

# Oppression of Women in Alice Walker's Works

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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# **OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN ALICE WALKER'S WORKS**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and  
Literature and Croatian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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## **Abstract**

Alice Walker, one of the most prominent African American writers, created a great variety of characters in her rich opus. Among them, some of the most notable ones are the characters of black women who experience a life marked by discrimination, violence, and prejudice, starting already in their childhood. Oppression is present in various forms, in every aspect of their lives, and they are forced to deal daily with sexism and racism, especially those women who come from the Southern society. As a result of patriarchy, they are left with insecurities about their own bodies and minds, and a constant fear caused by male authority. Walker creates female characters who emerge from this kind of environment, but are aware of the injustice and gradually become strong individuals, discovering their own identity along the way, and liberating themselves from the oppressor. She explores various topics and situations, and the main idea remains the same: the idea of emancipation and freedom of black women. With that in mind, she has created powerful characters and works that are valuable pieces of African American contemporary literature.

Key words: African Americans, women, oppression, discrimination, identity, stereotypes, emancipation

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## **Introduction**

Women have been protagonists of literary works since the very beginnings of literature, and a significant amount of those focuses on the more difficult and problematic aspects of a woman's life. African American literature in particular has brought to surface the discrimination black women were forced to endure, both in the past and today, as well as their fight for equality and justice. Such are the many works of Alice Walker, one of the most appreciated and famous African American authors of today. Many of her novels, essays, and short stories deal with oppressed female characters and their life of struggle in a patriarchal society. Discrimination is evident on many levels and it is present in nearly all aspects of everyday life. First and foremost, Walker's protagonists are faced with racism and the fact that they will often, if not always, be looked down on because of their skin color – something they aren't able to choose or change. Although this applies to both men and women, racial discrimination is much more difficult to endure and fight against for women because they additionally have to cope with sexism and traditional gender roles that were imposed on them.

Similarly to many of her female characters, Walker was born to a sharecropping family in Eatonton, Georgia, on February 9, 1944. From a very early age, she was showing signs of extreme brightness and intellect, noticed by both her family members and her teachers. Since her parents had to work hard to support their family, Walker started school one year before she was supposed to, at four years old, and continued to amaze everyone with the knowledge she accumulated by reading book after book. In 1952, an eye injury caused by a BB gun accident while she was playing with her siblings left her with a permanent scar and damaged sight. The injury affected her even more on a mental level, evoking insecurity and shame about the way she looked, as well as anger because of her brothers not being punished for what they did. Her scar was later repaired and scar tissue removed, but the effects of the

injury remained on the inside. Nevertheless, Alice Walker continued her success in school and in 1961 graduated from Butler-Baker High School and enrolled at Spellman College. It was about that time that she started to notice the injustice with which her race was being treated, and expressed interest for the Civil Rights Movement, which will later be seen in her writing. (White 2004: 14-60)

Walker transferred to Sarah Lawrence College and, a year after graduating, married a civil rights attorney, Melvin Leventhal, with whom she had her only daughter, Rebecca Grant. In 1968 her first collection of poems, *Once*, was published, and she became a writer-in-residence at Jackson State College. Two years later, she also published her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Apart from writing, she worked as a lecturer and editor, but she continued to create a various range of literary works which are of great value for both African American and feminist literature. Among them are three collections of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, and *The Way Forward Is With a Broken Heart*. She published seven volumes of poems, some of which are the already mentioned *Once*, then *Revolutionary Petunias*, *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning*, *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing*, and others. Her most notable and famous work is certainly *The Color Purple*, a 1982 novel, for which she has won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award. Film adaptation of the book was released in 1985 and nominated for eleven Oscars. Her other novels include *Meridian*, *The Temple of My Familiar*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*.<sup>1</sup>

Walker also writes non-fictional books, starting with *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, a collection of articles and essays. Another notable work included here, and to whose writing led the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is the book *Warrior*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://alicewalkersgarden.com/about/> (Accessed Sep 10, 2017)

*Marks* about the practice of female genital mutilation that women of some cultures are still subjected to. Walker thoroughly researched the topic, interviewing women who have had the procedure, and the book was made into a documentary of the same name.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this work is to try to show in which ways Alice Walker has included the theme of women and their oppression in her works. With a mention of the author's general view towards women and her representation of them in literature, different forms of discrimination will be analyzed, such as racial and sexual, together with the portrayal of traditional gender roles in a patriarchal society and the effect it has on women.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://alicewalkersgarden.com/about/> (Accessed Sep 10, 2017)

## **1 Racial discrimination**

Besides being women, the characters of Walker's works are primarily determined by another big factor: their skin color. Although race should not be such an important element in defining a person, racism is, unfortunately, still a huge problem. Racial discrimination is something that African American women face every single day, in addition to the unavoidable sexual discrimination they are dealing with. The women of Alice Walker's works face racism from a very young age, and it affects them profoundly. It is often the source of their insecurities and fears, stopping them from becoming strong and independent, keeping them in the chains of race, marked forever by an element of their lives they are unable to change. She portrays the effects racial discrimination has on young African American women, and how it follows them into their older years, causing them to feel insecure about their look and heritage. That is precisely why so many of them strive to get away from it, to run from their past and their tradition, hoping that they will be able to blend in with the predominantly white society which still now, in the age of progress, tends to look down on those that are different.

Just like Walker herself, many of her female characters come from the South, and grow up surrounded with prejudices and oppression. These issues frequently start in their childhood, in their homes and schools, and span over the period of their whole life. Marginalized and unaccepted by the white people around them, black women have to learn how to struggle and stick together, not letting life bring them to their knees. In most cases, it is difficult, since Walker often depicts characters that have been severely damaged by the racism and sexism they are forced to face. Nevertheless, they eventually learn how to survive, how to fight and stand up for themselves. Their route to liberation is a long and bumpy one, but they survive it and they go on because, in the end, they come out to be strong, fearless women.



Racism affects both male and female characters, but the way in which men experience it often has consequences on their relation to women. Feeling hatred all around them, they become incredibly frustrated and angry, and they take it out on their wives and daughters – because women are seen as inferior to men. Such is the case in Walker’s first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, where the character of Grange – and, later, also his son Brownfield – simply cannot deal with the way white people treat him, and in return harasses his entire family. “In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker uses the novel form to explore the complexities of the relationships between poverty, racism, and gender oppression in the life of a black Southern sharecropping family, the Copelands.” (Christian 1994: 5) The male characters of this novel nurse so much hate inside them towards the white man, that they are no longer capable of showing love and affection, not even to their own family. Domestic violence thus becomes a huge problem, with its roots being in the overall horrible treatment that black people experience and that is what Alice Walker dives into in her 1970 debut novel. “In *Grange Copeland* she demonstrates the ways in which the oppression the men face sometimes results in cruelty to wives and the destruction of children.” (Christian 1994: 5) It goes as far as Brownfield’s wife, Mem, being killed by her husband. In the end, however, the title character eventually comes to reason and is able to see his mistakes in the treatment of his family members, deciding that the discrimination he faces must not affect the relationships inside a family and trying to make up for his deeds by protecting his granddaughter, Ruth.

Such brutal physical violence is a daily part of lives of women in the collection *In Love and Trouble*. In the story “The Child Who Favored Daughter”, the premise is similar to that in *Grange Copeland*: a father who is so angry with the white world that he destroys his own family. “To understand the violence of this man toward these three women in his family, author Walker makes us know that it is the result of an immense chaos within – the components of which are his impotent rage against the white world which abuses him, his

vulnerable love for his child and his sister, both of whom chose white lovers.” (Christian 1994: 93-94) The cause of his actions, however, does not in any way justify them, but it shows that the discrimination and hatred with which all African Americans are treated often results in further outbursts of violence – violence of those who consider themselves superior over the ones that are thought to be inferior inside the already maltreated race, that is, violence of men over women.

The effects of racial discrimination against African Americans are seen perfectly in *The Color Purple*, where female characters experience every kind of oppression possible. Inside the circle of those racially oppressed, women are additionally discriminated against, not only by white people, but by their own husbands and men. They are considered weak and useless, worth nothing without a man standing behind them. A man is taught that he has to beat his wife in order for her to obey him, and this kind of violence is often a result of men themselves being oppressed and looked down on by the white people. In front of the whites, men feel the same as women do in front of men, be they white or black. Men are allowed to take their anger out on women, but women have nowhere to turn to treat their own frustrations, which subsequently leads to either their destruction or their liberation. The character of Sofia is the only woman in the novel that chooses to fight from the very beginning. Besides resisting her husband’s attempts of controlling her through violence, she also stands up to the white people who try to degrade and harass her. “The voice of sexual and racial *ressentiment* – for instance, she twice expresses a desire to “kill” her sexual and racial oppressors – Sofia is the first woman Celie knows who refuses to accede to both the patriarchal and the racist demand that the black woman demonstrate her abjection to her oppressors. But the mythic test of Sofia’s strength takes place in her refusal to enter the servitude of double discourse demanded of blacks by the white culture.” (Berlant 2000: 12)

## 2 Walker's approach to women

### 2.1 Female protagonists

Although Walker's novels and stories deal with different kinds of topics and problems, a great amount of them concentrates on female characters who often are protagonists of the literary work. These masterly depicted, colorful characters perhaps do not face the same difficulties in their fictional lives, but in the core of it are the same two issues: they are black, and they are women. Because of these two facts purely – facts that they cannot in any way influence or change – Walker's women are severely oppressed and discriminated against. Subsequently, the main idea of their storylines is frequently their journey to emancipation and freedom. It is enough to take a look at Walker's most famous novel, *The Color Purple*, and its main character, Celie. At the beginning of the novel, Celie is a mere shadow of a person: oppressed, unappreciated, and not taken seriously. Through the novel, she comes to terms with her own identity as an independent woman and manages to fight all the obstacles that stand in the way of her freedom. Similarly, the characters in her short story collections *In Love and Trouble* and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* undergo different difficulties and often face tough, life-changing decisions because of their race and gender. They are frequently depicted in contrast with white women and men, either their friends or enemies, which additionally emphasizes the difficulty of their situations. Although faced with discrimination, sexual harassment, and traumatic experiences such as rape and abortion, Walker's female characters rarely surrender or give up under the burden of their problems, but rather fight and are ready to go as far as it takes in order to succeed and achieve their goals in life (even as far as committing a crime). The first collection, *In Love and Trouble*, brings to light a range of black female characters tormented by the issues of race, gender, and identity. "Though written over a period of some five years, the volume is unified by two of Walker's most persistent characteristics: her use of a Southern Black woman character as protagonist,

and that character's insistence on challenging convention, on being herself, sometimes in spite of herself." (Christian 1994: 130-131)

These characters' lives are marked by a constant fight for equality and understanding, and while some only experience it in their private lives, others take part in it on a higher, political level. Meridian, the protagonist of an earlier novel of the same name, takes part in the Civil Rights Movement, thus trying to make a difference and fight for her rights and the rights of all African American people. She has undergone her own amount of difficulties, including a teenage pregnancy, failed marriage, abortion and so on, but really she is torn between the wish to fight for equality and progress, and yearning to return to tradition, which is what she ends up doing. While most of Walker's novels concern women who are desperate to get away from their suffocating traditional backgrounds, Meridian, as an opposite of that, finds fulfillment in returning to her roots.

Another protagonist haunted by her roots, though in a much more negative way, is Tashi from *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, a 1992 novel. Already seen in *The Color Purple*, this African woman comes to the United States in hopes of starting a new life with her husband, but is still traumatized because of her experiences in the Olinka tribe, when she had to undergo female genital mutilation. The procedure left permanent scars in her mind and caused her deep psychological and emotional problems, until she was finally able to face her past and her culture in hopes of recuperating from the trauma. In her quest for healing, she loses the support of her husband and is left on her own, but in spite of that manages to gather courage to seek revenge.

As seen from the examples given, what Walker wants to emphasize the most in her literary works are precisely the struggles her female characters go through. The oppression they are surrounded with is what, in a way, defines them and gives them the encouragement

needed to fight for liberation. By writing about these struggles, she brought to light an incredible female strength which flows through all her novels and stories – not only the strength to stand up for oneself, but also the strength needed to survive maltreatment and discrimination. Even the strongest among her characters sometimes find themselves on the verge of giving up, but the majority of them still come out as winners. What is important, however, is their inner, psychological path to self-acceptance and self-discovery, through which the readers are given the opportunity of diving into their minds and thoughts and getting to know them on a more intimate level. In this way, Walker makes it possible to see in which ways oppression affects women mentally and emotionally, and the consequences it leaves. Women who have grown up in an oppressive environment are often not even aware of the seriousness of the issue because they perceive it as a normal, everyday situation; they have grown accustomed to it. It is when they start to compare their lives to the lives of others that they become fully aware of the injustice they have been enduring. Most often does this comparison occur when they come into closer contact with white people, especially white women, and are able to notice the differences. Their unawareness arises from the fact that the oppression they face is not only racial, but more often gender-based, and they are submitted to it in their own homes. Upon realizing that life indeed can and should be better for them, they begin discover their own values and identity, striving towards emancipation.

In Alice Walker's great variety of female characters, where every one of them is carefully outlined and depicted in their environment, the core problem stays the same: discrimination and mistreatment of women just because they are women and, additionally, because they carry the burden of the skin color they were born with. Of course, discrimination comes in package with many other elements, and tradition plays a huge role in black women's lives, but that is exactly why Walker chose to depict as much as she could, in many different ways. Through her characters she tells stories of millions of African American women who

are unable to speak for themselves or to do something about the troubles they are forced to go through because they are who they are.

## **2.2 Female identity in Walker's novels**

The journey of Walker's characters through discrimination, abuse and maltreatment is never an easy one, but when they are finally able to surpass all the obstacles that stand in their way, they get a chance to come to terms with their own identity. The women of Walker's novels and stories often start off as confused, without a sense of belonging somewhere, or divided between two cultures. Desperately wanting to escape their tradition, which is marked by slavery and segregation, they seek new beginnings and fresh starts in the midst of modern cultures and society – and that is rarely easy. “Walker does not choose Southern Black women to be her major protagonists only because she is one, but also, I believe, because she has discovered in the tradition and history they collectively experience an understanding of oppression which has elicited from them a willingness to reject convention and to hold to what is difficult.” (Christian 1994: 132-133) What is important is for them to understand that they are not obligated to let go of their heritage in order to become emancipated, free women, but should instead learn to accept it as a vital part of themselves and their identity. Many of them take this path towards self-discovery and self-understanding, but every time it is a completely unique personal experience. While some of them are living an identity that has been forced upon them by their families and culture, others are caught in the middle, torn between wanting to appreciate tradition and wanting to break free from it. One of the latter ones is Meridian, who joins the Civil Rights Movement upon discovering that she is not able to feel fulfilled if she lives by traditional ideas and rules. “Meridian's quest for wholeness and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement is initiated by her feelings of inadequacy in living up to the standards of Black motherhood.” (Christian 1994: 133) She seeks understanding, she seeks to belong, but she does not find herself in the protest either, because

she cannot bring herself to promise that, if necessary, she would be ready to kill. Meridian likes the idea of nonviolent protesting, and is questioning herself about whether it would be right to kill for the sake of resistance. “And the intensity with which Meridian pursues that question is due to her views of herself as a mother, a creator rather than a destroyer of life. The source to which she goes for the answer to that question is her people, especially the heritage that has been passed on to her by her maternal ancestors.” (Christian 1994: 133) Meridian is a character torn between two worlds, two ideas that clash strongly, and as time goes by she comes to understand that no protest or person will give her what she is searching for – she has to find it within herself. A lost, insecure individual at the beginning of the novel, Meridian grows into a woman who understands that she is not obligated to “pick a side”, but is encouraged to find herself within both, to build her identity from both. “Like Walker in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Meridian seeks her identity through the legacy passed on to her by Southern Black women.” (Christian 1994: 133)

Unlike Meridian, Tashi from *Possessing the Secret of Joy* does not make peace with her heritage, but instead seeks answers and wants revenge on the tradition of her tribe, tradition that had made her so emotionally and mentally unstable and confused. Her identity had been forced upon her by her culture, suggesting that she is a woman and what a woman should be – essentially, a tool that serves only for the sake of childbirth – and thus the female genital mutilation procedure. However, Tashi had chosen herself to go through with the ritual, in a desperate cry to reconnect with her tribe, with her people, and to strengthen the sense of belonging which had started to fade. The Olinka people believe that a man would never marry an uncircumcised woman, that those women actually cannot even call themselves women, “real” women – and she wanted to feel and be seen as a “real” woman. Her instability prevents her from adapting to the new environment and drives away her husband, leaving the protagonist on her own in her quest for identity and healing.

Another “failed” attempt of going back to the roots can be seen in the short story *Everyday Use*”, where Dee, the older of two sisters, goes back to her African roots because that is fashionable at the moment. She does not actually appreciate her heritage or feels in touch with her African identity – on the contrary, Dee has spent her life rejecting tradition and “backwardness” of her Southern family, which is why her mother refuses to give her the quilts that her grandmother had made. She feels that the quilts, as a part of Southern tradition, would never be appreciated by Dee as much as they could be if she gives them to her younger daughter, Maggie. “For Maggie appreciates the people who made them while Dee can only possess the “priceless” products.” (Christian 1994: 130) Dee merely uses her African American heritage to present herself as a modern, interesting woman; Maggie, does not misuse her heritage – she understands it, it is an essential part of her.

An identity crisis is what runs through the entire storyline of *The Color Purple*, as Celie’s story evolves and she becomes a self-sufficient, independent woman. Celie cannot come to terms with her own identity because years of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse have left her not knowing who she really is and where does she belong. Such traumatic childhood made her believe that she is indeed in this world just to serve her purpose: do the work and please the men. Her journey of self-discovery begins after the loss of her sister, when she unwillingly marries Mr. \_\_\_\_ and meets influential, strong women who will help her on her quest for identity. Shug Avery, undoubtedly the key figure in Celie’s process of emancipation, was the one who taught her that she should not subdue to her husband and that she should accept and love herself, body and soul. Shug is person with identity, a free, independent woman, and because of that she evokes admiration and respect. As soon as Celie lets go of the ideas and rules that the community has forced upon her, she becomes a happier woman, as free and as emancipated as Shug. She finally understands that she will receive love and respect only after she has learned how to love and respect herself. In that way, Celie



becomes self-confident and strong and is, for the first time ever, able to fight for herself. “She liberates herself, that is, she comes to value herself, through the sensuous love bond she shares with Shug, her husband’s mistress, her appreciation of her sister-in-law Sophie’s resistant spirit, and the letters from her sister Nettie which her husband had hidden from her for many years.” (Christian 1994: 139)

Identity plays a huge role in Walker’s works, in the depiction of her female characters. Women who are oppressed and abused often feel lost and alone, like they do not belong anywhere, and it is difficult for them to fight when they are not even sure of who they really are. The concept of identity, be it racial, ethnic, sexual, or any other, is a crucial part of a human being – it helps people form their goals, express their desires and needs, fit into their community, family, or group. Violence and submission strip a person of their identity and leave them feeling worthless. But Walker’s characters learn to respect themselves and accept their past and their heritage, building their identity from there. More often than not, they are discouraged from their self-discovery by the people around them, all because of the idea that a woman actually cannot be her own person, and therefore does not have an identity of her own. Women are usually identified through their husbands or fathers, since they are subordinated to them, which results in young girls not really having a clear concept of their own self. Growing up in these conditions, they come to believe that they are less worthy than the male figures in their lives and, consequently, are not able to go through life on their own.

Although they come a long way in their search for self-confidence and identity, Walker’s characters also face obstacles throughout that process. Usually they have to cope with discouragement coming from their family members, husbands, and also other women. Humiliation and violence only become worse once the oppressor becomes aware of a woman’s ability to rebel and, in an attempt to stop it, they will turn to all possible ways of remaining in control. In Walker’s *The Color Purple*, when Celie finally gains the courage to

stand up to Albert, he attempts to discourage her by telling her that she cannot do anything because she is a woman:

“He laugh. Who do you think you is? he say. You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddamn, he say, you nothing at all.” (Walker 2003: 206)

The image of a black woman is here associated with someone valueless, insignificant, incompetent, as is the case in many similar situations in Walker’s other novels. Just like black men are perceived as worthless by white people, women are in the same way being degraded by their own race, even their own families. In spite of that, these characters change this perception and turn it to their advantage. Oppressed and dehumanized female characters eventually accept who they are and, more importantly, who they can be. In this way, Alice Walker shifts the identity of a black woman into something that should be admired and appreciated. Her women become images of strength and self-respect, people worthy of admiration, more so because they have gone a long and painful way to achieve it.

### 3 Stereotypical gender roles

#### 3.1 A woman's purpose

Patriarchal society and severe oppression of women have led to the creation of ideas and misconceptions about what women should and shouldn't do. As they were repressed and unappreciated – which all traces back to the times when women were denied education and basic human rights – the concept of women serving only for what nature enabled them of doing was created. They were thought of as useless for anything else except bearing children and taking care of their families, and, although that idea had started to slowly die when they finally became able to be educated and emancipated, it continued to live in areas like the American South, and it still today lives in some parts of the world. African American women of the South were, and sometimes still are, unwillingly defined by what is thought to be their “purpose”. Alice Walker explored this topic profoundly, creating women who were marked by this misconception and were therefore stopped from succeeding or at least leading a normal life. Her characters are often influenced by the society's ideas since their early childhood, and grow up thinking that they really are not in a position to become self-sufficient, independent women. Through their whole childhood, it is sort of implied that one day they are to get married, have children, and take good care of their families – no word about freedom, education, or self-realization. The belief that a woman's fulfillment comes with marriage and children, as wrong as it is, is also considered normal, even logical, and it leaves the women of these stories wanting more, yearning for freedom and a different life.

This “purpose” was exactly what the protagonist of *Meridian* was trying to escape. Upon becoming a mother at a young age, she felt like she was unwillingly living up to the standards of the Southern society and the idea that women were created only to be mothers and wives. She feels the wrongness of this idea on her own skin, as her marriage soon crumbles and she longs to achieve more, to fight for some higher goals. Meridian gives up the

role of a mother; she gives up her son for adoption so she could join the Civil Rights Movement. And yet, when she's faced with the question whether she would be willing to kill, she turns to the mother inside her. Although she sort of ran away from that part of her, she still feels like a mother, remains in touch with her motherly instincts. Meridian perceives a mother as someone whose main goal is to create life, not take it away, and in that sense she reconnects with the role that she had thrown away. However, she still does not subdue to the traditional idea of a woman being a mother and a mother only, but rather thinks of it as just one element of everything what a fulfilled woman could and should be.

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* deals directly with the issue of a woman's purpose, through the horrifying process of circumcision that the women of the Olinka tribe are forced to undergo. The procedure itself speaks about the view that the tribe has on women and their purpose: they are completely stripped of their womanhood; all that is left is their ability to have children – their only “purpose”. They are thought of as “real” women only after they had been circumcised, and spend their lives convinced that otherwise no one would want to marry them, so they would not be able to fulfill their duty. Tashi chooses to have the procedure done precisely because of that, because she wants to be seen as a “real” woman, because she wants acceptance from her people. She later regrets it, since she suffers horrible physical and mental consequences of the procedure. Not even childbirth, the one task that a woman should be able to do according to the backward philosophy, is possible without severe consequences. In a way, the whole process is a game of control over women. “In her story of Tashi's life Walker shows that M'Lissa and Tashi had been manipulated in a political game, to fulfil their male political leader's urging that the customs of and culture of their tribe should be continued as a sign of their independence from colonial masters.” (Lennox Birch 2014: 238) Tashi eventually recuperates, but only after she had confronted her own culture and understood that no procedure could make her into a woman because she already is one by birth, and there is

no definition of what a woman should be or what her purpose is – she should only be whatever she wants to be. She is accused and found guilty of murder of the woman who had performed the procedure on her and her sister (who died of the consequences), but she leaves this world knowing that she had found strength to fight and seek revenge.

Celie from *The Color Purple* is also brought up on a range of misconceptions about women and their role in life. She quietly suffers through her unhappy life, serving as a source of pleasure and a punching bag for her stepfather, and later for her husband, until Shug opens her eyes and teaches her that she is not in this world just to please others, but that she should receive pleasure herself. Once Celie understands that and learns how to love herself, she is able to achieve liberation and no longer questions her own purpose, for she now knows that her purpose can be whatever she wants it to be. Like many other Walker's characters, she strays from the traditional role that society had assigned her, and by the end of the novel becomes a fulfilled, content woman.

### **3.2 The consequences of patriarchy**

Patriarchal society is often the main source of oppression and unfairness in black women's lives. In a world where men have the last word and women are treated as inferior, it is only natural for their fears and insecurities to develop. The example of the Southern black woman, the one Walker has used so many times in her literary work, shows all the consequences that patriarchy leaves in young black women as they grow and go on with their lives. From the very beginning, they are taught that men are the authority and that not subduing to their will cannot end well. As little girls, they have to obey and respect their fathers and are never equal to their brothers, and it only continues as they become older. The treatment they received as children is simply copied onto a new family, a new male authority, and the girl becomes an obedient, quiet wife controlled by her husband. In an environment

like that, women can never have access to freedom because the whole society is working against them. And they also have no courage to fight because they essentially live in fear, because they know what could happen to those who dare to rebel.

The results of patriarchy are seen in the characters and their psyche, their mind. Treated as inferior their whole life, women start to believe it; they start to diminish their own value. They do not know how to respect themselves because they have never received respect from others. What suffers the most is their self-respect and their sense of identity. Pinning down their own identity is a difficult task, since they usually spend their lives belonging to someone, to a man, be it a father or a husband. As a result, they are not their own people, and thus have troubles with defining themselves as persons. Starting off with characters like that, Walker tells stories of women who find strength and courage to fight against the system, against society and its old-fashioned rules. This war against patriarchy is never an easy one, but the success in the end shows just how strong women are and how much they can achieve once they reach liberation.

## 4 Overcoming the difficulties

### 4.1 Reversed gender roles

In opposition to the stereotypes that society has created, Walker shows how traditional gender roles can be disrupted once a woman gathers the strength to rebel and fight for herself. It comes as a conclusion to the whole process of liberation, an understanding that gender roles are a mere creation of the patriarchal society and that women are perfectly capable of doing all the things men are able to do. When they finally taste the freedom from the shackles of discrimination and repression, their whole view on life shifts and they can experience what it means to truly live, on your own, without depending on a man or anyone else. With that, stereotypical gender roles become flexible and variable, shifting drastically as a confirmation of equality.

That best example of role-reversal in Walker's literary opus is *The Color Purple*, where roles have been reversed since the very beginning – that refers to Sofia, Harpo, and Shug. Neither of these characters bears the features of a traditional woman or man. Sofia, as a character of a fighter, is a strong, straightforward woman who is more likely to beat her husband than let him beat her – an attitude which is a consequence of constant oppression she faced in her childhood:

“She say, All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me.” (Walker 2003: 40)

She speaks her mind and sort of “wears the pants” in her family, doing all the hard work with no trouble at all. In contrast with her, her husband Harpo is an extremely feminine character, one that prefers to cook and clean the house while his wife works outdoors. That

kind of reversal is, of course, frowned upon by other members of society who firmly believe that a man should control and command his wife, or he is not a real man. For that reason, Harpo has issues with the image of himself he presents to the world, but that problem is eventually discarded as completely unimportant. Furthermore, the character of Shug Avery is through the whole novel presented as a woman who is completely out of the ordinary. Serving as a role model for Celie, a source of immense admiration, she is depicted as comporting more like a man than a woman. Freedom and independence with which she lives her life gradually drive Celie to the understanding that, in order to be liberated, she does not have to be a man, but simply has to take her life into her own two hands. Looking up to these characters, Celie in the end achieves her goal: she is as independent and as content as a woman should be.

Essentially, every woman who takes control of her life in an oppressive society such as the one of Southern African Americans is perceived as having mainly male characteristics. According to the stereotype, a woman's place is under a man, under his control, and as soon as one individual fights these "rules", she is no longer a woman, at least not in the traditional sense. Equality, however, arises from this reversal, from the complete annulment of the stereotypical roles, and equality is what these women strive for. This kind of disrespect towards tradition, in a way, is inevitably judged and criticized by the society, but Walker's characters rise above it and do not let anything stop them on their way to a happier, quality life.

## **4.2 Strong female characters**

From repressed, damaged women clutched under the burden of discrimination and society's rules, to emancipated, fully-formed individuals, Alice Walker presents the journeys of her characters towards a life in which nothing stops them from achieving their goals.



Although not all of her characters live to reach it – the women of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, for example, stumble under the pressure of violence and sexism, and lose their lives – most of them grow into strong, independent women. It indeed takes a lot of strength to endure everything they have to go through, all the humiliation and harassment, but their true strength comes to light once they are able to fight and struggle for their own happiness. Standing up to the world in the conditions these women live in is not easy, and Walker patiently takes us through the psychological path of their liberation. Racism, sexism, and violence they face leave deep scars, nearly impossible to heal, so the way to liberty is even harder and bumpier. In order to be freed, they have to learn how to accept themselves, as damaged and as pained as they are, and only then will others accept them too.

Characters such as Celie, Meridian, and all the different women from her short stories undoubtedly show that achieving freedom from the oppressor is difficult, but not impossible. The process takes a lot of strength and sacrifice, but in the end it is all worth it, and the ones who succeed are certainly rewarded for their troubles. No human being should ever be forced to go through that kind of struggle, however, discrimination of women is the cruel reality that was present in the past, and is still present today. Walker's portrayal of strong female characters confirms that, even in the most desperate times, it is possible to find strength within oneself and use that strength to fight for one's rights.

## Conclusion

Alice Walker undoubtedly made a great contribution to African American literature, as well as feminist literature in general, with her works that focus on women and their lives. By depicting the pains and strengths of black women, Alice Walker managed to penetrate every aspect of their oppression, and various ways in which they are able to overcome it. The discrimination she wrote about can be found in all aspects of one's life, from domestic to working environment, and it is still present today. Black women face racial oppression already in their childhood, and it extends into the adult life, becoming even more intense and causing them to be insecure and unable to fulfill their potential. This is paired with sexism, which is a huge obstacle for women of all races, but is much more unbearable for African American women, since they also have to endure racism. Sexual discrimination often begins at home, at a very young age – as seen in Walker's novels – and is taken for granted. Women are viewed as objects who serve exclusively for the purpose of male pleasure, while being taught that their own sexuality is something they should be ashamed of – subsequent to that, they often have to suffer through domestic violence, sometimes even endure rape. This is a consequence of living in a male-dominated, patriarchal world where women are taught that their only purpose in life is to be a mother and a wife. It is a widely accepted fact, so much that women themselves believe it, just like Celie in *The Color Purple*, and bend to the will of their husbands. As a result, they are not happy and fulfilled, and they are living in constant oppression. However, Walker's characters know how to fight for themselves, and she often portrays them as strong, independent women, or women who are at first victims of racism and sexism, but through the story evolve into fully formed characters who stand on their own two feet. Gender role stereotypes are proved to be unimportant and the women of these novels and stories find their own identity and learn to be strong and free despite the discrimination they are surrounded with.

Walker realistically portrayed the oppression and difficulties black women must cope with throughout their lives, and surely made those problems more understandable to the readers of her stories and novels. Sometimes brutally realistic and graphic in her depiction of women's struggles, she lays it all out for the reader, showing that a black woman's life is indeed a tough one. But the main idea is that there is no space for giving up. Although sometimes stumbling under the difficulty of their situations, the women of her works mostly come out as emancipated and strong personalities, setting an example for all those who find themselves in similar situations today.

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