Race, Gender in The Color Purple By Alice Walker

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ABSTRACT: African American Literature is rooted in America by writers of African descent. The primary origins of this genre can be traced in eighteenth century writers as Philips Whitley and Olaudah Equiano, who reached high points with slave narratives and the Harlem Renaissance. Today African American Literature is continued with authors such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and Walter Mosley who are ranked as the top writers in the United States. This genre is accepted as an integral part of American literature. This special kind of literature has generally focused on themes of particular interest to Black people in the United States.

INTRODUCTION
Alice Walker was born in Entonton, Georgia, the daughter of Willie Lee and Minnie Talluah Grant Walker. Educated at Spelman and Sarah Lawrence college, Walker was an active participant in the civil rights movement, working on voter registration in Georgia and for the Head Start program in Mississippi, as well as for the department of welfare in New York City. She has taught at Jackson State College in the sixties, and at Tougaloo College, Wellesley College, the university of Massachusetts at Amherst, the University of California at Berkeley, and Brandeis University for varied intervals in the 1970s. She has won several awards for her work, most notably the Pulitzer Prize fiction and the National Book Award, both for The Color Purple in 1983, (Gal, 1993) Walker has published five novels, and it is her novels that have secured her reputation for the larger public; The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970), Meridian (1976), The Color Purple (1982), The Temple of My Familiar (1989) and Possessing the Secret of Joy (1992).

2 BLACK FEMINISM
The lives of African-American women have been critically affected by racism, sexism, and classism, which are system of societal and psychological restriction. The racist, sexist and classist structure the American society compartmentalizes its various ethnic groups, denigrates the colored as inferior and characterizes males and females as center and margin respectively. Just as black as groups are relegated to an underclass by virtue of their race, women are related to a separate caste by virtue of their sex. Black women are related to a separate caste by virtue of their sex. A system of unequal power and privilege where humans are divided into groups or “races” with asocial rewards unevenly distributed to groups based on their racial classification. Variations of racism include institutionalized racism, scientific racism, and everyday racism. “In the United States, racial segregation constitutes a fundamental principle of how racism is organized.” (Collins, 2000. P.300).

Black Feminism is the acknowledgement that women of color have been oppressed by sexism and racism, that there was a failure to recognize and address these issues in the Feminist Movement and the Black Liberation Movement, and that women of color have their own agenda that neither movement can take on. “Black Feminism focuses on the experiences, needs, and desires of women of color” (Aldridge 1993).

3 THE COLOR PURPLE
The Color Purple is a novel that begins with a fourteen-year-old girl’s cry for help. Celie has suffered repeated rapes and brutal beatings by the man she believes to be her father, Alphonso, who tells her, in the novel’s opening line, , “You better not tell nobody but God.”. Celie, the protagonist in the novel is a poor, uneducated and very plain looking fourteen year old and living in the South of America. The Color Purple has generated the most public attention. Narrated through the voice of Celie, The Color Purple is an epistolary novel-a work structured through a series of letters. Celie writes about the misery of childhood incest, physical abuse, and loneliness in her letters to God. After being repeatedly raped by her stepfather, Celie is forced to marry a widowed farmer with three children. Yet, her deepest hopes are realized with the help of a loving community of women, including her husband’s mistress, Shug Avery, and Celie’s sister, Nettie. Celie gradually learns to see herself as a desirable woman, a healthy and valuable part of the universe. The Color Purple brings components of nineteenth-century slave autobiography and sentimental fiction together with a confessional narrative of
sexual awakening. In Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, the protagonist Celie undergoes a remarkable personal change. She evolves from being joyless, submissive and abused by her Pa and her husband Mr. to running her own business, owning her own house and feeling younger than ever. Celie’s most noticeable change is in the ways she relates to traditional gender roles throughout novel. “Initially, Celie believes that being a woman inescapably means that she has to serve and obey men and she is thus a victim of patriarchy. She is eventually introduced to another way of living by the strong female characters of Sofia and Shug who embrace her in a kind of sisterhood, which is a way for oppressed women to resist patriarchy”. (Sundqvist, 2006, p. 12).

4 CONCLUSION
Walker asserts that the American society is a racist, sexist and colourist capitalist society which operates on the basis of unnatural hierarchical distinctions. The oppression of Black women by their husbands, brothers, lovers etc. is an outcome of this system. *The Color Purple* became a controversial novel because of its strong indictment of the racism and sexism that victimized African-American women in the rural American South. Yet it is also the story of the growth and development of the central character from an ignorant, abused teenager to an accomplished woman who has learned to stand up for herself and cope with her hostile surroundings. The theme is liberation, as brought about by Celie’s desire to learn and to improve her. *The Color Purple* is a novel of celebration of heroism of black women who fight to escape from the yoke of forced identities that drives them along paths they have not chosen. The title itself signifies” a celebration of beauty, the pleasure of living and how that celebration is at the centre of spiritual and personal growth. “It also symbolizes the spirit of the black women, and her sexuality, bold and committed. Although far, more sensitive to social constrains and particularly those of race and class than the average white critic, black critics, too, saw the subject-black or white-as essentially free and as an autonomous moral agent, able to transcend the limitations imposed by time, place, and color. The relations between the white majority and black minority could be written interims of class relations, with the black minority kept subservient by ideology.” In *The Color Purple*, the heroine, who ends as successful entrepreneur, stays within an individualist, capitalist frame and is therefore not full liberated”. (Bertens, 2001, p 110)

REFERENCES: