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*Aspects of racism and feminism in Mules and  
Men By Zora Neale Hurston And The Color  
Purple by Alice Walker*

*An extended essay submitted in partial fulfillment of requirement for the master  
degree in English Languages.*

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## *DEDICATION*

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## General Introduction

African American literature rose and was brought up in the midst of controversies, plotting and a jeopardizing policy. It has been written by African American writers about their issues. It emerged in a time when the blacks were in need of a means of representation to their pathetic lives. But this literature did not convey all Africans' problems since it neglected the women's needs and desires. It dealt with men's issues only; this is why a new genre of literature called African American female literature was introduced.

Female African American literature is all literature written by black African women concerning their own problems and experiences and what they were going through because being black and female was not an easy task. So, writers such as Tony Morrison, Lucy Terry, Zora Hurston, Alice Walker...etc decided to speak up for their rights and choose the pen and words as their weapon against injustice.

Though *Mules and Man* and *The Color Purple* were not published in the same period, they do share common points that characterize the black female literature. Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker were born in different time but within the same community and under the same life condition. Never meeting each other, the two novelists are linked together and Walker has decided to follow Hurston's path. *Mules and Man* 270 pages long published in 1935 by Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) who was born in Eatonville Florida and *The Color Purple* 300 pages long published in 1982 by Alice Walker born in 1944 in Eatonton Georgia. The two novels focus upon themes that have a relationship with their society; being a woman of colour; they are suffering from both oppression and discrimination; they explore racism and feminism within the black community and give a truthful image about black characters.

The motivation behind this work is to see how themes such as racism and feminism are presented in the novels in question. The strategies used to trace the life of the characters present in the novel. Find the similarities between the two writers and the relationship between Walker and Hurston.

- ❖ How do black female writers deal with themes such as feminism and racism?
- ❖ What is African American literature, why does it written for who are the main black writers?
- ❖ How do Hurston and Walker introduced racism and feminism in their novels; *Mules and Men* and *The Color Purple*?
- ❖ How does the solidarity between women help in the development and the success of the female characters?

Our work is divided into two chapters;

The First chapter will be devoted to the theoretical foundations; in which an overview about the African American literature is given; it reveals the tackled points by the female black writers including their problems, issues and motivations. An overview about racism and feminism as themes in African American literature will also be given. We will provide a general idea about the two authors' lives, works and their literary movement. Womanism is a point that will be tackled in order to have an idea about the difference between feminism and womanism. Chapter one is provided with the plot summary of the two novels i.e. *Mules and Man* and *The Color Purple*, and how the events in both novels are narrated.

The second chapter will explore racism and feminism and their impact on the lives of the characters present in the novels. It will also highlight the language and the strategies used by both writers inorder to transmit their message to the reader. This chapter will deal also with symbolism within both novels; its meaning and significance and the aim

behind using it, also it will deal with the main character evolution and the impact of other characters present in the novels up on its development and self-recognition. At the end a brief idea will be given about the relationship between Walker and Hurston, how they affected each other, their literary bound and the common points between the two writers.

The General conclusion will deal with the solidarity of women and how does it lead them to succeed.

## **Chapter one: Theoretical foundations**

1. Introduction
2. Overview about African American female writers
3. Zora Neal Hurston
  - 3.1. Zora Neal Hurston's Biography
  - 3.2. Mules And Men's plot summary
  - 3.3. Zora Neal Hurston's literary movement
4. Alice walker
  - 4.1. Alice Walker biography
  - 4.2. The Color Purple's plot summary
  - 4.3. Walker's literary movement
5. feminism and racism in African American literature
6. Walker's womanism
7. conclusion

## 1.1. Introduction

In this chapter, we will try to trace the main features that characterize the African American literature written by Black female writers; the theoretical part of this dissertation will provide a ground on which the analyses put forward in the coming chapter will be done. Therefore the two novelists Zora Neal Hurston and Alice Walker will be the main subject of the research paper. In this part we will tackle African American literature, the main female writers, and as long as the two novelists are concerned there is a focus upon their literary movement and summary of their two main works *Mules and Man* and *The Color Purple*. Moreover we will discuss how Racism and Feminism are presented within literature.

## 1.2. Overview about the African American Female writers

Before talking about African American women's literature, African American literature must be first defined. There are many opinions about the right definition, but critics agreed that it is the body of literature written by Americans of African origins. African American women's literature on the other hand is all literature written by female black writers about their own experiences.

When I think of how essentially alone black women have been – alone because of our bodies, over which we have had so little control; alone because the damage done to our men has prevented their closeness and protection; and alone because we have had no one to tell us stories about ourselves; I realize that black women writers are an important and comforting presence in my life. Only they know my story. It is absolutely necessary that they be permitted to discover and interpret the entire range and spectrum of the experience of black women and not be stymied by preconceived conclusions. Because of these writers, there are more choices for black women to make, and there is a larger space in the universe for us (quoted by Mitchell and Taylor I)

Lucy Terry was the first African American who composed the first known poem in 1746. She was the pioneer in starting this new tradition. Throughout history; Black female writers have denounced their status and criticized their own lives. In this context Francis Smith says about the African American female writers that they used the word as both a tool and a weapon to correct, to create and to confirm their vision of life as it was and as it could become.

Black females were not oppressed and ill treated just from the whites, they were also submitted and terrorized within the same community:

It is obvious that most Black men are not in positions that allow them to exert the kind of institutionalized patriarchal power and control over black women's lives that privileged white men do in this society. But it is undeniable that they do exert a lot of power over women and children in everyday life (Hooks, 124)

Black women were the most suitable persons to speak about themselves; no one could better transmit the message than them; they were well situated to offer solutions because they were living within a sexist and racist society.

African American novels are interrelated, it is said that the writers are communicating throughout their writings from the 18<sup>th</sup> century up to nowadays. They are similar in terms of motifs, concerns, and major themes such as Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved*; Maya Angelo and her novel *I know Why The Caged Bird Sing*, Alice Walker *The Color Purple*, Zora Hurston with her novel *Mules and man* and also *Their eyes were watching God*, Nella Larsen and her novel *Passing*.

The African American writers were inspired by their historical circumstances such as Slavery, civil war, and civil rights movement. African American novels do not only focus on the relationship between the blacks and the whites but also about the blacks. Within their communities they used the black English language and show their traditional music genre such as Jazz,

Blues ...etc. Although black female writers have written since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they were not given consideration until the 20<sup>th</sup> century; by the emergence of African American female literary scholars. Anna Julia Cooper in *Womanhood A Vital Element in The Regeneration And Progress Races* says that “the education and elevation of black women is crucial to racial uplift” because women are responsible of the coming generation’s education. Also the changes that happened in America by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century politically, economically and educationally speaking gave opportunity and visibility to African American women’s literature “without the political changes of the 1960’s, educational reform by way of canon reformation and expansion would not have taken place” (Mitchell and Taylor 2) .

By the 1970’s African American women writers became more known and prominent in the world of literature and they started winning many Prizes, Alice Walker and her Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Color Purple*.

African American women authors have become dominant forces in creating and contributing to the larger tradition after many decades of being virtually silenced by outright neglect from publishers who considered them irrelevant. As with so much literature by and about women, that silence has been broken, giving voice to the infinite complexities of African American women’s lives, including women’s roles leaders, creators of culture, mothers, lovers, among many other (Dickson-Carr 2).

Later on many famous and successful black female novelists such as Gloria Naylor, Audre Lorde and others brought many themes to literature such as motherhood, the relationship between the mother and the daughter, spirituality ...etc .

Black women novelists adapted a new genre in literature; they started writing science fiction both for adults and for children such as Octavia Butler

and Virginia Hamilton. These novelists get famous and much known; this leads critics to speak about a new renaissance or a black Renaissance.

### 1.3. Racism and Feminism in African American Literature

The history of slavery in America, with all its load of abuse and oppression towards the blacks, led to the emergence of a new type of literature called African American literature. The major themes that are dealt with in this literature have to do with racism, sexism, and feminism. The tragedy of black folks urged writers to react and try to change the awful situation throughout their writings.

The well known novel which speaks about racism is entitled *Native Son*, written by Richard Wright; it dealt with the problems of race and racism in a Jim Crow society. Paul Laurence Dunbar writes his novel *The Sport of The Gods* (1902) based on the blacks in America who were suffering from slavery, racism, and oppression. Maya Angelo, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), and Tony Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) asked the question of how respect and self esteem are gained by black women in American society, which at that time did not accept their existence. Tony Morrison also studied the African American states in America in addition to female identity in works *Song of Solomon* (1977) *Beloved* (1987), and *Jazz* (1991).

Many other female novelists wrote about black community and its issues, Alice Walker's *The Third Life Of Grange Copeland* deals with family problems such as violence and poverty, also her novel *The Color Purple* is a masterpiece where she exposed domestic violence, daughters raped by their fathers, and a wife beaten and sexually abused by her husband. Alice Walker in her novel also denounced racial problems. She highlighted the way in which blacks were treated, and how they were marginalized. She paved the way for, and inspired, many unknown writers. She encouraged them to write in their houses and small towns. Zora Neale Hurston was one who assisted to the blues women of the 1920's and she paved the way for black females in her



novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mules and Men* (1935); she explored the Black community and its problems. She also dealt with self acceptance, and rejection of a black female journey. (Bloom 88)

The new Negro literature was a means to denounce racism, enhance and reinforce feminism as well as many other topics related to the black community. Through novels and essays, writers are trying to change the dramatic life of a man of colour.

#### **1.4. Zora Neale Hurston and her works**

Hurston is a black female writer that has chosen her own path to fight injustice in her society.

##### **1.4.1. Zora Neale Hurston's biography**

On January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1891, Zora Neale Hurston was born in the tiny town of Notasulga, Alabama. She was the fifth of eight children in the Hurston's family. Her father John was a carpenter, and a Baptist preacher; her mother Lucy was a schoolteacher. Within Zora's birth, the family moved to Eatonville, Florida. In 1904, thirteen year old Zora was shocked by the death of her mother. Later that same year, her father removed her from school and sent her to take care of her brothers. A restless teenager, Zora was ready to leave the responsibility of her brothers. She became a member of a traveling theater at the age of sixteen, and then she began work in a white household. The woman, for whom Zora worked, bought her first book and arranged for her to attend high school at Morgan Academy in Baltimore; she graduated in June, 1918. The early 1920s marked the beginning of Zora Neale Hurston's career and occupation as an author. In 1925, in the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston headed to New York City. She enrolled in Barnard College to study under Franz Boas, an significant founder of the discipline of anthropology. While there, Hurston married her boyfriend from Howard, Herbert Sheen, but the marriage was fleeting. After graduation, Zora returned to her hometown of

Eatonville to collect stories as material for her blossoming writing career. In the late 1920s, Hurston published several works and consequently gained financial sponsorship from wealthy New York patrons.(Sharon L,Jones4)

The 1930s and early 1940s was the peak of Hurston's literary career. She finished graduate work at Columbia; published four novels and an autobiography. In 1930 Hurston collaborated a play (never finished) titled *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life in Three Acts*. In 1934, she published her first novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, which was well received by critics for its representation of African American life orderly by stock figures or sentimentality. *Mules and Men* a study of folkways among the African American population of Florida, followed in 1935. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), a novel *Tell My Horse* (1938), a blend of travel writing and anthropology based on her examinations of voodoo in Haiti, and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), a novel, definitely recognized her as a major author.(7)

In her colorful life, Zora Neale Hurston experienced many of the major events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century concerning changes in race, class, and gender in America, events that would ultimately have an impact. Despite the many obstacles and problems she faced due to her status as a black female writer in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hurston produced a surprising number of texts both published and unpublished including short stories, novels, a memoir, drama, nonfiction essays, and folklore. She suffered a deadly stroke in 1959 and was hidden at unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida; and she died in poverty on January 28,1960.(13)

#### **1.4.2.Mules and Man'splot summary**

*Mules and Men* is a group of black folklore collected by Zora Neale Hurston in Florida her native village. The book is divided into two parts "Folk Tales" and "Hoodoo". Partone contains seventy tales and parts of tales it is more

divided into ten sub-parts that group tales collectively based on common social context. Part two contains seven sub-parts that include conjure stories, information about the origins of Hoodoo, and details about rituals learned under several conjurers or Hoodoo doctors. The rituals are typically geared toward specific purposes such as ruling the man you love, keeping a husband faithful, and using power over your enemies and perceived enemies.

A glossary and an appendix containing four sections “Negro Songs with Music” “Formulae of Hoodoo Doctors,” “Paraphernalia of Conjure,” and “Prescriptions of Root Doctors” round out the volume. The folk tales collected in *Mules and Men* are like much of African American folklore in terms of form and function. The result is a rich and multidimensional collection unlike anything that had been produced before, the contexts of the exchanges and conversations among the group, and between members of the group and Hurston as narrator, that the true meaning of each tale is revealed without the interruption of scholarly analysis. Part one features sermons, songs, and several kinds of tales, including tall tales such as “The Goat that Flagged a Train” and “Tall Hunting Story,” and origin tales such as “How the Cat Got Nine Lives” and “How the Squinch<sup>1</sup> Owl Came to Be”. The tales that most often reflect awareness of oppression and the will to survive under oppression are the trickster tales.

Trickster tales involving animals typically feature physically small or weak animals consistently outwitting physically superior animals. Tricksters are not, however, necessarily moral figures in fact, they typically ignore rules and laws in their insistence on simply having what they want by any means necessary. Sometimes, they are themselves tricked through their own work. For example, Hurston includes in subpart six of “Folk Tales,” “How Brer Dog Lost His Beautiful Voice,” features a competition between a dog and a rabbit. As the smaller, weaker creature, the rabbit’s task becomes that of destroying the dog’s beautiful singing voice. He does so by splitting the dog’s tongue; however, from that point on the dog chases the rabbit who can ill afford

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<sup>1</sup> Screech owl, sometimes known as a shivering owl.

to stop at the home of the object of his affection for fear of being caught. (King 49)

One of the most famous and enduring human trickster figures is John, also referred to as John the Conqueror or High John the Conqueror (a term that also describes a specific root used in conjuring). Such tales often come together as “John and Massa” stories and feature John as an heroic slave outwitting his master. Examples from the book include “Ole Massa and John Who Wanted to Go to Heaven,” “Massa and the Bear,” and “Deer Hunting Story”, the socio-economic oppressions they faced in their everyday lives.

The movement of Hurston’s text, from Eatonville focuses on women’s voices where they are dominated and the tales most often given voice by men, to the New Orleans area where no particular value is friendly to gender among Hoodoo doctors and conjurers, a much more specific objective becomes apparent.

Hurston uses *Mules and Men* to demonstrate that the greater distance from the pre-Christian, Afro-centric system of belief represented via Hoodoo, the more narrow the vision women have of themselves and their lives. In Eatonville, men usually give voice to ugly and sexist stories and comments about the nature of women; on the rare occasion that a woman is allowed to speak at length, her story does nothing to undermine sexist and unbecoming representations of women. For example, Mathilda Moseley’s tale, “Why Women Always Take Advantage of Men,” “Oh, yes, womens is got sense too,” Mathilda Moseley jumped in”(Hurston,30) begins with men and women as equals until God grants the man his request for more strength. Being turned down by God for a similar request, the woman must obtain her power from Satan. Female subjectivity and power are therefore associated with the ultimate symbol of evil.

Moving away from Eatonville, Zora meets Big Sweet and the lumber camp community. Big Sweet serves as an alternative to standard representations of women as weak or inferior; indeed, she defies gender expectations. She is widely respected and sometimes feared by men and women alike, and the fact

that she will not allow her voice to be dominated to those of men means that she recognizes herself as a subject and actor in the world, her significance is preserved when she saves Zara's life. Her story and the episodes involving her are well located to follow the Eatonville episodes in "Folktales" and lead up to «Hoodoo." She begins part two with a rationale for traveling to what she thought the Hoodoo capital of America, New Orleans. Nobody knows how Hoodoo started, "started way back there before everything. Six days of magic spells and mighty words and the world with its elements above and below was made. And now, God is leaning back taking a seventh day rest" (Hurston, 183)

In other words, Hoodoo preceded the universe's creation and thus the creator of the universe was the first Hoodoo doctor; the biblical Moses; was also a great Hoodoo doctor, his greatest feat being to secure the release of the Hebrews from slavery and lead them to the site of the Promised Land.

Hoodoo, Hurston explained in "Hoodoo in America," is a term related to the West African term *'juju*. Among African Americans, the term is also used interchangeably with "conjure" and "roots," though these two terms are more readily associated with healing, rather than magic. (King 51)

Hurston notes also that because Hoodoo was not widely accepted, believers often concealed their faith. One became a Hoodoo doctor through inheritance, by trainee, or calling. The next section recounts Hurston's experiences with six conjurers: Eulalia, Luke Turner, Anatol Pierre; Father Watson; Dr. Duke; and Kitty Brown. Except in the subpart covering her time with Eulalia, Hurston relates information about rituals, curses, and ceremonies obtained from each engagement.

Collectively, the information reveals that Hoodoo serves a number of purposes, including healing, empowerment over real or perceived adversaries of varying kinds like death, and securing love or the faithfulness of a loved one. Some conjurers and root doctors focus only on healing, while others engage in other work requiring magic. Hurston also provides background

information on Marie Leveau, a third-generation Hoodoo queen whose spirit still controlled over the New Orleans Hoodoo world.

### 1.4.3.Zora Neal Hurston’s Literary movement

Zora Neale Hurston was famous for her bright and flamboyant personality in the 1920’s and 1930’s. She created debate whenever and wherever she appeared. She also formed a remarkable body of writing folklore, anthropological studies, plays, short stories, essays, novels, and an autobiography. Zora’s writing began at Howard University, which led to the ability to write well. Allan Lock, a philosophy instructor at Howard University took a personal interest in Zora, and encouraged her to write and gain confidence as a writer.

Zora Neale Hurston arrived in Harlem in 1925 and she was only one of over one million Black men and women (artists, laborers, tradesmen, etc.) who run away north to escape poverty and violence. Black culture, literature, visual, and performing arts flourished during this era. A rebirth of ideas and feelings were expressed in a variety of mediums. Zora was very much a part of this “Harlem Renaissance.”(Grade.K183)

Zora finally organized her field notes and wrote *Mules and Men*, an entertaining and informative collection of conversations, sermons, joke-telling as well as cultural behavior, and local characters in Florida and Louisiana. *Mules and Men* was followed by *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, loosely based on the life of her parents. In 1937 in Haiti, she wrote her masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in seven weeks. Despite her literary success, financial security continued to be allusive. Zora’s style of writing was not mainstream and was often at chances with the Black community. She created characters that dealt with gender in the African American countryside, middle-class world and the struggle for an internal sense of freedom of spirit and the body. She searched for freedom as an artist. She searched for how to be Black without limitation, and how to be a woman without constraints. Her literary

work established her as a keen observer of African Americans and the world in which they lived.(185)

Hurston challenged and contested the notion that the integrity of the African American race needed defending and that Black people were deficient and had to be uplifted for approval by the dominant society. These views were developed and shaped to a considerable extent by her anthropological training under Franz Boas. He believed in the value and legitimacy of all cultures.

## **1.5. Alice Walker and her Works**

Alice walker was the first black female writer who won the Pulitzer Prize for a work of art.

### **1.5.1. Alice Walker's Biography**

As the daughter of the south, a sister in the struggle, Alice Walker chose her own weapon against injustice at an early age. She is known around the world for her essays, novels poems and books. She is never shy to tell the world what it needed to hear.

Born on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia, Walker is an African American writer; she was the eighth child and the last one. Her parents were sharecroppers. She grew up in hardship and poverty. When she was eight years old she lost sight in one eye; after her older brother shot her with a BB gun by accident. After two years in Spelman College in Atlanta on a state scholarship, she moved to New York in Sarah Lawrence College. After graduating, Alice Walker married Melvyn RosenmanLaventhal, a white civil rights lawyer. The year of 1970 was lucky for her because she completed her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and her daughter Rebecca was born. She became a social worker and teacher, she helped to initiate a welfare rights movements. In 1970's, she entered the MISS magazine and became the leading voice in the international women's movement as a pioneer of the womanist wave. Walker brought attention to the unique experiences of the African American women of color. Her works were mainly about sexism,

racism, violence and poverty it has been a part of her experience and that of other women around the world. *Meridian*; Walker's second novel was published in 1976; and in 1977 her marriage ended by a divorce. In 1982, she published another novel *The Color Purple* and she won the national book award and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. She also wrote *The Temple of My Familiar* in (1989), *Possessing The Secret of Joy* (1992), *By The Light Of My Father's Smile*(1998) and *Now Is The Time To Open Your Heart*(2004). (Beaulieu 886)

Her poetry is collected in "Once: Poems" (1968) "Revolutionary Petunias and other Poems" (1973), and "Absolute Trust in Goodness of the Earth: New Poems" (2003) and many others short stories and essays.

Alice Walker long life work not only demonstrates the mind of pen, but continues to give face to the unseen, a voice to the unheard and a vision to the unknown.

### **1.5.2. *The Color Purple* 's Plot Summary**

*The Color purple* is a masterpiece of literature, it was written in 1982 by Alice Walker and granted her the Pulitzer Prize. Three years later, the book was turned into a movie. The novel tells the story of a slummy unlearned fourteen years old Celie who lived in Georgia. Celie The protagonist writes letters to God and because the book is written letter by letter there are no chapters; it is an epistolary novel. In the first few letters Celie tells God that she has been raped by her father Alphonso saying: "you gonna do what your mamy wouldn't, first he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around" (Walker 5) and that she is pregnant for the second time. She also tells him that her sick mother dies leaving her alone to face her cruel father "he beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church". So Celie turns her attention to protect her youngest sister Nettie from her father's sexual advances. Alfonso brings home a new wife and yet still continues to beat and rape her.



Later on her Cellie's younger, smarter, and prettier sister Nettie attracts the eye of a man who is named Mr \_\_\_\_? Later he wants to marry her. The widower and the father of four children proposes to Nettie but her father refuses this marriage. He tells him that he should take ugly Celie instead "she ugly he say but sheaint no stranger to hard work" (8). Celie finds herself stuck in a loveless marriage caring for her husband's four children "I spend my wedding day running from the older boy" (13) and been regularly abused and beaten.

Celie finds a picture of a famous, sexy, glamorous and independent Blues singer Shug Avery "the most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama" (8) and she became very interested to her then she discovered that she is her husband's mistress. Nettie escapes from Alphonso and goes to Celie's home, but Ms\_\_\_\_? has always wanted her and when he offers himself to her she refuses, as a consequence, he forced her to leave his house, promising her sister that she will write her letters. After Nettie left the village, Celie, never hearing from her again, thinks that her sister is dead. The oldest of Celie's step sons Harpo marries an independent and strong young lady named Sofia. After the marriage, Celie felt jealous so she told Harpo to beat his wife to force her to listen to him just like all men do. Sofia later learns that Celie is behind her husband's behavior and confronts her. Sofia had no easy life before and the feeling of betrayal led her to give a very strong speech on all the violence she had to endure during her life, she spoke of her fights against her family members, then expressed her regret to be obliged to fight in her own house saying, "But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house." (41). Then she manifested what turns out to be a very feminist spirit saying "I loves Harpo. She say God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me... I used to hunt with a bow and arrow she say" (41). This confrontation led to a new relationship between them, they became like two sisters. Several years later Celie was surprised when seeing her husband bringing home a nearly dead woman. Celie accepted the responsibility of nursing Shug back to health. Although Shug was harsh with her, telling her

words like “you sure is ugly”(48) in first days but later on they became friends and a relationship of love and compassion grew between them.

Sofia later punched the town white mare because he beats her when she refused to work as his wife maid, this act leads her to the loss of her liberty by this time she and Harpo split out and he was with another woman called Squeak. Years in jail, Sofia now is able to leave but finds herself in another present. She was working as a maid in a white’s house; the same white that was the reason why she was jailed in the first place. Meanwhile Shug comes back to town, but she came back married with another man. And stayed in Celie and Mr\_\_\_? home. Mr\_\_\_? First name was Albert. Days after, with the help of Shug, Celie discovers her sister’s letters which were hidden by Mr\_\_\_? When she read those letters and not only caught up with her sister’s life but she also discovered that her two children were alive, and that they were living all together with a missionary couple in Africa with whom Nettie works.

After reading her sister’s letters, Celie becomes more independent and careless. She tries to kill her husband several times but she was stopped by Shug. Soon after she discovers that Alfonso is not her real father, thus her two children Adam and Olivia are not her brothers, and that her biological father was a store owner who was killed by a white man because his business was successful. After knowing all this, she decided to curse Mr \_\_\_? for all the miserable things that he has done to her. After that she decides to leave with Shug and move to Memphis although Mr \_\_\_? refuses; Celie was strong and stood up against him “you a lowdown dog is what’s wrong . I say it’s time to leave you and enter into creation and you dead body just the welcome... you took my sister Nettie away from me” (228)

Celie spent all the time sewing pants for women and turns that hobby into a successful and productive business. One day when she went back to Georgia for a visit she discovers that Alfonso—her step father has died—and the house and the land are hers now. Nettie was still living in Africa, she

married the man that she was working for after his wife passes away and she became the mother of her sister's children.

Later Celie visited Albert and they developed a new relationship built upon love and respect. The novel ends when the two sisters are united again all together; Celie, her children and daughter in law.

### **1.5. 3. Alice Walker's Literary Movement**

Back in the history of the United States of America, there was a high level of segregation, discrimination and racism. Black Americans prayed for help, prayed for people to come and show to the rest of the world what they are suffering from. Black American females had no life. This is why many female writers emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. "The black woman is one of America's greatest heroes not enough credit has been given the black woman who has been oppressed beyond recognition" (Walker quoted in Gerding 5) and it is said also that the black woman is "the other woman, the silenced partner" (Showalter 214).

Black women are "doubly marginalized"(Ward and Herndl 741) because being a woman is a problem but being a black and a woman is really difficult. The most prominent name in the black women writers is Alice Walker (Toni Morrison is a huge icon as well). She is a black African American novelist, walker's concerns are all about black female and most themes that she writes about are to denounce sexism, racism and men's control over helpless women. In her poems especially the ones written in her years at Sarah Lawrence College, she was brave enough to speak about women's issues such as abortion, rape, and suicide. Some of the poems are related to her own life. In her first collection of poems named "Once", she speaks about unwanted pregnancy which she has passed through during her teenage life. "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender"(quoted by walfreyz 97)

Womanism is a feminist term; it was coined by Alice Walker in 1983 in her book *Search of Our Mothers Gardens: Womanist Prose* to show the experience of a woman of colour.

She explores the individual identity of black woman and how her identity and bonding with other women affects the health of her community at large. Alice Walker describes this affinity among women as womanism. For her, womanist is one who is committed to the survival and integrity of the entire black race. (Sree 16)

Although Feminism is a reaction of women against a patriarchal society and it seeks equality between men and women; Womanism has been needed for black women. It grew because activists felt that feminism is concerned with middle class white women's movement and it does not encompass the perspectives of black female. (Weems 205)

Womanism in *The Color Purple* as far as the novel is concerned lies when Celie the main character undergoes a lifetime of physical and sexual abuse, and the importance of the three women in her life; Sofia Harpo's wife, Shug Avery; her husband's mistress, and Nettie her youngest sister. Celie comes out to the world and changes her life completely with the help of these women. She became an independent, strong and free to speak woman instead of a weak, shy and silent black female. Alice Walker follows the same plot line in nearly all her novels, i.e. girl experiences, girl abused, the turning point, the change in the girl's life and the girl rises above hardships.

Alice Walker's novels show and illustrate her commitment to black feminism. In all her novels, she manages to denounce the black female status and to send a message to the whole world that they are equal to the rest of the human being.

## **1.6. Conclusion**

The theoretical part was mainly done to shed the light upon African American female writers and to show how they represent their status and the main topics that they deal with. It also brought attention to two novelists who are considered to be pioneers in the world of literature. We tried to give an idea about their lives and their main works. This chapter gave an idea about the woman in the African American literature; how she was seen and represented by novelists. In the coming chapter, we will deal with two novels which are the main point in our work. And see how feminism and racism are shown within these two works.

## **Chapter two: Exploring the novels**

### 1. Introduction

### 2. *Mules and Men*

#### 2.1. Exploring feminism in *Mules and Men*

#### 2.2. Exploring racism in *The Color Purple*

#### 2.3. Evolution of the character in *Mules and Men*

#### 2.4. Symbolism

##### 2.4.1. Religion

##### 2.4.2. Mules and man

#### 2.5. Language in mules and men

### 3. *The Color Purple*

#### 3.1. Exploring racism in *The Color Purple*

#### 3.2. Exploring feminism

#### 3.3. Symbolism

#### 3.4. Letters as tool of communication

### 4. Hurston and Walker's relationship

### 5. Conclusion

## 2.1. Introduction

The main objectives of this chapter are to explore racism and feminism in two novels *Mules and Men* by Zora Neale Hurston and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. We will try to trace the evolution of the main characters in both novels and how the events influence their lives. Symbolism in both novels will also be dealt with and how the novelist managed to transmit their ideas to the readers, as well as the strategies used to create a vivid image to their stories. At the end we will have an idea about the common point between the two novels.

## 2.2. *Mules and Men*

*Mules and Men* is a novel written by Hurston about the blacks sufferance it is full of aspects and racism.

### 2.2.1 Exploring Racism in *Mules and Men*

Unlike many black authors who emerged during the Harlem Renaissance period, Hurston rarely portrayed blacks as victims of oppression and racist attitude held by white society. She often represented blacks as autonomous beings proud of their folk culture. This portrayal was undoubtedly influenced by her upbringing in Eatonville, where she learned the opportunities that were present to all blacks within her community.

Hurston's research taught her that the basic beauty of folk expression was by far its most important element. A kind of art grew from an expression like "mules and men" because a collective esthetic desire had transformed black people's identification with the mule - an overworked beast of burden into a special symbol. The phrase meant not only that black people were treated as mules, but also that they were defiantly human mules and men. The identification itself demonstrated this negative relationship: slave equals mule. It was a similarity between the mule's situation and that of the slave, then identified mulish traits with black people. Mules were bought and sold

by Massa<sup>1</sup> just as slaves were. But the mule also represented admirable characteristics for a slave society: individualism, stubbornness, strength, and unpredictability (Bloom 77).

In *Mules and Men*, one tale is entitled “Why Negroes are Black,” narrated in the store porch in Eatonville, where storytelling commonly takes place. Hurston initiates into the black world: “As I crossed the Maitland-Eatonville township line I could see a group on the store porch. I was delighted. The town had not changed. Same love of talk and songs” (7). Suddenly, a woman asks the audience, “Do y’all know how come we are black?” (29), and she starts telling her story about the origin of blackness. She explains that when God was making up humans, He did not finish them all at once. There was a day when He gave out the eyes, so all nations came up and got the eyes, another day He gave out the teeth and so on until one day, eventually, He gave out color:

So seven o’clock dat mornin' everybody was due to git they color except de niggers. So God give everybody they color and they' went on off. Then He set there for three hours and one half and no niggers. It was gettin' hot and God wanted to git His work done and go set' in de cool (29)

So He asked the angels<sup>2</sup> to look for the black people. The angels finally found the black people sleeping on the grass. The angels woke them up and told them that God wanted them. They all jumped up and ran up to the throne and they were so terrified they were missing something that they began to push one another, bumping against the angels, and they even pushed the throne all to one side; “So God hollered 'Git back! Git back!' And they misunderstood Him and thought He said, 'Git black,' and they been black ever since” (30).

Hurston’s work contributes to the understanding of the social life of the southern black population from an insider’s perspective; her own childhood

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<sup>1</sup> Slave master

<sup>2</sup> The angels Raphael and Gabriel



experience in Eatonville, Florida, and her Journey to the south made her expert of Black culture. As an insider Hurston is better situated to transcribe and to interpret Black culture. This story is part of the etiological tales allowing blacks to free their imagination and to give their own explanations about the universe in order to understand it. Blackness was regarded as a stain, dirty and as a staple ingredient in images of violence, evil and class difference. Black skin was thought of as proof of an indelible natural disease that could infect and contaminate whiteness, blackness was considered a distinctive mark of inferiority (Lin, 6). *Mules and Men* really refers to an idealized Eatonville of Hurston's childhood memory, Hurston implicitly told whites that they were not affecting them that much, and they kept practicing their own culture. Zora Neale Hurston felt that Black culture manifested an independent esthetic system that could be discussed without constant reference of white oppression (Bloom, 77).

### 2.2.2. Exploring Feminism in *Mules and Men*

In *Mules and Men* Hurston explores the natures of black women and black men, the ways in which their natures are shaped by their individual and collective experiences within American and African American cultures; and how their experiences inform their self-knowledge, their connection with the world around them and their relationships with others. Zora Neale Hurston had a sense of humor about women's issues, an optimistic position was almost necessary for an African American woman in the period following the reconstruction as such existence meant two fold discrimination. Much of the art produced during this time therefore expresses issues of feminine identity during this period of change and instability.

In *Mules and Men*, the toe party<sup>3</sup> in which the roles of men and women are severely defined, Zora said: "Say, what *is* this toe-party business?" I asked one of the girls. "Well, they out yo' toe. Some places you take off yo' shoes and some places you keep 'em on, but most all de time you keep 'em on"

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<sup>3</sup> Toe-party communal event where women display their feet and men purchase them

(15). In fact, the event represents the co modification of the black female body, as men are to choose the worth of a woman based on the look of her toes alone; these men then buy the women. Women, in effect, become the property of the men. Hurston is among the women purchased. Clearly, as there is no form of expression at this event by which women have behind a curtain with only the toe of their shoes visible. (134)

Men and women were equal in that period, Hurston claimed that God creates both men and women in an equal situation and asked them to live in a same house with the same power but the selfishness of men let him ask God for more strength; “Ah ast you *please* to give me mo’ strength than dat woman you give me, so Ah kin make her mind” (31). The preacher said in his sermon that men and women are meant to be together and walk side by side “male and female are like God made us side by side” (142).

### 2.2.3. Character Evolution in *Mules and Men*

Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935) is a book on folklore that aims to show the basic worth of black folklore and black tales not only as an essential part of black identity, but also as a constitutive part of American culture.

Hurston’s aim was to translate into written words the oral legacy of her ancestors and to “set them [the folktales] down before it’s too late” (8); she was the protagonist and the main character in *Mules and Men*.

Zora down into Polk county<sup>4</sup> to finish her mission ,she was excited, but she realized that the people of Polk county do not openly and immediately embrace her as they did in Eatonville. This worries Zora because she knows that such a huge and heavily populated area must be in rich folklore and that she must win the confidence of the residents and convinces them to tell her the stories.

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<sup>4</sup> Polk county is an area in Florida where Hurston collected folktales

Zora's experiences are different, finding herself in unfamiliar surroundings and later on she can place herself in a familiar environment and then moves to unknown territory once she has gained confidence.

Hurston breaks down the different mechanism of how black people express themselves. She breaks Negro expression down into several categories like drama, will to adorn, dancing, and folklore. Hurston points out imitation quite often, even lists it as a category of Negro expression. She talks about how black people and their way of expressing themselves.

“The brother in black puts a laugh in every vacant place in his mind. His laugh has a hundred meanings.” (xviii) Here Hurston tries to explain the power of laugh in face of things.

#### **2.2.4. Symbolism in *Mules and Men***

The novel is full of symbolism such as religion, mules, men ...etc

##### **2.2.4.1. Religion**

The theme of religion is especially important because it links the two major parts of *Mules and Men*. In part I, Hurston highlights the importance of religion and spirituality in the southern black folk community. The many tales about preachers, God conform to the religion to the African-American experience, and at the same time these tales present a critique of both the African-American church and Christian ideas. For example, in the early story that Ellis<sup>5</sup> tells about the preacher who threatens his congregation with a gun, the preacher's intentions are subverted by his actions, causing the exact opposite of what he wants, “Ellis: Ah knowed one preacher dat was called to preach at one of dese split-off churches. De members had done split off from a big church because they was all mean and couldn't git along wid nobody”(Hurston 22)

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<sup>5</sup> Eliss a wife of Armetta Jones Zora's childhood friend

While the story has a comic tone, it reveals the complicated power relationship between pastors and their followers. Charlie's story about the factions within the church is based on a retelling of a biblical story. It is meant to incite humor, and put Christ's disciples on the same level as common people, with the same vices such as greed and egotism (Jones,135)

Religion also serves to frame discussions of race and identity throughout the stories. One story claims that God gave blacks dark skin because of a misunderstanding; here the storyteller is revealing how trivial the color of one's skin really is, even though such significance is placed on it in society. Other tales involving the connection between race and religion are Eugene's<sup>6</sup> story in which Brother John prays to God that blacks know they are subordinate to whites, and Larkins<sup>7</sup> White's rebuttal in which a black man asks God to murder whites. Throughout such stories, what is common is the tie between race and religion: Religion is used to explain the injustices caused by racial factors, and it is also used as a means for exerting power and racial superiority. In many of the tales, the devil plays as integral a role as God, as he is the adversary to God. In this sense, the tales present a view of the world as in tension between two forces, between two competing powers. The stories tend to show how humans ultimately outwit and defeat the devil, who, while powerful, is only a foil to the good forces of God. The presentation of two competing forces, one for good and one for evil, is directly related to the presentation of the struggle between masters and slaves (Jones136).

#### 2.2.4.2. Mules

Nature serves as an important theme in the collection. A scholar has pointed out, "Florida's natural environment provided the wildlife for the animal tales in *Mules and Men*" (Hemmingway quoted in Lynette138). The use of animals with human characteristics is hugely widespread in the African American storytelling tradition, with Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and other animals playing prominent roles. In their roles imitating humans, these animal

<sup>6</sup> Eugene is a storyteller in *Mules and Men*

<sup>7</sup> Larkins White a storyteller

characters shed light on truths about the relationships between human beings and expose issues relating to race, class, and gender. The animal stories often serve to highlight the idea of competition, and have an analogue in human behavior. The tales about animals search to explain phenomena in the natural world; for example, Big Sweet's story about why the mockingbird does not sing one day a week, or Jim Allen's tale about how a rattlesnake got its venom and rattle. In other stories, the origin of the gopher<sup>8</sup> and weather phenomena are explained. Jim Presley's story about Brer Dog and Brer Gator explains their animosity toward each other. (Jones 138)

Certain tall tales exaggerate natural phenomena; here the humans are using unbelievable stories and humor to pretend that natural laws can be counteracted. Will House tells a story about fast-growing cucumbers, and Joe Wiley<sup>9</sup> tells about a mule raising jackasses on its farm. Obviously unbelievable, these stories nevertheless suggest a close relationship between the teller and the natural world. The power of nature over humans is also represented in these tales, such as in Joe's tale about a catfish pulling a man under water while he fished, causing him to drown "Now take cat-fish for instances. Ah knows a man dat useter go fishin' every Sunday."(Hurston 95)

So, while in some stories the natural law can be seen as shifting to please the tale-tellers, in others it remains fast. The mule is the most important nature symbol, as it is prominently part of the title of the book.

The title *Mules and Men* implies that there are two different forces coming into play here, represented by these two presence, the mule and the man. This is not to say that the two are in constant opposition the mule against the man because as seen, they often are in close relationship with one another; in fact, these two symbols are often conflated, the animals acting like men and the men acting like animals. The point is that a distinction is being made between two aspects of the natural world, even though both parts make up the integral whole.(138)

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<sup>8</sup> Dry land tortoise

<sup>9</sup> Joe Wiley, Will House and Jim Presley workmen and storyteller in *Mules and Men*

### 2.2.5. The Language in *Mules and Men*

Hurston applies dialect to bring the story as well as the characters to life. The use of the vernacular makes the characters seem real; they are believable. Later then making some primary adjustments as a reader to become familiar with the language, readers feel as if they were actually a part of the action. “Some of 'em talkin' 'bout marryin' you and dey wouldn't know whut to do wid you if they had you. Now, dat's a fack.” (Hurston,64)

Also :“Ah know dey wouldn't. Dey'd 'spect you tuh git out de bed and fix dem some breakfus' and a bucket. Dat's 'cause dey don't know no better.(64)

In general Zora Neale Hurston addresses her informants in African dialect and her reader in a literary language. Hurston's literary voice as well as her entire scholarly apparatus of footnotes, quotations, and parentheses is aimed at bringing the reader closer to the language of the information, and it estranges and isolates her from her material, forcing her to play dumb and brainless for the reader's benefit as when of the men invites her to a toe party and she has asked “A toe-party! What on earth is that?” (9)

Hurston argues that dialect, the language of the folk, shows the particular African American genius. The fact that the narrative voice changes according to its environment makes it a classic example of free indirect discourse. In the hoodoo section of *Mules and Men*, Hurston's willingness to undergo such experience sacrificing sheep and boiling a black cat alive. In the study of Hoodoo to white belief in science, she had located an example of African American culture.

Hurston offers an excellent example of black English dialect in mules and men in recording a number of folktales.

### 2.3. *The Color Purple*

Alice Walker Pulitzer prize winning novel is a representation of racism and feminism in the African American society during the 1900's

#### 2.3.1. Exploring racism in *The Color Purple*

Alice Walker's masterpiece *The Color Purple* includes very interesting themes. It brings them into the light rather than sweeping them into the rug. One of the major themes that Walker dealt with is racism. *The Color Purple* is one of the revolutionary African American feminine novel. It does not only deal with racism of the whites towards the blacks, but also about racism within the same community .i.e. internal racism. Alice Walker recognizes her literary and cultural heritage, she "celebrates her people" and manifests "a deeply-rooted consciousness of her role as an artist in a socially and politically complex world" (Davis. T 32) As a black writer, she is aware of her people's folk tradition and pays homage to her ancestors by conceiving a neo-slave narrative that features a twentieth-century female character, who although living under the yoke of psychological and social "slavery" imposed on her by the patriarchs of her clan is capable of re-affirming and re-claiming herself (Davis, 32).

Most of the black characters of the novel live in sub standard housing separated from the white population, they have their own cemetery, church, school and they are forced to wait in lines until the whites are served. It was common for the whites to beat blacks and treat them as if they were slaves or animals. Even the poorest of the whites consider themselves as superior to any black. To start with, Celie's real father was killed because he was so successful in a world in which it was not allowed for a black to be successful. Celie says "My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me (197). Sofia was the main episode in Walker's novel, she

was victim of violence, she was beaten because she said no to a white man “hell no” (90).

Sofia was beaten, jailed deprived from her children because she refused to be a maid in a white’s house. Once in jail, she was described by Celie as a dead person after the torture she has been through. Celie thinks it is weird that Sofia was still alive even though they “crack her skull, ... ribs. ... tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye” (93). In jail, she was doing all what was said to her, without revolting as usual, she acted like she had already lost hope. Sofia on the other hand compares her submission to that of Celie, making Celie a symbol of submission, saying: “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).

After spending years in jail she finally got out but she was spiritually raped and emotionally abused by the mayor’s wife. Before the incident, she was proud and independent, but the mayor’s action turned her into a hopeless woman. The fact that she was beaten in front of her children was like she was murdered, such an event can be considered as the origin of the feeling of inferiority towards the whites that children grow up with. And thus will never react against the white’s abuse. But Sofia’s incident is not the only one of the type in the novel, the same event happened in the beginning of the novel when the store owner called Pauline’s mother “girl” and commanded her to make her choice quickly and leave while she stood in a line (15). Even though he was impolite to her, she was calm as if the blacks are compelled to accept their destiny.

*The Color Purple* emphasizes not just on racism between blacks and whites, but also between blacks themselves (17). The blacks were also slaves to each other, being a black within a black community does not mean that there is no racism. The degree of darkness has a crucial role in their lives, for instance, Shug Avery Celie’s husband’s love, is black but not as dark as Celie, so he has control of her life. Celie the protagonist on the other hand, proved



that slavery still exists because she was enslaved first by her stepfather who was beating her, telling her what to do and what not to do. She was obliged to remain silent and tolerate her stepfather's rape. Once introduced to her husband Mr\_\_\_? he was on a horse, that means that he was higher than her she was ordered to turn; "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" (12-13).

When Celie got married her suffering did not stop. She had to endure her husband's violence, when Harpo—his son—asked his father why he was beating her he often answered "cause she my wife. plus she stubborn" (24). Mr\_\_\_? wants Celie to submit to him, he wants her to be his slave, never say no, never be ill never be late, he wants her to be obedient as a slave and not as his own wife .

*The Color Purple* is a novel that shows how racism influences black people's personal, social and economic lives. Walker confirms that American society is suffering from both internal and external racism. She has portrayed the whites as cruel and heartless (90) but she has also shown the harsh and brutal side of the blacks as well.

### **2.3.2. Exploring Feminism in *The Color Purple***

Through series of letters, Walker has created an inspiring novel about an unforgettable woman who, through love, discovers her own voice in the world . Walker focuses on a problem faced specially by African American black females during the 1900's. In this context, Walker said in an interview to the *Washington Post* that she does not write books that make men comfortable but she is rather writing them to show men's abuse and oppression.

The Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Color Purple*, traces the lives of four black females who were trying to secure a better life and a dignifying place; Celie was an ugly, black, and uneducated girl. Nettie, Celie's little

sister, was pretty and educated. Sofia, Harpo's wife, was a strong and independent woman, Shug, a very famous Blues singer, beautiful, self-confident black woman. Like any other black female at that time they were facing physical and mental pain. Throughout this novel the writer focuses on the Feminist – Womanist consciousness. In Abel's terms *The Color Purple* is a novel which has a social message but its main idea is to deal with women when they are considered as inferior and less important.

Celie, Nettie, Sofia and Shug have to fight in many fronts because they were suffering from both sides; first being Black in a white community and second being a woman in a male dominated society. *The Color Purple* begins with a fourteen years old girl crying for help "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 was repeatedly raped and brutally beaten by her step father Alphonso . She wrote a letter to God asking for help because she had no one to turn to and he had ordered her to remain silent "You better not never tell nobody but God. I'd kill your Mammy" (4). Walker emphasizes the violence scene to show the protagonist's status, when Celie was introduced to her future husband Mr\_\_\_?, she was presented as if she was not a human being. She was asked to turn, to walk; she did not have a right to say anything. Walker chooses not to use Mr\_\_\_? to show the male domination and to draw attention to the negative side of the black men .

Once in her husband's house she was ill-treated sexually, abused and marginalized. She was beaten without mercy "he beat me like he beat the children. cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room pecking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry" (24). Mr\_\_\_? like other characters in the novel consider their wives as machines; they treat them as slaves, they consider that nothing is better for their wives than "a good sound of beating" (37). The only way to stay alive for Celie was to keep calm, not say anything and tolerate the beating (24).

Nettie also suffered from sexist society but she had to fight to stay alive when Mr\_\_\_? wanted to abuse her, she fought; she did not accept his advances .She ran away and started a new life (19).

Sofia, Harpo's wife, was victim of both black and black man violence when she was beaten by her husband Harpo who was only doing what Celie told him (37). But Sofia did not accept his act, she beat him back. Sofia used to fight before to remain alive and mark her place in the society ruled by men "All my life I had to fight" she says, "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." (41). When Celie advised Harpo to beat his wife she proved that the patriarchal society had changed her and drove her to submission. Sofia was also victim of the white man abuse when she was beaten by the town's mayor and jailed for having dared to say no.

The unfairness that women faced in the American society drove Alice Walker to write and criticize her own society. Men in the novel are portraying society and they are representing a truthful picture of a harsh racist sexist community. *The Color Purple* gives an image about women's struggles and the reasons that obliged them to be mute.

### **2.3.3. The Evolution of Female Characters in *The Color Purple***

The African American writer Alice Walker in her novel *The Color Purple* followed the life of black female characters; their problems, thoughts, beliefs and all the cruel situations that they passed through. The oppression against women is the major theme in the novel (4). Through letters, the writer shows the evolution of her main character. In this context Maples believes that: "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is a literary text that showcases a method by which her character, and ostensibly African Americans can situate themselves within the world .It follows that the novel is inherently related to the notion of growth" (Moples 1).

The novel starts with a violent scene: A fourteen years old girl being raped and beaten by her father and obliged to remain silent. The only thing that helps her was writing letters to God telling him about all what was happening to her. The protagonist, Celie, got married but unfortunately nothing changed, she was still living in hell, always raped and abused not by her father but by her husband now. She was living as a slave in her own home. Later on, she met other women Sofia<sup>1</sup> and Shug Avery<sup>2</sup> a relationship of love and compassion grew between them (Barker). At the beginning of the novel Celie did not know how to fight. “But she keep on. You got to fight. You got to fight. But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (19). It is noticeable that the protagonist's life had changed; she learnt how to cope with her life and how to behave. Thus, she progressed mentally and spiritually.

Black women in Walker's novel helped each other to find the way to happiness and to a cheerful life. Shug for instance refused to leave Celie's house until she confirmed that Celie's husband will not beat her anymore. Yet, before leaving, she insisted on teaching Celie how to smile and how to love herself. The letters written by her sister also had a great influence upon her behavior and made her more confident as she knew that her sons are still alive and that Alphonso is not her real father. She was helped by Shug in improving her sewing talent. The change in Celie's life drove her to finally stand for her rights. When she told Mr\_\_\_? that she was going to Memphis with Shug although he said no when Shug asked him, is a good example of this change. Celie changed completely from being an abused black character to a self-independent woman

From a used and abused woman, Celie emerges as an independent, creative business woman. She moves from being ugly duckling to a figuratively beautiful swan. She moves from being Hurston's mule, the beast of burden, to physical and mental declaration of Independence, to a reunion with her children and sister (Trudier 14).

The protagonist was first silenced by men in her life but through love and understanding and mainly thanks to women's solidarity, she became more independent and self-confident.

From the meek, subdued, obedient, and accepting person she was [...] to a self-conscious human being who is just starting to appreciate her own worth. [...] Her inferiority complex, due to violence, to male chauvinism, and to poverty, is being erased because of the supportive bonds between black women in the novel (Fraile-Marcos 122).

Alice Walker gave opportunity to speak and to express their thoughts and desires. This idea is further reinforced in Walker's Womanism, which is a movement which states that women should stand for their rights and help each other to prove their identities while putting an end to men's supremacy.

#### **2.3.4. Symbolism in *The Color Purple***

Colours usually symbolize emotions, feelings and spiritual status. According to psychologists such as Jennifer Boorn and As far as Purple is concerned, it is a very rare colour, not easily found in nature, it stands for love and passion. When Walker named her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple* she selected this colour because she wanted to show the importance of love and understanding in everyone's life.

When Celie went to the store with her husband's sister she was looking for something purple that represents her search for love. Although most people around her were wearing purple she could not find it in the store. This symbolizes that she was always suffering from the lack of love in her life.

Alice Walker made a link between her novel and her Womanism "Womanist is to Feminist as purple is to lavender" (Walker xi-xii), a link which focuses on the fact that Womanism is a search of compassion and love between black females. In the novel's preface Walker said "this color that is always a surprise but everywhere in nature" (walker I) same for love it is

everywhere but not easy to find. Purple is a combination of two colours, red and blue, when the writer used it she wanted to refer to the passion and aggressiveness of the red and the calm and purity of blue. This represents woman; she can be calm and wild at the same time; this was the case for Celie and Shug. When Shug said to Celie that God will be very angry if people passed by the colour purple and do not stop to admire it; Walker here referred to the fact that everyone should enjoy love and life (223).

At the beginning of the novel Celie believed that Purple will not suit her, so she was not really interested in wearing it; but when she discovered her own identity and grew mentally and spiritually she started enjoying all what is purple. She came out of her shell and spread love everywhere around her. This is what the writer expressed when Celie painted her room with purple; “Everything in my room purple and red cept the floor that painted bright yellow” (Walker 348).

*The Color Purple* is a novel that celebrated the rise of a woman through love and understanding, and the progress which happened in her life. The protagonist had undergone many problems and she developed from being despised, degraded, and a misused thing to an independent, full of hope and determined woman.

### **2.3.5. Letters as a Tool of Communication in *The Color Purple***

Alice Walker’s latest work *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel; written in form of letters in which the writer expressed thoughts and emotions of the protagonist Celie; who is struggling with men that make part of her life. Altman said about the epistolary novel that “it is a hardly species that continues to produce lively strains in various parts of the world” (03).

Celie was obliged to write letters to God because she did not have the right to speak “you better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill you mommy” (4). She was afraid so the only way to express what she felt was by writing. Schwartz imagined another scenario of Celie’s life if she did not write;

On this journey her written voice has been the vehicle for self expression and self revelation. Without the act of writing, Celie might have developed a distractive rage against her mistreatment. Or she would have been silent and invisible and probably would have died early, like her mother. The act of writing has saved her from this fate, as it has been a productive process and not a distractive one (06).

According to Schwartz, Celie played two roles in the novel; first she is the narrator and second she is the main character (7). The letters in *The Color Purple* are a vehicle through which the reader learns about Celie's life and the life of the other characters present in the novel; "Celie participates in the creation of meaning for herself through language. Without language, silence would have ensured madness or, as in her mother's case on early death." (Fifer & Scheick 156).

Celie's feelings, problems, thoughts and social situations are presented in vernacular English; using the blacks' dialect was the most important aspect in the novel. In this context, Fort said "Walker's use of language especially black idiom, is masterful and adds poignancy and depth to the narrative" (115). Throughout dialect, poor grammar, and spelling mistakes "My mama dead. She die screaming .... She scream at me. She cuss at me" (5), the novelist focused on the idea that the protagonist is uneducated. The use of non standard language was an intelligent way to show what the characters were passing through. Walker's use of African American dialect shows her concern about the black culture, and traditions and her refusal to the white society.

*The Color Purple* is the best example of a book that was successfully written in dialect. It denounced the suffering of a black woman who was sexually abused and physically beaten.

## 2.4. Hurston and Walker's Relationship

Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker have always been considered literary mother and daughter. After Zora Neale Hurston died in Florida, Alice Walker made a pilgrimage to the town where the anthropologist and novelist had lived, she gathered information about Hurston's youth and final years in the state.

Zora Neale Hurston has led the way in search of the significances of identity and experiences within relationships. Her novels can help to rediscover the significance of human values. As a writer, she has the capability to guide the reader towards the position of humanity changes with time and human experiences that connect men with one another. The purpose of her writings is to raise the consciousness of man, by learning to live his life fully and struggle to evolve a free self of his own. Hurston's analysis of her characters indicate Alice Walker's belief that "the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora's work: racial health – a sense of Black people as – complete, complex, undiminished human beings a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature" (Hurston quoted by Plant 60).

Hurston's characters in *Mules and Men* choose to fight oppression, proving that they have an imposing self. As John the Conqueror a slave who constantly battled his master for freedom. To her, the novel has been an important vehicle through which race, class and gender inequalities are uncovered paving the way to reach self-identity. Whereas *The Color Purple*, set in an earlier time, Walker involves that the male dominated church, an institution where women compete for men's attention and approval, cannot be a supportive community. Celie at the end of the novel discovered that God that she has been writing to was no longer than a man; a man like all men present in her life. For Walker, racism is not the only problem, but also sexism and the weakness of the oppressed people to protect each other. (Walker 220)



*Mules and Men* is the storytelling traditions of black culture, *The Color Purple* is more consciously literary. Written as a series of letters from Celie first to God and then to Nettie, the novel asserts its kinship both with the traditional literary form open to women: letters and journals. Unlike Hurston, Walker links her novel to the larger literary tradition. The great achievement of both writers, however, has been to open the tradition to black women's voices and to the changing spiritual power of their vision. (Bush Trudy )

## 2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have investigated racism and feminism in both novels and how they were represented by Walker and Hurston. We followed the evolution of the main character in the novels; how Celie and Zora evolved and transformed during the events and the reasons behind their self-recognition. we dealt, as well, with the main symbols present in both novels and the main characteristics that joined the two writers together.

## General conclusion

Our purpose in this research is to show how black women writers use their literary production to show to the white and black society their status and sufferance. Those women writers try to find out the truth about themselves and the world they lived in throughout different circumstances and in different cultures.

The emergence of black women's literature seeks freedom and equality for women in America, to prove their humanity and demonstrate a capacity for artistic creation. Literature became a way for black women to voice not just their rejection of slavery and racism, but also their desire for freedom and equality. Womanism began as a response to the fact that black women were not represented in the American feminist movement. The major feminist leaders were white, middle-class women who addressed only the needs that related to them. It was Walker who adopted the term womanism in her book "*In Search Of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*" which was published in 1983. Her doctrine was clearly cited in her work *The Color Purple*; she encouraged the women's power and union.

In this research we have dealt with the image of black female character in African American literature, for the black woman, feminism and racism have always been associated also the difference between the feminism and womanism, the term used by Alice Walker, the struggle of black women to be recognized as "women", black women writers employed literature as a vehicle for self-empowerment.

Written by two pillars of the African American literature, the two books *Mules and Men* and *The Color Purple* revealed how black females were treated in a male dominated society. The protagonists of both novels are women suffering from oppression and domination.

*Mules and men* does offer a continuous criticism of how patriarchy and racism control African American in the rural south, influencing Alice

walker's color purple, Hurston shows how violence within the African American community often reflects the class, racial, and gender of the society. In *Mule and Men*, Hurston wrote that black people hide their true thoughts from white people, "We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing."<sup>(2)</sup> Hurston understood that African Americans often counted on the ignorance of whites.

Hurston organized her folktales to show the relationship between race and gender in black's life, she revealed how men use folktales to reinforce and "legitimate" oppression of women and how women use these folktales to "fight" against this power and injustice. (Meisenhelder)

*The Color purple* for Walker the forms of oppression that women suffer are not individual, but historically and socially based. This novel shows that Celie's oppression in a male/female pattern of domination is comparable to that of white/black domination during slavery. Like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, Celie must find a way to save herself from her degrading situations of sexual and physical violation. The novel emphasized the fact that women are able to succeed if they co-operate together. In a sequence that is not unlike a slave narrative, Celie begins to develop an awareness of the possibilities of freedom with the arrival and protection of Shug Avery. Celie was an uneducated, ugly, hopeless girl but with the help of other women in her life she became more independent. Her sister Nettie taught her how to read and write, Shug Avery her husband's mistress shows her how to be beautiful, independent, and powerful. She taught her how to love herself. Sofia, Harpo's wife, taught her how to persist and how to be strong in a patriarchal society. These four women helped each other to undergo problems of race and gender in a society where women especially the blacks one have no right to speak. Through women's love; mother/daughter love, sister love, lesbian love or friends love women were able to succeed and develop.

Works of Black literature tried to change the usual image of a black female character that was always portrayed as fragile and obedient to a fighter and persistent one.

This work emphasizes the idea of how black female writers do portray racism and feminism in their work; how was it seen and how was it dealt with. The writers that have been chosen are considered to be the most prominent figures in the world of the African American literature. Hurston and Walker have been seen as literary mother and daughter. Both of them used the pen as a tool to denounce all injustices that the black community were suffering from during the 1900's.

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