

Racism in Alice Walker's "The Color Purple"

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Abstract: African-American literature can be defined as writings that have been written by African descent people who have been living in the United States. It regards as a highly varied writing. This study is divided into two chapters. The first chapter deals with African American literature. The second chapter deals with the important themes in the novel, "The Color Purple", like Racism, Religion, womanism and Violence.

Keywords: (womanism, African-American literature, civil rights, movements)

1. INTRODUCTION

African-American literature is considered as the body of literature that is produced in the United States by African descent writers. It starts with the works of the late 18th-century writers such as Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, then arriving to the early top stages of the nineteenth century with narratives. Then the stage of Harlem Renaissance which starts at 1920s was flourishing times for literature and arts. Many writers of African-American literature prove their ability to win the highest awards such as Toni Morrison who won the Nobel Prize in 2008..... (1)

Before the American Civil War, the literature basically consisted of diaries that had written by people who had run away from slavery; the slave narratives were called genres, which included sketches of life under slavery and the way of justice and Access to freedom. The 20th century shows a new turn which was non -fictions works. They appear for certain reasons such as to face or appease racist issues in the United States. Some of those authors are W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington.

Many issues such as racial segregation and Black Nationalism had been written during the American Civil Rights movement, by authors like Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks. Now a days, African-American literature has become accepted as a legal part of American literature, with books such as Roots: The Saga of an American Family by Alex Haley, The Color Purple (1982) by Alice Walker, which won the Pulitzer Prize. (3)

Broadly, African-American literature can be defined as writings that have been written by African descent people who have been living in the United States. It regards as a highly varied writing. (4) The general focus of African-American literature is on the role of African Americans within the larger American society and what is the value of being an American. (5)

2. FEATURES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

The African American Literature contains many formal characteristics. Its language is rhythmic, dramatic, evocative for instance: "Darkness is like a cage in black around me, shutting me off from the rest of the world". The African American writers used to refer to color-race-ethnicity for instance: "I don't get in trouble at school or have any problems with people picking on me. I am nice to everyone regarding his or her color or sex. They also use vocabularies, images, metaphors. For instance: "I feel like I'm suffering from being with world. There no lights, food, water, bed and clothes for me to put on. I am frighten, scared of what might happened if no one finds me. But I pray and pray until they do find me". (6)

Many writers of that literature used cultural references. Example: "How about slipping me some chitterlings in tonite". They also used the Ethno linguistic idioms,. For instance: "...a fight has broke loose"; "It would run me crazy...." verbal

inventiveness, unique nomenclature were additional characteristics that were used by those writers; for instance: “[The settlers] were pioneerific”; “[The box] has an eye look-out”. (7)

The oral culture of African-American is rich in poetry, including spirituals, gospel music, blues and rap. This oral poetry also appears in the African-American tradition of Christian sermons, which make use of deliberate repetition, cadence and alliteration. African-American literature especially written poetry, but also prose—has a strong tradition of incorporating all of these forms of oral poetry, but not all works by African-American writers are consisting of such characteristics. (8)

Signification is one trope that is common to African-American literature. Gates claims that signifying “is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes are subsumed, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, and also hyperbole, an litotes, and metalepsis. Signification also refers to the way in which African-American “authors read and criticize other African American texts in an act of rhetorical self-definition (9)

3. WRITERS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

There are many eras that American African literature has been experienced. The early era is "Early African-American literature". It shows that African American literature has similarly the same deep roots that United States have. Many writers emerge at that time but the author of the oldest known piece of African-American literature is Lucy Terry who wrote a poem 1846 under the title "Bars Fight". Another writer is Phillis Wheatley who was born in Senegal, but she was brought to America after being captured and sold into slavery at the age of seven. It was very hard to believe for some whites who saw that it is impossible for a black woman to write such accurate poetry. To prove that she had written her works, Wheatley had to defend herself in the court. Jupiter Hammon (1711–1806?) was another early African-American author who wrote in 1778 an ode to Phillis Wheatley. Séjour was famous in his short story and Brown in his novel *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853) which was regarded as the first novel that is written by an African American. (10)

The second era that American African literature contains is the period of Slave narratives in the middle of the 19th century. It could be defined as the genres that were written by the slaves who displaced and came to a new place so, they wrote about their lives in the south and how they got their freedom. Describing the cruelties of life under slavery was their main purpose. Harriet Beecher Stowe is one of the writers who appeared at that time. He wrote his famous novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in (1852). Thousands of former slaves wrote sketches about their lives. 150 of these sketches were published in the form of separated books and pamphlets. Another African American writer who was born in slavery is Frederick Douglass (c. 1818–95) who succeeded to escape from being a slave. He wrote many well-known works like: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, and My Bondage and My Freedom*. (11)

The third era of African American literature is Post-slavery era, which is started after the slavery and the American Civil War had been finished. The main works that had been written then was non-fiction. These works were only terms about the African Americans in the United States which were written by some African American authors, like W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Jamaican Marcus Garvey, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Charles W. Chesnut. (12)

Harlem Renaissance (1920 - 1940) was regarded as the time of flowering for African American literature and art because of the emergence of many black artists in many fields such as literature, art, music, theatre and many others. It was called so according to Harlem society in New York city where this renaissance started from. Many famous writers appear there like: Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Alice Walker, Dorothy West, Countee Cullen and many others. (13)

Civil Rights Movement era is the period that shows a large emigration of African Americans during World War I and World War II. At that time the black writers were deeply affected, influenced and imprisoned by movement. They tried to create a new concept for Black Nationalism. Many writers tried to achieve such matters like: James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, Lorraine Hansberry, Amiri Baraka, and Martin Luther King, Jr. who was one of the leaders of Civil Rights Movement. (14)

The Recent history period started in the 1970s, in which the academia starts to accept the works of black writers. Began to win many awards and achieve best-selling. (15)

4. RACISM

Racism is defined as the belief that members of one race are basically superior than members of other races. In *The Color Purple*, racism is defined as a white antagonist against a helpless black person. It is interesting to realize that none of the antagonists in the novel are purely one-sided evil beings. Those who bring about the violence are usually victims themselves of some form of abuse. Mr. ___'s son Harpo beats his wife Sofia after Mr. ___ implies that he is less of a man due to Sofia's resistance, saying "Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating. (16)

Mr. ___'s family and the people around him are treated by him much like his own tyrannical father had treated him. Racism is generally viewed as a cage in the novel, by which the blacks are suppressed by the whites. Sofia's imprisonment is a metaphor for blacks imprisoned by racism, confined to servitude and domesticity within their own homes. Due to this racism, there is the belief throughout the novel that "bright skin" is more beautiful. (17)

In her novel Walker clarifies the reason behind people's appreciation to "The Bright Skin" which is regarded as better than the dark skin, which also causes so much trouble. For example, when she was visiting Celie, Mr. ___'s sister criticizes his ex-wife for being "too black," and because she was "too black," she was murdered. (18)

5. RELIGION

In the early parts of the novel, Celie looks for God as her listener and helping hand, also she thinks that He is a completely separated figure from her world, so far Celie does not have a clear understanding of who God is. She only knows that God is a white patriarch." Shug invites Celie to imagine God as something totally different, as an "it" that delights in creation and just wants human beings to love what it has created.. She writes to God because she has no other way to express her feelings. Her writing thrusts her into a rich symbolic life that results in her repudiation of the life she has been assigned and a desire for a more expansive daily existence. While her faith is strong, it's dependent on only what other people have revealed to her about God. (19)

Later she tells Shug that she sees God as a white man. She has this belief because everyone she knows has said God is white and a male, she says " it don't seem quite right", but It's all she has. Later, Shug informs her that God isn't an old white man with a beard: by saying "Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else" . God is inside us! . Also she says God has no race or gender. This enables Celie to see God in a different way. She realizes that persons cannot attribute human qualities to God because God is a part of the unknown. (20)

In a time of the novel , Celie stops thinking of God as she stops thinking of the other men in her life—she "git man off her eyeball" and messaging God in her writing "You must be sleep". But after Celie has chased her patriarchal God away and come up with a new concept of God, she writes in her last letter, "Dear God, Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God." This reimagining of God on her own terms symbolizes Celie's move from an object of someone else's care to an independent woman. It also indicates that her voice is now sufficiently empowered to create her own narrative. (21)

6. WOMANISM

The term Womanism is a new concept which has been devised from folk expression commonly used by Black mothers for their daughters 'You acting womanish'. The term womanish refers to outrageous, courageous, and matured woman who act in an independent manner. Walker gave a new term because it was free from the consideration of the color, the 'black' Feminist Movement which reminded them of being different. A womanist is the one who speaks out against or in defense of something important or the one who loves herself, her culture and who is committed to the survival of whole people.(22)

Most of all, however, the color purple is regarded as a feminist novel about a powerful character that is trying to find out who she is? Valuing what she can become. Celie realizes through her path of searching for truth, that the patriarchal culture she has endured with is abusive to all women. When she meets Shug and escapes from Albert, she learns that women can be equal to men, in power and in knowledge. Near the end of the novel, When Celie returns to live in Georgia she is no longer weak and submissive; instead, she has become a capable, self-assured female who knows she can be content without depending on anyone but herself. This is the ultimate lesson of feminism, which Walker calls "womanism". (23)

Celie and Sofia are the two most mistreated women in the novel. They form a deep bond; they are brought together by their suffering in strong solidarity. In the past, Celie has only known the importance of standing up for other women in her family; she has willingly protected both her mother and her sister from Fonso's mistreatment by sacrificing herself. (24)

Another woman in the novel, who knows the value of women's solidarity is Shug . When she finds how Albert has treated Celie over the years, she loses her desire for him and permanently erases him from her life. Then she helps Celie and Mary Agnes to escape their lives of domestic abuse and drudgery. In the process, she gives Celie a sense of her own unique, beauty and spirit. (25)

7. VIOLENCE

The theme of violence is portrayed many times in the novel. The first face of violence is appeared by the opening of the book when Celie starts to describe her family. She refers to her stepfather who beats her mother and proceeds to rape her. She lives in constant fear of "him" and hopes to protect her sister, Nettie from his violent wrath. Celie is impregnated by her stepfather and when she gives birth to her first baby, her stepfather takes the infant out into the woods and kills it, or so she thinks. Celie fears he will do this to her second newborn baby, as well. Instead, he takes the baby to Monticello and sells it. He takes both babies from Celie, allowing her to believe that he killed them, and sells them in town. (26)

Mr. _____'s first wife was violently killed by her boyfriend in front of their children. Murder seems to be just another act in the town, regardless of its method and intent. And although she was killed instantaneously by a bullet, the very act of murder is pure violence. This violence follows her son Harpo in his own pursuits of marriage. On a day that should be celebrated with love and passion, Mr. _____ beats his new wife, Celie, on their wedding day. Moreover, his violent streak has been passed onto his children, for they also taunt and beat her. One child throws a stone at her head, causing her to bleed.

When Harpo wonders why his father beats Celie, Mr. _____ tells him that beating a wife is a manly and husbandly duty. He beats her because she is his wife, and furthermore because he believes she is lazy. In his mind, these are proper and reasonable reasons for such brute violence. Harpo admits to his father and Celie that he does not beat his wife Sofia. He is embarrassed by his meager actions and wants to know how to make her do everything he asks and be the subservient wife he wants. Sofia even recommends that he beats her so that she listens to his orders. Unfortunately, he returns home with bruises of his own (from her). One day, Celie finds them fighting like two savage men on the porch of her house. The violence has spread to both of them, as they both want control over the other. (27)

8. CONCLUSION

Throughout this study and all over two chapters, I have dealt with the African American literature, one of the famous writers in the African American literature, Alice Walker, and one of the famous novel, The Color Purple, which is written by her.

African American literature has been discussed, in its historical backgrounds, its features and its writers which are stated according to the eras that the African American literature has been experienced. Throughout the African American literature we conclude that it has the same importance as the American literature has.

Lights have been shaded on one of the most important writers in African American literature and the author of the novel of "The Color Purple", Alice Walker, and This study looks deeply to many sides within this writer such as themes that she dealt with.

The most important themes of Alice Walker's The Color Purple have been discussed, like racism, womanism, religion and violence. The main aim that this study tries to convey is to reflect the racism idea that most of African women have been suffered from.

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