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**Theme**

**Feminism and Womanism of women of color in Alice Walker's  
Novel "*The Color Purple*"**

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To my beloved mother and father.

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In this thesis, the representation of Black female sexuality in Alice Walker's novel "*The Color Purple*" and debate of feminism and womanism of women of color in the late of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America. *The Color Purple* was the subject to controversy when it came out in 1982. It shows the oppression that African-American women have faced, and how their oppression is different from African-American men. Additionally, it shows how this oppression has led to the black feminist movement. Gender and race are inextricably linked, and this thesis aims to shed light on this type of intersectionality, sexism, heterosexism and womanism.

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Feminism is a movement that fights against the oppression of women. Within feminism, there is a group of African-American women who also fight against oppression, but it is essential to them to also stress how race and womanhood cannot be separated. This particular movement within feminism is often referred to as black feminism. Both African-American men and women have faced oppression in terms of race, class, and ethnicity. The difference between race and ethnicity is the fact that ethnicity is determined by cultural factors such as nationality, language and culture, while race is determined by physical characteristics such as skin color, facial features, and hair type (Isik 4). The concept of oppression entails “any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society” (Collins 4). Race, ethnicity, class and gender are inextricably linked together, and even though African-American men have also been the victims of oppression in American society, there is an extra dimension of oppression for African-American women, since they also faced oppression in terms of gender, in a different way than African-American men have.

Recognizing the link between race, ethnicity, class and gender, also referred to as intersectionality, also means that there is[ a difference in feminism for black women and white women], as they have a different race and therefore different experiences of oppression in American society. Sexuality is integral to feminism because it is part of womanhood, and African-American women had a different relationship with their sexuality compared to white women in the 19th and 20th century. In feminist theory, sexuality is at the center of oppression. In feminist contexts, sexuality represents a central site of the oppression of women; rape and the rape trial are its dominant narrative trope.

To put it in historical context, oppression was already present during slavery time. Enslaved men and women were considered property without any human rights to protect them. This meant that sexual violation frequently went unpunished, as black females were already considered promiscuous and willing to engage in sexual activities. At the same time, there were some court cases that challenge. The assumption that sexual abuse was not punishable by law. Either way, sexual abuse was happening, considering in particular the period from the late 19th century until the 20th century (ibid). White males marginalized the sexual exploitation of African American women, and rationalized their actions by assuming it was their right in the process of becoming a man. There is a considerable amount of evidence that slaveholders had an impact on the sexual and emotional lives of their slaves. If they were not the sexual abusers themselves, they would make other slaves

do it for them. For example, the 16-year-old Texas-born Rose Williams was forced by her owner to have sexual intercourse with another slave to increase his human property. There were also enslaved men who abused their authority as a supervisor to feel entitled to abuse the females they supervised.

Oppression did not end with slavery, however. Even though the Civil War and the 13th amendment ended slavery, during the war and the post-emancipation period there was still a lot of sexual violence against African American girls and women. Many white men used rape as an instrument to establish their power after they lost their privilege by the abolition of slavery.

Oppression in terms of sexuality is not only described in feminist theory. This concept can also be identified in fiction, especially in historical novels written about the 19th and early 20th century. Accounts of sexual assault of black women in literature, both in non-fiction and fiction, are related to black women's sexuality, as they mirror the society of the time in which the story takes place. One of these works of fiction that has themes related to sexuality is Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Walker, an African-American author and feminist, touches upon issues such as sexual assault, also by African-American men, and the way African-American women dealt with that. The reception of Walker's book involved some masculine bias. Merely the fact that Walker is a female author already sparked some hostile reactions from the public both black and white, let alone the fact that sexual assault by African-American men was portrayed. Although *The Color Purple* is a work of fiction and not reality, besides the fact that this work was controversial and influential, Walker's *The Color Purple* describes events that mirror US society in the time that the story takes place, which is why it is an appropriate example to research the representation of black female sexuality in literature. The way in which African-Americans dealt with their sexuality was one of the biggest reasons why black feminism arose, and Walker herself is also a scholar of black feminism. U.S. black feminism acknowledges the intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality, and can be seen as a reaction to traditional "white" feminism in which African-American women do not always feel included.

In this study, *The Color Purple*, the well-known novel by Alice Walker will be analyzed in terms of feminist criticism. In the very opening of the novel, the reader is presented with a small girl who is abused and raped by her step-father. In her lonely world, she cannot



find anybody to trust in and share her despair. Since her step-father Alphonso says “You better not never to tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy.”(Walker&11), she finds the only solution to express her hopelessness in writing letters to God. Too insecure to even give her name, we soon learn through the mouth of another that her name is Celie. While her mother is away Alphonso, presumed to be her ‘Pa’ rapes Celie saying, “You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t.(Ibid).

The novel is an epistolary novel which consists of her letters addressed to God, and then to her sister Nettie. Letters becomes the only way for Celie to express herself, and only key for reader to have a better and deeper understanding of Celie, the protagonist.

From the very beginning of the novel, the reader becomes familiar with a fourteen year old poor girl who is used to do the works of her husband. In the novel, Celie is just a servant who is responsible of looking after her husband, Albert, and his four children and to meet the sexual desires of him. He always abuses Celie until she declares her identity as an independent woman. When his oldest son, Harpo, asks Albert why he beats Celie, he says simply “Cause she my wife.” (Walker 30) He thinks he has the right to beat and abuse Celie merely because she’s his wife. For a long time, Celie bears the abuses and her sister Nettie says to her “You got to fight. You got to fight. Celie’s answer to this, - But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive.” (Walker 25-26) She just tries to stay alive after the abuses, because she doesn’t know how to fight with the men around her. She is always abused, firstly by her step-father, then by her husband, Albert. She accepts the abuses by expressing her feelings in a letter to God saying; “He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don’t never hardly beat them. He says, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man.” (Walker 30)

*The Color Purple* is a novel where womanism, feminism, sexism, racism, colonialism and traditional gender roles are the main issues that the novel tackles. Walker stresses the idea of making our world a place for better life. She admits the differences between people, yet she believes as well that these differences can’t be a source of oppression or humiliation. She uses the novel as a signifier for human reactions against the abuse. Feminists look in this novel for the established stereotypes, while Walker believes in the ability of establishing our own lives and selves. Walker asks us through Celie to realize our

own selves as individuals. She demands to stop judging blacks according to their past, or even humiliating them and considering them as second -class citizens. She encourages blacks to believe in themselves and in their color. She encourages them to fight the traditional gender roles, especially women's roles. She challenges the idea that we were born in a patriarchal society where we have to accept the traditional gender roles and if we don't, then we will be looked at as bad citizens.

From my dissertation, I will try to answer about these questions:

- ❖ How did Alice Walker presented racism and man domination in her novel?
- ❖ How did the role female character change in the novel?
- ❖ How did Alice Walker given the new concept of womanism and what is the link between it and sexism and heterosexism in then novel?

The method that will be used for this thesis is historical research in articles and journals that describe the situation of black female oppression in American society, especially in terms of sexuality and gender, in the 19th and 20th century. I will also perform theoretical research into black feminism, and a study of how the themes of sexuality, sexual assault of black women, the intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality, oppression of black women, black feminism and womanism are represented in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

In the first chapter, in order to gain context on the oppression of African-American women and the motives for the rise of black feminism, I will discuss the ways in which African-American women have been oppressed. And I will discuss the definition of black feminism and moving to the concept of womanism.

In the second chapter, I will look at Alice Walker as an author, and look at her own life and experiences that relate to black female sexuality, to find out what her motivation was for writing this book. Then, I will give the plot summary for Alice Walker's novel with give the characters of the novel, and also discussing the major themes of the Color Purple.

In the third and last chapter, I will analyze the findings from chapter two, and apply the theory of chapter one to research the link between black feminism, womanism, oppression and *The Color Purple*. And I will try to investigate racism, black feminism and womanism by talking about sexism and heterosexism in *The Color Purple*.

## **1-1-Introduction**

In this chapter, I began with the oppression of women of color in 20thC in America, with them suffering. After that I moved to talk about the feminism generally, and how it changed and developed to be black feminism. Also this chapter gives the definition of womanism as a concept and how Alice Walker defined.

## **1-2- Women of color in the 20th century:**

Investigating the life of African American women necessitates the examination of the link that relates gender to race. It is also important to put female of color sexuality in context and try to uncover that link between sexuality, race, and gender. Women of color faced different kinds of oppression in the American society from their arrival as mere slaves in the 20th century. They were excluded from the categorization of “lady” constructed by general US society, which says “as much about sexuality as it did about class” (Higginbotham, 262).

We can define sexuality neither by biological elements, nor by reality. Sexuality is rather “an evolving conception applied to the body but given meaning and identity by economic, cultural, and historical context” (Higginbotham, 263). Sexuality is partly defined by society, just like race. It is evident that race and sexuality overlap. I will examine how African-American women’s sexuality is defined in economic, political and cultural context, and how they were treated differently in comparison to white men and women, and African-American men. Additionally, I will investigate in what way black women were oppressed in American society.

From the beginning of slavery in the US, an important 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).

Patricia Hill Collins divides black female oppression into three dimensions: an economic, political and ideological dimension of oppression.

First, black women’s labor has been essential to US capitalism, and the exploitation of this labor represents the economic dimension of oppression. This is also one of the reasons

why there are not many black women intellectuals, as the priority for African-American women has always been survival, which did not leave much room for intellectual work.

We can find the political dimension of oppression in the denial of the right to vote for African-American women. Both African-American men and women were excluded from public office, and did not receive equal treatment in the criminal justice system. An example is Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old boy who had been lynched because he whistled to a white woman. The two men who were responsible did not receive jail time. Moreover, literacy was not allowed for slaves, and the educational system was unequal for African-Americans. For instance, black women were sent to segregated Southern schools that did not receive proper funding. According to Collins, this was “to ensure that a quality education for Black women remained the exception rather than the rule”.

The ideological dimension of oppression can be found in the stereotypical images of black women during the slave era. Collins explains ideology as it “refers to the body of ideas reflecting the interests of a group of people”. There are several racist and sexist ideologies that have been adopted by US culture in such a way that it seemed normal. It was assumed in US culture that black women had certain negative qualities or characteristics, and mostly white Americans used this assumption to justify oppression. Because of these types of oppression, black women were often excluded from high power positions, which kept white Americans in positions of power and able to continue the oppression (Isik 11).

White women have also subscribed with white males to the oppression of women of color. Ancient or classical white feminists have not included the women of color in their fight for equality and their feminist movement, however; often times black intellectuals discussed the importance of intersectionality [is an analytic framework which attempts to identify how interlocking systems of power impact those who are most marginalized in society. Intersectionality considers that the various forms of what it sees as social stratification, such as class, race, sexual orientation, age, disability and gender, do not exist separately from each other but are complexly interwoven] of gender, race and class. Afro-American researchers on Black feminism have given the fact of gender; race and class are intertwined and are inseparable

However; white feminist theory did not admitted this intersectionality. Classical feminism cared only about the middle-class issues not race issues. This meant that racism

was continually undermining the fight of Black women to be represented in the women's suffrage movement. Black were different from the conventions womanhood, which excluded them from the different of "woman", they needed to challenge there conventions to gain a voice (Carby 4). Even though; the white feminist theory pressures the need for variety, without add the woman of color in their research, because for the scholars on feminist theories that, they are not qualified to speak for race that is not their own, and because they have not experienced that kind of oppression (Collins 6).

In short, explanation of the three dimensions of oppression and the lack of black intellectuals' work in feminist theory show that oppression exists since the beginning of slavery, and was existed in the 20th century. In terms of gender and sexuality, African-American women had a different experience of their oppression in comparison to African-American men.

### **1-3- Black feminism:**

'What is feminism?' The answer to this question can be found in many dictionaries. Susan Osborne in her work (2001, 8) shares the Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics' definition: 'Feminism is a way of looking at the world, which women occupy from the perspective of women. It has as its central focus the concept of patriarchy, which can be described as a system of male authority, which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions.' Chambers dictionary sees feminism as: 'A belief or movement advocating the cause of women's rights and opportunities, particularly equal rights with men, by challenging inequalities between the sexes in society.' No different is a definition which is given in the Cambridge dictionary: 'the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state.'

Susan Osborne (2001, 9) and Margaret Walters (2005, 12) both quote the statement of Rebeca West, a British author, journalist and literary critic, who says that she has never been able and can to define what feminism is but she has been called a feminist many times, especially when she expressed sentiments that distinguished her from a doormat (Isik 8).

There were several reasons for the origin of black feminism, shared the attitudes of some white feminists. It could be said about several of them, that they were racist, even though they were mostly fighting against slavery and for the civil rights of African Americans. It went that far, that they did not allow black women to be a part of suffrage campaigns.

Another reason for the development of black feminism was that feminism around 1970s did not include the experiences of black women. There were white women who were fighting against sexual discrimination and then there were black women who had to fight against more things, such as racism, classism and also sexism. Another difference between these two groups of women was that white feminists usually came from the middle class while black feminists were mostly part of the working class, which made them focus on different things. Even though white feminists were proclaiming “we are all women”, black feminists saw this as just a way to avoid fighting for their specific needs and rights. Jennifer Rich (2007, 31) also quotes a part of manifesto released by Combahee River Collective group: “Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, and that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression.” From this statement, it is clear that black women did not find refuge in mainstream feminism, because the different types of oppressions that black women encounter every day were not taken seriously. In an attempt to make this situation better, a significant first step needed to be taken: to acknowledge these different black women’s experiences (Isik 8).

Black feminism is a school of thought stating that sexism, class oppression, gender identity and racism are inextricably bound together. The way these concepts relate to each other is called intersectionality, a term first coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. In her work, Crenshaw discussed Black feminism, which argues that the experience of being a black woman cannot be understood in terms of being black or of being a woman. Instead, each concept should be considered independently while including the interactions that frequently reinforce each other.

Black feminism became popular in the 1960s, as the consequence of the Civil Rights Movement that supposedly excluded women, and the supposed racism of feminist movement. From the 1970s to 1980s, black feminists formed various groups which addressed the role of black women in Black Nationalism, gay liberation, and second-wave feminism. In the 1990s, the Anita Hill controversy placed black feminism in a mainstream light. Black feminist theories reached a wider audience in the 2010s, as a result of social media advocacy.

Proponents of black feminism argue that black women are positioned within structures of power in fundamentally different ways from white women. The distinction of black feminism has birthed the derisive tag "white feminist", used to criticize feminists who do not acknowledge issues of intersectionality. Critics of black feminism argue that racial divisions weaken the strength of the overall feminist movement.

Among the theories that evolved out of the black feminist movement are Alice Walker's womanism, and historical revisionism with an increased focus on black women. Angela Davis, bell hooks, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill Collins have emerged as leading academics on black feminism, whereas black celebrities, notably Beyoncé, have encouraged mainstream discussion of black feminism.

#### **1-4-Womanism:**

Is the neologism ( is a relatively recent or isolated term, word, or phrase that may be in the process of entering common use, but that has not yet been fully accepted into mainstream language. Neologisms are often directly attributable to a specific person, publication, period, or event. In the process of language formation, neologisms are more mature than proctologists’) coined by the American Alice Walker in her book *In search of mothers Gardens: Womanist Prose* argues that the life experience of women of color in womanism was originally theologically oriented? The word comes from the theology of Jacquelyn Grant (white women’s Christ and Black women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and womanist Theology). Delors Williams (sisters in the wilderness: The challenge of womanist God-Talk) and James Hal Core (A Black womanistic theology, Delors Williams, defined womanistic theology, Delors willians, defined womanistic theology in the following way:

Womanist theology is concerned with a prophetic voice for we are of the entire African community men and women, adults and children. Womanist theology tries to help you see black women and to encourage them to help you see black women and to encourage them to have confidence in the significance of their experience and their beliefs for the determination of the character of Christian religion in the African American community.

Womanist theology challenges all repressive forces. Those impede the struggle of black women to survive and to develop a positive productive life for the freedom and welfare of the family and women. Womanist theology stands against all oppression on the bases of race, gender, class, sexual preferences and physical abilities.

Based on the life experiences of black women in the United States, womanism strongly sided with all minority women, of low socio-economic status as well as women and young.

Part of view that the womanists want is the struggle for equality that will be Zeno hypocritical absurd and contradictory. Women activists observe racism, injustice, arrogance and incompatible conditions, leading to all forms of discrimination: xenophobia, etc.

Alice walker who founded womanism is one of the most renowned African America writers today due to the broad spectrum of themes in her work which reflect the diverse experiences of African American community in the US. Starting with her first novel the third life of Grange Copeland the latest collection of essays we are the ones we have been waiting for, walker has examined the whole history of the African Americans, from the trouble period of slavery and the long struggle for civil rights to the victories scored in overcoming negative stereotypes and restrictions imposed by the white community. This struggle represents an integral part the African matrilinear heritage which can clearly be traced in walker's especially in the portrayal of her female precursors and oral heritage they had bequeathed to them.

**Womanist** 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish", i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in great depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting



grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. 2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Walker, 1984: xi-xii)

### **Alice Walker's Womanism:**

Alice Walker's Womanism is but one of the many concrete forms black feminism has taken throughout the years. Another well-known example is the Combahee River Collective, founded by Barbara Smith, and its *Black Feminist Statement*. Yet, as it is beyond the scope of this paper to go in to black feminism in general, these other approaches will not be elaborated on. Instead, the focus of our attention will be Alice Walker's Womanism, which will be theoretically explored in this part. First of all, Walker's own definition of the concept will be given and analyzed in detail. Secondly, some themes that return regularly in her theoretical writing will be considered in the light of this definition.

### **1-5- Conclusion**

This chapter is the historical background of feminism of women of color and, I give them some kinds of suffering of women of color in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America. From the definition of black feminism, this chapter focuses on how black feminism changed and went to the concept of womanism.

## **2-1- Introduction:**

In this chapter, I will talk about the novelist Alice Walker and her novel *The Color Purple*. Also this chapter focuses on her life, plot summary of the novel with the characters and the major themes.

## **2-2-Alice Walker:**

### **2-2-1- Overview of Alice Walker's life and work:**

Alice Malsenior Walker is born on February 9, 1944 as the eighth child of Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker. Growing up in a sharecropper family in Eatonton, Georgia, Walker experiences first-hand the southern atmosphere in which the “black vernacular is prominent and the stamp of slavery and oppression are still present”<sup>1</sup> and which will shape many of her future works.

When she is eight years old, Walker accidentally gets shot in the eye by one of her brothers playing with his BB gun. The incident leaves her blind in her right eye and turns the young Alice into a timid and reclusive child. Yet, this solitary attitude leads her “really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out” (Walker 244). It brings her to “read stories and begin to write poems.” (Walker 245)

After graduating from high school as the valedictorian, Walker begins her higher education at Spellman College in Atlanta. The two years (1961-1963) she spends in the College are “marked by an awakening to intellectual and social issues”<sup>2</sup> as she gets more and more involved in the Civil Rights Movement. During these years she is also active in the Georgia voter registration movement of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In 1963 she transfers to Sarah Lawrence College in New York where she finds herself to be one of the six black students there. In the summer of 1965, she travels to Africa and returns pregnant from the trip. Until a friend refers her to an abortionist, Walker struggles with suicidal tendencies, sleeping with a razor blade under her pillow for three nights (see: Walker 246). It is during this confusing period before and just after the abortion that she writes the poems that will later be published in the 1968 volume *Once: Poems*.

During the 1960s Walker works at the New York City Welfare Department. On March 17, 1969 she marries Melvyn Rosenman Leventhal, a white civil rights lawyer and moves to Jackson, Mississippi with him. (This in spite of the fact that an interracial marriage is still against Mississippi State laws at that moment.) She starts working in the Head Start program there and becomes a writer-in-residence at Jackson State College (1968-1969) and Tougaloo College (1970-1971). After a miscarriage in 1968, on November 17, 1969 Walker gives birth to her daughter Rebecca.

During the seventies Walker's career both as a writer and as a teacher kicks off. She will prove to be a talented author, trying her hand at short stories, novels, poetry and essays. Yet, her work, however versatile, reveals some homogeneity as well. Themes like racism and sexism, the role of the artist, the relation between art and life, the process towards "spiritual health and self-definition"<sup>3</sup> of the characters and environmental issues run as threads through her oeuvre. Although she shows a special preference for "the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" (Walker 250), she says herself that she is "preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of [her] people." (Ibid) She also often incorporates autobiographical elements in her work and depicts the political, social and moral conditions of the South in it. In 1970, Walker publishes her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. With this novel, Walker becomes part of what critics call "The Second Black Renaissance" in which black women authors (like Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison) play a leading role. In 1972-1973, she leaves Mississippi for an eighteen-month period in which she teaches at Wellesley College as well as the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Her course on black women writers is among the first of its kind and deals with previously neglected authors like Phillis Wheatley, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Brooks and Paule Marshall. Her commitment to the recovery of Zora Neale Hurston especially catches the eye. Walker for example edits 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) in order to make it available again. In 1973, Walker publishes the collection of short stories *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* as well as a volume of poetry, *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*. In 1974 Walker becomes editor at *Ms.* Magazine and in 1976 her novel *Meridian* is published. This book is exceptional because it describes the Civil Rights Movement from the perspective of a young black woman. Walker becomes associate professor at Yale University in 1977 and in 1978 she moves to San Francisco with Robert Allen after her divorce from Melvyn. In

1979 she publishes a new volume of poetry, *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You In The Morning*.

After the publication of another collection of short stories *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* in 1981, Walker moves to Mendocino County, California to concentrate on her next novel. That novel, *The Color Purple*, is published in 1982 and unites all the themes Walker treated in her previous works. The novel becomes a huge success and secures her reputation as a writer once and for all, winning her both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1983. Moreover, in 1985, the novel is turned into a movie by Steven Spielberg. In 1983 *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, a collection of essays Walker wrote the past decades, is published. With this collection of what Walker herself calls "womanist prose" she affirms her reputation as a black feminist on theoretical grounds, coining the term "Womanism" to refer to black feminism. In 1985 collected volumes of her poetry and fiction appear: *Alice Walker Boxed Set--Poetry: Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning; Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems; Once, Poems* and *Alice Walker Boxed Set--Fiction: The Third Life of Grange Copeland, You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down, and In Love and Trouble*. Throughout the years, Walker also shows a great concern for the planet and environmental problems, more universal issues that go beyond sexual or racial questions. In 1987 for example, she is arrested while blocking a gate of the Concord Naval Weapons Station in California. In 1989, *The Temple of My Familiar*, an ambitious novel of ideas, appears.

During the nineties and the first decade of the twenty-first century, Walker continues along the same path, publishing many different works. In 1991 she publishes the children's story *Finding the Green Stone* and in 1992 she writes another novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. She also produces non fictional works like *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993), which relates the making of the documentary under the same name that she produced with Pratibha Parmar about the genital mutilation of women. Another book about the making of a movie is the 1996 *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult; A Meditation of Life, Spirit, Art, and the Making of the film "The Color Purple," Ten Years Later*. This work not only talks about Walker's feelings during the making of the film adaptation of *The Color Purple*, but also contains her screenplay Steven Spielberg refused to use. In 1997 she publishes *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: a Writer's Activism*, which deals with her personal social and political stance. Her 1998 novel, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, treats female sexuality. In 2000 she publishes another collection of short stories: *The Way Forward Is with a*

*Broken Heart*, which again is full of autobiographical references. After more than a decade, Walker returns to poetry in 2003 with *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth*. In 2004 she publishes her seventh novel, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* about a black female novelist.

### **2-2-2- Alice Walker's position in (African-) American Literature:**

In this part a concise and highly generalized overview of African-American Literature will be given in order to elucidate Alice Walker's position as an author and a scholar. Focusing on black women writers exclusively, the section will try to relate Walker's current position to the cases of some important predecessors.

It goes without saying that, while often neglected, almost from the moment they set foot on American soil, black people have written. However diverse their situation and their time of writing, black people's experiences "of Africa, the transatlantic or Middle Passage, slavery, Southern plantation tradition, emancipation, Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, Northern migration, urbanization, and racism – have produced a residue of shared memories and frames of reference" (Isik 21). Besides recognizing this specific heritage, throughout the centuries, black people have always considered themselves and their experiences as undeniably part of American life as well. In their writings, they have found different ways of portraying what W.E.B. Du Bois calls their "double consciousness", which he describes as follows:

*[A black person] ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, quoted in: Byerman, 1995) (Isik 22).*

## **2-3-Plot Summary of the Color Purple:**

The novel is told in a series of ninety letters, from the poor, ignorant Celie to God, from her sister Nettie back to Celie, and from Celie to Nettie. Celie takes literally her stepfather's injunction, "You better never tell nobody but God," a clear attempt to conceal his sexual abuse of Celie.

As the novel opens, Celie is questioning her own status as a moral person. "I am I have always been a good girl" (1). This strikethrough reveals that Celie has accepted that she is no longer good; she feels responsible for the wrongs done to her. She is pregnant, and she eventually has two children with Alphonso, whom she believes to be her father but is really her stepfather. Both of the children disappear, and she presumes they are dead. One day a local widower with four children comes to ask for the hand of Nettie, Celie's younger sister. Alphonso refuses to let Nettie go, but offers the widower Celie instead. The widower, Alpert accepts the offer out of desperation. Alpert's children are angry at their father for remarrying, and Harpo, the eldest son, attacks Celie immediately. To get through Alpert's sexual advances, Celie concentrates on protecting Nettie.

One day in town, she sees a woman, the wife of a minister, with a young girl about the right age to be her daughter. She asks her the baby's name, and the woman tells her that the baby is called Pauline, but she calls her Olivia, the name Celie had embroidered on the baby's diapers before the child was taken away.

Celie's life at Alpert's is drudgery, but she has no choice except to serve him. Nettie runs away from home to escape the attentions of Alphonso. She stays with Celie until Alpert starts trying to seduce her, eventually trying to rape her. Celie sends her to the minister and his wife, "the only woman I ever seen with money" (18). Nettie goes to her, promising to write, but Celie does not hear from her again for nearly thirty years.

Shug Avery comes to town. Alpert has been in love with Shug his whole life, but his father would not allow him to marry her. Instead he married Annie Julia, the mother of his four children, and continued his affair with Shug. Annie Julia also had an affair, but when she tried to break it off, feeling guilty, her lover shot her in front of her son, Harpo. She died in his arms.

Uninterested in Alpert as a sexual partner, Celie finds herself drawn to Shug, whom she knows only from pictures. "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."

Meanwhile Harpo has fallen in love with a strong willed young woman named Sofia. Her father forbids their marriage, citing the death of Harpo's mother as evidence that the family is not worthy. Harpo intentionally impregnates her so that her father cannot object to their marriage. His father, on the other hand, dislikes Sofia, but she does not care. She tells Harpo that she will live with her sister and her husband until Harpo decides to be with them. Harpo fixes up a shed on his father's property and marries Sofia. She does not behave, however, like a traditional wife. When Harpo asks his father how to make her obey him, his father says to hit her. And when he asks Celie the same question, she answers, "Beat her." Sofia, however, fights back, and Harpo starts appearing with bruises and scratches.

Celie starts to regret her advice to Harpo, and when Sofia finds out that Celie was the one who told him to beat her, she confronts her. Celie tells Sofia that she envies her the ability to fight:

She say, 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. (40)

Celie, ashamed, apologizes to Sofia, who admits that she feels sorry for her, and encourages her to fight back against Alpert .

Shug Avery, ill, comes to stay at Alpert's house. Celie nurses her back to health despite Shug's nasty comments. "She weak as a kitten. But her mouth just pack with claws" (49). Nevertheless, Celie feels drawn to Shug physically. As she gets healthier, she and Celie start to become friends.

Celie and Sofia start on a quilt called Sister's Choice. Celie works in pieces of a dress that Shug has donated. While they quilt, Sofia tells Celie that Harpo has started eating enormous amounts of food in an attempt to get to be as big as she is, so that his attempts to control her will have some effect. Sofia leaves him, going to live with her sister, a choice that causes Celie a pang of regret for her own lost sister.

When Sofia leaves, Harpo transforms their house into a juke joint, a small music club. It is not very successful until Shug starts to sing there. She writes a song for Celie, and then they become intimate when she discovers that Celie is essentially sexually innocent, making her look at herself naked. But Shug is planning on leaving soon, and spends every night with Alpert.

Sofia comes to the juke joint with her new boyfriend. Harpo's new girlfriend, a mixed-race woman called "Squeak," is angered when Harpo asks Sofia to dance; Squeak intervenes and they fight.

Soon after, Sofia is imprisoned for attacking the mayor. His wife, admiring her children, asks Sofia if she would be her maid. Sofia refuses, saying "Hell, no," so the mayor slaps her, and she hits him back. Celie and the others go to see Sofia in prison, where she has been badly beaten. She explains how she conforms to the prison routine: "Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say" (88). Squeak and Harpo take the children, but Sofia is clearly going insane in jail. They decide something must be done, so Squeak, the warden's niece, goes to intervene, allowing herself to be raped in exchange for Sofia's parole. But Sofia is not actually freed: She is sent to work at the mayor's house, the very fate she went to jail to avoid.

Meanwhile Squeak, who now insists that people use her given name of Mary Agnes, begins to sing in Shug's absence, first Shug's songs, and then her own.

Shug returns over the holidays with a new husband, Grady. He and Alpert spend most of the time drinking together, leaving Shug and Celie alone. Celie confesses to Shug about her rape, and about Nettie. Shug tells Celie that she has seen Alpert hiding letters, and they find them and read them.

Nettie did run to the minister, Samuel, and his wife. They educated her and took her with them to New York City and then to London, preparing to go to Africa as missionaries. The tribe with which they work, the Olinka, initially has had little contact with Americans, and none at all with people with black skin.

Although the Olinka have had some contact with Westerners, they have not been colonized. They worship their god, the roof leaf, upon which they depend for shelter and safety. When the missionaries arrive, they are presented with their own roof. They start a school, but only male students and Olivia attend. Olivia befriends an Olinka girl, Tashi. Her family does not approve of the friendship, but the girls endure. Nettie notes that Olinka men talk to women like the men at home do, as though they're invisible.

A road comes through the Olinka village, destroying the church, the school, and many dwellings and fields. Soon, the entire village is transformed into a rubber plantation, and the Olinka become employees and tenants in their ancestral homeland.

Meanwhile, Corrine, Samuel's wife, is growing increasingly suspicious of Nettie, whom she believes to be Olivia and Adam's mother, because of the strong resemblance between



them. It is through Corrine's suspicions that Nettie learns the truth: Alphonso is not her and Celie's father. Their real father was lynched because he was a successful black businessman, and their mother went mad. But Samuel, who as a young man had been a friend to Alphonso, took Celie's children and raised them as his own. When Nettie confesses her identity and connection to the children, Corrine is still bitter and angry, and her health fails. She finally relents and admits to meet Celie in town, but dies soon after.

Celie's anger at Alpert for concealing the letters first makes her want to murder him, then leaves her feeling numb. Knowing that Nettie is alive, she now writes to her rather than God. Shug asks why, and Celie says that the God who lives in church—tall, white, white-haired—has never listened to her. Shug offers a different perspective, of a God who is inside people and nature, present in all things. She says all God wants is appreciation: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (196). Celie hears her, but cannot believe. Shug decides that she must get Celie out of Georgia, and Celie curses Alpert as she leaves. He responds: "You black, you pore, you ugly you a woman. Goddamn, he say, you nothing at all" (206). Celie replies, "I'm here" (207).

In Memphis, Celie lives in Shug's house and keeps her company. She also begins to make pants for people. She makes pants for Shug, for Squeak, and for Sofia's brother-in-law Jack. Soon everyone wants her pants, and she founds a company called Folks pants.

Celie returns to Georgia for Sofia's mother's funeral. There she sees Alpert, much improved, hard-working and clean. He had fallen into squalor after Celie left, but Harpo nursed him back to health. More important, he made Alpert give up the rest of Nettie's letters to Celie.

When Nettie's letters continue, they tell of her marriage to the now-widowed Samuel, and of the destruction of the Olinka village and way of life. The family heads to England to try and raise relief money for the Olinka, but they fail. Samuel confesses to Nettie that he fears they have done nothing in Africa, that this is the fact that killed Corrine. Nettie points out that no one in Africa asked them to come; is it any surprise they are unwelcome? Samuel replies with tears in his eyes, "We love them. We try every way we can to show that love. But they reject us. They never even listen to how we've suffered. And if they listen they say stupid things. Why don't you speak our language? they ask. Why can't you remember the old ways? Why aren't you happy in America if everyone there drives motorcars?" (237). When they return to Africa, empty-handed, they discover that Tashi has undergone traditional Olinka facial scarification, in which the skin is sliced and objects

such as sand are inserted underneath to form decorative textured ridges, and is hiding, because she is in love with Adam and doesn't want him to see her. She finally emerges, but soon she and her mother Catherine disappear, joining the Olinka who have run from the rubber plantation. Adam goes after her, and after nearly three months, returns with her. He has also scarred his face. Samuel marries them.

Back in America, Alphonso has died. The house he built with Celie's parents' money is hers (as was the money), and his young new wife has no interest in keeping it. Shug and Celie light incense to clear the evil spirits from the house.

But Shug has fallen in love with a young man, breaking Celie's heart. Grady and Squeak, now openly a couple, move to Panama to raise marijuana. Most importantly, however, Celie and Alpert become friends. They talk about their marriage, about their shared love for Shug. They sew together.

Shug sends her young lover to college and returns to a peaceful scene with Celie and Alpert. Squeak returns to America to focus on her singing career. Nettie, Samuel, Adam, Olivia, and Tashi arrive, completing the circle of family.

## **2-4-List of Characters:**

### **1. Celie:**

Celie is the main character of the novel. She is shown to have experienced abuse at the hands of men for most of her life: she is routinely beaten and raped by her supposed father, with whom she has two children during her adolescence and whom he gives away. He later gives her away to be married to Mister, who is in love with Shug Avery, a blues singer. When Shug comes to recover from an illness in Mister and Celie's home, it leads to an intimate relationship between Celie and Shug.

Celie and Shug's relationship later develops a romantic and sexual dimension culminating in their sleeping together, this being Celie's first positive sexual experience. Shug has a significant influence on Celie, who begins to draw inspiration from Shug's independence, leading her ultimately to her own independent attitude. Shug not only influences the way that Celie allows Mister to treat her, but also shows Celie that actions deemed sinful by others may not truly be evil or transgressive and that they do not prevent one from believing in and living for God, thereby broadening Celie's views on religion and ethics.

It is also Shug who frees Celie from Mister's bondage, first by loving her, then by helping her to start a custom sewing business. From Shug, Celie learns that Mister, now revealed as Albert, has been hiding letters written to her by her sister Nettie, who is in Africa working as a missionary. These letters, full of educated, firsthand observation of African life, form a moving counterpoint to Celie's life. They reveal that in Africa, just as in America, women are persistently oppressed by men.

## **2. Nettie:**

Nettie is Celie's younger sister, whom Celie loves and saves from living the tragic life that she had to endure. Because Nettie is prettier than Celie, who has been deemed ugly, Mister is originally interested in Nettie as a wife, but settles for Celie. Nettie runs away from home to be with Celie, but is unable to stay with Celie as Mister tries to assault her sexually. As a result, Nettie leaves home and before leaving, promises to write to Celie and tells her that only death can keep them apart. Nettie is eventually taken in by Samuel and Corrine, a missionary couple, with whom she travels to Africa as a missionary.

While in Africa, Nettie becomes the caregiver of Samuel and Corrine's children and faithfully writes to Celie for decades. Nettie marries Samuel after Corrine's death and moves back to America with what are revealed to be Celie's biological children. Through explaining her experiences to Celie, Nettie encourages Celie to be more enthusiastic and optimistic about life. Nettie finds that while there is not racial disparity in Africa, gender disparity exists. The women of the tribe are not treated as equals, and are not permitted to attend school.

## **3. Shug Avery:**

A sultry blues singer who first appears as Mister's mistress, Shug becomes Celie's friend and eventually her lover. Shug remains a gentle mentor who helps Celie evolve into an independent and assertive woman. At first, Shug doesn't appear to be the mothering and nurturing kind, yet she nurtures Celie physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Shug helps Celie discover the letters from her sister Nettie that Mister had been hiding for decades. In allowing Celie to view these letters, Shug supplies her with even more hope and inspiration, letting Celie see that in the end, everything works out for the best.

Shug Avery is a blues singer and model of strong black female sexuality. Before the time frame of the novel, she bore Alpert two children. She fascinates Celie long before they meet, when Celie knows her only as her husband's mistress. When they meet, she is ill and cruel to Celie, who nevertheless takes good care of her and restores her to health. Shug and Celie become lovers, and Shug gives Celie different ways of understanding herself, her sexuality, her spirituality, and the world around her. Also, Alpert's treatment of Celie causes Shug to lose interest in him as a partner. Celie never stops loving Shug, but their actual affair is fairly short. A singing job at Harpo's "juke joint" (a type of bar or nightclub) reestablishes her career and she becomes quite famous. She later marries Grady, then separates from him and takes up with Germaine, a much, much younger man.

#### **4. Alpert:**

A widower with four children, Alpert is cruel to Celie because she fails on two counts: She is not Shug Avery, the true love whom Alpert's domineering father would not allow him to wed, and she is not her sister Nettie, to whom he was also attracted. His first wife, Annie Julia, responded to his infidelity by having an affair of her own. When she attempted to break off that relationship, her lover shot her, and she died in her son's arms. Alpert sees Celie primarily as a domestic slave: As the novel develops, he stops working his farm, leaving it to Harpo and Celie. Celie leaves him when she discovers that he has withheld from her many years' worth of letters from her sister. Later his son Harpo intervenes to restore his father to health and dignity, and he and Celie become companionable friends in their old age

#### **5. Harpo**

Harpo is the son of Alpert and his first wife, Annie Julia. We first meet him just after Celie's wedding to Alpert when he punishes Celie for not being his mother by throwing a stone at her head, which wounds her slightly. We also learn that his mother died in his arms, shot by her lover. He later marries Sofia, whose strength he both loves and resents. When Harpo asks Celie how to "make her mind," Celie replies, "Beat her." Harpo does, leading eventually to the disintegration of his marriage. He then opens a juke joint in his old house and has a relationship with a biracial woman named Squeak. After Celie leaves, Harpo develops a closer relationship with his father and is reunited with Sofia.

## **6. Sofia**

Sofia is an enormous, and enormously strong, woman. She dates Harpo, but her father objects to him because of his mother's shameful death. She gets pregnant and they wed anyway, living in a small house on Alpert's property and having several children. Harpo's attempts to control Sofia through violence cause her to beat him right back, and eventually she leaves, taking up with a boxer named Buster Broadnax. A condescending and insulting comment by the mayor's wife leads Sofia to strike the mayor, a crime for which she is imprisoned for many years, an experience she survives, she tells Celie, by "pretending I was you." Eventually, she is released to be a servant to the mayor and his family, and treated as a parent by the mayor's daughter, a role she resents. Toward the end of the novel, she is reunited with Harpo.

## **7. Squeak**

Mary Agnes, known as Squeak by Harpo and his family, is a mixed-race young woman who lives with Harpo. We first meet her in the juke joint when she challenges Sofia, who knocks out two of her teeth. When Sofia is in prison, she helps raise Harpo's and Sofia's children. For Harpo's sake, she has sex with the prison warden to secure Sofia's release. At Shug's insistence, she becomes a singer as well, leaving Harpo to make a career. Eventually she enters into a relationship with Shug's husband Grady, based primarily around marijuana. They move to Central America to farm it, but then Squeak returns to the States and her career.

## **8. Grady**

Grady is an auto mechanic who marries Shug Avery. He introduces Celie to "reefer," another word for marijuana. When Shug takes Celie away to Memphis, Grady and Squeak accompany them, eventually moving to Panama to farm marijuana. As Shug notes, "when you finish talking about women and reefer, you finish Grady" (249).

## **2-5-Major Themes:**

### **1. Gender:**

Throughout her career, Walker's main concern has been the representation of black women, seeking to give voice to the voiceless, to those who suffer the double oppression of race and gender. Celie is, in many ways, Walker's archetypal heroine: Her path from oppression to anger to acceptance and wholeness comprises the narrative of *The Color Purple*.

Walker has long been criticized for what many consider to be her unfair portrayal of black men. There is some truth to this claim: In *The Color Purple* nearly every major male character—particularly Alphonso, Alpert, and Harpo—has significant problems relating to women as anything other than their personal possessions, to be used as they see fit. Alphonso marries an insane woman and proceeds to father two children on her daughter. Then, after her death, he marries a series of much younger women. Alpert, thwarted in his early love for Shug Avery, proceeds to punish first Annie Julia and then Celie for the crime of not being Shug. Harpo sacrifices a genuine passion for Sofia on the altar of gender hierarchy: It becomes more important to him to assert his manhood by controlling her rather than loving her. But Alpert and Harpo gradually learn that their behavior alienates the women they love, and both reform, in their own ways [...] (Donnelly 88).

### **2. Religion:**

One of Walker's major concerns in *The Color Purple* is the representation of religion. God is an important character in the book: The vast majority of the letters included are addressed to him. But Celie loses her faith altogether when Alpert's betrayal with Nettie's letters is revealed, inspiring one of Walker's most direct refashioning of the traditional idea of religion.

Celie believes that God is a white man: "He big and old and tall and gray bearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted." Shug agrees: "Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white. . . . When I find out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. You mad cause he don't seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything colored say?" (194–195).

Instead Shug proposes an ideal of religion based on the idea that God exists through and inside of people and things, rather than as an abstract, judgmental creator: “I believe God is everything, say Shug” (195).

*She says, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being a part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh. Shug! I say Oh, she say. God love all them feelings That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em, you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by doing what you like. (196)*

After connecting God explicitly to sexuality, Shug notes, “I think it pisses God off when you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it” (196), indicating the centrality of this important theme in the novel.(Donnelly 89)

### **3. Race:**

Explicit discussions of race play a small part in *The Color Purple*. It's not that race is irrelevant; it's just that there are few significant white characters, so the encounters between white and black culture are limited. Black culture is presented largely as a closed system, only touching on white culture when absolutely necessary, usually as an unreasonable and unreasoning source of violent authority.

The events surrounding Sofia's imprisonment offer the clearest illustration of encounters with white society. In this altercation, the mayor's wife makes a condescending compliment to Sofia, then asks if she would like to work as her maid. Clearly the woman believes her offer to be a tremendous compliment, and is shocked at Sofia's response: “Hell, no.” The mayor gets involved and slaps Sofia for her presumption, so she strikes him in return.

*When I see Sofia, I don't know why she still alive. They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a*

*piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of a eggplant (86–87)*  
[...] (Donnelly 91).

## **2-6-Conclusion:**

This chapter gives Alice Walker biography and talks about her life with her literary works. I give a plot summary for her novel *The Color Purple*, with the major characters that Alice Walker given in her novel and themes of the novel.



### **3-1-Introduction**

The main objectives of this chapter, to explore racism; sexism; heterosexism; feminism and womanism in the novel. I try to trace the evolution of the main character in the novel, and how the events influence their lives.

### **3-2-Exploring racism and Black Feminism in the Color Purple:**

In this book, some major themes come to light that mirror the society of the early twentieth century. The theme of violence within relationships was not much written about until the 1960s, as black writers wanted to avoid anything that might reinforce racial stereotypes (Isik, 25). “In *The Color Purple* the role of male domination in the frustration of black women’s struggle for independence is clearly the focus” (Isik 25). Walker explores this theme in the love triangle of Albert, Shug Avery and Celie. Celie and Shug become friends, and their friendship even evolves into a sexual attraction between the two. Albert tells Shug that he beats Celie because she is not Shug. However, Shug rejects Albert because of the fact that he physically abuses Celie. This is an example of the way in which black women dealt with the frustration of male domination; they stand up for each other and fight back for independence. Celie also has to deal with the fact that she is forced by her stepfather to leave school when she first becomes pregnant, which shows how controlling her stepfather is.

When Celie is forced into marriage with Albert, Celie is treated more or less like a slave in a slave auction. First, her stepfather convinces Albert to marry her by telling him that Celie works hard and will obey him. This represents a patriarchal point of view where a woman is either ‘good’, meaning she “cleans, washes, takes care of children, and fulfills her husband’s desires,” or she is seen as a bad wife, a witch, when she disobeys her husband (Isik 25). Subsequently, Albert “looks her over like a head of livestock and marries her in desperation because he needs someone to cook and clean for him and take care of his four children” (Isik 26) Celie is treated like property and like a servant here, handed from one domineering black male to the other. She is not a slave in the literal sense, but she is still very much dominated by the men in her life, not able to make her own decisions. In the end, Celie gains enough confidence to leave Albert, when she learns that there is a definition of God that ‘even’ loves poor; ugly black women, because that is how she feels herself to be.

She also fears the men in her life, because they handle her so violently. For example, her stepfather beats her when he sees her winking at a boy in church, even though Celie tells God in her letters that she is scared of men and does not look at them. "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them" (*The Color Purple* 7). Moreover, when Albert has sexual intercourse with Celie, it is unromantic at best. "He git up on you, heist your nightgown around 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" (74). The dominant role of the man in the marriage is clear in this scene.

However, there is also a sort of acceptance about male domination. It frustrates her, but Celie also accepts that that is the way society is in her time. For example, she says "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 used to love him. Plus, look like he trying to make something out of himself." Even though he physically abused her, Celie also appreciates that Albert changes throughout the story and he tries to better himself. The fact that Celie is so easily forgiving illustrates how deep the oppression goes; this man does horrible things to her, but because of Shug and the fact that he is trying to better himself is enough for her to not hate him. Moreover, it shows how society was at the time, how men were able to get away with dominating their wives.

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 novels. 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" (Rahoul.Halima 34). 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 (Rahoul.Halima 34).

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 Alpert? 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). Alpert? 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.

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 never tell anybody 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 Alpert? 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 Alpert? 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. Crept he don’t never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, get the belt. The children are outside the room pecking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry” (24). Alpert 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 Alpert? 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.

### **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” (Rahoul Halima 39).

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 Alpert? 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 (Rahoul Halima 40). 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 (Rahoul Halima 41). 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.

### **3-4-Sexism, Heterosexism and Womanism:**

Oppression in terms of sexuality and gender are certainly also evident in this novel. Scholar Bernard Bell argues that *The Color Purple* is "more concerned with the politics of sex and self than with the politics of class and race... its unrelenting, severe attacks on male hegemony, especially the violent abuse of black women by black men, is offered as a revolutionary leap forward into a new social order based on sexual egalitarianism" (263). Walker "plays" with stereotypical gender roles in her novel. For instance, one of the characters, Sofia, Celie and Albert's daughter in law, does not let her husband Harpo dominate her, and it becomes clear that she is also strong in a literal sense, because when he tries to beat her it becomes clear that Sofia is stronger than Harpo.

Sofia and Harpo's marriage actually contains reversed stereotypical gender roles, as Sofia is more masculine and Harpo is more feminine. Harpo likes to do 'woman's work' and doing the household, while Sofia likes to work outside of the house. Peculiar about this is the fact that both are comfortable with these assigned roles in their marriage, but Albert raised his son Harpo to be a dominant man in the marriage. He feels pressure to be more controlling over Sofia, and starts beating her. This moment can be seen as Walker criticizing the social construction of gender, as Harpo and Sofia feel pressured by the socially constructed gender roles to have a relationship with opposite roles from what they are comfortable with. This can also be seen in a less obvious way with Albert and Celie, as in the end of the book they are sitting on the porch while Albert is sewing, and Celie is

wearing pants and smoking a pipe. Moreover, Shug Avery is often described as being more masculine, despite her feminine charm. Albert says about her: “Shug act more manly than most men. I mean she upright, honest. Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost” (244). However, Celie disagrees with him, telling him that she thinks the traits he mentioned are more feminine. “Alpert think all this is stuff men do. But Harpo not like this, I tell him. You not like this. What Shug got is womanly it seem like to me. Specially since she and Sofia the ones got it” (244). The novel challenges the socially constructed stereotypes of men and women.

Walker creates a number of strong female characters in this story. Shug Avery, Kate and Sofia are all strong, rebellious, and independent women, and they serve as a role model for Celie. The relationships between women are also a distinct part of the novel. The sisterhood of black women is a reoccurring theme with African-American female writers and filmmakers. Black women can support each other and help each other grow (Collins, 104). Nettie and Celie have a strong bond, and they stand up for each other. Also Shug and Celie connect on an emotional level in way that Celie does not have with any men in her life. They become sexually intimate, and Celie gains more confidence because of this relationship. There is a big contrast between Albert who beats and dominates her, and Shug who accepts and adores her as a woman (Isik 27).

Shug helps Celie coming to terms with her own sexuality, by helping her form the image of God that loves everyone. She actually enjoys sleeping with Shug; something she never did with Albert. “God loves all them feelings. That’s some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves ‘em you enjoys ‘em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that’s going, and praise God by liking what you like” (113). A major difference between Shug and Celie is the fact that Shug has a sense of self that is not “male inscribed” (Isik 28). Throughout the story, Celie gains the same sense of self because of the reimagining of God, and stands up to Albert. For example, when Celie is leaving for Memphis with Shug, Albert says, “Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddamn, he say, you nothing at all” to which Celie a little later reacts, “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here. (*The Color Purple*, 187). Albert’s comment is an example of the patriarchal culture within society, which Celie resists after gaining enough confidence to do so.



As Celie is discovering a new perspective on God, Nettie also gains a more fluid image of God while she is in Africa. "And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us," Nettie writes to Celie (264). Hearing how women are treated in Africa, and realizing that it does not differ as much from American society, also makes her feminist views grow. She is appalled to hear that the Olinka women see her as a woman who is nothing, because she has no husband. Nettie describes to Celie how the Olinka women in Africa don't believe in education for girls, as their only goal in life is to be the mother of her husband's children. "The Olinka do not believe girls should be educated. When I asked a mother why she thought this, she said: A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something. What can she become? I asked. Why, she said, the mother of his children" (140) When Nettie tells Olivia, who turns out to be Celie's daughter, Olivia compares this to the treatment of black women in America: "They're like white people at home who don't want colored people to learn" (141). A little later, Nettie writes Celie that this also reminds her of the way their stepfather has treated them: "There is a way that the men speak to women that reminds me much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don't even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads toward the ground. The women also do not 'look in a man's face' as they say. To 'look in a man's face' is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? Again, it is our own behavior around Pa" (146-147). It is clear that the men described in the novel are controlling their wives, which is an example of the existing gender roles and male dominancy in American society.

Scholar Lauren Berlant compares the violation of rape to the lynching of Celie's and Nettie's biological father. "For Celie and Nettie's biological father, race functions much as gender functions for the sisters: not as a site of positive identification for the victim, but as an excuse for the oppressor's intricate *style* of cultural persecution" (Isik 28). Gender, the fact that Celie and Nettie are women, serves as an excuse for the men in their lives to treat them in oppressive ways, just like the fact that their biological father was African-American served as an excuse for the white merchants to lynch their black competitor. Both oppressors, the men in Celie and Nettie's lives and the white merchants, feel superior over them and feel justified by society to hurt them. Oppression in terms of gender and sexuality is evident here, mirroring the society they lived in where men were taught and expected to oppress their female counterparts.

Besides the dimensions of oppression, the recognition of heterosexism as a system of power is a second key part of black feminism, and similarly present in *The Color Purple*. Just like oppression in terms of race and gender, heterosexism applies a social and cultural meaning to black female sexuality. “*Heterosexism* can be defined as the belief in the inherent superiority of one form of sexual expression over another and thereby the right to dominate” (Collins 128). In other words, heterosexism is a way of oppressing anyone who does not adhere to heterosexuality as a form of sexual expression. In *The Color Purple*, heterosexism is present through Shug and Celie’s relationship, as homosexuality is not the norm and Shug continues to have sexual intercourse with Albert even while she and Celie become intimate.

Heterosexism can also be linked to Collins’ controlling images of womanhood, as these images were constructed by a culture that is dominated by men. For instance, the “hoochie” is used by men as an excuse for sexually assaulting black women, portraying them as sexually aggressive. In this heterosexist perspective, men express their dominance by constructing images that can function as an excuse for their oppressive behavior towards women. This can also be found in *The Color Purple*, as Celie’s stepfather uses his dominance and control over the family’s resources as a license to abuse his stepdaughter. One of the goals of black feminism is resisting these stereotypes.

The controlling image of the “mammy,” describing the stereotype of a submissive woman can also be found in the book. Not as a character however, but in the social pressure of the ideology of the “mammy” that the female characters feel. They are expected by the men in their lives to behave in a submissive way, such as Celie acting submissively when her stepfather takes her children, or uses her for his sexual satisfaction. The image of the “mammy” is internalized in these characters and they struggle to resist this image. The women in the book are in a constant struggle of resisting the expectations that come from the images that exist of black women. On the other hand, the other images that Collins mentions, the matriarch and the welfare mother, are not present in the novel. Moreover, the “mammy” and the “hoochie,” are not on the forefront in the novel. Heterosexism is present in the novel, but the stereotypes are not very present. In fact, many female characters in the book go against these stereotypes, and are strong and active. This can also be seen as feminist criticism from Walker, creating strong characters that deviate from the stereotype to show that these stereotypes are not truthful, and there are many strong black women.

Apart from the critiquing of black female oppression and heterosexism, black feminism can be identified in the representation of sexism, in the fact that Walker challenges socially constructed gender roles by reversing them, and the way in which the characters attempt to resist the oppression they face. Alice Walker manipulates the expectations that are associated with the historical novel as a concept by using the epistolary form. By using this style, Walker creates an intimate setting and uses private events as a critique to American political issues such as black female oppression in a broader perspective (Isik 32). Celie's oppression can be identified within her vulnerability that has grown from her being a woman and being dominated by her stepfather (Isik 33). Sexism, meaning discrimination based on sex, is present here, as male domination causes her to believe that she is less important than her male counterparts.

There is resistance against sexism though, as Walker creates strong female characters that are rebellious and independent, and resist the patriarchy or at least attempt to do so. Shug and Sofia serve as a role model for Celie. Shug has a sense of self that is not defined by any man. Additionally, the relationships and the idea of sisterhood between the women in the novel, how they support each other and help each other grow.

Oppression of sexuality binds oppressions of race, gender and class together, as they all share the core feature of the controlling of black women's sexuality. Race controls sexuality in terms of the controlling images of black women, like the "hoochie" or the "mammy." Gender controls the sexuality of black women because of the dominant role of the men in American society. Class controls sexuality because white women have different controlling images of their sexuality, they do not have the stereotypes of the "hoochie" and the "mammy."

The objectification and controlling of black women's bodies has always been present within US society, and is also evident in *The Color Purple*, for instance when Celie's stepfather 'sells' Celie in a way to Albert. They talk about how Celie is ugly, but she can work hard. They treat her like property, or a servant. They also talk about how Nettie is prettier, and Albert talks about Shug in an objectifying way. Moreover, Celie's mother is not able to satisfy her stepfather's sexual needs, which her stepfather sees as an excuse to rape Celie. The regulation and exploitation of black female sexuality is present here.

According to Collins, "controlling Black sexuality has long been important in preserving racial boundaries" in the United States (Collins 133). By regulating black

women's sexuality, an assumption arose of 'good girls' and 'bad girls.' This serves as a way of creating a sexual hierarchy within American society, and maintaining the social order of male dominance. As we can see, the discrimination based on sex is present in American society, as well as in *The Color Purple*.

### **3-5-Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have investigated racism; feminism; sexism; heterosexism and womanism in the novel and how they were represented by Walker. I followed the evolution of some character in the novel. How Celie evaluated and transformed during the events and the reasons behind her self-recognition.

In conclusion, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has had a significant opinion about black feminism and womanism, when Alice Walker brings this new concept through her novel to demand rights of equality to women of color. While analyzing black female sexuality in *The Color Purple* it is necessary to acknowledge how race and gender are linked, and to recognize the oppression that black women face in all of these notions. Black female scholar Patricia Hill Collins divides black female oppression into the economic, political, and ideological dimension of oppression. Moreover, traditional feminism has participated in the oppression of black women in the sense that feminist theory written by white scholars often does not acknowledge the intersectionality of sexuality, race, gender and class, or does not even mention black women. However, because of the aforementioned intersectionality, sexuality for black women is different than for white women. Another type of oppression in terms of sexuality is the stereotyping and the emergence of controlling images in American society. Additionally, the "culture of dissemblance" arose, which meant that black women dealt with issues regarding their sexuality with silence and secrecy. Derived from the extra dimension of oppression that women faced as African-American women, black feminism arose, dealing not only with gender and sexuality like traditional feminism, but also with the aspects of race and class that come with being African-American and female.

To examine how *The Color Purple* is situated in black feminism, I analyzed the aspect of sexuality in the novel. Sexuality binds oppressions of race, gender and class together. In the novel, sexuality is present in male domination of female sexuality, in the oppression of gender and the pressure of adhering to stereotypical gender roles. However, there are also strong female characters present in the novel, and there is a change of consciousness throughout the story. Some types of oppression that black feminism deals with are present in *The Color Purple*, including sexism, heterosexism and the "culture of dissemblance." However, not all aspects of black feminism are represented in the novel.

Thus, going back to the research question "how is *The Color Purple* situated in the late 20th century feminism?" I have shown that the novel has definitely played a role, more so than feminist theory represents. Walker created a voice of a young black woman, to hold up a mirror in the face of American society. This encourages discussions on (institutionalized) oppression, criticizing it in a time where the consciousness of black women started to change, contributing to the shift from a "culture of dissemblance" to the creation of black women's voices on black feminism and womanism.

The Color Purple presents us good examples in terms of Feminist Criticism and the concept "womanism". We see the male domination over women in every part of life, but in the course of time, women want to release themselves from the abuses of man and be independent. They succeed in their aim and we see the traces of female domination in the name of Celie, the protagonist, and womanism by Shug and Celie and ,their relationship in the novel.

Both movements have yet to enter the conversation and realize that they are all women, and they are all standing up to demand respect for their womanhood. Black and white feminism remains divided, one of the reasons being they have different experiences and different priorities within feminism. However, even though there is a clear division between traditional feminism and black feminism, the ultimate goal of both movements remains the same: equality for women. As Alice Walker accurately articulated it: "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (Walker 45).

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