It is a combination of the wisdom of blue and the love of red (Diwakar 137). Celie even imagined Sofia wearing pants one leg red and one leg purple and dancing on the moon. "I'm busy making pants for Sofia now. One leg be purple, one leg be red. I dream Sofia wearing these pants, one day she was jumping over the moon." ( Walker 223). It also symbolised the indomitable spirit of Sofia who unlike Celie fought for a meaningful existence, She was a woman with strong will power struggling to earn self-respect and dignity. (Diwakar138).

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This practical chapter talked about Alice Walker and her novel *The Color Purple*, by highlighting the major themes had been treated in the novel like racism, male oppression, and female movement showing the development of the female character during the story. Lastly discussing the symbolism of the color purple within the novel.

## General Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to explore the way Alice Walker pictured the black females suffering in the American society during the twentieth century. In addition to the examination of women's solidarity and the emergence of black feminism along the novel.

The present research discussed the issues of race and oppression against black females in the American society, African American women suffered from different types of abuse which touched various domains such as economic, political, and ideological, by both black males and whites. Moreover, the appearance of many controlling stereotypes worked to draw a bad name and defeat the reputation of black women in the American society.

Additionally, the traditional feminism contributed in the oppression of women of color, because it eliminated black women's desire from their movement since the feminist theory was written by white scholars. African American women struggled against racism and male domination creating their own black feminism movement to defend their rights.

the first chapter of the research gave a general background about the status of women in the American society during the twentieth century, and ways they have been oppressed by both White and Black males. Then in the second chapter, the work showed the different themes Alice Walker used in her novel *The Color Purple*, and how women were treated in the American society.

Alice Walker, as a black female and as a black activist, examined the status of women during the twentieth century, she succeeded in presenting the different black female suffering, also her female characters Celie, Nettie, Sofia, Shug

Avery, showed the way African American women helped each other to resist the different ways of oppression, in order to be independent.

Alice Walker further presented the concept of black feminism via creating a voice for the young black woman Celie, the protagonist, after her suffering from abuse and male control, she worked to find a way to save herself from the offensive situations of sexual and physical violation. Then she developed her awareness, with the support of other women Celie learnt how to be beautiful, independent and how to love herself. The novel emphasized on the fact that women were able to succeed if they cooperated together.

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## Summaries in Three Languages

### التلخيص

تتناول هذه الرسالة قضايا الاضطهاد والعنصرية ضد النساء الأمريكيات من أصل أفريقي في المجتمع الأمريكي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك ، فإنه يوضح كيف تعمل النساء السود من أجل ظهور الحركة النسوية السوداء من أجل إيجاد صوتهم وتمثيل أنفسهم في مجتمعهم ، من خلال تحليل الموضوعات الرئيسية في رواية اليس والكر اللون الارجواني .

### Résumé

Cette thèse aborde les questions d'oppression et de racisme contre les femmes afro-américaines dans la société américaine. De plus, il montre comment les femmes noires travaillent à l'émergence du mouvement féminisme noir afin de trouver leur propre voix et de se représenter dans leur société, à travers l'analyse des thèmes majeurs du roman d'Alice Walker *The Color Purple*.

### Summary

This dissertation tackles the issues of oppression and racism against African-American women in the American society. Additionally, it shows how black women work for the emergence of the black feminism movement in order to find their own voice and to represent themselves in their society, through the analysis of the major themes in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*.

