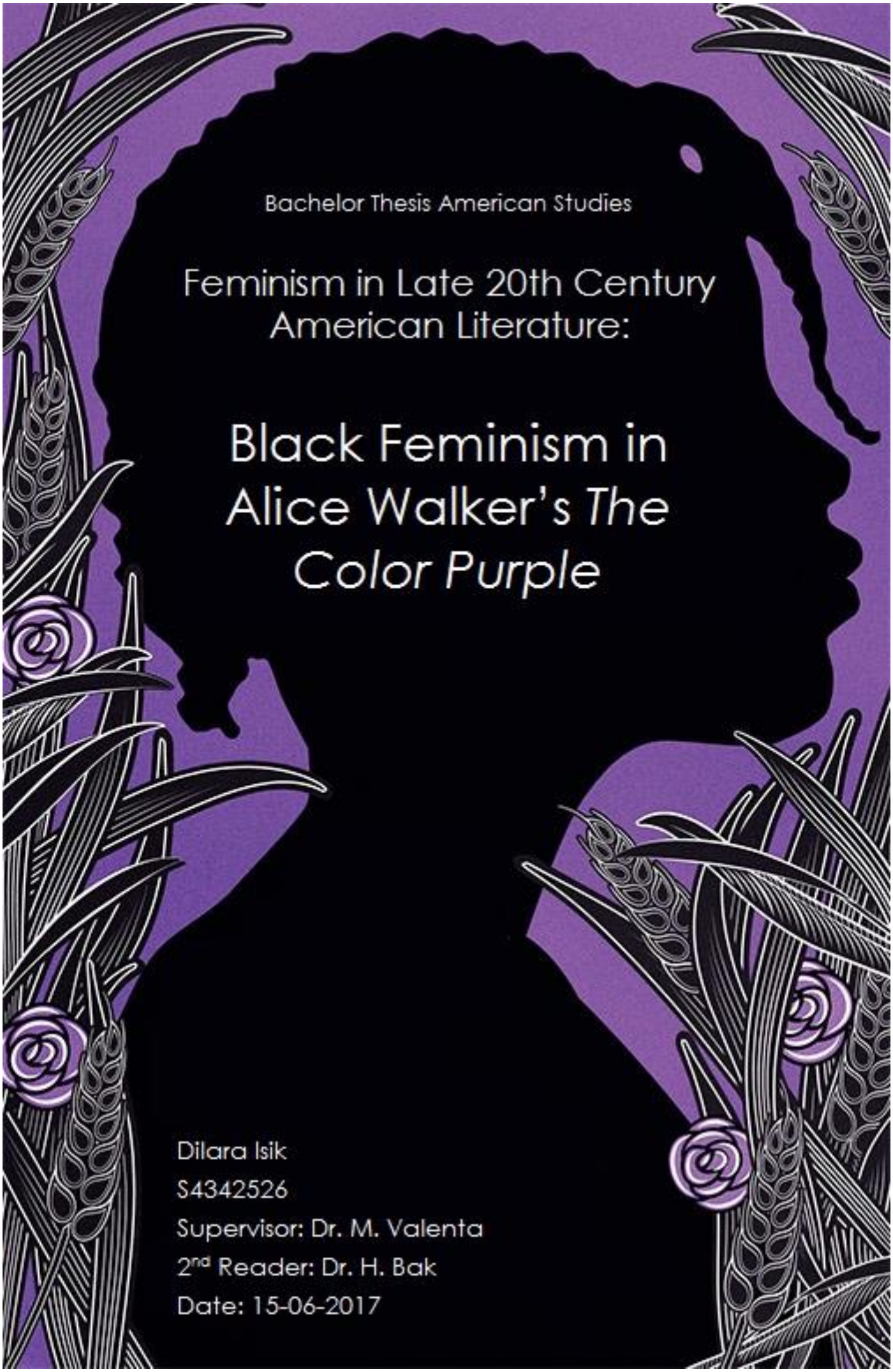

Bachelor Thesis American Studies

Feminism in Late 20th Century American Literature:

Black Feminism in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract

In this thesis, the representation of black female sexuality in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is examined, in relation to the political debate of feminism in the late 20th century. *The Color Purple* was 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.

Keywords: Black feminism, intersectionality, black female sexuality, gender, race, womanhood, sexism, literature.

Introduction

Feminism is a movement that fights against 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 (Betancourt, 631). 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"(Hammonds, 134).

Patricia Hill Collins, a scholar on black feminism, names three approaches to

conceptualizing sexuality. First, sexuality can be examined as an independent system of oppression, similar to race, gender and class. The second approach analyzes the way in which sexuality is manipulated within systems of oppression such as race, gender and class. Third, the concept of sexuality can be approached as the junction where intersecting oppressions meet (Collins, 128).

One key aspect of oppression and black feminism is the issue of the lack of openness that black females had about their sexuality. Historically, from around the 18th century, black women would react to notions related to their sexuality with silence and secrecy (Hammonds, 132). They pretended to be open about their sexuality, but in reality they kept their private lives secret from the ones whom they felt oppressed them. This is also described as a "culture of dissemblance" (Hine, 912).

To put it in historical context, oppression was already present during slavery. 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 are 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 (King, 173-174). 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 (King,

180).

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 (King, 180). During slavery, many white owners were able to get away with sexually abusing their female slaves, as the enslaved black women were considered the slave owner's property. Black women chose to keep their sexual experiences private, out of fear of judgement by society. Black women were often seen (and stereotyped) as very sexual and promiscuous. They also chose to keep that part of their lives private to at least have their sexuality as their own, in a world where they were often merely seen as property. Feminist scholar Evelynn Hammonds describes three themes that describe how the perceptions of black women's sexuality are produced and maintained. The first is "the construction of the black female as the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of black women as the unvoiced, unseen everything that is not white." The second theme is "the resistance of black women both to negative stereotypes of their sexuality and to the material effects of those stereotypes on their lives" and the third theme that Hammonds describes is "the evolution of a "culture of dissemblance" and a "politics of silence" by black women on the issue of their sexuality" (Hammonds, 132). However, there came a point when some black women started to speak up about their sexuality and their experiences, also because they wanted to hold their abusers accountable for their actions.

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, beside 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-American dealt with their sexuality was one of the biggest reasons why black feminism arose, and Walker herself is also a scholar on 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.

Besides black female sexuality, *The Color Purple* has many other themes that are at the center of black feminism. Works of fiction such as *The Color Purple* were written to promote political and social change, and deals with notions of sexuality, gender, race and class. It has become an important part of American literature, gaining a lot of popularity since it first came out in 1982, and even more after the release of the film adaptation. Therefore, it is an influential work in American culture.

A scholar on black feminism, Hazel Carby, argues that novels written by black women should not be read as "passive representations of history", but rather as "active influence within history" (Carby, 95). She states that these novels are not merely a product of the political situation and social conditions in which it is written, but they also shape these social

conditions, becoming cultural artifacts. “The novels of black women, like the slave and free narratives that preceded them, did not just reflect or “mirror” a society; they attempted to change it” (Carby, 95). These novels can be seen as weapons for social change, shaping African-American culture and its political struggles. Even though *The Color Purple* is mentioned in black feminist theory, it is frequently only shortly mentioned together with many other titles, and it is hardly studied in depth in relation to black feminism and used as a representative. I address this gap in the literature by researching how *The Color Purple* is situated in black feminism of the late 20th century, by looking at notions such as black female sexuality in the novel while keeping black feminist theory written in the 20th century in mind. By doing so, I aim to address the fact that feminist theory does not often acknowledge works of fiction in depth as a contribution to social change in terms of feminism, and find out if they have the potential to do so.

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, and black feminism are represented in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. Both primary and secondary literature has been selected, focusing on both literary and political aspects regarding black female sexuality and the broader political framework of black female oppression of that time period.

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. First, I will discuss the economic, political, and ideological dimensions of oppression, and the oppression of black women by white

feminists. Then, I will discuss the controlling images that exist of black womanhood, especially focusing on images concerning gender and sexuality. Additionally, I will examine the "culture of dissemblance" that existed in the 20th century. Lastly, I will see how this comes together in black feminism.

In the second chapter, I will do a case study of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. First, 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 proceed to analyze the book, also considering the epistolary form, to see how this book represents black female sexuality, and to see whether what is written can be considered to be a good representation of the oppression that women faced during the time the story was set in. I will especially consider the themes of male domination, gender and sexuality in the book, in order to find out how this book fits within black feminism.

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, oppression and *The Color Purple.* I will attempt to find out if oppression in terms of male domination, gender and sexuality in the novel matches with black feminism and oppression that women faced in the 19th and 20th century, by researching how oppression, the stereotypes and controlling images, and the "culture of dissemblance," are represented in *The Color Purple*.

Chapter 1: Oppression of Black Women and Black Feminism in the 20th Century

1.1 The Institutionalized Oppression of Black women

To research and understand black female sexuality and the aspects that belong to this topic, such as gender and race, it is important to put black female sexuality in context and recognize the link between sexuality, race, gender and class. Black women have been oppressed in several ways. They were excluded from the definition of the term "lady" constructed by general US society, which says "as much about sexuality as it did about class" (Higginbotham, 262).

Sexuality is neither defined by biological elements, nor by a reality that exists without the influence from society. 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 overlaps. 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.

Since the beginning of slavery in the US, the majority of African-Americans have been 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 that many black women intellectuals, as the priority for African-American women has always been survival, which did not leave much room for intellectual work (Collins, 5).

Second, 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" (Collins, 5).

Third, 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" (Collins, 5). 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.

Besides white males, white women have also contributed to the oppression of black women. Traditional (white) feminists have not always included black women in their fight for equality, even though black intellectuals have often expressed the importance of the intersectionality of gender, race, and class. In other words, African-American scholars on black feminism have stressed the fact that gender, race and class are intertwined and cannot be seen separately from each other, but white feminist theory often does not acknowledge this intersectionality. Traditional feminism has been more concerned with white, middle-class issues rather than race issues. This meant that racism was continually undermining the fight of black women to be represented in the women's suffrage movement (Carby, 4). Black women were different from the conventions of womanhood, which excluded them from the definition of "woman." They needed to challenge these conventions to gain a voice (Carby, 4). Feminist theory often stresses the need for diversity, but leave black women out of their research. A reason given by scholars on feminist theories is that they do not feel qualified to speak for a race that is not their own, since they have not experienced that kind of oppression. However, excluding the voices of black women makes feminist theory one-sided (Collins, 6). An example of such conclusion is Nancy Chodorow's work on sex role socialization in 1978, and Carol Gilligan's work on the moral development of women in 1982. Both have had great impact on feminist theory, but they also only use the notion of a white middle-class woman and leave out black feminist ideas (Collins, 6). Hazel Carby describes how black feminist theory was not really there, because there was no

political movement. She states that “the lack of an autonomous black feminist movement contributed to the neglect of black women writers and artists” (Carby, 7). Moreover, male critics and white feminist critics have made sexist and racist assumptions, which results in the fact that the importance of the work of black women writers is often not acknowledged. White female critics established “the experience of white middle-class women as normative within the feminist arena” (Carby, 11).

In short, both Collins’ explanation of the three dimensions of oppression and the lack of black intellectuals’ work in feminist theory show that institutionalized oppression exists since the beginning of slavery, and still 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.

1.2 Controlling Images of Black Womanhood

Something that can be associated with the ideological dimension of oppression is the stereotyping and the existence of controlling images of African-American women. Stereotypes that existed of African-American women, like the "jezebel" and the "mammy," originate from the beginning of slavery. Several images exist of women's sexuality, which are ever changing and sometimes conflicting. However, black women's sexuality seems to stay the same over time (Higginbotham, 263). These sexual ideologies have such high cultural and political power that they have become normative. Slavery is the source of these "socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination" (Collins, 72). Every woman deals with certain expectations from society. The traditional ideal image of a white woman has four aspects, "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Collins, 72). However, black women encountered different controlling images, four of which are definitely significant in studying the oppression of black female sexuality.

One of these images is the "mammy," which is an obedient servant who works in the homes of richer white people, caring for their children and doing the household. This image was "created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves," and it "symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power" (Collins, 72). A big problem to the "mammy," is the fact that African-American women started to internalize this image, behaving in the submissive way that was expected of them. In turn, they taught their own children about the racial hierarchy and how African-Americans are beneath white power structures, and unintentionally contributing to the racial oppression that this image represents (Collins, 73). Compared to controlling images of white women, the image of the "mammy" distinguishes black women from the rest. This image has gender significance, as its function is very physical. "The mammy image buttresses the ideology of the cult of true womanhood, one in which sexuality and fertility are severed. "Good" White mothers are expected to deny their female sexuality. In contrast, the mammy image is one of an asexual woman, a surrogate mother in blackface whose historical devotion to her White family is now giving way to new expectations" (Collins, 74). Thus, the mammy is seen as an asexual, submissive caretaker of the children of a white family, devoting her life to the family she works for.

While the mammy embodies the 'good' black mother figure in white homes, another controlling

image is that of the "matriarch", which embodies the 'bad' black mother in black homes. The idea of this image is that these mothers are working too hard and therefore cannot be at home with their children to raise them. The image of a black female head of the household became a negative image, as it "became a figure of oppressive proportions with unnatural attributes of masculine power. Independent black women were destined to become labeled black matriarchs" (Carby, 39). This also resulted in the idea that these working mothers could not keep an eye on their children, and therefore contributed to the fact that their children failed at school (Collins, 75). The stereotype of the matriarch is an aggressive, unfeminine woman, representing a failed "mammy" who "dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant" (Collins, 75). Like the mammy, the image of the matriarch is also a subject of oppression in several ways. This image is used to explain Black social class outcomes, as the matriarch has taught her children the same values, resulting in a vicious circle where black children do not receive the same upbringing as white middle-class children, and end up poor and a failure in school. The mammies also worked for long hours doing emotionally draining jobs, meaning they spent precious time and energy away from their children. According to Collins, in this particular image of American society, poor African-Americans cause their own victimization. "In this context, portraying African-American women as matriarchs allows White men and women to blame Black women for their children's failures in school and with the law, as well as Black children's subsequent poverty" (Collins, 76). This kind of view also results in a disadvantage towards the gender ideology that exists in America. The matriarch is aggressive, unfeminine and too strong, unlike the aforementioned traditional image of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity for white women, causing even more division between the two. This image created a gap within the fight for equality by women, as well as the black community, at a time where it was critical to unite during the struggle for equality in society.

A third image that exists of black womanhood is the "welfare mother," describing "poor, working-class Black women who make use of social welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law" (Collins, 78). The stereotype arose when black women gained a little more political power, which meant that they gained the same access to state services as white Americans. This image is essentially derived from the image of the "breeder woman" that existed during slavery, where black women were believed to be more suitable for giving birth than white women. Both images justify the efforts to interfere with black women's fertility. The "breeder woman" justified the fact that slave owners wanted to 'breed' his slave women to

gain more property. The "welfare woman" justifies the effort to control black women's fertility to change the economy. Both the matriarch and the welfare woman are considered bad mothers. However, in contrast to the matriarch, who works most of the time, the welfare mother is seen as lazy; she is satisfied to sit around all day and to take advantage of her access to financial help from the state, all the while teaching her children to do the same. Gender plays a big role in this image, as the welfare mother is typically portrayed as a woman alone. This goes against the white, male-dominated ideology positing that a woman gains her worth and financial security from marrying a man (Collins, 79).

A last controlling image might be the most significant in oppressing black women, at least regarding their sexuality: the jezebel, whore, or "hoochie." The jezebel is an image that portrays black women as sexually aggressive, as an excuse for the high number of sexual assaults by White men. The issue here is that both African-American men and women do not challenge the controlling images that exist in American culture, which can be misunderstood as a validation for these images by African-Americans. This image still also exists in popular culture. For example, in the song "hoochie mama" by 2 Live Crew, where they sing: "Mama just don't understand/ Why I love your hoochie ass/ Sex is what I need you for/ I gotta good girl but I need a whore" (Collins, 82). The heteronormativity that exists in US society of an active (white) man and a passive (white) woman, excludes the African-American woman, and stands on its own as the "gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality" (Collins, 83). Sexuality is still controlled in this image, as well as in the aforementioned images. We can conclude from this that the controlling of black women's sexuality is key in black women's oppression.

These images are also seen in slave narratives. "These portraits of black women did not eliminate association with illicit sexuality, nor did they contradict conventional interpretations of black female sexuality. Rather, the cult of true womanhood drew its ideological boundaries to exclude another definition of black women from "woman" (Carby, 39). All images represent the expectations that society has of black female sexuality; the images try to control how black women should behave, how fertile they are, how sexually aggressive they should be, how they should raise their children, etcetera. These images also exist to justify certain actions of white men, like sexual assault, trying to blame the black women, who are the victim, by creating a stigma that lets people view black women as very sexual people. These controlling images are a form of oppression that existed among black women in the 19th and 20th century.

1.3 Culture of Dissemblance

A reaction to the existence of the aforementioned controlling images that can be recognized, is the silence and secrecy that black women had about their sexuality. There are three themes that especially arise while analyzing the history of black women's sexuality. "First, the construction of the black female as the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of black women as the unvoiced, unseen everything that is not white; second, the resistance of black women both to negative stereotypes of their sexuality and to the material effects of those stereotypes on their lives; and, finally, the evolution of a "culture of dissemblance" and a "politics of silence" by black women on the issue of their sexuality" (Hammonds, 132).

The latter, the politics of silence, arose to counter the negative images about black women in terms of sexuality. Scholar Darlene Clark Hine builds on this statement by suggesting that rape or even the threat of the former, economic oppression, and domestic violence influenced the motivation of African-American women to maintain integrity about their sexuality, resulting in a "culture of dissemblance". (Hine, 13). By this term, Hine means "the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors" (Hine, 912). The controlling images were used as a way to control black women's sexuality and as an excuse for sexual assault, and black women used silence as a strategy to resist abuse by the creation of these negative stereotypes. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham agrees, stating that black women adhered to the Victorian ideology of moral purity, which was "crucial not only to the protection and upward mobility of black women but also to the attainment of respect, justice, and opportunity for all black Americans" (Higginbotham, 266).

Another matter that influenced the "culture of dissemblance" was the economic discrimination that black women faced, as they had less employment opportunities than black men. Black women's jobs were the most undesirable. For instance, in 1930, 15 percent of working black women in Chicago were unskilled and worked in factories. As a result, employed black women kept their jobs as a domestic servant, not changing much from their lives in the South, except for earning a little more money. However, black women left the South "out of a desire to achieve personal autonomy and to escape both from sexual exploitation from inside and outside of their families and from the rape and threat of rape by white as well as black males" (Hine, 914).

In short, the "culture of dissemblance" arose as a reaction to the oppression of the controlling images that existed of black women since the beginning of slavery. Some black women responded to the image of a sexual black woman with integrity, silence and secrecy, to resist the use of the image as an excuse for sexual assault, but also to keep their sexual lives private from their oppressors, to gain more respect, justice, and to resist the economic discrimination that they faced.

Hammonds states however that this strategy had some issues. Women were not able to end the negative stereotyping by being silent about their sexuality. A reason could be the fact that "the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization (Collins, 3). Moreover, middle-class black women needed poor working-class women to take part in these "politics of silence" to protect the entire race. Finally, the most problematic aspect of this silence about sexuality is the fact that black women were now unable to form any new or real concept about their sexuality (Hammonds, 133). It is another form of oppression that African-American women faced in American society.

1.4 Black feminism

The internalized oppression, the controlling images, and the fact that the "culture of dissemblance" was not able to end racial and sexual discrimination, were all motives for the rise of black feminism. Black women remain an oppressed group. Feminist scholars, especially from African-American women's history, felt it was necessary to emphasize the aspect of race within feminism, and recognize the "role of race as a metalanguage" (Higginbotham, 252) as it is intertwined with sexuality, gender and class.

There are three strategies that black feminist scholars use. First, they define the construction of race, gender and sexuality. Second, they define the metalanguage of race. Third, they define race as an opportunity for dialogue, "since race has constituted a discursive tool for both oppression and liberation" (Higginbotham, 252). All strategies include race in their feminist goals.

The first strategy is used in black feminism, because it is important for black feminists to make people recognize race as a social construction. The second strategy is used because the definitions of race are always shifting. The definition of race, in its simplest form, is a small difference in genetics. "Chromosome research reveals the fallacy of race as an accurate measure of genotypic or phenotypic difference between human beings" (Higginbotham, 253). However, race has come to be a definition of social power constructions. "Race is a highly contested representation of relations of power between social categories by which individuals are identified and identify themselves (Higginbotham, 253). Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that there is an "overdeterminancy" of race in the United States, that resulted in the construction of social relations (255). The third strategy is used because there is a double standard in traditional feminism. Higginbotham argues that the lack of representation of African-American women in feminist theory stems from the double standard: white feminists are often unable to "separate their whiteness from their womanness" (255). Therefore, some black women have started to use the term womanist instead of feminist, to reject the "homogenizing of women" (Higginbotham, 273).

Patricia Hill Collins agrees that black feminism is needed to reject the homogenizing of women. She states, "being black and female in the United States continues to expose African-American women to certain common experiences" (23). African-American women as a group, she says, "live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female" (23). Collins argues that it is hard to define black feminist thought, as it is an ever-changing concept. "U.S. Black feminist thought encompasses diverse and

often contradictory meanings" (21). Several definitions of feminist terms keep changing over time, producing a "greatly changed political and intellectual context for defining Black feminist though" (22). There are some problems with US black feminism, as not all black women have the same experiences and ideas, and also the significance of those experiences and ideas differ among the group of black feminists. Nonetheless, the core themes of black feminism remain the same, and establish their standpoints.

Collins names six distinguishing features of black feminism. First, black feminism is a group of American women who are oppressed, and use activism to try to stop the oppression. Second, despite the different experiences and ideas within black feminism, the core themes and standpoints remain the same. Third, US black women acknowledge the "heterogeneous collectivity" which stimulates resistance. Moreover, it is key that black women intellectuals analyze all dimensions of a standpoint, taking different experiences, ages, classes, background, etc. in account. Additionally, US black feminists recognize the significance of the changing character of US society. Lastly, black feminism is related to a wider struggle for equality (22-41).

In short, as a reaction to the oppression that black women face in US society, black feminism arose, trying to make people acknowledge the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality and class. Even though the group of black feminists in itself is diverse, it has core themes that form the standpoints that black feminists fight for.

Chapter 2: Alice Walker and *The Color Purple*

2.1 About Alice Walker

Literature, along with other mediums such as theater, art and the press, offered an opportunity for oppressed groups to express their struggles, to start discourses about racism and illustrate the existing stereotypes of sexuality (Higginbotham, 265). Alice Walker was deeply inspired by Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston received a lot of criticism in her time, because she was an artist who was both African-American and a woman. Despite the possibility of receiving the same amount of criticism, Walker still decided to speak her mind through her work. She creates characters who are "incorrect enough to refuse to be measured by others' standards" (Winchell, 2). Walker wrote in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), "To be an artist and a black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it: and yet, artists we will be" (Gardens, 237).

The Color Purple, which was published in 1982, was Walker's third novel and she won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for Fiction in 1983 for her work. A movie adaptation was made in 1985, which only increased the fame of the novel. Walker's experiences in her personal life serve as a source of inspiration in her work. She grew up in Eatonton, Georgia where young male brutality towards women and violence was part of daily life. In an interview Walker said about her grandfathers: "as young men, middle-aged men, they were … brutal. One grandfather knocked my grandmother out of a window. He beat one of his children so severely that the child had epilepsy. Just a horrible, horrible man" (Winchell, 6). However, as her grandfathers grew older they became sweet, sensitive men, despite their previous behavior. This is also seen in her novels; Walker is more sympathetic towards the older black male characters. Also in her immediate family violence was not uncommon. Her father felt the need to dominate his wife and children, and her resistance was often met with violence. Her father had a sexist attitude. His daughter could not be interested in boys, and if she became pregnant she would not be welcome in the house anymore. Walker became pregnant in the last year of college, which made her contemplate suicide. At the same time, her father encouraged his sons to experiment with sex (Winchell, 7-9). Thus, in Walker's personal life she experienced older black men as more sensitive and sweet, while the younger men in her life were aggressive and sexist. Experiencing this form of sexism has motivated

Walker's feminist views, and it has resulted in the fact that she became a spokesperson for (black) women.

Walker studied women's liberation ideology, learning that her father's and brothers' sexist behavior were an imitation of the society they lived in. Walker grew up with the oppression of black women, in a society ruled by white people. Her mother worked hard and looked up to white people. Walker said about her mother, "My mother, a truly great woman who raised eight children of her own and half a dozen of the neighbors' without a single complaint – was convinced that she did not exist compared to "them." She subordinated her soul to theirs and became a faithful and timid supporter of the "Beautiful White People."" (Gates&Appiah, 38). The fact that white people were the ones with power in American society was also evident in her own family, as her mother looked up to white people, subordinating herself to them even though she was a hard working woman that had no reason to feel like a lesser person than her white counterparts.

Walker has different characters in her work that go through three different cycles of her personal construct of the history of black women. The women of the first cycle belong to the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth century. These women are the "suspended women." Walker calls black women of the post-Reconstruction period "suspended women," as most of the women in this group were excluded from society, because of the pressures that were put on them by society. People only saw them as (cheap) laborers. As Zora Neale Hurston put it, this group of black women in this period were "the mules of the world," carrying the weight of racial and sexual oppression (Gates&Appiah, 40). Most of the characters of Walker, and of other black female writers such as Frances Harper and Toni Morrison, are suspended women: artists who were not able to express themselves creatively (Gates&Appiah, 41). In a way, Walker herself was also a suspended woman, being a black woman and an artist in a society where she was only expected to do cheap labor, however she resisted by becoming an artist. Walker's own experiences and analysis of the historical struggles contributed to the exploration of the tragedies in lives of black women, as they were limited by sexual and racial oppression (Gates&Appiah, 43-44). Poverty and physical, emotional and sexual abuse from men who are abused themselves are all themes that are evident in her work.

The second cycle belongs to women in the forties and fifties, when some African-Americans desired and attempted to be part of mainstream America, while assimilation meant that ethnicity was entirely denied by most Americans. "Several literary critics have labeled this period in black literature a

period of "mainstreaming" because of the indications in literature that writers (…) were "raceless"" (Gates&Appiah, 44). Some women were trying to be part of the white society and as a result they denied their background of poverty. Like the first cycle, Walker constructs these women also as victims, not of physical violence but of emotional violence that estranges them from their roots. "As a writer especially concerned with the need for black people to acknowledge and respect their roots, Walker is sensitive to these women who are divorced from their heritage" (Gates&Appiah, 45).

The third cycle belongs to women in the late sixties, who have gained a new awareness after the political changes in the sixties, such as the freedom movement. This emerging black woman has suffered, but never loses the energy for political activism, and the search for the meaning of their heritage, their roots and traditions (Gates&Appiah, 47). Thus, Walker's female characters go through three different cycles. At first, they are suspended women, not really participating in society. Then, there is the second cycle of women in the forties and fifties, where black women try to be part of mainstream (white) America and deny their own background and culture, and in the third cycle black women reclaim their past. These characters are based on real women in the 18th, 19th and 20th century. Of course, not every woman was like these type of characters, but they do represent some types of women in American society. These types of women also inspired black feminism, be it to do the opposite as a reaction of their behavior, like the second cycle, or to empower them, like the third cycle.

2.2 Male Domination in *The Color Purple*

The Color Purple is one of Walker's most famous works. The novel is in epistolary form, set from the beginning of 1900 through the mid-1940s. The main character is Celie, a 14-year-old girl from the South who faces oppression, mainly from the men in her life. For most of the story Celie writes letters directed to God, because she feels lonely and God is the only one she can turn to. She talks about the hardships and oppression she faces as a young black woman. From a young age, she loses any privacy she has over her body. She is repeatedly raped by her stepfather, whom she first believes to be her father. She gets pregnant from him twice, and he takes both children away. Besides raping her and impregnating her, her stepfather also beats her and forces her into a marriage with a widower named Albert, in the novel often referred to as Mr. ____, who is actually in love with blues singer miss Shug Avery. Albert treats Celie as a servant and "an occasional sexual convenience" (Gates&Appiah, 16). When his son asks why he beats Celie, he says it's simply because Celie is his wife, representing the dominancy of the male in a marriage in their time. Generation upon generation, men were raised to dominate their wives. Albert learned this from his father and is teaching it to his son as well. However, Celie gains enough courage to stand up to him, and in the end, feeling supported by the women in her life, especially her sister Nettie, Celie is able to break out of Albert's control and leaves for Memphis where she starts a business to design clothes.

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 (Gates&Appiah, 17). "In *The Color Purple* the role of male domination in the frustration of black women's struggle for independence is clearly the focus" (Gates&Appiah, 17). 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 (Talif & Sedehi, 430). 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" (Winchell, 86). 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.

2.3 Gender and Sexuality in *The Color Purple*

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" (Bell, 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. "Mr ____ 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 (Talif & Sedehi, 430).

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" (Winchell, 92). 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" (Gates&Appiah, 216). 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 where taught and expected to oppress their female counterparts.

Chapter 3: *The Color Purple* and Black Feminism

3.1 Dimensions of Oppression in *The Color Purple*

To research how *The Color Purple* is situated in black feminism, I will apply the black feminist theory to the novel and to see how the two complement each other, particularly using Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, author of *Black Feminist Thought*. There are not that many black female scholars, and Collins provides a fairly complete insight discussing a considerable amount of black feminism. However, she only mentions *The Color Purple* briefly and does not analyze its significance within black feminism. Nonetheless, key points of black feminism that Collins mentions can also be found in *The Color Purple.* The first element of black feminism that I am addressing is the institutionalized oppression, subdivided into the three dimensions of oppression as discussed in the first chapter. Collins' dimensions of oppression as discussed in the first chapter are also present in *The Color Purple*, though in a less general way than it is described by Collins.

The first dimension concerning economic oppression, relating to the exploitation of black women's labor, is present in the fact that Sofia is more or less forced to work for the mayor, because she is punished if she resists. The mayor's wife asks her to become her maid, but Sofia rejects her offer. The mayor then slaps her for disrespecting him and his wife, to which Sofia reacts by hitting him back. As a result, Sofia is sentenced to work as the mayor's maid for twelve years. Moreover, Celie is economically dependent on Albert, though this dimension remains in the background.

The second dimension regarding political oppression is explained by Collins as the denial of the vote, but it is present in the novel on a more personal level in the male domination that exists in the novel. Celie does not receive proper education, because she is taken from school by her stepfather when she becomes pregnant. She is only literate because her sister Nettie taught her how to read and write. Her father also takes her children away from her, rapes and beats her. He also forces her into marriage with Albert, who beats her as well, his excuse being that it is because Celie is his wife. Although the political dimension may not be as clear at first sight, it is definitely present in a way in which women are treated as the lesser persons in American society.

The third and last dimension, which considers ideological oppression in terms of stereotypical images of black women, can also be found in *The Color Purple* in several scenes where images are reflected upon the characters. The characters are aware of the gender roles that American society expects from them, and feel pressure to behave according to these socially constructed images. For example, Sofia and Harpo feel like they need to adhere to the particular gender roles that are seen as normal in society, even though it is not what either of them want. Harpo likes to do 'women's work' and working in the household, while Sofia likes to do more physical work. This clearly describes the fact that the characters know what society expects of them, and feel the need to adhere to them, even though they will be happiest if they let go of that pressure and take on the role in the marriage that they would want for themselves. In a way, Walker criticizes this ideological oppression, by reversing the stereotypical gender roles and creating female characters who have more masculine characteristics, and vice versa. Moreover, Celie criticizes Albert when he mentions to her that he thinks Shug acts like a man. She tells him that she thinks the characteristics that he appropriates to men, are womanly.

Yet, *The Color Purple* also deviates at certain points from the dimensions of oppression, as the strong female characters in the novel do resist the oppression they face. For instance, Sofia does not let herself be beaten by her husband as a submissive wife, and Shug stands up for Celie when she learns that Albert beats her. A feminist aspect can be identified in the fact that the characters do not passively endure the oppression they encounter.

3.2 Heterosexism and Controlling Images in *The Color Purple*

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.

3.3 Sexism in The Color Purple

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 (Gates&Appiah, 212). Celie's oppression can be identified within her vulnerability that has grown from her being a woman and being dominated by her stepfather (Gates&Appiah, 215). 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 dominancy. As we can see, the discrimination based on sex is present in American society, as well as in *The Color Purple.*

3.4 Culture of Dissemblance in *The Color Purple*

The "culture of dissemblance" as discussed in the first chapter is also present in the *The Color Purple.* Since it is hard for black women to talk about the oppression that they face, books such as *The Color Purple* are important to provide an insight to themes of sexism and racism. Even though it is fiction, it still functions as a representation of what actually happens within the black community, something that black women do not often talk about. Collins states that Walker creates a voice for women with similar experiences as Celie, in an attempt to start discussions about the politics of black womanhood. "By creating Celie and giving her the language to tell of her sexual abuse, Walker adds Celie's voice to muted yet growing discussions of the sexual politics of Black womanhood. But when it comes to other important issues concerning Black women's sexuality, US Black women have found it almost impossible to say what has happened" (Collins, 123). Celie writes letters to God as a much needed outlet, as a result of her loneliness. Black women with the same type of experiences, who do not feel comfortable to share them with the people around them, could relate to this character.

Celie writes letters to God, because she feels like no one else listens. The book starts with the sentence: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill you mammy" (*The Color Purple*, 3), after which Celie proceeds to write letters to God, telling him about all the hardships she has faced that she did not tell anyone about, such as being raped by her stepfather. Out of guilt and shame, Celie deals with this kind of abuse with silence and secrecy, but writing the letters addressed to God gives her a voice. "Stripped of any right to the privacy of her body, and sentenced to vocal exile, she manages to "speak" in public by becoming a talking book, taking on her body the rape, incest, slave labor, and beating that would otherwise be addressed to other women" (Gates&Appiah, 215). However, throughout the book, Celie changes, breaks her silence, and "writes herself free." For instance, until Shug teaches her how, Celie does not feel like she has a right to control her body and her pleasure. This is a characteristic of black women's literature. Individual black women in literature often change their consciousness and become empowered throughout a story. Many African-American women writers share the belief that "no matter how oppressed an individual woman may be, the power to save the self lies within the self" (Collins, 119). Even though the bond between black women can be very strong, and they can empower each other, ultimately the individual woman is the only one who can define her. *The Color Purple* represents how black women create their own

voice. Celie starts out by writing letters to God, writing about being sexually, physically and emotionally abused. This is when she first starts to acquire a voice. Eventually, throughout the story she starts to speak up and talk to others more and more.

Collins mentions four ideas about black women's consciousness in black feminism: "the importance of self-definition, the significance of self-valuation and respect, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and the centrality of a changed self to personal empowerment" (Collins, 119). Black women intellectuals, among them black women authors, explore these ideas of consciousness. In *The Color Purple* Walker gives a glimpse into the consciousness of a black girl in the beginning of the twentieth century, and how this consciousness changes. By the increased attention that is paid to consciousness, a new political space is created for the discussions about the oppression that black women encounter. Consciousness acknowledges the complexity and intersectionality of race, gender, class and sexuality (Collins, 120). The rise of consciousness of black women to be self-reliant and the importance of self-valuation indicates the shift from a "culture of dissemblance" towards developing of a voice to encourage discussions about black female oppression.

3.5 Public Reaction to *The Color Purple*

The importance of literature by black female authors such as *The Color Purple* is evident in the fact that it has provoked some criticism, proving that black feminism is not at the point where it wants to be. Walker received some hostile reactions when the book came out in 1982. This is good in the sense that it opens discussions about black feminism. Patricia Hill Collins states that female African-American intellectuals have been speaking out more about their opinions on gender inequality within black civil society since 1970s. This sudden increase of published work by black female writers in the 1970s and 1980s evoked some hostility, especially from African-American men. Calvin Hernton argues that this "masculine bias" comes from the interpretation that it will be "counter-productive" for the goal of the black struggle. However, he says, "while black men have achieved outstanding recognition throughout the history of black writing, black women have not accused the men of collaborating with the enemy and setting back the progress of the race" (Hernton, 5).

Walker based the character Celie on her great-great-grandmother, who was raped by her master and got pregnant when she is was eleven years old. Celie is raped by a black man, whom she believes to be her biological father. This was one of the reasons that both the novel and the movie evoked an "angry outcry" from parts of the black community. It does not seem like there is any positive portrayal of a black man in the story, and the representation of a black family was "demeaning" (Winchell, 86). As a counterargument, Walker states that her critics failed to see the fact that Albert changes throughout the story, and that he, too, suffers from the pressure from American society to fulfill the stereotypical gender roles (Winchell, 87).

The use of the vernacular for Celie was also a point of criticism. Walker explains however that having "Celie speak in the language of her oppressors would be to deny her the validity of her existence; to suppress her voice would be to murder her and to attack all those ancestors who spoke as she does" (Winchell, 87). Mel Watkins, author of the New York Times book review in 1982, recognizes the fact that the epistolary style of the novel can also put off some readers, as the vernacular makes Celie seem like a naïve and uneducated girl. However, Watkins argues that using the letters, without the intrusion of the author, makes it easier for the reader to identify with the character. Moreover, Celie's progression as a person can be identified through the letters. Her letters become "sharper and more informed"

(Gates&Appiah, 18).

Watkins also critiques Nettie's correspondence from Africa. Her letters describe examples of female oppression that can be compared to the ways in which women were oppressed in the Deep South, but "they are often mere monologues on African history." According to Watkins, they "seem lackluster and intrusive" (Gates&Appiah, 18). Additionally, Walker has been accused of only portraying men positively when they are too old to be a sexual threat (Winchell, 97). For example, Celie is nicer about Albert and Harpo in her letters when they are older. A trend that can be seen here is that the men in Walker's novel do not become more likeable characters because of age, but rather because they take on more feminine characteristics. When he is older, Albert does his own housekeeping, cooking for himself, working in the fields, and he even sews with Celie when they sit on the porch (Winchell, 97).

Many black men were unable to empathize with the character of a black woman suffering under sexism, or did not even acknowledge the struggle, and some men even used the popularity of *The Color Purple* for their own struggle with oppression (Winchell, 98). In her essay *In the Closet of the Soul* in *Living by the Word*, Walker states that "indeed, there are many black men who appear unaware that sexism exists (or do not even know what it is), or that women are oppressed in virtually all cultures, and if they do recognize there is abuse, their tendency is to minimize it or to deflect attention from it to themselves" (Walker, 79). Moreover, many black men "drew attention to themselves," but not to use the opportunity to learn, understand and acknowledge the fact that they oppressed women and children, they drew attention to themselves to claim that they were put in a bad light by the book, and they were the ones being oppressed (Walker, 79). Walker points out that black men have not noticed Albert's progress, because even though he is an oppressor, he changes and grows as a character throughout the story. One thing that people may fail to notice is the fact that Albert is part white, and he inherited the plantation house from his white grandfather, who was a slave owner. Albert learned how to treat women from his father, who in turn learned this from his father, Albert's grandfather. They do not necessarily realize that their behavior is sexist; they simply repeat the behavior they see from others.

Thus, *The Color Purple* has provoked some criticism, which Walker has also partly addressed in interviews and her essay in *Living by the Word*. The fact that especially African-American men criticized the book indicates that black feminism is not where it aims to be, but it does open discussions on black

feminism, which means that it is moving forward. It is apparent that *The Color Purple* at the very least stimulates a conversation between black men, black women and white men and women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has had a significant role in black feminism. 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 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.

There are, of course, strengths and limitations to this thesis. I address the gap in feminist literature of the fact that *The Color Purple* is often mentioned, but hardly studied in depth and used as a representative for black feminism. Moreover, late 20th century white feminist theory barely discusses black feminism and its intersectionality even though this is an essential aspect of feminism.

To limit the scope of this thesis, I chose to mainly focus on one of multiple black feminists, namely Patricia Hill Collins. As a result, ideas of other black feminists are not included. Moreover, to find out how this literary work fits in 20th century black feminism, I used sources that are mainly from the 20th century, which do not entirely represent black feminism the way it is now. Therefore, I recommend further in depth analysis of contributions by other scholars on black feminism, such as bell hooks, Evelynn Hammonds, Angela Davis, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Hazel V. Carby, and more recent studies of black feminism. Furthermore, to realize the goals of black feminism, I think that public debate on this topic needs to be stimulated, in order to raise awareness and attempt to embed black feminism more in mainstream feminist theory.

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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