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**A BLACK FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*
AND ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE***

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TONI MORRISON'UN *SULA* VE ALICE WALKER'IN *MOR YILLAR* ADLI
ROMANLARININ SİYAH FEMİNİST YAKLAŞIMLA İNCELENMESİ

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ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı Toni Morrison ve Alice Walker tarafından kaleme alınan *Sula* ve *The Color Purple* isimli romanları siyah feminist yaklaşımla incelemek, kadın karakterlerin yaşadığı zorlukları ve bir parça özgürlük ve kendine güven için verdikleri savaşı ortaya koymaktır. Önde gelen iki siyah kadın yazar Toni Morrison ve Alice Walker eserlerinde Afrika kökenli Amerikan kadının gerek cinsiyet rolleri ve toplum kuralları, gerekse yaşadıkları ırkçı ve cinsiyetçi toplumları tarafından sömürülmesini, baskılara ve insanlık dışı hareketlere maruz kalmalarını betimlerler. Söz konusu romanlarında güçlü kadın karakterleri ana karakterler olarak göze çarpar. *Sula*'da Sula, Nel, Eva; *The Color Purple*'de Celie, Sofia, Nettie ve Shug farklı kuşaklardan güçlü ve bağımsız siyah kadın temsilcileridir. Çalışmanın odak noktası bu kadın karakterlerin tüm zorluklara karşı ayakta kalabilmiş olmalarıdır; onlar tüm sınırlarla, baskılarla başa çıkabilmişler ve böylece tüm engellerden arınmış yeni bir düzen oluşturabilmişlerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Siyah Feminist Edebiyat Eleştirisi, Siyah Kadın Temsili, Irkçılık, Cinsiyetçilik

A BLACK FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF TONI MORRISON'S *SULA* AND ALICE
WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Presented by: Sema Demir

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine the novels named *Sula* and *The Color Purple* penned by the writers Toni Morrison and Alice Walker with the black feminist approach and to put forth the hardships the female characters experience and the fight they have been giving for some piece of freedom and self-reliance. In their works Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, the two prominent black women writers, portray exploitation, dehumanization and oppression of African American women not only by gender roles, by society's norms and also by their racist and sexist communities. In their so-called novels, the powerful women characters draw the attention as the chief protagonists. Sula, Nel, Eva in *Sula* and Celie, Sofia, Nettie and Shug in *The Color Purple* are all representatives of different generations of strong and independent black female selves. The argument's focal point is that these black female characters are able to survive against all challenges; they are able to cope with all the borders, oppressions, and so they are able to craft a new order free from all these obstacles.

Keywords: Black Feminism, Black Female Voice, Sexism, Racism

YEMİN METNİ

Yüksek Lisans tezi olarak sunduğum “A Black Feminist Analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*” adlı çalışmanın, tarafımdan bilimsel ahlak ve geleneklere aykırı düşecek bir yardıma başvurmaksızın yazıldığını ve yararlandığım eserlerin bibliyografyada gösterilen eserlerden oluştuğunu, bunlara atıf yapılarak yararlanmış olduğumu belirtir ve bunu onurumla doğrularım.



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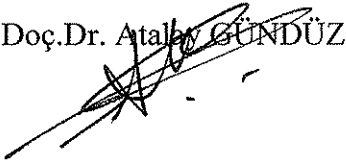
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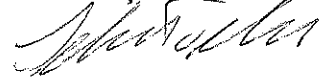
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PREFACE

After reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* which primarily portray black woman circumstance, I have realized that there is a black woman struggle that has been waged against racism, sexism, patriarchy- all the hostile and confining contexts of society. Throughout the centuries those have been black women who suffered most as blacks and females because when women's problems are mentioned, it implies white women and when blacks' problems are considered, the reference is to black males only. Black women are the missing part of these conversations; they are disregarded, ignored and silenced. In my thesis, I have banded Morrison and Walker together as the writers who give voices to silenced black women. In their novels, women characters demonstrate the inner strength to live an independent, dignified life, free of oppressive male dominance and racist, sexist abuses.

In the first part of my thesis, I have examined the black female case in the era of slavery and presented the appearance of the black feminist movement and how it proliferated. In the second part, I have discussed about Toni Morrison as a black woman writer and analyzed the powerful female characters in *Sula*, at whose centre lies the close female friendship. In the third part, I have studied Alice Walker and her term "womanism", and also dealt with *The Color Purple*, in which Walker depicts sincere female ties and her heroine's process of gaining a voice and freedom.

The process of writing this thesis was a real challenge for me. It was a period of my life that I learned so many things about myself, life, and people in my life as well as their meanings for me. With the help of this thesis I have also endeavoured to satisfy my hunger for literature. In this respect, that I was able to finish this study requires me to express many thanks for certain people as I would never come to this far without their contributions.

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Women

They were women then

My mama's generation

Husky of voice- Stout of

Step

With fists as well as

Hands

How they battered down

Doors

And ironed

Starched white

Shirts

How they led

Armies

Headragged Generals

Across mined

Fields

Booby-trapped

Kitchens

To discover books

Desks

A place for us

How they knew what we

Must know

Without knowing a page

Of it

Themselves.

Alice Walker

INTRODUCTION

African American women's devaluation and dehumanization even in the recent times are not surprising events. Their devaluation and dehumanization began with their journey on the ships from Africa to America and continued throughout the period of slavery, approximately for more than two hundred years. In other words, the era of slavery planted the seeds of oppression that black women have struggled to overcome.

Slavery with its dictionary meaning and with the roles given to the word in changing decades is presumably based on human power relations and so on the dichotomy between dominance and submission. From the various definitions of the word, those have been noted that slavery is a "hard work about the most awful form of which mankind knows", a "control by imposed authority" and "the practice [...] of keeping slaves under bondage [...]" (Gove 2139). In plain words, slavery is defined as an: "institution based on a relationship of dominance and submission, whereby one person owns another and can exact from that person labour or other services" (Encyclopedia.com).

In the light of the definitions above, it is well-known that there have been the institution of slavery, slave-owning societies and nations before slavery thrived in the Americas. As the direct result of one group's subjection by another and the wars between groups, the history of slavery dates back to the ancient times. Although as an institution, slavery is thought to have emerged after the development of agricultural economy, even among the primitive pastoral groups of people such as the nomadic Arabs, seafaring Vikings and Native Americans, domestic and sometimes concubine slavery appear in all ages. Moreover, it reaches beyond recorded history. There are references to slavery in the ancient Babylonian code of Hammurabi and in the ancient Hebrews according to the texts in the Bible. It is slave labour that build temples and pyramids of ancient Egypt, as well ("Slavery").

In ancient Greece around the 1400 B.C. slavery was an established institution. There were slaves named according to their labour as domestic slaves, agricultural

slaves, artisans, workers and, also, public slaves belonging to the temples. These slaves were treated well and had some rights protecting them against cruelty and abuse. However, they had no rights in the court of law, and were regarded as properties to be bought and sold. At least, as an award or as the will of their owners, they had the right to obtain their freedom. In the early Roman history, slavery was similar to that established in Greece. Yet, the Romans had a form of agricultural slavery called “estate slavery”, offering the landowner the absolute power over slaves. Along with the expansion of the Roman Empire, the number of slaves increased and they were employed in the theatre, in gladiatorial combats and also in prostitution (“Slavery”).

Even after the introduction of Christianity toward the end of the Roman Empire, slavery continued as the church did not abolish the institution. As a result of the fact that the Mediterranean pirates carried on the custom of enslaving the victims of their attacks, slavery flourished in the Byzantine Empire and later in the Ottoman Empire. Like Christianity, Islam accepted slavery, so it became a standard institution in Muslim countries. Moreover, in Islamic life, as it was in the Roman Empire, the slave supply was a sign of luxury and wealth. Thus, the slaves in Muslim lands, mostly of African origin, were used as soldiers, concubines, cooks, entertainers and to perform many other works. In addition, the eunuch guardians of the harems had an important part in the formation of Islamic slavery. Contrary to the strict rules in the West, slaves in Muslim countries were bestowed upon the rights to reach great positions and power (“Slavery”).

By the end of the Middle Ages in Western Europe, slavery mostly disappeared except for the use of slaves on galleys. However, a new form of slavery began to flourish in the 15th and 16th centuries as a result of European exploration of the African coast and of the Africans living there. African slaves were first brought to Europe. However, it was not in Europe that African slavery was most widespread and profitable, but in the Americas, in which European exploitation started toward the end of the 15th century. The British, Dutch, Spanish, French all took part in the African slave trade on account of their profits. The African’s exploitation as the slave lasted for almost five centuries and marked the definition of New World Slavery (“Slavery”).

Indeed, the presence of Africans in the Americas could be traced back to a time when the demand for labourers was “colour blind” (Walvin 74). The first people

enslaved in the Americas were the Native Americans, but they resisted slavery, either escaped or revolted against it. After the colonization in the Americas, the colonizers attempted to use Indian and white indentured servants. Nonetheless, it was soon found out that Indians were not satisfactory slaves as their men left work to their women and chose hunting or fighting. Furthermore, these indentured labourers, many of whom were Irish and Scottish, were serving for a limited time, their bondage was limited and they had rights. The Africans, brought to the colonies in America in order to be used as slaves by European colonizers in the 17th century, were different from those indentured servants who were “low in English social and political esteem” (Walvin 74). According to James Walvin the problem lies in the difference between the “indentured labour” and “slavery” (74). Planters needed labour and they needed it for longer terms but the labour they received through indentured workers was not adequate.

Black slavery gradually developed as a substitute for the indentured labourers. The problem of finding cheap and steady labour which colonizers were faced with was solved with the African labour, which created immense economic change. Colonizers realized that the black slaves, who had been used to farming in Africa, were useful workers at farms and plantations. For such reasons James Walvin claims that “Africans began to arrive in ever great numbers” (74). James A. Rawley and Stephen D. Behrendt broaden this claim of Walvin denoting that:

Demand for African slaves sprang most of all from the development of a system of plantation agriculture. The severe manual labour of cultivating sugar required hands in numbers that, as it turned out, could be supplied only from Africa (12).

As a result of such need for African human power to work in the plantations, many Africans serving in the U.S. colonies under indentures around the 1640s, were called as “slaves for life” in the middle of the 1650s (Stetson 72). Erlene Stetson asserts that by 1661 there appeared provisions in the law concerning “Negroes”, no longer called as Africans, which contributed to the formation of black slavery. Then, by 1750s black slavery legally had become a part of life in the colonies of Virginia, Maryland, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina (Stetson 72).

Slavery became a defining institution creating the image that to be black was to be a slave. Walvin claims that “such a formative link between race and slavery had not necessarily been true of earlier slave societies” (73). While the slaves in other slave-owning societies were merely captives, convicts, concubines or human beings regarded as a lower caste in the social order, black people brought to the Americas were thought as already enslaved with the aim of bondage for the white supremacy. Racial discrimination is the most known quality of the “New World slavery” (Walvin 75).

In their book named *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, James A. Rawley and Stephen D. Behrendt discuss slavery’s link to race, or especially to colour. Rawley and Behrendt note that “racial bias was the main reason why black Africans remained in perpetual servitude” (266). The rhetoric which favoured and validated white supremacy was that “the blackness of skin colour connoted filthiness, sin, baseness, ugliness, evil, and the devil” (Rawley and Behrendt 266). The colour black was in a direct contrast to “a range of cultural values associated with whiteness; with purity, goodness, virtue and beauty” (Walvin 75). While slaves’ black colour of skin was associated with sin and ugliness, colonizers’ whiteness was considered purity and beauty. In other words, the word “black” turned out to be an oppositional term providing a superior status to the white race.

Along with the imposed racial inferiority, blacks were exposed to intolerable working conditions, beating or harsh treatment. Black slaves were held in chains, herded, and “violated physically” (Walvin 20). They were beaten before “they stumbled ashore, naked or near naked” (Walvin 20). Especially flogging was one of the most common ways of physical assaults as well as slitting the nose, cutting of the ears, branding in the forehead. The punishments were carried out by white overseers and drivers who watched slaves while they were working on the fields (Walvin 20-25).

What is more, blacks did not have any material possessions, any legal rights, a family or at least a chance to be free. They had literally nothing. In her book, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, Patricia Hill Collins claims that:

Black people remained outside the public sphere- they were black, enslaved, and judged by their group membership, and they possessed no property, not even

themselves [...] because they lacked property, they lacked privacy rights accorded to individuals holding American citizenship. Just as animals are considered private property whose non-human status grants them no rights of privacy (15-16).

Apparently, blacks were degraded to the level of property and considered as if they were any item of trade; an object or an animal. They were merely regarded as chattels to be bought and sold. They were banned in all areas of freedom and they even had no control over their bodies. Experiencing these kinds of non-human treatments, blacks were forced to learn that their existence was bound to the white power. Thus, they were kept subservient to their white masters.

With the rise in economic prosperity that flourished during the American Revolution (1775-1783) slavery in the North America began to decline. By 1789, it was not only the American Revolution but also the French Revolution which stimulated the ideas for the abolition of slavery. It is hard to ignore Thomas Paine, the prominent name, who is deeply involved in both revolutions with his ideas about the equality of mankind. His pamphlets and writings such as "Common Sense", "The Age of Reason" and "The Rights of Man" have profound influence especially on the American Revolution. Paine criticizes the unjust system and supports that all humankind is equal; none of them has the precedence or right to dominate others. He, thus, raises the awareness that black people were abused, mistreated, so they must claim their own rights and struggle for freedom. And, Americans find "themselves gravitating toward definitions of American freedom based on race" (Kassanoff 11).

After the revolutions, despite America's declaration that all men are created equal, in the South, black slaves were still commonly used as labour force in rice or big cotton plantations or tobacco farms because the South's economy was mainly dependent on agriculture. Slaves and land were the major sources of wealth there. In 1830s with the emergence of an abolitionist movement in the North, southerners became anxious over the future of slavery. The tension between the North and the South about the abolition of the slavery increased so much that it resulted with one of the most tragic and bloody wars in American history: The Civil War (1861-1865). The North's victory was a turning point in the lives of black slaves. During the period called Reconstruction,

the 16th American president, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and then with the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution slavery was abolished in 1865. In the following years with the 14th and 15th Amendments, blacks gained the rights of full-citizenship and voting, but which were only valid for “men”.

However, not all the whites were content with the rights given to the black population. Their hatred and resentment, but especially their desire to protect white supremacy over blacks led them to gather around racist groups such as Ku Klux Klan, The Knights of The White Camellia and The White League. Not only these vigilante groups organized intimidating attacks towards blacks but also whites continued their attacks in social life too by segregating blacks from using “schools, restaurants, trains, buses, libraries, parks, swimming pools, and other public amenities” (Rattansi 44). Known as “Jim Crow system of segregation” (Rattansi 44), these laws even after the abolishment of slavery put blacks once again into a subservient position.

As a reaction to segregation, African-Americans gave a civilized response by founding democratic organizations such as The National Afro-American League (1890), the Niagara Movement (1905) and NAACP, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, (1910). As opposed to the KKK or other groups of whites, blacks’ organizations were not racist; they simply intended to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination as well as gaining political, educational, social, and economic equal rights for blacks, for all people.

In the 1920s, the increasing pressure, the racial climate and widespread violence of lynching in Southern states coupled with blacks’ desire to live an economically and socially better life in the North, caused blacks’ migration from Southern states to Northern states in great numbers. The migration and so the rise in African-American middle class in the North set the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement, a cultural movement in art, music and literature. Harlem Renaissance was the era of social and racial rebirth of black people in the United States, but with the Great Depression of 1930s it ended suddenly because black intellectuals and leaders had to shift their focus from art and culture to the economic and social realities of the time. The rapid end in black population’s “rebirth” demonstrated both that the wealth and power offered by the

American Dream that seemed so close remained as a dream for blacks and that blacks had still a long way ahead.

In the midst of the 20th century, African-Americans having experienced Civil War, Reconstruction and Harlem Renaissance, began to gain a new consciousness of their identity. Being no longer able to tolerate the hypocrisy of American democracy, they began to feel the freedom to talk about their resentment towards the system which still forced them to live as an inferior class and to admit the second-class treatment by whites. Although slavery was already over and so-called equality was gained, “black was [still] a derogatory label” (Rattansi 91). This injustice coupled with a new black consciousness led them to start the Civil Rights legislation of 1960s for equality before law, in all American institutions and to “reduce or even eradicate racial inequality” (Hajnal 1). During the struggle for civil rights “the slogan ‘Black is Beautiful’ empowered populations” (Rattansi 91). The Civil Rights Movements keep their effects till today.

Without doubt, black women’s struggle depicted in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* finds its roots within this racist and sexist history. The racist and sexist exploitative social system which also dominated the institution of slavery is present in the portrayals of black female cases either implicitly or explicitly in both novels. In her article “Defining Black Feminist Thought”, Patricia Hill Collins supports that it is the “interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority hav[ing] characterized the black woman’s reality as a situation of struggles struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited and oppressed” (3). The two racist and sexist worlds, therefore, are inevitably embedded into the stories of the black female protagonists penned by Morrison and Walker.

Sula and *The Color Purple* present the black women perspective through strong female protagonists who resist racial and sexual oppressions in their own distinct ways. *Sula* portrays the situation of black women in the aftermath of World War I towards 1965. By delineating black women’s experiences in the antagonistic world of American society, the novel shows that things have not changed much even in modern times. Its plot generally takes place in the segregated small black town named the Bottom. *Sula*

and Nel, two close black female friends, are aware of the fact that they are neither white nor men in their male and white dominated society; they have to be strong to survive. On the other hand, *The Color Purple* focuses on black life between the 1920s and 1940s and revolves around a black woman and her experiences, oppressions due to her sexual, racial and hierarchical position in the community. Celie, the protagonist, fights against the extreme oppression, violence and absolute dominance of males that she is exposed to nearly throughout her life. Hence, the resistance against oppressions, restrictions or any kind of dominance which are depicted in both novels forms a crucial reaction against the institution of slavery and its effects, proving that the transition of the black community from enslavement to freedom has never been pain free.

CHAPTER ONE: THE BLACK FEMINIST VIEWPOINT

I.1. Black Female Slave Experience

Black women's historical situation was peculiar as no other race was brought to America by force and enslaved. Black women were those who were most subjected to traumatic experiences and cruel treatments because it was not only racism but also sexism threatening their lives as oppressive forces. Sexism, the systematic attempt by men to subjugate women, dehumanizes women by claiming females inferior due to their gender. Like racism, it has an element of power and a desire to make the victim submissive. In the white-male dominated America, "both sexism and patriarchal ideology [have] stigmatized women as 'other'- left, bad, awkward, wrong, stupid, and so on" (Robertson 16). Therefore, black women have also been treated unjustly on the basis of their sex in addition to facing discrimination in all facets of life on the basis of their skin colour.

Black women's devaluation began on the ships in which they were transported from Africa to America. During these transportations, black women found themselves in a great struggle to protect themselves, their identities and also their chastity. They were vulnerable to the sexual exploitation of white men. When they resisted the orders and demands of their white masters, they were beaten or lashed harshly. They were always faced with the threat of rape. Only those who endured the voyage to the Americas, because nearly half of them died due to inefficient and inhumane conditions on the ships, would face the same and other kinds of inhumanity during their years of slavery.

Enslaved women fell into a social hierarchy based on race and sex in America. In this hierarchy, the first rank belonged to white men, who were followed by white women. Then black men were in the next rank followed by black women, who were in the lowest rank. During their enslavement, black slaves' conditions were strictly defined by white racist mentality. In parallel, black women's place was defined by racism, but their roles were also defined by patriarchy and sexism. Black women slaves' roles, therefore, were a good deal different than those of black men. In the preface of their

book, *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery In The Americas*, David Barry Gasper and Darlene Clark Hine assert that:

Gendered relations and expectations within the slave societies of the Americas constituted a powerful force that shaped the lives of slaves in such a way that slave women experienced slavery quite differently from slave men, although it is difficult to identify a strong sense of such differentiation in the slave laws (ix).

Although it was difficult to trace the sexual differences in the laws, there were huge disparities in the conditions of black female and male slaves. Black male slaves were chiefly exploited as labourers in plantations, whereas black women slaves were exponentially exploited as labourers in plantations like black men, as maids in domestic works, as breeders, and as sexual objects satisfying white owners' pleasures. That is, it was common to see black female slaves plowing with black men in the fields, planting, or harvesting crops under harsh conditions. In addition to performing the same tasks as black men, black female slaves were obliged to spend a good deal of time working indoors completing chores such as cooking, taking care of the children, spinning, weaving, sewing, nursing, cleaning, and picking up after the plantation owners and their offspring. Black women were forced to take on a "masculine" role in some jobs, but they were still deemed lower than black men. Because of patriarchal mentality, men had a higher position as compared with women.

Furthermore, sharing the same harsh conditions of slave life and labour, black female slaves were beaten as harshly as black male slaves. There was no discrimination in the area of punishment, which is also supported by Claire Robertson: "if women slaves were at least equal to men in performing hard labour, they also shared equally in punishment for not working hard enough, in the field or the house" (21). That is why it was possible to see a black woman on a plantation "stripped naked, tied to a stake, and whipped with a hard saw or club" (*Ain't I A Woman* 23). Plus, as Bell Hooks asserts, "the nakedness of the African female served as a constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability" (*Ain't I A Woman* 18).

Like they had been on the ships, black women slaves were raped, impregnated, robbed of their children and were subject to inhuman deeds. Especially rape was a

common method of torture; it was the threat and terror in black women slaves' lives. According to Robertson:

For slave women, sexual harassment was the ultimate oppression that male slaves did not experience [...] a treat to women's 'self-respect and their emotional autonomy' and a means of 'bestializing her and breaking her resistance, violating her only area of possible autonomy' (24).

It was specifically black women slaves who were sexually assaulted as a result of their compounded race and gender. Besides satisfying men's sexual lust, these rapes aimed at demoralizing and dehumanizing them. Black women did not have any control over their bodies and they "were forced to perform sexual and reproductive labour to satisfy the economic, political, and personal interests of white men of elite class" (Davis 107). They had no choice but to submit or else "they risked physical cruelty and punishment" (Bush 194). Rape was the reminder of black female slaves' powerlessness in the hands of their masters.

There were no laws to prevent black women from being sexually harassed, raped and used as prostitutes or concubines by white men. The "refusal of law to recognize sexual crimes against enslaved women enabled masters to compel sex" (Davis 114). Plus, the passing of the law specifying the status of black female slaves' newborn children exacerbated the plight of black women. By 1662, all children born within the colony of Virginia would follow the status of the mother. Under this law, enslaved women gave birth to enslaved children regardless of the father's status and race. Erlene Stetson noted that this law was important in two ways. First, it went against the English Common Law of determining a child's status by the father's status. Second, as Stetson detailed:

It implicitly condoned sexual intercourse between white men and black slave women, in effect allowing white men more legal, social, and psychological freedom by not holding them responsible for any offspring resulting from sexual relations with female slaves (72).

It was apparent that black women's sexual vulnerability was legitimized by white institutions of law. The law, as Davis affirms, "institutionalized access to [enslaved

women's] bodies" (114) as well as declaring them and their children as private properties of the institutionalized slavery. Having no control over their own bodies, black mothers also had no claims, legal or otherwise, on their children. Collins emphasizes that: "Just as any offspring of an animal's owner became his property, Black women's children became the property of their mothers' owners" (*Fighting Words* 17). Black women's offsprings, who were bought and sold easily, were already born as slaves and as the property of the slave owner.

The direct control of enslaved women's sexuality resulted in giving birth to white wealth. Masters saw black women not as mothers, but as instruments enabling the growth of slave labor force. In a way, "under slavery, black women's bodies produced property and labor" (*Fighting Words* 17). White men ordered their black female slaves to give birth to many children both for use and market. As Adrienne Davis noted "In the United States, it was enslaved women who reproduced the workforce" (109). Breeding, thus, turned out to be "another socially legitimized method of sexually exploiting black women" (*Ain't I A Woman* 39). Black women were exposed to constant breeding. And, they were treated like animals such as horses and mules, which had also a great impact on their sense of selves. They began to consider themselves as whites wanted to see them, as non-elites.

Without doubt, racism was not the only reason for many brutal acts of violence or rapes that black women were exposed to, but patriarchal ideology served to rationalize these means, as well. Black women were taught to be submissive, silent and obedient. Their acceptance of male superiority was related to Christian theology which maintained that women were the cause of original sin; women were the representatives of evil. The idea that women are sinners prevailed for centuries, justifying the need for a strong patriarchal system. However, with the economic prosperity that white men gained in the nineteenth century, white women's status elevated. As Hooks claims, a "white woman was no longer portrayed as sexual temptress [...] she was depicted as goddess rather than sinner; she was virtuous, pure, innocent, not sexual and worldly" (*Ain't I A Woman* 31). It was the emergence of "the cult of true womanhood" that defined white women as non-sexual beings. It simultaneously excluded black women

who were now “seen as the embodiment of female evil and sexual lust” (*Ain't I A Woman* 33). While white womanhood was idealized, black womanhood was degraded.

With all the ideas about their being sexually loose and unladylike, black women were deemed not totally blameless for being raped. Moreover, they were regarded as responsible for their vulnerability to sexual assaults. Hooks points out that “black women were labeled jezebels and sexual temptresses and accused of leading white men away from spiritual purity into sin” (*Ain't I A Woman* 33). That is, it was black women who caused white men to “fornicate or commit adultery” (*Ain't I A Woman* 33). Their sexual exploitation was not regarded as a trespass or a violation; since black women were considered the guilty party, they were allegedly the temptresses of white men. Rape was merely a point used to describe the violation of white women.

Nonetheless, white men were not the only ones who were responsible for black women's destiny. Black men exploited and oppressed black women, too. Working for white masters during the day, black women worked in their own cabins for their husbands in the evenings till nights or mornings. Their black men were emasculated by slavery. They felt humiliated because they could neither protect their women nor supply the needs of their cabins. Black men, therefore, began to identify themselves with the white patriarchal system in order to become the strong sex; they took up the social rights awarded to “men”. They also used their women as sexual objects or as servants who performed domestic deeds. And, to prove their power and authority over them, black men violated and degraded black women. In a sense, black women subjugated by their men could not get a better treatment from their own race. Also, white women, instead of protecting their fellows, played an active role in black women's physical and psychological degradation.

In brief, black women were not treated in the same regard as white women, who were afforded a privileged position in America's patriarchal society. White women were second class citizens, whereas black women were chattels. Unlike white women, enslaved women's working in the fields, their sexuality and breeding capacity “for white pleasure and profit” (Davis 104) made them even “regarded as unworthy of the title ‘woman’ ”(Davis 107). White women who endured the same sexist social order

looked down on black women. African American women were forced to submit and to accept their double inferiority: their femininity and race.

I.2. Black Feminist Movement

Black women have been subjected to dehumanization to such an extent that the words “human” and “woman” have become devoid of their meanings. Within the racist and sexist social framework encouraged by capitalism, black women’s status was precarious; they were considered intellectually inferior than black men and morally inferior than white women. With the aim of getting rid of their lower class position in society, black women struggled to overcome all restrictions and oppressions placed upon them during and after slavery. They reacted against white women’s and blacks’ liberation movements that excluded and ignored black women. Under the umbrella of the black feminist movement, Afro-American feminism or womanism was further highlighted by key theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Alice Walker, Barbara Christian, Bell Hooks, Hazel Carby, along many others. Within black feminism, black women are enabled to shout out all injustices they have experienced and to gain their own voices.

I.2.1 Exclusion of the Black Race in the Modern Feminist Movement

In white male-dominated America, it was not only blacks but also women who have been facing discrimination in all facets of life. Just like blacks, women have also been regarded as “other” by men-centered society. They, who were defined as an “imperfect man” (Selden 121) even by ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, have been denied from gaining their economic, educational, political and social rights. Serving as a daughter, as a mother and as a wife were the only roles that have been allocated to women by the patriarchal social order.

Although women have struggled to claim autonomy, they and their experiences have been ignored and silenced by men who were deemed the owner of authority and power. Men have treated women as second-class and throughout history they have used every possible means, including an attribution of an intellectual and biological inferiority to women, to justify their superior position over females. Thus, women, too, have had to struggle to improve the female condition and to fight for gaining equal rights and treatment within the prevailing system based on the rules of manhood and whiteness.

In the 18th century, the ideas of Enlightenment argued the necessity that all individuals have natural rights to equality, liberty, possessions, and to life, but in America, it was during the mid 19th century and the civil rights movements of 1960s when women could officially organize companies to struggle for equal rights. Before that century American women's voices could not be heard directly and widely because they lacked the necessary economic and educational power that would lead them to unite for organized revolts.

In the United States, feminist movements can be studied in three periods known as the first wave, the second wave and the third wave. The first wave dated back to the first women's rights convention which was held in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848 and continued until the 1920s when American women gained the right to vote. The two primary concerns that women fought for in the first wave of the feminist movement were the right to vote and the access to education. Women owed much to organizations such as National Women Suffrage Association (1869) and American Women Suffrage Association (1869) for achieving the right to vote and greater educational access (Encyclopedia.com).

Blacks' struggle for equality during the civil rights movements of the 1960s again motivated women to demand work and reproductive rights in the 1960s and 1970s. The second wave of feminism witnessed these women who wanted to improve their work conditions and to gain more social rights because they were still treated as second-class citizens though gaining the right to vote declared their citizenship. Some of the important activities for the women's movement in the second wave were as follows: In 1963, the Equal Pay Act prohibited wage differences for equal work performed by men and women. In 1964 Title VII of the Civil Rights Act "protect[ed] persons against employment discrimination because of their sex, race, religion, or national origin" (Perritt 4-5). In 1968, alongside with the National Organization for Women (1966), Women's Equity Action League had politicians revise the applications of the previous acts in practice and supported the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 that forbade sexual discrimination in educational settings.

With all the laws, organizations, campaigns, riots or anything they held, women wanted to declare that they are equals of men and individuals with their own free wills

rather than being just wives, mothers or passive, fragile creatures who only watch events without interfering. Feminism is a movement which struggles to end the unequal treatment between men and women. It aims to break “the complacent certainties of such a patriarchal culture and to eradicate sexist domination” (Selden 121), and thus to free all women from sexual exploitation and oppression. However, feminism’s overemphasis was mostly on the experiences of middle class white women, which disillusioned many feminists concerned with all forms of oppression, such as race, class, sexual orientation, on women’s lives. That reawakening gave rise to the third wave of feminism which was popularized in the 1990s. And, women’s divergent concerns gave rise to different feminist groups “including black feminists, critical feminists and global feminists” (“Feminism”).

Indeed, white women developed an understanding of femininity as well as feminism in which the definition of women as white. They, “the group of college-educated white middle and upper class women,” who dominated the women’s movement in the late 1960s focused merely on their problems and ideas about politics, suffrage, literature, and social and economic equality between sexes (*Ain’t I A Woman* 121). Thus, failing to take into consideration the appeals of other women, white women omitted black women’s experiences and other voices. Black women, as Hooks claims, “who supported feminism and participated in the effort to establish a feminist movement received little attention” (*Ain’t I A Woman* 187) though both black and white women struggled equally for the women’s movement.

In his article titled “Feminism and the Subtext of Whiteness”, George Yancy discusses that “whiteness, within the feminist movement, has assumed a position of absolute authority, speaking from a center which marginalizes non-white voices” (4). However, it was not just “women of color” that the modern feminist movement marginalized but there were also discrimination against “working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women” (“Racism and Women’s Studies” 49). The term “women” when used in conjunction with liberation, oppression, question, rights, referred to white, middle class, heterosexual women. This time any women “in lower class and poor groups, particularly those who are non-white” (*Feminist Theory* 19) were regarded as others. Yancy, therefore, criticizes feminism as it held a racist,

classist and sexist attitude toward women, claiming that such kind of feminism is “philosophically bankrupt and dismissive of the particular experiences, identities and complexities of non-white women” (3).

African American women, thus, as advocates for women’s liberation, never had an equal voice with white women who saw colored women as “dehumanized beings, who do not fall under the heading woman” (*Ain’t I A Woman* 139). It was “white female racism barred [the colored women] from full participation in the movement” (*Ain’t I A Woman* 161). Sojourner Truth, one of the leaders of the black feminist movement, pointed out the separateness between two races in the 1851 Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio:

[...] ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me-and ain’t I woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well- and ain’t I a woman? I have borne five children and I seen ‘em mos all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus hear-and ain’t I a woman? (*Ain’t I A Woman* 160).

Truth’s speech clearly proved that the brunt of the world was on the shoulders of black women due to their double discrimination which restricted their existence. In a way, black women had to cope with different realities of life such as rape, slavery, racial discrimination, separation from their children and the lynching of their fathers or husbands. Starting from the days of slavery, they had to work outside under the harshest conditions with black men while white women never had such an obligation. Slavery and working conditions hindered black women even from spending time with their own families. Because their main duty was to work for the benefits of their white masters, they did not have the luxury to look after their own children. Only after the abolition of slavery were some black women able to direct all their affection to their families, while staying at home and taking care of the family were already parts of white women’s lives. Black women had to suffer a lot merely to have what white women already had and refused. Only black women were obliged to fight in several fronts.

Having realized that their realities as black women were incompatible with white women's experiences, African American women felt the need to separate themselves from white feminism. Shifting from feminism, black women formed their own organizations and created black feminism or womanism, an Alice Walker term, which includes everyone regardless of race and gender. Nonetheless, white-women-centered feminism was not the only factor whose outcomes disillusioned black women. African American females were also put off by the Civil Rights Movements or, in general, by the black liberation movements, which did not allow for full expression of black women's voices.

I.2.2. The Black Liberation Movements and Black Feminist Thought & Politics

Black feminism, as a social and political movement, emerged due to black women's dissatisfaction with the black liberation and the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As previously mentioned, black women who struggled to partake in the feminist movement confronted with white women's racism. The needs, problems, experience and existence of black women were largely ignored in the women's rights movements. Black women faced the same problems in the black liberation struggle which centered on the black men's oppression. Neither movement was genuinely interested in the issues concerning black women. As Hull and Smith claim "because of White women's racism and Black men's sexism, there was no room in either era for a serious consideration of the lives of Black women" (xxi).

Being racially oppressed in the feminist movement, black women were sexually underrepresented in the black liberation movement. In Hooks' view "racist and sexist patterns in the language Americas use to describe reality support the exclusion of black women" because "the word 'women' to refer to white women and 'black' to refer to black men" (*Ain't I A Woman* 140). In a sense, freedom of blacks was mostly equated with black men's freedom. The rights were actually aimed to guarantee the liberation of black men though it was also black women who fought for the freedom of black race with men in the Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism, the Black Panthers and others all considered under the title of black liberation movements in this thesis.

Black women were placed in the lowest rank by the white men centered social structure. Interestingly enough, black men did not oppose nor reject the white patriarchal system, moreover, they colluded with it to subjugate the rights of black women. The rights demanded by the black community, besides opposing racism, turned out to be an announcement of black patriarchy, because they only provided black men with freedom and citizenship. Black women's concerns were excluded due to black men's sexist statements though black males and females were allies in the struggle for equal civil rights. As Hooks asserts "women's liberation was presented as inimical to black liberation" (*Ain't I A Woman* 181) because black males

[...] made black liberation synonymous with gaining full participation in the existing patriarchal nation-state and their demands were for the elimination of racism, not capitalism or patriarchy (*Ain't I A Woman* 176).

In a way, black men neglected and undermined black women, and they “have remained blind or resistant to the implications of sexual politics in Black women’s lives” (Hull and Smith xxi). Black men wanted black women only to help their men and to organize around their men’s needs by minimizing their own efforts. Hooks supports that black women saw “pressure from black men to assume a subordinate position” (*Ain't I A Woman* 188). They were supposed to play passive, subordinated, inferior and supportive roles.

In response to all these separatist attempts and politics, black women began to fight against restrictions placed upon them. They wanted their own voices to be heard after they had felt marginalized in the white dominated feminism and silenced in the black liberation movements. Thus, black women identified themselves in separate black female groups such as “Colored Women’s League, National Federation of Afro-American Women, National Association for Colored Women” (*Ain't I A Woman* 163) and formed a movement of their own, the Black Feminist Movement, which has focused mainly on sexism, racism and classism, the problems that they have been struggling to overcome for years.

According to Hull and Smith, black feminism is totally committed to the liberation of black women and to the “recognition of Black women as valuable and complex human beings” (xxi). Understanding that they deserve to be treated as worthy of respect, valuable, equal, black feminists discuss that African American women are not victims but “strong-willed resisters” (Collins, 1990 92). They are great warriors because even though they have been suppressed and taught to be silent, passive and submissive throughout more than two centuries, black women “have managed to do intellectual work, and to have [their] ideas matter” (Collins, 2000 3). Patricia Hill Collins says that:

Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary McLeod Bethune, Toni Morrison, Barbara Smith, and countless others have consistently

struggled to make themselves heard. African women writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, and Ellen Kuzwayo have used their voices to raise important issues that affect Black African women [...] African-American women's intellectual work has aimed to foster Black women's activism (Collins, 2000 3).

Many black women advocates have announced that black women have to speak for themselves and express their difficulties and victimization within the white patriarchal society. Thus, they have given voice to black women's existences, needs, problems. And, black female scholars have managed to demonstrate black female subjectivity and activism in their works. Their keys to freedom have been self-realization, self-definition and self-respect.

Black feminist theory is truly an important step for black women to get their demands for social, political and economic equality heard. Bell Hooks and Cornel West affirm that: "theory is inescapable because it is an indispensable weapon in struggle, because it provides certain kinds of understanding, [...] illumination, [...] insights" (qtd. in *Fighting Words* xv). In this way, African American women develop a sense of self-awareness and consciousness and form the organizations of Black feminist or womanist thought which "consists of specialized knowledge created by African-American women," and which "clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women" ("Defining Black Feminist Thought" 3) by questioning "normative blind spots that essentialized gender and silenced race, ethnicity, and class" (Villaverde 55). Black female theorists have drawn black feminism's central themes, which include:

- 1) the presentation of an alternative social construct for now and the future based on African American women's lived experiences, 2) a commitment to fighting against race and gender inequality across differences of class, age, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, 3) recognition of black women's legacy of struggle, 4) the promotion of black female empowerment through voice, visibility and self definition, and 5) a belief in the interdependence of thought and action (qtd. in Villaverde 56).

In an effort to speak out black women's problems, the central themes of black feminism focus mainly on interlocking systems of race, gender and class oppression and urge black women to struggle, to act and to think fearlessly and freely.

What is more, Black feminism's agenda is aimed to address the problems of all women, the subjects related to black women's and women of other colors' lives, and the issues white centred feminism ignored. Bell Hooks speaks out:

[...] we are women, American women, as intensely interested in all that pertains to us such as all other American women; we are not alienating or withdrawing, we are only coming to front, willing to join any others in the same work and cordially inviting and welcoming any others to join us (*Ain't I A Woman* 164).

Believing that liberation involves freedom of all people, black female advocates do not follow a segregationist policy unlike the two movements they separated themselves from. Plus, in contrast to white women's organizations' confinement to the issues such as education, charity, literature, black women were interested in various issues such as poverty, joblessness, prostitution, lynching of non-white people and so on. African American feminists aim to embrace everybody and to deal with as many problems as possible. Black feminist issues, as Barbara Smith declares in her article named "Establishing Black Feminism":

are universal access to quality health care; universal accessibility for people with disabilities; quality public education for all; a humane and nonpunitive system of support for poor women and children, i.e., genuine welfare reform; job training and placement in real jobs that have a future; decent, affordable housing; and the eradication of violence of all kinds including police brutality [...] violence against women; reproductive freedom; equal employment opportunity; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender liberation still belong on any Black feminist agenda (52).

It is apparent that the agenda of black feminism is quite wide. It also includes men and the topics relevant to them as opposed to feminism. Black women have regarded men as companions with whom they have shared the oppression and victimization of their enslavement in the white supremacist world, unlike white women who mostly

considered men enemies against whom they had to fight. Black women do not exclude any other women of color or the opposite sex and they put various histories, issues, experiences and cultures together in feminist movement and create their subjectivity.

To conclude my remarks, black feminism, or African American feminism, or womanism, as Alice Walker calls, creates an opportunity for black women to have a voice in their struggles for liberation and to clarify their places between the white feminist movement and black nationalism. Black women were generally forced to make a choice between racial and gender oppression. Those who chose to fight against sexism were deemed the ones who disturbed the so-called peace of their community. Thus, black feminist supporters have been criticized by their own communities for breaking taboos and violating traditions as well as destroying black nationalism. According to the supporters of African American patriarchal regime, they simply degrade African and African American culture. Nonetheless, pointing out the unsaid defects of society, black women have to give voice to their needs and goals in order to gain victory against the racist and sexist attitudes of both white and African American communities.

CHAPTER TWO: THE BLACK FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*

II.1. Toni Morrison: "A Black Woman Writer"

Toni Morrison, the writer of the novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1999), *Love* (2003) and *A Mercy* (2008), has a significant place in literature. She has won many literary awards, including a National Book Critics' Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize, and she is the first African American writer to win the Nobel Prize. In this regard, before turning to the black feminist analysis of Morrison's *Sula* as one of the core issues of this thesis, some introductory points will be made concerning her person, work and position as a black woman writer in Black and American Literature.

The title or the description of Toni Morrison, above, as a black woman writer is chosen deliberately since Morrison insistently describes herself as a "black woman novelist," (Kubitschek 1). However, she does not consent to identifying herself as a black feminist writer. When she is asked about that point in one of her interviews, her answer is that: "I would never write any 'ist'. I don't write 'ist' novels" (Salon Interview). She states that it is easy to label her novels as "feminist" because they have so many women characters. When Morrison is asked why she puts a distance between herself and feminism in such a way, she says:

In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed. Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors, sometimes, not even closing the book -- leaving the endings open for reinterpretation, revisitation, a little ambiguity. I detest and loathe [those categories]. I think it's off-putting to some readers, who may feel that I'm involved in writing some kind of feminist tract. I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it's a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things (Salon Interview).

Evidently, Morrison does not want to take positions that are restricted in order to be as free as she possibly can in her own imagination. She avoids categorizations. Instead, as

Kubitschek points out; “She sees herself as a writer with a racial/cultural identity, a gender identity, and a national/ regional identity [...] [The] three terms- black, woman, and American- suggest three literary contexts for Morrison’s novels” (13). Her historical background, her gender and her African American identity are crucial to Morrison’s sense of who she is.

Although Morrison does not want to restrict her imagination as a writer, she draws her borderline clear having been occupied with portraying women’s suffering and the black women case. She “writes as a black woman with the experiences of black women in mind” (Peach 13). Plus, Morrison thinks that this specific situation is the same for other black women writers. She, therefore, puts black female writers into a different category from other white or black male and white female authors, pointing out the fact that:

I am valuable as a writer because I am a woman, because women, it seems to me, have some special knowledge about certain things [...] I write for black women. We are not addressing the men, as some white female writers do. We are not attacking each other, as both black and white men do. Black women writers look at things in an unforgiving/loving way. They are writing to repossess, re-name, re-own (qtd. in Peach 14).

Morrison signifies that black female writers’ concerns are quite divergent. Their gender and race give them a different gift and perspective while creating novels. After many years of oppression, experiencing difficulties and especially because they have started from a difficult position, the claims of repossessing and re-naming are important for black women writers.

That is to say, Toni Morrison accepts the favor of being a black female author and writing for black women though she has a problem with the term “feminism”. Unlike Alice Walker, Bell Hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Christian and many other black feminists who find themselves in the feminist movement, Morrison does not directly accept to be a feminist. In the interview mentioned above, she explains what she thinks about her relationship with feminism:

I think I merged those two words, black and feminist, growing up, because I was surrounded by black women who were very tough and very aggressive and who always assumed they had to work and rear children and manage homes. They had enormously high expectations of their daughters, and cut no quarter with us; it never occurred to me that that was feminist activity. You know, my mother would walk down to a theater in that little town that had just opened, to make sure that they were not segregating the population -- black on this side, white on that. And as soon as it opened up, she would go in there first, and see where the usher put her, and look around and complain to someone. That was just daily activity for her and the men as well. So it never occurred to me that she should withdraw from that kind of confrontation with the world at large. And the fact that she was a woman wouldn't deter her. She was interested in what was going to happen to the children who went to the movies -- the black children -- and her daughters, as well as her sons. So I was surrounded by people who took both of those roles seriously. Later, it was called feminist behaviour (Salon Interview).

Toni Morrison appears to believe the idea that feminism has already been a part of black females' lives, so the title "feminist" is not necessarily important for her. The issue which concerns her is the powerful female personalities she observes around herself, even before the emergence of feminism as a term. Morrison's women ancestors are inherently feminists. She, herself, lives with four generations of women in her family and remembers the strong personality of her great grandmother as a woman who could not read but was a talented midwife. Hence, she identifies black women as "busy and eminently capable [...] managing households and other people's children and two jobs and listening to everybody and at the same time creating, singing, holding, bearing, transferring the culture for generations" (qtd. in Kubitschek 5).

Additionally, it has been inevitable for Morrison, as a black woman writer, to confront the racist and sexist issues in literature. In the late 1960s, most of the works over the truth of black females' experiences was not published. When Morrison published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970, women characters had been drawn according to certain "stereotypes" which differed for white and black women. In her book, *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion*, Kubitschek maintains that: "the

stereotypes of whites and black women were complementary. In [the] racist and sexist folklore, white women became sexless angels, while black women became sexual animals” (16). The huge discrepancy between the roles depicted for white and black females was because of their historical background. In Bell Hooks’ view, “a devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery” (*Ain’t I A Woman* 53). And, according to Gerda Lerner as a continuance of “slavery’s institutional rape, ‘a myth was created’” that “all black women were eager for sexual exploits, voluntarily ‘loose’ in their morals and, therefore, deserving none of the consideration and respect granted white women” (qtd. in Bjork 19). Therefore, black women were seen as chattels, sexually loose; while white women were thought as ladylike, angelic figures.

Barbara Christian delineates three main stereotypes of black women before 1970: “the bossy and comic Mammy, who nurtures everyone; the mulatta, a mixed race woman whose life is necessarily tragic; and the Sapphire, who dominates and emasculates black men” (qtd. in Kubitschek 17). The stereotypes were a troublesome problem for black women authors to overcome. There was the white culture’s pressure on them to write within this constricted context.

Nonetheless, Morrison refuses to answer such expectations of dominant culture. Her fiction deals with complicated female identities. She becomes a pioneer, creating more realistic and complex black women characters with her first two novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. As Kubitschek signifies, in those two books Morrison talks about:

menstruation and sexuality, two truths of the female body. Perhaps more importantly, she focused on the truths of black female culture, with its emphases on female friendship and motherhood. And she told the truths of American society in her portrait of racist damage to black children and the African American community. Overturning stereotypes, these novels set a new standard of complex, nuanced presentation for black female characters (17).

It is clear that Morrison’s novels invert routine myths and familiar stereotypes of black women. She not only overcomes the racist stereotypes, but confronts the sexist issues concerning all women writers, as well. Because male publishers found “truths of female

body such as pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, rape and sexual experience” inappropriate to write about, women could not express them in their works (Kubitschek 16). However, Morrison who is in the attempt of writing about the truths of the black female body stands out against such barriers that limited both black writers and women writers.

Besides portraying realistic female characters, Morrison has profound contributions to African American literature. She makes a breakthrough with the characters and places she has created, the situations she has imagined, the moral ambiguities, public pronouncements, private sufferings and celebrations she has dramatized. Morrison’s novels contain some needs, desires, and aspirations by comparison with stereotyped context of black writings.

Morrison, as an editor, makes great contribution to giving shape the tradition of African American literature, as well. Her editing work helps to open doors for many African American writers. Especially in the early 1970s with the publication of *The Black Book*, she greatly contributed to African American culture and literature. At that time history text books mostly focused on white men and their military battles, but *The Black Book* “chronicles the everyday lives of ordinary African Americans [...] like an old attic trunk full of a hundred years’ memorabilia” (Kubitschek 4). In a way, it collects the advertisements and news cuttings about the life of black people in America from slavery to The Civil Rights Movement. In addition to its importance in African American culture, life and history; the materials in it gives inspiration to the novels of Morrison.

Indeed, Morrison particularly deals with African American notions of spirituality, time, and the self and all novels of her examine African American characters and communities. What makes her original is her unique fiction, unusual characters and plot developments. Furthermore, her subject matter has always been innovative as it is in *Sula*, focusing on women’s friendship as an uncommon topic in literature before 1973. According to David L. Middleton “What she does with allusion, with unique characterization, with experimental structures exploiting oral narrative strategy is, in effect, to create a ‘wholy black test’”(xii). The development of black fiction is important for her and Morrison’s intention is to make room for novels different from those produced by Western phenomenology.

In sum, Toni Morrison with all of her innovations, her fondness for blackness and black literature, her different styles, characters, position in literature is a brave novelist who gives voice to African American women and who celebrates their vitality and strength. She, as a black woman writer, depicts the oppressions affecting the black women's lives. In her novels, black female struggles are focused on with a combination of African American culture.

II.2. An Overview of *Sula*

Written in 1973, *Sula* depicts the friendship of two black women, Sula Peace and Nel Wright, with regards to their community, called the Bottom. The novel is mostly set in this black town, in Ohio and the story explores women's relations in the patriarchal and segregated South. The emphasis is "on the inner dimensions of women's experience; women voices tell the story and women's psychological conceptions locate and order the crises presented" (Middleton xii).

Sula is an "African American female bildungsroman" (Kubitschek 53), a novel focusing on the main character's growth from youth to adulthood. However, *Sula* depicts two black women's passage into womanhood in contrast to the traditional bildungsroman which concentrates on the single character. The bildungsroman ends when the protagonist has reached the most important phase of his/her development. As commonly outlined, in the nineteenth century, the bildungsroman's emphasis is on white women characters' paths to marriage. White heroine's marriage after her development into adulthood is the popular tendency. Nonetheless, in *Sula* marriage is not a sign of growing into adulthood, but is the result of social oppression. Morrison's heroines, Sula and Nel, do not fulfill their self-developments by getting married. That is, Sula does not believe marriage is self-satisfying or worthwhile, and Nel does not complete her development with her troubled marriage. Plus, the central character, Sula, violating the expectations of the bildungsroman, dies before she completes her self-development.

In addition to changing the conventions of the genre, bildungsroman, *Sula* is written in an innovative narrative framework. The novel is divided into two parts, Part One and Part Two, each containing specific years to title the chapters. The first part is arranged in orderly succession from 1919 to 1923, and finally leaps to 1927. In the second part, the first four chapters are titled 1937, 1939, 1940, 1941 and finally jumping to 1965. *Sula* does not follow a linear story though it is written in a chronological order. At the end of each chapter, Morrison depicts another issue, a different event to enlighten readers about the developing and evolving plot. Readers grasp the development of story line by piecing the chapters together. In her interview to Thomas LeClair about *Sula*, Morrison explains, "I thought of *Sula* as a cracked mirror, fragments and pieces we have

to see independently and put together” (qtd. in Ron David 59). Similarly, but in a detailed way, Linden Peach illustrates that in *Sula*:

Each part in a number of ways is an inverse mirror image of the other. Characters introduced and developed in part one are reintroduced in inverse order in the second part and the novel opens and closes with an act of memory [...] the novel, like *The Bluest Eye*, is fragmentary and elliptical. Indeed the centre of the novel is literally blank, a missing decade when the reader knows very little of what happened to Sula (40).

Apparently, *Sula* is a contemporary novel which is steeped in modernist subject matter, plot, and the technique. It, like Morrison’s other novels, does not follow the conventional norms of narration.

Indeed, the fragments, shifts and spaces in the narration of *Sula* enable the novel to be open to multiple interpretations. It is Morrison’s gift for her readers to read between the lines and to try to complete the gaps and the non-linear structure. She wants her readers to be active and to come to their own understandings of her novels. Morrison, therefore, implores her readers to use their own concentration, imagination and intelligence. She says, “Forget about what I say in an interview it might be anything but trust the tale and start with that” (qtd. in Ron David 65). She expects her readers to reach their own judgements and interpretations, so no absolute authority exists in her novels. It is the very same for her *Sula*. Missy Dehn Kubitschek comments on *Sula*, “as a modernist work [which] never lets the reader rest easy, with a single and uncomplicated understanding of an event’s meaning. Instead, the reader must develop an interpretation that honors a multiplicity of meanings in experience” (19).

Sula, thus, offers several choices as the central theme of the novel. The fragments and the shifts in the novel’s narration suggest the fragmentation of both individual and the community only as one of its major themes. The others are: Sula and Nel’s individual developments, the friendship between them, the juxtaposition of three generations of women in the Peace and Wright families, the feminist energies of female characters. What is more, the relationship between black men and black women, racism as the social condition in the Bottom, the function of the Bottom, Sula’s relationship

with the society, the effect of World War I especially on the psychologies of male characters are among the novel's themes. As the novel's title suggests, the protagonist, Sula, unifies these various concerns (Kubitschek 51).

In brief, *Sula* is a woman-centred novel. Morrison demonstrates her bravery by writing *Sula* and by celebrating the female camaraderie and unconventional, strong, independent female characters. She portrays the social roles affecting her female characters' individual developments and the friendship between them. As David elaborated "[*Sula* is] a book about how serious, strong, unconventional black women should live their lives their way and not be deterred by friends, family, or men" (68). In a way, *Sula* can be considered a challenge to the traditional male-dominated ideology. In Hortense J. Spillers' view, "Toni Morrison's *Sula* is a rebel idea, both for her creator and for Morrison's audience" (qtd. in Ron David 63). The novel proves its difference not only thanks to Morrison's depiction of realistic black women characters struggling to survive in a racist, sexist, antagonistic society; but also thanks to her focus on the women's changing roles, their independence and the fight between the old gender roles versus the recent strength of women.

II.3. The Black Feminist Analysis of *Sula*

Sula opens with the description of the Bottom, the small Ohio town in which the black community lives. Morrison's omniscient narrator focuses on the neighbourhood which is called "the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom" (*Sula* 3). Ironically, the unusual name of the Bottom is "A joke. A nigger joke" (*Sula* 4), tells the narrator. For, it is high up in the hills though it is named as the Bottom. This issue is explained in the story of the "good white farmer" who promises his slave that he will give him a piece of fertile land of the valley, "a piece of bottom land" and his freedom if he performs some hard tasks for his master. The slave does what his master wants. However, the white farmer deceives him and wants him to accept land in the hills defending the idea that "when God looks down, it's the bottom [...] the bottom of heaven" (*Sula* 5).

The joke reveals the white exploitation of blacks. God is authority over all mankind, but the white man is another God deciding on the portions of land to offer to his slave. Through guile, the white man swindles the black man out of a valuable piece of land. The trick in his language unfolds "how language can be and has been manipulated by those in authority to maintain their advantage and protect their positions" as Linden Peach states (40). The event, thus, epitomizes the huge discrepancy between the white and the black; it is the black slave who is forced to own the land given to him and to accept his degraded status in society.

Furthermore, in Bjork's view, the inhabitants of the Bottom think of the naming of their towns as a joke but no other way because "laughter is one way of dealing with their pain" (56). They try to cover the racist discourse with their sense of humour. Nonetheless, they cannot cover the racist discrimination between their white masters and themselves. The discrimination black people face displays itself with the unfair division of the settlement. That is, while white people deserve to live in the fertile land of the valley, black people have to endure the environment "where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter" (*Sula* 5). Under those tough conditions it is the black people who encounter poverty and hardship.

The Wrights and The Peaces, the two very different families, live in that town. The Wright women including the fair skinned Creole Rochelle, Helene and Nel are set in contrast to the Peace women, Eva, Hannah and Sula. The Wrights' following of the conventional womanhood runs against The Peaces' nontraditional women. Furthermore, while the former represents the middle class women, the latter is the embodiment of the poor, working class of black women. Middleton points out that "*Sula* explores the mother-daughter experience in the Bottom's equivalent of the middle class, the Wrights' milieu, and in its poorest sector, the household of the young Eva Peace" (69). However, each household contains three generations of women and it is the relationships among them which constitute the backbone of the novel. In other words, *Sula* revolves primarily on the lives and experiences of three generations of black women, reminiscent of Morrison's own life with four generations of women living in the same house.

The friendship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright, the daughters of those two different families, is the primary focus of *Sula*. They meet at the age of twelve and "their friendship [is] as intense as it [is] sudden. They [find] relief in each other's personality" (*Sula* 53). Their friendship nurtures both of them in various ways and completes their lacks. In the nontraditional Peace women's home, Nel tries to escape from her mother's adoption of middle class norms. For example, taking the support of Sula, Nel can act against her mother, Helene, by stopping her mother's use of the clothespin on Nel's nose with the aim of reshaping it. On the other hand, Sula senses order and control which is absent from in the Peace home thanks to Nel. Moreover, Sula feels love with Nel, which her mother, Hannah, could not supply her with.

Indeed, Sula and Nel find in each other the personal worth that racism and sexism ignore. They are lonely and friendless without each other. Therefore, they share the loneliness as women in the society and find the support within each other to form their identities in somewhat hostile, racist and sexist, contexts. The omniscient narrator describes this intimacy between them:

So when they met, first in those chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all

freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for (*Sula* 52).

The problem that they are neither a white woman nor a man is emphasized by Morrison, who displays the "double jeopardy" of black womanhood (Feng 81). In the man-centered and racist social system, those are black females who are oppressed twice because they are both women and blacks. Nel and Sula lack the privileges, freedom of whites and men, so they will "create something else" to protect themselves from the disadvantages of the sexist and racist world. And, their creation will be the strong friendship between them.

The central figures, Sula and Nel, affect each other's development throughout the novel, but mostly with the presence of Sula, Nel becomes an independent figure. The omniscient narrator says that "Nel seem[s] stronger and more consistent" (*Sula* 53) when she is together with Sula. Sula is the activist, urging Nel to seek some adventure. For instance, when she persuades Nel to take the "shortest way" on their way home, they meet with a group of Irish boys which attempts to harass them. Yet, Sula protects Nel and herself from them. She cuts her forefinger with Eva's knife and says: "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" (*Sula* 54-55). This brave act of Sula shocks Nel and proves her passivity in comparison to Sula.

Sula and Nel find confidence in each other. They grow up together, they share dreams and secrets together, and they are closely connected with each other. Their close friendship is confirmed when they cause Chicken Little's drowning. Sula, again playing an active role, wants to help Chicken Little climb a tree. After he descends from the tree, Sula plays with him by picking him up by his hands. She swings him around until he slips from her grasp and falls into the river. While the water swallows Chicken Little, Sula and Nel do nothing but watch in paralyzed inaction. That shocking incident stays as a hidden fact of life between them.

The close intimacy between Nel and Sula, however, is interpreted differently by some critics. Sula and Nel are in a great harmony when they are together and as discussed above they complete each other like two halves of one self. In Bjork's point of view "the attraction between Sula and Nel centers upon either a unification of the divided self or upon their latent, erotic desire for each other" (68). Even their dreams complete each other and pave the way for a close analysis. The omniscient narrator says "it was in dreams that the two girls had first met" (*Sula* 51). While Nel dreams of lying in bed and "waiting for some fiery prince" (*Sula* 51), Sula, sharing her dream, imagines that she gallops "on a gray and white horse [...] in full view of a someone" (*Sula* 52). This dream of theirs is interpreted as if they are linked together in erotic dreams. Banywa-Horne claims that "the groping of two girls for each other in their dreams echoes the groping of the unconscious self to embrace its conscious part" (qtd. in Bjork 68). Barbara Smith, as a lesbian-feminist reader, comments upon the same dream scene and says that it "shows their relationship from the very beginning is suffused with an erotic romanticism" (qtd. in Bjork 69). Therefore, she conceives of *Sula* as an overtly lesbian text.

Although Smith talks about the "erotic romanticism" in Sula and Nel's friendship, Morrison says that she "obviously did not intend the reader to perceive Sula and Nel's relationship as inherently lesbian" (Hull, Scoth, Smith 170). Morrison's main concern in *Sula* is to focus on "a very old, worn-out idea, which [is] to do something with good and evil, but putting it in different terms" (qtd. in Bjork 70). For this intention of her, Morrison states that:

When I wrote *Sula*, I knew I was going to write a book about good and evil and about friendship. I had to figure out what kind of people would manifest this theme [...] Nel would be one kind of person; Sula would be different. Friendship between women is special, different, and has never been depicted as the major focus of a novel before *Sula*. Nobody ever talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexual, and there is no homosexuality in *Sula* [...] It seemed to me that black women have friends in the old-fashioned sense of the word (Tate 119).

Nel and Sula are not lovers in sexual sense, but friends in the old-fashioned sense of the word. They represent the potential for good and evil. That is, according to community value constructs, Nel represents good, traditional values and Sula epitomizes rebellion. Nonetheless, Morrison compares Nel's conventional womanhood with Sula's autonomy and presents good and evil "in different terms" (Bjork 70).

Nel and Sula evolve from a similar pair towards a contrasting pair. While Nel adopts the common social roles rather than following her own feelings, her opposite Sula, acting on her own feelings, rejects all norms and expectations of conventional womanhood. Unlike Nel, Sula senses the truth of her own needs and relies on them. Thus, she prefers looking for exploration and experiences, but Nel wishes for respectability and survival in her community, so she decides to get married to a local boy, Jude Green. After Nel's wedding, she and Sula draw apart. In search of the "experimental life", (*Sula* 118) Sula leaves the town and disappears for a ten-year period. When she returns, the two girls will be following different paths.

Nel and Sula's female ancestors greatly affect their development and their decision making to follow different paths. Nel's story starts with her mother's childhood and the memory of Rochelle, Helene's mother; whereas Eva Peace's struggle to find money and her missing leg give a start to the story of Sula. The omniscient narrator introduces Helene Wright, the daughter of a Creole prostitute, before meeting Nel. Helene is educated by her grandmother, Cecile, because her mother is a whore. In contrast to Rochelle's unconventional life, "The grandmother [...] raised [Helene] under the dolesome eyes of a multicolored Virgin Mary, counseling her to be constantly on guard for any sign of her mother's wild blood" (*Sula* 17). That is, Helene grows up with Cecile's warnings against her mother's nasty past and with the "Virgin Mary" images that "symbolize her education in sexual repression" (Feng 82).

Pin-chia Feng focuses on the importance of Rochelle as a character, though she appears briefly in the novel. Feng not only thinks that Rochelle is a haunting past for Helene, but also that her status as a whore reveals one of the limited roles of black women in a racist society. Her body displays a historical fact whose origin dates back to slavery. Thus, through the character Rochelle, Morrison again depicts the double, racial and sexual, oppression of black women. Besides, in Feng's view Rochelle's

unconventional life, her freedom, independence from conventional rules, makes an introduction to the life of the adult Sula (82-83).

For Helene, however, her mother is a source of shame, nobody but a “painted canary who never said a word of greeting or affection” (*Sula* 26). It is clear that Helene does not like her mother and is ashamed of her because she is a prostitute. Chastity is the most valuable virtue in patriarchal societies. Prostitution, therefore, is a cause of shame for women. On account of this, to declare her separation from her mother, Helene adopts a middle class woman role. She simply covers her past as it relates to Rochelle; she dons a social mask which allows her to follow conventional womanhood and traditional domestic life. As a respectable puritan, middle class woman, she goes on with her “satisfactory” life in the community:

Helene Wright was an impressive woman, at least in Medallion she was. Heavy hair in a bun, dark eyes arched in a perpetual query about other people’s manners. A woman who won all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority. Since there was no Catholic church in Medallion then, she joined the most conservative black church. And held sway. It was Helene who never turned her head in church when latecomers arrived [...] She lost only one battle--the pronunciation of her name. The people in the Bottom refused to say Helene. They called her Helen Wright and left it at that (*Sula* 18).

The omniscient narrator’s description of Helene reveals her rigidity, her attitudes of orderliness and propriety. The irony lies in her respectability and acceptance by society as a result of the fact that she plays the role of self sacrificial, traditional woman; a role attributed to all women in the community. This role, giving Helene her respectability, confines her into certain parameters such as “keeping a clean house, having sex infrequently and quietly, rearing a child, and above all controlling behaviour to exclude anything unconventional” (Kubitschek 67). It limits Helene’s freedom, but grants her acceptance by society. That is, Helene owes her place in the Bottom to her adoption of conventional values; social values are above everything else for her.

Pin-chia Feng comments on Helene’s following “lady-like” traditional womanhood, pointing to her being a new image of a “black lady” (83). Feng defends the

idea that this new image is an opposite effect of the sexually loose black women stereotype, which has been created for justifying sexual exploitation of black women since slavery. However, according to Feng, Morrison attacks Helene's black lady image as Helene "merely imitates the cult of true [white] womanhood" (83). It is particularly "white" in parenthesis as Kubitschek explains the cult of true womanhood as a term "that literary historians use to describe the completely domestic, self-sacrificing role that nineteenth century society prescribed for white middle-class women" (65). Even in the beginnings of the twentieth century, when *Sula* begins, the social roles for women were still restricted with being obedient wives or sacrificial mothers under the effect of the cult of true womanhood. That is why Helene lives according to those kinds of expectations of "true" womanhood, gaining the praise of the community while putting her own self aside.

Now that Helene Wright epitomizes the stereotypical middle class conventional housewife and mother, she educates Nel in the same way. Therefore, "under Helene's hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (*Sula* 18). Helene wants to repress Nel's individuality, imagination and ideas. She wants her to be a silent, traditional lady who abides by the roles of society. Besides, because of her social concerns and her fondness for white womanhood, Helene insists on clothespinning Nel's "broad flat nose" (*Sula* 18).

Despite all that pressure upon Nel, Helene cannot totally eliminate Nel's wish for creating her own "me-ness" (*Sula* 29). Her self-realization develops when she sees her mother's experience of being black in the larger white society. On their trip to New Orleans to attend Cecile's funeral, Helene smiles to the racist white conductor scolding them as they are in the train's wrong part. Nel watches "her mother's foolish smile" (*Sula* 22) to pacify the white conductor, her turning "into jelly" (*Sula* 22) in front of him and also the anger in the eyes of the black soldiers there at that moment. In a way, Nel feels the mask of her mother with disgust. She senses the self-denial of her mother and the distortion of her life. For this reason, to separate herself from her mother, Nel continuously repeats "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (*Sula* 28). That is, she gains awareness both for herself and against Helene, and "the trip,

perhaps, or her new found me-ness, [gives] her the strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother” (*Sula* 29). This friend is Sula Peace.

Like Nel, Sula’s individual development and her concept of womanhood is shaped by her relationship with her mother and grandmother. In contrast to Helene and Cecile, Hannah and Eva are quite indifferent to social conventions. Their mother and daughter relations and their relationships with others work in unconventional terms. First of all, even the disorder and complexity in the Peace house contrasts with “the oppressive neatness” (*Sula* 29) of the Wrights’ home. The narrator portrays “Sula’s woolly house” (*Sula* 29) from the eyes of Nel as a place:

[...] where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions; where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink, and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream (*Sula* 29).

It is clear that the Peace family is very different from Helene and her world of propriety. In a way, in the Peace home there is no mother who “enjoyed manipulating her daughter and her husband” (*Sula* 18) as Helene does or nobody tries to control everyone and everything around by “scold[ing]” or “giv[ing] directions” (*Sula* 29). The Peace women’s seeming lack of politeness, order and clean dishes draw a distinct picture as opposed to Helene’s idealised womanhood.

Unlike The Wrights’ nuclear family, The Peace house is inhabited not only by three generations of Peace women but also by Plum, Eva’s son; three orphaned children, The Deweys; and by a drunken bachelor, Tar Baby. In addition to them, Eva welcomes any strangers “leaving the bottom of the house more and more to those who lived there: cousins who were passing through, stray folks, and the many, many newly married couples [...]” (*Sula* 37). Middleton thinks that “Indeed, Eva’s house becomes a kind of extended family when she takes on the matriarchal role” of embracing everyone (77). She functions as a mother to most of the Bottom. At this point, Missy Dehn Kubitschek regards Eva as the representation of the strong and nurturing archetypal Earth Mother.

Plus, Kubitschek puts forth the likeness of the name Eva to the archetypal mother of humanity, "Eve" (56, 62).

Eva's wish to turn her family into a small social community seems to be the result of her past life of poverty, misery and abandonment. Her husband, BoyBoy, deserts her "after five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage" (*Sula* 32). Eva is left alone with three hungry children to take care of and no money. However, when Eva and her husband are together, things are not very different because BoyBoy "was very much preoccupied with other women and not home much" (*Sula* 32). Unlike the father figure in the Wrights who provides his family with money, BoyBoy "liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third" (*Sula* 32). In the absence of a father in the house, Eva has nothing to do but leave her children with a neighbour named Mrs. Suggs and go out of the town to find money like a man. She comes back eighteen months later with one leg and "reclaime[s] her children, next she [gives] the surprised Mrs. Suggs a ten-dollar bill, later she start[s] building a house on Carpenter's Road" (*Sula* 34-35). In Bjork's opinion, with that act of hers, Eva is "the embodiment of a black feminist self-determinism that defied the odds against abandoned black women in 1921" (64). She is a powerful woman who does not lose heart because of starvation, poverty and her husband's abandonment. She struggles against everything for her children even if it costs her one of her legs.

Eva is a strong, devoted mother. However, analyzing Eva as a character, Bjork claims that she is more complicated than the stereotypical self-sacrificing black woman. She draws a different picture from the traditional mammy of oral folk tales: "Practical and commonsensical, she is also arrogant, domineering, and mean-spirited" as opposed to "the kind, religious, asexual white-folk's mammy" (Bjork 64). Furthermore, she fills her heart with her hatred for BoyBoy: "it was hating him that kept her alive and happy" (*Sula* 37). She is very dissimilar to others with her diverse characteristics, with her resilience to go on her life and to be happy. Morrison's own criticism for Eva also reveals Eva's difference as a mother. Morrison talks about her: "she [...] kills her son, plays god, names people and, you know, puts her hand on a child. You know, she's god-like, she manipulates-all in the best interest. And she is very, very possessive about other people, that is, as a king is" (qtd. in Bjork 66). With all her traits, Eva is very

different from the Bottom's role model of motherhood. She veers from the conventional maternal morality.

Eva, indeed, is a mother whose actions deem her controversial. On one hand, she sacrifices her leg in order to feed her children and throws herself out of a window to extinguish the flames killing her Hannah; but on the other hand, she decides to kill her drug addict son, Plum, who is a war veteran "floated in a constant swaddle of love and affection, until 1917 when he went to war" (*Sula* 45). However, when he returns home, he starts to use drugs and finds himself in a state of reverting infancy: "Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time" (*Sula* 71). Eva does not welcome her son's weakness. Therefore, as Morrison says above, Eva, as "a king" or a "god-like" figure, decides her son's death. She burns him to death because she wishes him to die "like a man not all scrunched up inside [her] womb, but like a man" (*Sula* 72). Moreover, she defends that act of herself:

There wasn't space for him in my womb [...] I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again [...] I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't (*Sula* 71-72).

Obviously, Eva's actions extend beyond conventional definitions of self sacrifice. She kills her own son pitilessly. Patrick Bryce Bjork, therefore, puts her to "a position of pragmatic matriarch, possessive and domineering" (67). She acts selfishly and thinks that she has the right to decide what is best for her son. Middleton supports the same idea: "her own needs must be primary, [...] she cannot again take on the all-sustaining maternal role which she has already performed for Plum" (79). Eva kills him as it is easier than dealing with him or understanding him. She is the dominant decision maker in her children's lives.

In addition to her unconventional motherhood, Eva is not a fond mother. Her continuous struggle to feed and clothe her children, and her severe experiences might not allow Eva to express her love in affectionate terms. Her daughter, Hannah,

therefore, questions her mother's love for them. After Eva's murder of her son, Hannah asks her mother if she loves them. Eva answers in the following way:

You settin' here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't.

I didn't mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin' 'bout something else. Like. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?

Play? Wasn't nobody playin' in 1895. Just 'cause you got it good now you think it was always this good? 1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies.. Don't that count? Ain't that love? You want me to tinkle you under the jaw and forget 'bout them sores in your mouth? Pearl was shittin' worms and I was supposed to play rang-around-the-rosie?

But Mamma, they had to be some time when you wasn't thinkin' 'bout...

No time. They wasn't no time. Not none. Soon as I got one day done here come a night. With you all coughin' and me watchin' so TB wouldn't take you off and if you was sleepin' quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin' what you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer? (*Sula* 68-69).

Apparently, Eva gets angry by Hannah's question because she thinks her question is a sign of ungratefulness after her struggles to ensure her children's survival. She stays alive for them and allows a train to cripple her leg to make money in order to feed her starving children. In other words, she believes that she has managed to look after her children even under the harshest conditions and to provide her children with material necessities like a heroine. However, Eva ignores their emotional needs.

Although Eva devotes herself to her children, she does not show her love for them. She is a good example for Gloria Wade Gayles' claim that "mothers in Black women's fiction are strong and devoted", but "they are rarely affectionate" (qtd. in Collins, 2000 187). Eva lacks empathy, love and an understanding of her children's individuality. Even her physical separation from her children for a while is "a sign and symbol of [her] emotional distance" (Middleton 76). In Bjork's view the absence of

affectionate feelings in Eva's character is particularly significant as "it leaves a dangerous void of indifference and obliviousness in the lives of Eva's children and in their children" (65). Her emotional numbness affects Hannah and her relationship with her own daughter Sula, as well as Sula's personality.

There is much similarity between Eva and her daughter, though Hannah is lack of her mother's strength and independence. After her husband Rekus's death, Hannah avoids having romantic relationship with men and she never remarries, like her mother. The narrator says: "With the exception of BoyBoy, those Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters" (*Sula* 41). Thus, Hannah enjoys making love with men in the Bottom. She does not even seek for sensuality in her relations, but merely desires "some touching every day" (*Sula* 44). Because she demands nothing from the men, "she [can] break up a marriage before it [has] even become one-she [can] make love to the new groom and wash his wife's dishes all in an afternoon" (*Sula* 44). In one of her interviews, Morrison discusses about Hannah that: "she has no concept of love and possession. She likes to be laid, she likes to be touched but she doesn't want any confusion of relationships and so on" (qtd. in Bjork 66). In a sense, like her mother, Hannah lacks a loving, sensitive centre.

Hannah repeats Eva's attitude of raising children. As an inability learned from Eva, she also cannot communicate love. Therefore, she too creates an emotional distance between her daughter and herself. However, while Hannah doubts her mother's feelings about her, Sula overhears Hannah say that: "I love Sula. I just don't like her" (*Sula* 57). Sula feels hurt to learn that her mother does not like her. Thus, she grows up without an affectionate centre to trust. David L. Middleton, discussing the distance between Peace mothers and daughters, notes that it "allows the daughters considerable freedom in creating a self, but it restricts the daughters' capacities for emotional nurturing, empathy and connection" (81). The three generation Peace women all lack emotional communication among themselves, which causes them to be free to a certain extent as they do not have to become or do anything to gain the love of each other.

Given that the mother and daughter relationship has such an importance in the development of female personality, as indicated in the claims of Middleton and Bjork above, Sula creates a self with "a dangerous void of indifference" and without any

relational “capacities for emotional nurturing, empathy and connection”. Raised by loveless Hannah and Eva, Sula is narrated in the novel as a combination of these two characters. The narrator says: “Eva’s arrogance and Hannah’s self-indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions” (*Sula* 118). That is, “with a twist” (*Sula* 118) which mixes the effects of Hannah and Eva on her identity, Sula becomes less interesting than her mother and more arrogant and independent than her grandmother. She completely turns to her own desires and wishes, thus choosing to live an “experimental” life.

In her experimental life, like Hannah, Sula makes love with the men in the town and avoids direct commitment to them. However, unlike her mother who appears to “[compliment] the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands,” Sula “[tries] men out and discarding them without any excuse the men [can] swallow” (*Sula* 115). That is to say, Sula throws them away after she establishes relationships with men. Therefore, while Hannah only “exasperate[s] the women in the town” (*Sula* 44), Sula is labelled as a “bitch” by them (*Sula* 112).

Sula, actually, threatens the value system and traditional norms because she is “completely free” (*Sula* 119). She is “like any artist with no art form” (*Sula* 121). As she has “no art form”, she has also “no self to count on [...] she [has] no center, no speck around which to grow” (*Sula* 119). She, thus, becomes “dangerous” for the social norms prevalent in her community. Especially after she hears Hannah’s dislike of her and causes the death of Chicken Little, Sula looks for an alternative self:

completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments--no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself--be consistent with herself (*Sula* 119).

Sula chooses to create an alternative self rather than following the community’s traditions and values. She breaks with all social values and every community norm. That is why the community and even Eva do not welcome Sula’s freedom, though it is Eva’s strength and independence reappearing in her.

Eva supports the traditional role, proving herself in opposition to Sula’s freedom from society’s control and order. Sula leaves the town in pursuit of her own dream “of

linoleum galloping through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses in full view of a someone" (*Sula* 52) and to seek physical and emotional autonomy. However, when Sula comes back, Eva asks her about her plans regarding marriage and having children:

When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you.

I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.

Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man.

You did.

Not by choice.

Mamma did.

Not by choice, I said. It ain't right for you to want to stay off by yourself (*Sula* 92).

It seems that Eva does not advocate her unconventionality to other women. She defends the traditional idea that a woman cannot live comfortably in a society without a man, without a family. She, therefore, calls Sula "selfish" because she does not want to marry. Although Sula has got role models like Eva and Hannah, Eva does not want Sula to live as she and Hannah have lived. Furthermore, Eva emphasizes that Hannah's and her lives are the results of bitter events, not their own choices. Yet, Sula has the option of following her feminist desires, as opposed to Eva and Hannah, women of the old generation.

Showing no interest in marriage, Sula rejects being a wife and mother. Therefore, she outrages both Eva's and the community's standards. While neither Eva nor Hannah threaten the order in the society with their unconventional lives, Sula is regarded as a threat, as the rebellious one. In Bjork's view, her act of rejecting marriage and giving birth to a child is her "first act of rebellion against the community's order" (74). Then, Sula turns into a real threat when she wants to destroy "the community's certitude and conformity and, as a result, create her own form" (Bjork 77). Despite their independence from traditions, Hannah and Eva do not reject social conventions at all. They get married, become mothers, and try to perform the roles of mother and wife. However, Sula is different both from the other Peace women and the women of the

Bottom. She totally disregards the social rules, and insists on her own emotions. In a sense, she declares her own kingdom.

Sula's return to the Bottom is portrayed in the novel as it is "accompanied by a plague of robins" (*Sula* 89). According to Bjork, it is a foreshadowing that Sula will only "create chaos and resistance within the community" (74). Sula causes disorder since her freedom and audacity are incompatible with the society's moral rules and conventions. The townspeople disapprove of her experimental life. The narrator states: "all minds [are] closed to her" (*Sula* 112). Except Nel, everybody isolates Sula as her "selfishness is equated with immorality, with not being good" (Middleton 68). However, when Sula returns, Nel notices how much she has missed Sula's originality, humor and emotional support. She finds in Sula her other self that she buried with her the act of marriage, so "she [feels] new, soft and new. It [has] been the longest time since she [has] had a rib-scraping laugh" (*Sula* 98). Nonetheless, Nel's sense of newness will be temporary because she and Sula are on different paths in life.

Nel is on a conventional path. Like her mother Helene, she follows the society's rules and settles into the life of a housewife. After her marriage, Nel willingly accepts to be an object of the patriarchal system. She puts her me-ness aside and selflessly follows social conventions and traditional notions of feminine goodness. In other words, Nel personifies the aspects of traditional womanhood as performed by other women in the town. As the narrator says: "now Nel belong[s] to the town and all of its ways" (*Sula* 120). As a stereotypical loving and dutiful wife, she also belongs to Jude's image of wifely subordination:

Whatever his fortune, whatever the cut of his garment, there would always be the hem--the tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges; a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up. And in return he would shelter her, love her, grow old with her. Without that someone he was a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman. With her he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity (*Sula* 83).

In a way, their marriage, as a social contract, depends on mutual conventional roles. Jude protects Nel in exchange for her kindness and service. For Jude, Nel is a nurturer

of his emotions. He marries Nel and secures his sense of manhood. For, Jude, in fact, wishes for a man's job in the new road work, in the tunnel. Yet, he is unable to find employment, and so respectability, because he is not accepted to the work as whites do not want to work with blacks. Therefore, he tries to find solace in marriage and aims to fill the emotional and economic incompleteness in his life. He is attracted to Nel with "his need for comfort and sympathy in the face of racism" (Kubitschek 58).

Nel assimilates herself into Jude's self as the narrator says: "Two of them together would make one Jude" (*Sula* 83). Jude's ideas about marriage "consist of absorbing his wife's personality" (Kubitschek 58) and Nel shows no sign of aggression. She does nothing against Jude's exploitive treatment. Plus, she no longer asserts: "I am me". For Grewal, this kind of subservience is an epitome of the Black Nationalist erasure of the feminist claims (47). Nel is unable to assert herself, but she does not care about it. She, as a supportive wife, does not challenge her husband and his tales. Instead, she is ready to coddle her husband, so she provides the sympathy Jude needs as opposed to Sula who makes fun of Jude and his tales. Regarding Nel's consoling attitude towards Jude, Morrison notes that it is "the conventional black women's response to white victimization of black men" (Kubitschek 61). Nel always supports him. However, Jude does not appreciate Nel's love and devoted self. With no loyalty to Nel, he becomes interested in Sula. Furthermore, Jude flies away, as the black men usually do in *Sula*, after Nel finds him having sex with Sula. He does nothing to salvage his marriage.

As a consequence of Jude's and Sula's unfaithful action, Nel loses both her husband and her dearest friend. Although Nel, at first, is not a part of the society's condemnation of Sula's independence and sexual freedom, she too starts to condemn Sula: "Sula was wrong. Hell ain't things lasting forever. Hell is change" (*Sula* 108). Nel finds herself in a hell as she feels betrayed by the ones she loves most. She questions the act of Sula: "Why didn't you think about me? Didn't I count? I never hurt you. What did you take him for if you didn't love him?" (*Sula* 144). Sula's sexual relationship with Jude is against Nel's values of loyalty and trust. Thus, Nel creates a "gray ball [...] of fur" (*Sula* 109) as a symbol of her utter pain and disappointment. Then, she heads for using her children to suppress her feeling of solace. That is, she completely gives

herself to her children to compensate for the losses of her close friend and husband. However, the narrator describes Nel's love for her children as "a cumbersome bear-love that, given any rein, would suck their breath away in its crying need for honey" (*Sula* 138). Her love for her children is "ugly, perverse, even dangerous to them" (Kubitschek 62). Refusing to live her own life, Nel lives for her children.

As for Sula, Morrison does not want to impose moral judgements and she does not judge Sula. Therefore, in the novel, Sula's point of view sheds light to her own innocent claims. Sula thinks that "she had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude" (*Sula* 119). Her intention is not to hurt Nel. Sula only wants to experience some pleasure. That is why she cannot understand Nel's response to her deed. Sula merely feels sad and angry that Nel follows traditional values instead of acting on her own emotions. In her opinion, the town's women are "those with husbands [having] folded themselves into starched coffins" (*Sula* 122) and because of Nel's conventional way of thinking, Sula perceives Nel as "one of them" (*Sula* 120):

One of the spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the web, who dangled in dark dry places suspended by their own spittle, more terrified of the free fall than the snake's breath below. Their eyes so intent on the wayward stranger who trips into their net, they were blind to the cobalt on their own backs [...] (*Sula* 120).

That is, Sula criticizes Nel as one of those women whose lives are tormented by the confining duties of marriage and motherhood. With her conventional ideas in her mind, Nel cannot spread her wings and lead her life as a free woman. She, as Sula believes, goes on her life blind to her own self, feelings and ideas. She is not able to strip herself of structural constraints erected by society. In a way, she is satisfied with society's limits, rather than questioning those limits and risking a "free fall".

In the midst of the women following conventional norms and being, therefore, exposed to the debilitating effects of marriage and motherhood, Sula stands out as both a strong, different character and as a pariah. Bjork supports the idea that "Sula's rebellious acts predictably place her in a pariah position" (77). Sula's prominent independence, especially her sexual adventures are well beyond society's limits.

Everyone in town hates her. They are not able to come to terms with Sula's eccentric ways: Sula steals Nel's husband and watches her mother burn without doing anything and without any sign of grief. What is more, she forcibly puts Eva in an old folks' home and insults the town by sleeping only once with the town's men. She is also rumoured to break the prohibition against black women sleeping with white men. There is nothing lower and filthier she can do because according to the community's view "all unions between white men and black women [are] rape; for a black to be willing [is] literally unthinkable" (*Sula* 113). All these actions of hers cannot be appreciated by the black community in the Bottom.

Linden Peach, however, focuses on society's double standardization in regards to Sula's having sexual relationships with white men. That is to say, black men can lie with white women, but the townspeople condemn Sula for her licentious adventures with white men. Peach comments on Sula's sexual freedom and states that she "gives expression to her own sexuality in a way in which men have done so for generations" (53). She merely behaves independently in her sexual relations, as men do, and she merely wants to satisfy herself, not others. In one of her interviews, Morrison defines Sula's sexually free behaviors in the following way:

Sula is a masculine character in that sense. She will do the kinds of things normally only men do, that is why she is so strange. She really behaves like a man. She picks up a man, drops a man, the same way a man picks up a woman. And that's her thing. She is masculine in that sense. She is adventuresome, she trusts herself. She is not scared, she really ain't scared. And she is curious and will leave and try anything (qtd. in Peach 53).

Apparently, with her man-like free spirit, Sula is very far away from the over determined fate of being a traditional black woman. Sula behaves like a man. She, thus, creates a threat to men's dominance and freedom in the Bottom society because she lives in this sexist society in which men need to be dominant, powerful and authoritative. Being strong and self-assured, she challenges the traditional gender roles and is consequently regarded as an outcaste in her community.

The remarks of the townspeople highlight Sula's deviance. According to them: "she [is] free of any normal signs of vulnerability" (*Sula* 115). Also, some of the men in the town draw their attentions to that: "neither gnats nor mosquitoes would settle on her" (*Sula* 115). With all the claims about her difference, Sula is declared a witch and a threat of evil against whom the whole community should fight. Therefore, the townspeople begin to define their lives in direct contrast to hers: "They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst" (*Sula* 117-118). Wives become very attentive to their husbands "lest they be tempted by Sula" (Kubitschek 57), daughters who dislike Sula's treatment of her grandmother and mother, treat their own with respect. And, mothers take better care of their children "lest they be harmed by Sula's 'evil eye'" (Kubitschek 57). As Sula comes to be more hateful, the townspeople become more loving of one another. They achieve a more stable order through her.

Sula's return to the Bottom is indeed far more than meets the eye at first glance. Showing the weaknesses and hypocrisy of the Bottom's social institutions and gender roles, Sula is considered a danger to the Bottom's order and conformity. However, Sula provides them with what her surname offers in its meaning: "peace". It is her presence which gives the community the motivation to live in real harmony. She turns out to be actually a blessing in disguise, which is parallel to Morrison's own words: "one can never really define good and evil. Sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good- you never really know what it is. It depends on what uses you put it to. Evil is as useful as good is" (qtd. in David 64). So is Sula useful for the Bottom. The community needs its evil, Sula, to claim goodness and moral purity.

Although Sula does not mind the townspeople's hatred and goes on living as she wishes, just for once she acts as a stereotypical, non-feministic woman. She behaves differently in her relationship with Ajax, the only man she values and loves deeply. He is a man whom Sula has known since childhood. After hearing "all the stories about Sula" (*Sula* 127), Ajax is interested in her because "her elusiveness and indifference to established habits of behavior remind him of his mother" (*Sula* 127). He believes "that [Sula is] both tough and wise" (*Sula* 128) and admires her free spirit that refuses "to baby or protect her" (*Sula* 128). Ajax treats Sula as an equal: "They had genuine

conversations. He did not speak down to her or at her [...]” (*Sula* 127-128). Plus, they share the same desire for adventure and freedom. Ajax has a great fondness for airplanes. Flying for him “symbolizes his desire not only to resist limitation, but to escape consistency and control” (Bjork 78). However, finding another one like herself, Sula also begins “to discover what possession [is]” (*Sula* 131). She begins to tie ribbons in her hair, do housework, and she tells Ajax to “lean on [her]” (*Sula* 133). In a way, Sula turns out to be a weak, dependent woman, like the other women in the town, which is enough to frighten Ajax away. Like the other black males in the town, he leaves his woman.

Abandoned by Ajax, Sula, like Nel, feels the similar feeling of pain and disappointment. However, Sula is aware of her flaw that she “did not hold [her] head stiff enough when [she] met him and so [she] lost it just like the dolls” (*Sula* 136). Indeed, it does not matter whether a woman is conventional or unconventional; the relations between black men and black women are crippled in *Sula*. Eva, Hannah, Nel, Helene and Sula are all forsaken lonely women who are not gratified by their relationships with men. Thus, it is always better for black women to hold their heads stiff and be strong both in their relationships with men and in society.

What is more, Sula notices that she cannot replicate the close intimacy she experienced in her friendship with Nel with other men. That is why in her deathbed, Sula does not think about Ajax, but Nel. Yet, when Nel comes to visit her out of the goodness she defines herself with, Sula and Nel’s deathbed confrontation turns into an argument about women’s roles. Nel, as Eva has done before, argues that Sula seeks the impossible: “You [...] a colored woman [...] You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, talking what you want, leaving what you don’t” (*Sula* 142). Nel adds that Sula is lonely because of these behaviors of hers. Sula admits this, but says: “my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s [...] A secondhand lonely” (*Sula* 143). Although Sula is isolated and lonely, she thinks that she “sure did live in this world” (*Sula* 143), so she does not feel repentant. Plus, challenging Nel’s standards, she asks Nel how she can be so sure of her goodness; Sula questions: “maybe it wasn’t you. Maybe it was me” (*Sula* 146).

Sula's final question to Nel about how either of them can know who is indeed good leaves the critical issue mostly unresolved. Although there is often a clear-cut distinction between good and evil characters, Morrison portrays that "good and evil coexist within each other and are subject to an ongoing process of negotiation" (Peach 45). The hierarchy of goodness over badness is resisted by the nature of her novel itself as there are shallow boundaries between good and evil in *Sula*. Plus, Morrison neither says a final word nor affects her readers considering the evaluation of good and bad. Although Sula epitomizes evil, it is not highlighted whether she has devilish thoughts in her head or not. It is just the same for Nel who represents good, but does not do anything more than blindly follow traditions. As it is previously claimed, Morrison offers good and evil "in different terms".

When Sula dies in 1940, she has learned that living an experimental life for a woman causes only loneliness, alienation and ultimately a descent "down howling, howling in a stinging awareness of the endings of things" (*Sula* 123). She lives the fate that the possible meanings of the name "Sula" offer: "to alter from a proper condition to a worse one and to fail in spirit" (Peach 42). So does the Bottom society. Without its pariah the Bottom begins to come apart. They no longer practice familial or relational duties with as much care and dedication. Mothers who took care of their children and wives who protected their husbands now argue among themselves and treat one another badly as they had done before they united against Sula. When Sula dies, people are glad to get rid of her, but after her death their unity dissolves: "A falling away, a dislocation was taking place. Hard on the heels of the general relief Sula's death brought a restless irritability took hold" (*Sula* 153). Her absence leaves the neighbors without a scapegoat or an evil against which they struggle to lead upright, moral, sober lives.

It is only Shadrack who mourns Sula's death. In the opening pages of the novel, Shadrack is portrayed as a World War I veteran who has suffered from shell shock and so stays at a hospital for a period of time. When he returns to the Bottom as a disabled veteran, he creates a day called National Suicide Day in order to control death and to dismiss the possibility of suicide. Terrified by the unexpectedness of death, every January 3rd, he wanders in the streets ringing a cowbell and carrying a hangman's rope. He invites people to kill themselves or each other if they so desire. In a sense, opposing

the town's norms, he is an outcaste like Sula. He does not communicate with anybody with the exception of Sula, his only visitor. After discovering that Sula has died, Shadrack realizes that celebrating National Suicide Day is futile. Death cannot be controlled: "his visitor [is] dead and [will] come no more" (*Sula* 158).

Sula's death leaves Shadrack lonely and unmotivated to celebrate National Suicide Day. Nonetheless, he decides to celebrate his last National Suicide Day, which causes a disaster. He invites the entire community to end their lives for the last time. The townspeople who mock and laugh at Shadrack's parade begin to walk together with him. What they look for, as the narrator says, is a "respite from anxiety, from dignity, from gravity, from the weight of that very adult pain that [has] undergirded them [...]" (*Sula* 160). Thus, they follow him blindly up to the tunnel which, as blacks, they have been forbidden to build. And, the tunnel, the unfulfilled symbol of economic promise and the incarnation of white power and years of discriminatory practices, angers them as they approach it. In a spontaneous act of rebellion, the townspeople try to destroy it. Then, they cause it to collapse, and they bury themselves there. Many of them die as Shadrack simply watches the incident from the top of a hill while ringing his bell.

It seems ironic that the tunnel accident occurs in 1941, just one year after Sula's death. The Bottom society has always felt a need to focus its fear and hatred on something which they regard as a threat or an evil. The tunnel becomes their second target replacing the danger and evil Sula symbolizes. Nonetheless, their blaming Sula and the tunnel could not improve their conditions, instead brings them mass death. What is true, as Barbara Christian suggests:

when one is not able to destroy evil, one must try to outlast it. Human beings have to demand more from life than mere survival, or they may not survive at all. To really live life, there must be some imagination, some exploration, so there can be some creative action ("The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison" 48).

The Bottom has been both spiritually and physically drained by poverty, starvation, harsh weather, white domination; in a way, by a total powerlessness. Yet, they do nothing to ameliorate their conditions; they "fail to take responsibility for discovering,

examining, and acting on their own natures” (Kubitschek 65). It is even worse that they disown their free female spirit Sula, who is the only one looking for some creativity, exploration, and imagination among the townspeople. The community makes a fatal mistake rejecting its powerful and independent female member. When it rejects Sula, it unleashes its own destruction.

In the novel’s final chapter titled 1965, Nel is the only figure observing how so much change has occurred in the Bottom. In 1965 “nameless whites reverse the trick [...] of the good white farmer” (Page 197). The hills, once regarded as useless, become valuable for whites who change their minds. The narrator says that “instead of keeping the valley floor to themselves, now [whites] wanted a hilltop house with a river view [...]” (*Sula* 166). Therefore, the Bottom is now full of houses, new buildings and people. This small black town is displaced by new developments including a golf course, a TV station, and a rich white population. And, the Bottom descendants, who are “anxious to [...] leave town, and abandon the hills to whoever [is] interested,” (*Sula* 166) have slowly moved into Medallion, once regarded as the city of whites. They moved from the Bottom only to realize too late that the hills became valuable.

Nonetheless, things are better, or at least they seem so. Blacks having benefitted from the civil rights movement now work in the shops in town and teach in the schools. Their job prospects have improved, but Nel sees that “now there [aren’t] any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by” (*Sula* 166). Bjork claims that “this desire for separateness leaves Medallion’s blacks, like their white counterparts, corrupted by a society’s obsession with personal gain [...]” (81). People now are immersed in a capitalist world and so live in isolated households rather than as a collective whole.

In this atmosphere of alienation and ambivalence, Nel wants to visit Eva Peace, one of the few acquaintances left in the town. Nel’s visit recalls her last conversation with Sula about which one of them is good or bad. Preoccupied with her own goodness, Nel does not acknowledge that Sula’s point has any validity. She does not ask herself the same question until Eva confuses her with Sula and accuses Nel of Chicken Little’s killing:

I didn't throw no little boy in the river. That was Sula.

You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. (*Sula* 168).

Eva makes Nel remember and realize that she had watched and “[...] had been secretly proud of her calm, controlled behavior when Sula was uncontrollable” (*Sula* 170). Nel attributed her calmness to “maturity, serenity and compassion,” but in fact it “was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation” (*Sula* 170). Eva insistently refuses to admit the difference between Nel and Sula, and tells Nel that they are similar: “Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you” (*Sula* 169). Nel gets angry with Eva once she listens to her. Yet, she, visiting Sula's grave, recalls that she and Sula were once one in their participation of life, dreams, friendship and love. She says in agreement with Eva: “We was girls together” (*Sula* 174). At this point, Nel's “soft ball of fur” (*Sula* 174) breaks and scatters in the breeze; the gray ball, all the repressed anger, pain and contrasting feelings that are haunting Nel, dissolves into “a fine cry-loud and long [...]” (*Sula* 174):

“All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.” And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat [...] “O Lord, Sula,” she cried, “girl, girl, girlgirlgirl” (*Sula* 174).

Nel abandons her attachment to her husband and “cries out for, longs for, her friend and soul sister Sula” (Demetrakopoulos 77). She now feels sorry for her greater losses: Sula and Sula's friendship. In a way, Nel awakens to what Sula has discovered before: “a lover [is] not a comrade” (*Sula* 121) and feels that her friendship with Sula transcends everything.

Finally, thanks to the close friendship between Nel and Sula, Nel is able to get rid of her traditional ideas about womanhood, which formerly blinded her to the truth about Sula and herself. The Bottom's inhabitants and their descendants remain confined within moral rules and traditional norms “that deny human diversity and potential” (Bjork 82). They will never know that Sula is not what they consider her to be, but at least Nel breaks out of the conventional view of goodness. She achieves her sense of me-ness. In the Bottom, then, only the self-reliant individuals survive in the end. *Sula* celebrates the strong female ties and the powerful black female selves like Nel, who

reclaims herself, and Sula, who is the spirit of female freedom. The free female spirits are essential parts of black survival and solidarity.

CHAPTER THREE: THE BLACK FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

III. 1. Alice Walker and 'Womanism':

Alice Walker is a sophisticated author, poet and activist; trying her hand at various novels, volumes of poetry, essay collections, short-story collections and children books. Alongside Toni Morrison, discussed in the second part of this thesis, Walker is the other important name in African American literature, gaining many awards and honors, as well. She is best known with her third novel, the Pulitzer Prize winning *The Color Purple*, which will constitute the other core issue of this thesis. In this regard, in the following part, Alice Walker's person, her position in literature and the term 'womanism' will be discussed in advance of the black feminist or in Walker's term 'womanist' analysis of *The Color Purple*.

As a self styled writer, Walker frankly and often writes about her own experiences, life and her art. In her essays, many of which are similar to or consist of letters, speeches, and diary entries, she extensively talks not only of her characters, of their inner lives and the act of creating them, but also of her opinions, parents, her childhood memories and the rural environment of Eatonton, in which she was born. Walker's Southern heritage and her background of poverty and social restrictions in Eatonton mean a lot for the author as a source for her images, characters and language in her fiction. Especially her portrayal of sexism and young black males' brutality toward women should not be a surprise to the reader since one of Walker biographers Winchell points out "violence was a fact of life in Eatonton" (6) and since Walker is an author determined to speak to her mind for the facts of life.

With the publication of her first volume of poetry, *Once*, in 1968, Walker appeared on the literary scene and from the time up to now she has decided to tell the truth, a truth that "rises over any kind of oppression, cultural demons and institutional establishments" in Dieke's words (1-3). Refusing to be measured by others' standards, in her poetry and fiction she creates strong black female characters that are different from the stereotypes. These characters find their own voices while fighting against oppression and brutal black male characters, such as Celie and Albert in *The Color*

Purple. And her male characters reach salvation only when they learn to respect women and acknowledge their sufferings. Indeed, considering Walker's essays, it is possible to say that, in addition to dealing with external realities such as gender roles, poverty, exploitation, and discrimination, she writes on a variety of topics, namely "from lesbianism to nuclear weapons, from communism to hairstyles, always including her opinions of the standards by which women in general and women artists in particular are measured" (Winchell 2).

Female circumstance, especially black female circumstance, is always in the centre of Walker's narratives. Her overwhelming concern is with exposing the suffering and struggle of black women as she states, "I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" (*Gardens* 250). Moreover, in Mary Helen Washington's view, Walker mainly deals with the issue of physical and psychic oppression of women, and she says that Walker depicts "her own awareness of and experiences with brutality and violence in the lives of black women, many of whom she had known as a girl growing up in Eatonton, Georgia, some in her own family" (qtd. in Johnson 80). That is, her art and her preoccupation with black women issue are the result of "a wounded self- a self that is private, feminine, and social" (Dieke 3).

Walker's voice, thus, examines women's role and position within the patriarchal system. She believes that "disregard[ing] the existence of male oppression of women would be a turning away from the realities that women have historically faced" (Richards 104), and keeping this idea constantly in her subconscious, she mostly criticizes the male-dominated practice which objectifies women and often treats them as less than human. Hence, as a reaction to patriarchy, Walker's women characters feeling helpless, silenced, abused and trapped by their men draw strength and discover themselves arising from their desires for freedom and spirituality as Walker herself has realized in her own life. In other words, in her works, Walker represents her celebration of black women who achieve power and psychological wholeness when they are able to stand against oppression "whether its source is white racism, their own black men, or their own self-righteous anger" (Winchell x).

Another Walker biographer, Barbara T. Christian in the introduction of "Everyday Use", one of the short stories of Alice Walker, discusses Walker's description of the three "cycles" of black women in her fiction. She defines Walker's first type of black women characters as those "who were cruelly exploited, spirits and bodies mutilated, relegated to the most narrow and confining lives, sometimes driven to madness" and continues with Walker's second cycle of women "who are not so much physically abused as they are psychically conflicted as a result of wanting to be part of mainstream American life". Finally, Christian defines the women in Walker's third cycle as those "who come to a new consciousness about their right to be themselves and to shape the world". Those female characters, like Celie, Shug and Sofia in *The Color Purple*, leave the established patterns, traditions, institutions behind them and embrace a new philosophy of life after a maturation or inner development process. Thus, as a success, Walker, presumably for the first time in American literary history, presents a variety of black women perspectives ("Introduction" 6-9).

Another distinctive quality of Walker as a writer is her putting a new emphasis on her black female ancestors. Her considering of herself as artist and as woman is part of "the creative legacy" to her "that African Americans have inherited from their maternal ancestors" ("Introduction" 3). She believes that she is connected across continents and through generations with her female ancestors. Barbara T. Christian, therefore, states that Walker "instead of looking for a clearly defined African American female tradition of art" is on the side of looking for the female folk creativity sustaining their maternal ancestors despite the racism and sexism that would refuse its expression ("Introduction" 4). In the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" Walker herself says that those women "some of them, without a doubt, were our mothers and grandmothers" are "Artists" as they kept alive their creativity and transferred it to the next generation though they lived in an era when reading, writing, painting, sculpting, and even singing were forbidden for a black woman (*Gardens* 232-33).

Walker appreciates her female ancestors for their courage and creativity. She especially mentions the names such as "Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry, Frances Harper, Zora Hurston, Nella Larsen, Bessie Smith, Elizabeth Catlett, Katherine Dunham" (*Gardens* 238) as her role models and as the pioneering ladies bringing her to the title of

her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens". "Of the lesser known or not previously identified of these African American women, Lucy Terry was an eighteenth-century poet; Frances Harper a nineteenth-century author, abolitionist and woman's right activist; Elizabeth Catlett is a contemporary sculptor and Katherine Dunham a contemporary choreographer and dancer" ("In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" 45). Zora Neale Hurston and her works especially inspire and shape Walker's writing throughout her career. Walker also sees her own mother among the women impressing her and honestly states that many of the stories she writes are, in fact, based on her mother's stories.

Obviously, Walker draws special attention to the power and variety of African American women's voices. Furthermore, giving her voice to her maternal ancestors often silenced by the racist or sexist oppression of the time, Walker breaks "silences and stereotypes about her grandmothers', mothers', sisters' lives" ("Introduction" 11). She plays an important role in the rediscovery of her female ancestors' works. Even today thanks to Walker's efforts many of them, for example Zora Neale Hurston, is counted among great American writers and her works are chosen for the college syllabuses as a course on black women's writing. In other words, Walker's search of these names has provided great contribution not only to African American literature but also to African women's culture.

Alice Walker unfolds her black feminist identity by dealing with the troubles of black women in general and black female artists in particular, as it is previously asserted. Coining the term 'womanism' to refer to black feminism, she affirms her reputation as a black feminist on theoretical grounds, as well. The term 'womanist' first appears in Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), which is "a collection of essays, articles, reviews, and speeches Walker wrote between 1966 and 1982" and which Walker subtitled "Womanist Prose" (Winchell 14). In much of the volume of this work, she evaluates her critique of race and gender forces that deny wholeness of people and theorises it within the concept of womanism.

Although Walker's womanism is thought to be similar to black feminism since both support a common agenda of black women's self-definition and self-determination and are concerned with struggles against racism and sexism, they are not wholly

identical things. Womanism is more than black feminism as Walker denotes that a black feminist as womanist “brings new demands and different perspectives to feminism, and compels the expansion of feminist horizons in theory and practice” (“Womanism”). Moreover, in one of her interviews, she explains her reason why she forms such a new term beyond black feminism with the following words:

I don't choose womanism because it is 'better' than feminism [...] I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it; because I cherish the spirit of the women (like Sojourner) the word calls to mind, and because I share the old ethnic-American habit of offering society a new word can help it more fully see (“Womanism”).

It is obvious that Alice Walker thinks the word “feminism”, whether it is black or white feminism, is not able to fully account for the problems of black woman. There is a need for a new terminology that should carry the weight of the racist and sexist oppression of black women and determine the unique position of them. Thus, Walker's womanism meets the need as a new term for black feminism by capturing its causes and goals.

In the very first pages of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker introduces four definitions of womanism that present not only “a political analysis of black women's oppression” but also “a depiction of a positive role model” (Lauret 18). The multiple meanings of the term shed light on the issue of why many African American women prefer the term womanism to black feminism, as well:

Womanist 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of 'girlish' i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color [...] Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one [...] Responsible. In charge. Serious (italics are in the original) (*Gardens xi*).

In her definition, Walker refers to the etymology of womanism as derived from the word “womanish”, the opposite of “girlish” which she interprets as “frivolous, irresponsible, not serious”. Contrary to the girlishness that Walker uses as a critique of the 1970s' white feminism because she likens white women's sense of own oppression to the cry of a spoilt child, womanists are “responsible, in charge and serious”. The

emphasis is on the fact that the desire for the black woman's case does not derive from a childish passion. Instead, it is rooted in feelings of responsibility and seriousness. Walker takes the term from the Southern black folk speech of mothers to female children "you acting womanish" which means "like a woman" who is brave, outrageous and wilful in her behaviours, and she indicates that black females behave free from any conventions, constraints and eternal forces limiting women. They want to know more and in depth, not being satisfied with the good offered to them. Walker's term womanish, thus, encourages black women on the premises that they should be strong so as to survive and to overcome the detrimental effects of any oppression (*Gardens xi*).

In the second definition, Walker defines a womanist as a woman "who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually" and continues with the following lines below:

2. *Also*: [...] Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility...and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival whole of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist [...] Traditionally capable [...] (*Gardens xi*).

Walker's womanism refuses any kind of separatism, especially both racial and lesbian separatism, though it shares the idea of white feminism's valorisation of women bonding, women's culture and strength. A womanist is free with her sexual choices and with her relationships either with women or men. That is, as opposed to the 1970s' feminist separatists' view that "to love men meant to 'sleep with the enemy'" (Lauret 20), Walker's definition does not accept such separatism as an ideology. As Patricia Hill Collins states in her article "What's In a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond" that, for many black women feminism is a movement exclusively for women and so for attacking or eliminating men; however, "womanism seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender oppression without attacking black men" (11). It celebrates relations, the passage of wisdom or any kind of collaboration between women and men, for the sake of survival in the white or black communities and with men.

Womanism, thus, is “traditionally universalist” and it is for togetherness of all humankind as not being a separatist but a humanist term. A womanist defends the unity of all people regardless of race as she is aware of the fact that “the colored race is like a flower garden, with every color flower represented” (*Gardens xi*). Reading this definition as a metaphor, Collins, in the same article mentioned above, notes that “womanism [...] furnishes a view where the women and men of different colors coexist like flowers in a garden yet retain their cultural distinctiveness and integrity” (11). Hence, Walker offers a tolerant attitude needed both among sexes and races with this statement as a useful philosophy not only for black women but also for the whole of mankind.

In her third definition, Alice Walker lists what a womanist loves both physically and spiritually:

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless (*Gardens xii*).

With these words pleasure and sensuality are foregrounded; dance, music, love, food and roundness are symbols for the bodily and worldly pleasures that a womanist loves. “The moon” is a symbol of femininity. Plus, love for “the moon” and “the Spirit” are symbols for the spiritual dimension of women beings. “Roundness” connotes the comfort with one’s body without the unease and punishment of maintaining a constructed regiment. Love for “food” and love for body bring ease to soul and enjoyment of life. Moreover, love for “struggle” is underlined because of black women’s long history of struggle against oppression; they do not easily give up on their goals. And, besides loving “the Folk” in general, womanists also love themselves. Apparently, womanism, as a positive and active identity, is integrated into daily life. In my estimation, these words (dance, music, love, food, roundness), having hedonistic connotations, also put forward the cultural lifestyle of Africans and their physical characteristics in the past.

Walker’s last definition is that a “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (*Gardens xii*) which draws a divisive line between womanism and feminism

setting up the former as a privileged, original term and the latter as a mere duplicate. Walker chooses purple to lavender on purpose as the colour of reference because in the 1970s lavender was taken as the colour of American lesbian feminists. She, by mixing it with black, intensifies this colour, darkens it and gets the colour purple. In this way she obviously does not reject feminism; however, she absorbs it into her project and formulates womanism as a critique and revision of it. Both have things in common, but are undeniably different as it is also indicated in my explanations above (Lauret 20-21).

It is obvious that in these four definitions of womanism, Walker argues several different things. Yet, she especially foregrounds (black) women as strong, beautiful beings and praises their intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual wholeness. In this regard, she also focuses on the need of survival and wholeness of all people as she indicates that people have so much in common “regardless of race, gender, class, sexual or ideological orientation” (Dieke 3). Thus, dealing with black women’s case and the equal status between woman and man, Walker aims to remove the “hierarchical and invidious distinctions, sadistic strength, duplicity, and perilous meanness” and to provide “human beings, especially women,” with “their fundamental civil and human rights” (Dieke 8). She reveals her belief for a better world and her concern for the goodness of all women.

III. 2. An Overview of *The Color Purple*

Published in 1982, *The Color Purple* has been both a great success and a turning point in Alice Walker's career. It launches Walker into the public eye in a new way bringing her both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1983. The novel took part in the *New York Times* best-seller list for a number of weeks. Moreover, in 1985, it was adapted into a movie by Steven Spielberg and in 2004 into a musical, increasing its fame.

The Color Purple focuses on the black female circumstance approximately between the years 1920s and 1940s. It takes place mostly in rural Georgia and develops around a young black woman resisting against the hegemonic (patriarchal/Christian) powers. It is the story of Celie, a poor, powerless, uneducated, abused black woman, who is forced to marry a widowed farmer with four children after being repeatedly raped by her stepfather. However, with the help of a loving community of women around her, Celie gradually learns to see herself as a valuable part of the universe and "develop[s] a sense of self love and a new sense of God" (Dieke 36). She acquires her own voice ensuring her victory over sexism, man-domination and also over racism.

Upon discussing Celie's process of becoming a strong woman, it is hard to ignore the relation between Celie and Janie, the protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). It is a novel which Walker has described with the words "*There is no book more important to me than this one*" (qtd. in "Introduction" 9, italics are in the original). Walker, whether in *The Color Purple* or in her other novel, *Meridian*, is very much "Zora Neale Hurston's novelistic daughter" (Bloom 1). However, the spiritual kinship that Walker feels to Hurston is mostly felt in *The Color Purple*. In the book named "*Alice Walker's The Color Purple*," Harold Bloom suggests Walker's Celie is a revision of Hurston's Janie (1). Both Celie and Janie "first endure a series of trials that threaten psychic extinction, death-in-life; both are moved by another person's love as a catalyst to begin to love and value themselves; yet both finally attain the self-worth necessary to survive alone" (Fannin 46). The obvious common point between them is that they grow to discover their own voices and to overcome man-domination so that they can fulfil their own lives and wishes.

Indeed, the very core of *The Color Purple* is the idea of giving a voice to the voiceless. Walker centers on Celie, who is “an invisible woman”, a triply marginalized character because she is black, woman and lesbian (Abbandonato 296). Celie falls in love with Shug Avery, the mistress of her husband and finds herself attracted to her sexually. Her story, as Linda Abbandonato claims, is “the story of that most marginalized of heroines, the black lesbian challeng[ing] patriarchal constructions of female subjectivity and sexuality” (296). Nonetheless, she is able to develop her voice to assert her own authority though she is trapped by sexist and heterosexist oppressions.

In its form *The Color Purple* manifests itself with its epistolary structure. Narrated by the voice of Celie, *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel. Celie starts writing at the age of fourteen about her childhood incest, her physical and mental abuse and her loneliness. She goes on writing for four decades ending her letters sometime in the nineteen forties when her journey toward self-knowledge, life and love and Nettie’s journey through the world reunite them. Celie’s letters are initially addressed to God and sometimes to Nettie. They are ordered chronologically for the most part, ranging in length from two short paragraphs to several pages. They are nearly illiterate written in African American folk dialect. Plus, they are unsigned and undated obviously because they are not intended to be read by anyone, so are never answered as one would typically expect from epistolary communication. As the primary narrator, Celie presents all the other voices (characters) of the story, her voice and the speeches of others merge into one through her writing.

According to Linda Abbandonato’s view, the epistolary style of *The Color Purple* reminds the reader of Samuel Richardson’s eighteenth-century novel *Clarissa*. Both novels deal with the hardships of a young woman within the patriarchal system. Celie, like Clarissa, is “imprisoned, alienated, and sexually abused,” suffering at the hands of men (Abbandonato 296). Nonetheless, *The Color Purple* attacks the patriarchal system and the bourgeois morality that *Clarissa* represents. Richardson tells Clarissa’s story, “authorizing her on his terms, eroticizing her suffering, endorsing her masochism as virtue and her dying as the emblem of womanly purity” (Abbandonato 296-7). On the contrary, Walker’s Celie is reborn into a new world in which she delights in her own sexuality and lives in a supportive, loving community.

Furthermore, Priscilla L. Walton suggests that *The Color Purple* also recalls *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740). Pamela is the other heroine penned by Richardson in the voice of a young woman who writes letters telling about her desperate situation as she is deprived of other means of confident communication. Celie's early life mirrors the life of her. Pamela, a beautiful young girl, refuses the sexual advances of her master and tries to escape. However, her master, Mr. B. kidnaps her and imprisons her in one of his estates. Pamela's insistent refusal is ultimately rewarded with his love and marriage. In this regard, *The Color Purple* "ironically transposes" *Pamela* (Walton 192). For, Pamela, being Mr.B.'s wife, "becomes reconciled to the world of men" (Walton 192). Yet, Celie does not enter into men's world. Moreover, she destroys the patriarchal order and initiates a new one, into which she allows men to enter when they reconfigure their treatment toward women. To Maria Lauret, Walker, thus, parodies the English epistolary novel in *The Color Purple* and she consciously manipulates the form with the aim of a race and gender critique (27). As a matter of fact, *The Color Purple* insists on female self-sufficiency and criticizes the commodity's denial the value of women.

In sum, *The Color Purple*, attacking the patriarchal system and the abuse of women by men, offers a new social order based on female self-sufficiency and sexual equality. In this new and self-sufficient society, the celebration of universal love and freedom through sisterhood plays a central role. That is why, in her preface to the Tenth Anniversary Edition of the novel, Walker says that "This book is the book in which I was able to express a new spiritual awareness, a rebirth into strong feelings of Oneness I realized I had experienced and taken for granted as a child; a chance for me as well as the main character, Celie, to encounter" (qtd. in Sinha 110). That is, Walker lets Celie recognize a universal love regardless of gender, ethnicity and all other boundaries, so her story becomes an issue not only for all women but for all people, as well.

III. 3. A Black Feminist and Womanist Approach To *The Color Purple*

You better not never tell nobody but God. Ifd kill your mammy (italics are in the original) (*Color 3*).

The Color Purple starts with this command of silence of Pa, the man Celie believes to be her father. His disembodied voice prohibits Celie's speaking, pronouncing a death threat against her mother and thus holding Celie hostage. He repeats the menacing expression "You had better" with a similar but different message: "shut up and git used to it" (*Color 3*) by the end of the third paragraph of Celie's first letter. Just from the start, Celie is trapped into complicity in the shameful secret of incest. She is not only psychically and sexually abused but also impregnated by Pa. Thus, she writes out of shame, isolation and despair, initially addressing her letters to God, the only audience allowed to listen to her pleas:

Dear God,

I am fourteen years old. I am I have been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me (*Color 3*).

Obviously, Pa's authoritative discourse is in contrast to Celie's plain sense of powerlessness, insecurity and her own limited understanding. She feels guilt, shame and confusion. She is only fourteen years old but she is exposed to rape, incest, domestic violence, as well as physical and psychological oppression. She does not believe herself to be a good girl anymore. Therefore, she corrects "I am" with "I have been". In Lauren Berlant's view, she, thus, situates herself squarely on the ground of negation. Moreover, for Berlant, Celie's particular negation arises not just from the fact of rape but from the vulnerabilities that grow from her gender. Rape here merely intensifies her negation that grows from her subjugation as a girl within her patriarchal family (215).

Indeed, the opening passage of *The Color Purple* portrays Celie's family as a social unit that subjects female children to a life of rape, violence and terror: "First he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me [...]" (*Color 3*). Celie suffers from brutality and oppressions in her patriarchal family. In fact, no woman in her household is inviolable because Pa believes that all the women

in the house are his properties. Holding absolute control of the family, he violates his women, namely Celie, Nettie and their mother. Also, he claims the right of rape and incest as his wife has become too ill and too weary of sex and cannot fulfill her role as a wife. He sees Celie as her mother's substitute since she is the oldest of the girls in the family. He just tells her that "You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't" (*Color 3*).

Alphonso, better known as Pa, can be defined as the master or God, whereas his women are regarded as chattels or at least victims who can easily be oppressed. He does not pay attention to Celie's needs or feelings. He "never [has] a kine word to say to [her]" (*Color 3*). He just satisfies his sexual needs with his wife's daughter. On the contrary, Celie is considered sinful and cursed by her mother as an immoral after giving birth to two babies born of her father's rape. As she is told, Celie never talks about the rape to protect her mother from death and herself from her father's violence. When her mother asks her about the babies and where they are, she simply claims that God is the father of her children and He has taken them. For, she does not "know no other man or what else to say" (*Color 4*). In fact, it is Pa who immediately takes the babies and gives away or sells them to a family who later become African missionaries.

No women in the household can escape the detrimental effects of Alphonso's dominance and patriarchy. All the oppression and sexual exploitation Celie endures in her home result in her premature menopause: "A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more" (*Color 7*). The first three letters she writes also suggest that the same cruel and violent treatments cause the death of Celie's mother: "[she's] already half dead, an all of these children" (*Color 3*). With her passing away, Celie realizes that she and Nettie are left more powerless to be exploited by their Pa. He immediately begins to eye Nettie as Celie states "I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I'll take care of you" (*Color 5*). Therefore, she serves as a maid and as a protector of her beloved sister Nettie against Alphonso's sexual advances. Clearly, "a girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (*Color 38*).

Having satisfied his sexual desires by abusing Celie, Pa finds a new and young girl friend and remarries. While his family goes on growing with the number of children, he wants to sell his daughter to Mr. __, an old widower with children. In a scene reminiscent of a slave auction, Pa introduces Celie to Mr. __, while she is told to stand in

front of Mr._ so that he can look her over. He informs Mr._ about the fact that her daughter is not a virgin and she has been spoiled twice. He adds that she is unable to have any more children and states that “[...] she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it” (*Color 10*).

It takes a long time for Mr._ to decide whether to marry Celie or not since he does not want to marry her, preferring Nettie’s hand in marriage. Though he wants to get married to Nettie, the girl he sees in the church, Pa does not let him because Nettie is “too young, no experience” (*Color 8*) for taking care of Mr._’s household and children. Besides, Pa wants Nettie for himself. Therefore, Pa offers Celie along with some cows:

She can take that cow she raise down there back of the crib [...] She ugly. Don’t even look like she kin to Nettie. But she’ll make the better wife [...] she can work like a man (*Color 10*).

Obviously, Celie is described in terms of her ability to work and to satisfy Mr._’s sexual needs while traded to him as a wife-slave. Celie becomes the object of exchange between Pa and Mr._. She is merely a victim of a patriarchal system reducing her to the status of property. Being more interested in her dowry than in Celie and her goodness, diligence, discipline and caring: “Mr._ say, That cow still coming? He say, Her cow” (*Color 12*), and he marries Celie.

Marriage only becomes an extension of her unhappy family life; it is never a safe shelter for Celie. In Linda Abbandonato’s view, when Celie marries Mr._, this man with no name becomes part of the system of male oppression, joining Pa. Identified with the cow that accompanies her, Celie is handed over “like a beast of burden” (302). She, physically and psychologically abused by stepfather and husband alike, is denied a status as subject. Her sexuality and reproductive organs are controlled by men, her children are taken away from her and her submission is enforced through domestic violence. In her terrified exposition to such obvious male brutality, “Celie symbolically mirrors everywoman” (Abbandonato 302).

At Mr._'s house, Celie suffers a harsher reality of patriarchal abuse upon her body. Mr._ does not pay any attention to her. In his eyes, Celie is the ultimate object, someone who exists to carry out the domestic functions of cooking, cleaning and working in the fields for him and taking care of his children. All the while Celie is vulnerable to her husband's verbal and physical abuses. As Mel Watkins claims, she is just "a servant" (16). Mr._ never treats her as a human being, as a woman or as his wife. Moreover, he beats her. When Harpo, the son of Mr._, asks him why he beats Celie, he says that "Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for- he don't finish" (*Color* 22). As in Pa's situation, holding his family's control gives Mr._ license to violate women.

Celie still has to face the threat of violence and rape. Forced into a loveless marriage to Mr._, she is just passed from one cruel and domineering man into the hands of another. There is a great similarity between Pa and Mr._. Both of them see Celie not as an individual but as an object of sex. Mr._ wants to satisfy his sexual needs without caring how exhausted or disinterested Celie is. Their sexual relationships, hardly based on mutual fulfillment, are also another kind of rape for Celie. As she states "He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in [...] Never ast me how I feel, nothing [...] He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck [...]" (*Color* 68, 97).

Men's oppressive presence over Celie is absolute. As Priscilla L. Walton suggests, Celie's life, trapped by male hegemony, "is more a death-in-life, a life without hope, joy, or any indication of improvement" (190). Celie cannot make too much sense of her experiences. She is rather the passive victim of her father and her husband. She says "I don't say anything [...] I stay where I'm told. But I am alive" (*Color* 21). Nettie wants her to fight for herself and for her rights. When Mr._'s children treat Celie badly, Nettie says "You got to let them know who got the upper hand" (*Color* 17). However, Celie, as an obedient woman silenced by abuses, is powerless in doing that. She just accepts Mr._'s upper hand and dominance in the family. Plus, Celie confesses that she does not "know how to fight", all she knows is "how to stay alive" (*Color* 17). Not only Nettie, but Mr._'s sisters, Carrie and Kate, encourage Celie to fight for herself, as well. Kate says "You got to fight them [...] I can't do it for you. You got fight them for

yourself' (*Color* 21). Carrie and Kate do not hesitate to support Celie in her struggles with their brother. Although they are Mr. __'s sisters, there is a strong feeling of solidarity between Celie and them, and this bonding comes from a need to oppose men's unjust and cruel treatment of women.

Celie never considers fighting because both the family and marriage operate on the assumption of her inferiority as a woman. Moreover, religion supports this order. As pointed out by J. Shannon Clarkson and Letty M. Russell, in patriarchy "all men are not just 'fathers', they are lords or masters over women" (40). That is why Celie does not oppose her father and her husband and she is lack of angry feelings toward them. As Celie specifies:

I can't even remember the last time I felt mad [...] Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what [...] sometime Mr. __ git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways (*Color* 39).

Simply, Celie obeys God's will because she believes that she will be rewarded in heaven when she dies. She thinks if she resists her father and her husband and their brutalities, it is also a resistance against the order of God. Celie is afraid of God. Plus, He is Celie's only confidant. Because she does not expect any help from other people around, she tells her sufferings to God. She shares every single feeling in her heart to Him. It is only God, she believes, who can help her and provide her the necessary protection from the world around her. She, therefore, prefers to be silent.

Besides, lack of education keeps Celie weak. In the article named "The Purple Colour of Walker Women: Their journey from Slavery to Liberation", Om P. Juneja calls Celie not just "God fearing and church going" but a "plain, ignorant" woman (81). Celie is not allowed to continue with her education because of the sexual exploitation of her supposed father. Pa, also avoiding the rape case being revealed, pulls her out of school once she is impregnated:

The first time I got big Pa took me out of school. He never care. That I love it. Nettie stood there at the gate holding tight to my hand. I was all dress for first

day. You too dumb to keep going to school, Pa say. Nettie the clever on in this bunch.

But Pa, Nettie say, crying, Celie smart too. Even Miss Beasley say so (*Color* 11).

Pa does not believe in the importance of girls' education they are supposed to stay at home and serve the needs of their husbands and their children. He bluntly declares his thoughts about educated women, especially about Addie Beasley, Celie's teacher: "She run off at the mouth so much no man would have her. That how she have to teach school" (*Color* 11). Alphonso's insistence that Nettie continues her education is primarily based on his plans to her for his sexual needs. If she goes to school, she would stay at home with him for a long time and would not marry.

Treated merely as an object, Celie does not feel worthy of love and respect. She does not find herself beautiful and smart. On the contrary, she defines herself as ugly. When it takes Mr. _ a long time to decide about marrying her, she thinks "I know I'm not as pretty or as smart as Nettie, but she say I ain't dumb" (*Color* 11). Also, when she sees Shug's photograph, she says "She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me" (*Color* 8). Celie always feels convinced that she is not worthy. She is caught in a self-deprecating attitude of always discounting herself and her worth. Inured to sexual pains and abuses since her childhood, Celie is physically and emotionally numb which causes her to reject herself.

In E. Ellen Barker's view, Celie is actually denied a sense of self. This is not just because she is treated merely as an object but because she lacks sense of belonging. Her mother is too much a product of an oppressive environment to provide Celie some nurturing. She is not a caretaker, but a victim like Celie. In addition, Celie is removed from the only other person she loves, Nettie. Mr. _ sees their intimacy as a threat. If Celie is allowed to see Nettie or to correspond with her, she will have what Mr. _ does not have: love and a sense of belonging. Thus, by depriving Celie of Nettie and her letters, Mr. _ keeps Celie from the will to fight back (56-7).

Robbed of her self-esteem and repeatedly being reminded that she is "black, pore, ugly, a woman, nothing at all" (*Color* 176), Celie begins to consider herself in the

same way: "I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear men" (*Color* 22). She feels non-human. In the article named "The Color Purple: An Existential Novel", Marc A. Cristophe discusses that this depersonalization witnessed in Celie is standard clinical behaviour of alienated people when they face seemingly insurmountable problems. They pretend to be "other" than who they are and try to transcend their situation by transforming their reality. The result is the alienation from the real self, as Celie does (104). Furthermore, Celie's alienation is the outcome of Mr._'s oppression and objectification. When Mr._'s sisters want him to buy Celie some clothes, he looks at Celie "like he looking at the earth" (*Color* 20). Mr._'s destructive and dehumanizing influence is clear as Celie states: "She need clothes? he ast. Well look at her. He look at me [...] It need somethin? his eyes say" (*Color* 20). Celie is aware that Mr._ does not consider her worthy for buying clothes. For her, his look sounds like "It need sometin?" (*Color* 20). Here the use of "it" instead of "she" as a subject pronoun proves how Mr._ depreciates her even with his looks.

Within this emptiness, this absence of love, Celie gathers the will to survive. In a sense, she is reborn out of her ashes like a phoenix. Or like other black women that coped with devaluation and dehumanization, she does not give up and clings to life instead. In this regard, it is interesting to note that her quest for self-affirmation starts with her envy for Sofia Butler, Harpo's wife. Sofia's body size and her blunt and disarming attitude become a shock to Celie when Mr._'s son, Harpo, brings her to the house to meet his father. Celie notes that she is not "quite as tall as Harpo but much bigger, and strong and ruddy looking, like her mama brought her up on pork [...] Arms got muscle. Legs, too" (*Color* 30, 32). Sofia both is a strong woman and has a dynamic, powerful character. She is the "amazon" (Berlant 219). She has determination, pride and aptitude for self-defense. She is not submissive and silent as opposed to Celie. That is why, Celie urges Harpo to beat his wife to make her submissive to him. She envies Sofia's will and freedom. In response to Sofia asking her why she suggested such an action to Harpo, Celie replies:

I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't. What that? she say. Fight. I say (*Color* 38).

Celie's intimate confessions point to the fact that she is ready to change herself. She begins her initial efforts at self-expression. Marc-A Christophe denotes that by telling Harpo to beat Sofia, perhaps Celie, "for the first time in her life, expresses her own volition". Through Harpo, she attempts to impress her will upon another being (104). On the other hand, her confession of jealousy turns their confrontation into a revelation of Sofia's own abusive upbringing:

All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my dady. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles [...] But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house [...] To tell the truth, you remind me of my mama. She under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot. Anything he say, goes. She never say nothing back. She never stand up for herself (*Color* 38).

Apparently, Sofia's life has been more similar to Celie's than different. Yet, Sofia, serving as an example of independent woman in the novel, encourages herself by fighting back against men's domination. She refuses to be dominated by her husband. She does not want to be like Celie or her mother who lives under her father's feet and never fights for herself. Sofia, therefore, tells Celie that she should fight back, too. After that conversation, Celie and Sofia become friends and support each other in the course of the abuse they each suffer.

Furthermore, Sofia and Harpo make Celie aware of the existence of alternative relationships between males and females. They reverse the notion that marriage consists of a domineering husband and an overworked subservient wife. Sofia prefers to "be out in the fields or fooling with the animals. Even chopping wood" (*Color* 54) instead of maintaining the house. She is at home in Harpo's pants, sometimes "making shingles" or "working on the roof" (*Color* 58). Nonetheless, Harpo enjoys woman's work. He "love cooking and cleaning and doing little things round the house" (*Color* 54). However, Priscilla L. Walton declares that Harpo and Sofia are subjected to criticism and mockery as it is not thought proper for men and women to trade their gender roles (189). Due to the power structure formulated in the patriarchal system, Harpo especially becomes the target of criticism. Celie sees him as a woman stating that he "begin to look like a woman face" (*Color* 27). Mr. _ makes him feel less of a man if he is not in control. Plus, society presses him to reason that Sofia's behaviour is not the way a

woman should behave. Harpo, therefore, tries to prove his manhood by beating Sofia, as Mr. _ beats Celie, to make her “mind” (*Color* 34):

He try to slap her [...] She reach down and grab a piece of stove wood and whack him cross the eyes. He punch her in the stomach, she double over groaning but come up with both hands lock right under his privates. He roll on the floor he grab her dress tail and pull [...] He jump up to put a hammer lock under her chin, she throw him over her back. He fall bam up against the stove (*Color* 36).

They fight “like two mens” (*Color* 36), but Harpo gets the worst of the beating. Sofia’s strong-willed character and her physically strong body frustrate Harpo’s attempt to reproduce the patriarchal/ masculinist structure of his father’s marriage in his own. Harpo does not simply accept that he and Sofia are happy in their reversed roles. Instead, he desires to have his father’s domineering role in the marriage. To overpower Sofia, he plans to gain weight and to build up his body. For this purpose, he eats beyond his capacity. However, he cannot attain his aim and, what is more, he is ridiculed as he ends up looking pregnant because of his big stomach.

After Harpo’s insistence on Sofia’s obedience rather than love and happiness, Sofia loses her interest in him. She leaves him. Then, she goes to jail due to sassing the white major’s wife. Unfortunately, the qualities that make her attractive also prove to be the instruments of her downfall. Her audacity angers the major. While she is in prison, she pretends to be the submissive Celie: “Miss Celie, I act like I’m you. I jump right up and do just what they say” (*Color* 78). When at the end of the novel Harpo and Sofia come together again, they turn back to the roles that they are most comfortable with, even if society is not; while Sofia clerks in Celie’s store, Harpo stays at home.

Sofia is Celie’s only model of the indomitable woman before Shug Avery’s arrival. Yet, Celie’s awakening begins with Shug. She is everything that Celie is not; beautiful, courageous, independent, powerful and confident. Indeed, as Elliott Butler Evans points out Shug is “the embodiment of feminist existential freedom” (168). She, choosing a career as a blues singer, refuses not only marriage and motherhood but also settling for a domestic life. Moreover, she insists on enjoying all the sexual freedoms

generally limited to men. In a way, she does not accept the limitations that society imposes on a woman's life, so becomes the target for attack:

Even the preacher got his mouth on Shug Avery, now she down. He take her condition for his text. He don't call no name, but he don't have to. Everybody know who he mean. He talk bout a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner (*Color* 40).

Obviously, some church folk define Shug as immoral and sinful. However, Celie does not pay heed to these allegations about Shug's character. She rejects the virtues that society appreciates and identifies with the rebellious character of Shug. Celie begins to idolize Shug, as soon as she finds her picture. Shug provides an ideal for her. She is very different from the other women in Celie's life, she is not broken through years of abuse. She is pretty and different offering an alternative lifestyle.

In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker defines womanist as a serious, independent woman whose aim is to gain possession of her own space in the world (xi-xii). This definition is echoed in *The Color Purple* with the characters Shug and Sofia. In a conversation with Mr. _ about Shug's and Sofia's performance of empowered females, in accordance with Walker's description of womanist selves, Celie narrates: "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 [...] Sofia and Shug not like men, he say, but they not like women either" (*Color* 228). Christophe affirms that Sofia and Shug "are indeed a new breed of women" (106). They have control over their lives and fates. They are, to use Walker's description, "outrageous, audacious, courageous, responsible, in charge" (xi).

Shug comes into Celie's life as her husband's lover. She is the woman whom Albert, Mr. _, always wanted to marry. However, they never get married because Mr. _'s father strictly disapproved of Shug. He considers her a whore because she has had three children by a man and she earns money singing in juke joints. Mr. _'s lifelong unhappiness and destructiveness can be said to originate from his inability to marry Shug. Because his father forbids the union, Mr. _'s life passes with long absences from

home and private dates with Shug, which cause Anna Julia, his first wife, to take care of their children alone and seek the solace of another man, who eventually kills her as she wants to leave him to spend more time with her children.

Celie hears Mr._'s name for the first time in her life from Shug. Celie is afraid of Mr._; whereas Shug has never taken him seriously. As opposed to her, Shug is very relaxed when she is with Albert. While Celie describes Mr._ as an oppressor and as a cruel tyrant, Shug talks with her about Albert's tenderness and passion. Celie never sees Mr._'s tenderness in her relationship with him. Their sexual relation is also completely different from that of Shug and Albert. While Celie narrates her sexual relationship with Mr._ to Shug, she says "most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference [...] Just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (*Color* 68). This description of her sexual intercourse makes Shug comment: "You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you" (*Color* 69) and leads her to talk about female anatomy:

You never enjoy it at all? she ast, puzzle. Not even with your children daddy?

Never, I say.

Why Miss Celie, she say, you still a virgin.

What? I ast..

Listen, she say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It git boner and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lot of sucking go on, here and there, she say. Lot of finger and tongue work.

Button? Finger and tongue? My face hot enough to melt itself (*Color* 69).

Upon learning that Celie has never found sexual fulfilment even though she has had two children from her Pa and married to Albert, Shug calls Celie a virgin. In Molly Hite's view Shug redefines the word "virginity" in this passage, which is a threat to patriarchal control over women's bodies as it places priority not on penetration, but on enjoyment (117). Thus, in Shug's sense of the word, Celie remains a virgin until her sexual union with Shug.

Indeed, Celie feels nothing for men except fear. When Pa beats her because of her allegedly winking at a boy in church, she writes "I don't even look at mens" (*Color*

7). As she confesses in her letters to God, she “look[s] at women, tho, cause [she’s] not scared of them” (*Color* 7). Philip M. Royster states that “Celie’s homosexuality is clearly portrayed not as congenital but as a predilection or pathology that results from being the victim of not merely male but also father figure abusiveness. She is too afraid of her father to look at boys” (qtd. in Pia Thielmann 70). Even after her marriage, when a black woman compliments Albert’s handsomeness, Celie says “He do look all right, I say. But I don’t think about it while I say it. Most times mens look pretty much alike to me” (*Color* 15). It is obvious that Celie is not interested in men. They are all the same for her. For this reason, she does not care about Albert’s good looks. She takes his physical appearance in stride, preferring to let his good looks slide with a nonchalant “[he’s] all right”.

Although Celie is not at all attracted to men, she is immediately drawn to Shug. She begins to feel something deep inside from the moment she first sees her picture. Seeing her for the first time in a photograph, Celie writes that Shug is “the most beautiful woman I ever saw” (*Color* 8). Just thinking of her is enough for Celie to feel “something stirring down there” (*Color* 59). She begins to dream of and fantasize about Shug. The only reason Celie even tries to find some sexual stirrings in sex with Mr._ is that she knows he and Shug are lovers and it is something Shug has shared with him. Celie expresses her thoughts as “I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him” (*Color* 13). As Daniel W. Ross expresses “even as an imaginary construct, Shug stirs Celie’s first erotic feelings. When the real Shug steps into Celie’s life these feelings become activated” (9).

Celie finds herself aroused by Shug in a way that no man has ever before achieved. Her erotic stirring for Shug is clear when she bathes the ill Shug, brought to the house by Albert to be nursed by Celie. While she is helping Shug’s bath, she feels “like something pushing” her “forward” (*Color* 46). Looking at Shug’s naked body, Celie feels that she has turned into a man. She also states that washing her body “feel like I’m praying” (*Color* 45). She hardly resists the temptation to take Shug’s fingers into her mouth while holding and looking at her thin black hands. Obviously, Celie’s passion for Shug brings to mind Walker’s second definition of womanism: “A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually” (*Gardens* xi).

Under Shug's guidance, Celie discovers her body by replacing sexual abuse with sexual pleasure. Shug plays a crucial role in Celie's development, especially in reconciling her with her own body. While narrating her first erotic encounter with Shug, Celie says "I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little baby too" (*Color* 97). Daniel W. Ross points out that "this scene culminates an ecstasy that is both maternal and infantile for Celie" (6). Plus, Celie's orgasm indicates a rebirth or maybe an initial birth into a world of love, tenderness and loyalty. Discovering a sister, a lover, a friend and a mentor, Celie even breaks Pa's dictation of silence and tells Shug about her rape and incest. Upon telling her story, Celie angrily says, "Nobody ever love me" and Shug directly responds: "I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth [...] I kiss her back. Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more" (*Color* 97). Celie's description of lovemaking with Shug reveals the love and tenderness between them. Celie tastes the joy of her sexuality that she has never experienced with Mr. _: "It feel like heaven is what it feel like, not like sleeping with Mr. _ at all" (*Color* 98).

Celie and Shug cross traditional gender boundaries once they enter into their lesbian relationship. In Shug's lesbian embrace, Celie not only reappropriates her own body taken from her by men but also finds "the wish to be other than what society and Mr. _ want her to be" (Christophe 106). As "the novel's professor of desire and self-fulfillment" (Berlant 214), Shug frees Celie from her oppression. She enables her to transcend her objectification by Mr. _ and finally evolve into an independent woman. Also, she teaches Celie to recognize her self-worth and to value her body, her sexuality, and her thoughts. As Bernard Bell acknowledges, "rather than heterosexual love, lesbianism is the rite of passage to selfhood, and sisterhood for Celie" (qtd.in Winchell 96).

In *The Color Purple*, Celie goes through two kinds of awakenings: the first one which begins with Shug's arrival is physical and the second one which begins with Celie's finding Nettie's letters is emotional. Nettie, the only person whom Celie loves and who loves Celie, is torn from her when Nettie is first forced to escape from her home due to Pa's sexual advances. When she joins Celie and Albert, she teaches Celie

reading and writing. Nonetheless, Nettie is soon told by Albert to leave as she rejects his sexual advances. She, therefore, leaves to work with the missionary couple, Samuel and Corrine, in Africa. Nettie and Celie promise to write each other with the hope of remaining joined to one another. Nettie tells Celie that “Nothing but death can keep” her from writing but “she never write” (*Color* 18). Celie begins to believe that Nettie is dead. In fact, it is Mr. _ who hides Nettie’s letters for many years and who causes Celie and Nettie’s lifelong separation.

With Shug’s help, Celie is able to find Nettie’s letters. These letters contain information about the true identity of their father, their family history and Celie’s children. Nettie writes to Celie, “Once upon a time, there was a well-to-do farmer who owned his own property near town. Our town, Celie” (*Color* 148). Then, she reveals the fact that their biological father has been lynched: “one night, the man’s store was burned down, [...] and the man and his two brothers dragged out of their homes in the middle of the night and hanged” by “the white merchants” (*Color* 148). Lauren Berlant claims that “this mode of vigilante white justice was a common threat to Southern blacks through the 1930s” (216). Moreover, Berlant adds that in this autobiographical tale “racism succeeds sexism as the cause of social violence in the narrative”, but each provides a distinct logic of social relations shedding light to different kinds of facts about Celie’s identity (216).

Learning her true origin empowers Celie because Pa is not her Pa. In Berlant’s view “having eliminated the perversion from her memory of being raped by her stepfather, the rapes themselves seem to disappear” (217). The fact that Pa is not a blood relative brings great relief to Celie as she now knows that her children are not her sister and brother. She recovers from the guilt and shame associated with being raped and impregnated by her supposed father. Celie grows in confidence. Plus, she is not afraid of Mr. _ anymore. She is even driven to take revenge against him as he hides Nettie and her origins from her. She considers that she will feel better if she murders him. She finds a chance when Albert commands her to shave him. Sharpening the razor, Celie thinks about murdering him, but Shug holds her back. She says “Remember that. Thou Shalt Not Kill, [Christ] said” (*Color* 122). Shug also says Celie must remember

that Nettie will come home and if Celie kills Albert, she may not see Nettie again. Hence, Celie stops herself from harming Albert.

What is more, the revelations of Nettie's letters cause Celie to lose her faith in God. She opposes God: "Dear God, [...] My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not Pa. You must be sleep" (*Color* 151). Celie is shaken by the news of her father's lynching, as well as her mother's mental illness and she is aware of that she has suffered under the delusion of incest throughout the years, so she accuses God of waiting so long to reveal the truth to her. As Catherine E. Lewis claims Celie, "for the first time, does not resign herself to God's will and the abstract dream of a heaven that waits and rewards" (167). Celie has always viewed God initially as "big and old and tall and gray-bearded and white" (*Color* 165) man with whom she shares her confidences. Throughout the novel she addresses her letters to this white and patriarchal God. Yet, she now perceives God as a man who acts like other men "trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (*Color* 164). Refusing to acknowledge God, Celie stops writing to God and starts writing to Nettie. Thus, she, justifying female subservience in the name of God, begins to undermine acceptance of male-dominance.

Shug, nonetheless, offers Celie a very different understanding of God. According to her, God should not be restricted to a church: "God love everything you love—and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration" (*Color* 167). With her redefinition of God, "It" loses "Its" colour and gender: "God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (*Color* 167). Shug actually believes in a God who is "everything" (*Color* 167). Her belief is essentially pantheistic and animistic: "it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed" (*Color* 167). This statement is parallel to Walker's own concept of God: "I do not believe there is God beyond nature. The world is God. Man is God. So is a leaf or a snake" (qtd.in Scholl 123).

Shug's concept of God deconstructs the patriarchal belief in God by replacing it with a belief that one must be part of the Creation and the universe. First of all, Shug introduces Celie to the belief that God is inside of everybody and each individual should nurture his/her relationship with God free from the regulations of institutions, which are

flawed. This view likens one to transcendentalism, a religious movement that gained momentum in the 1840s in the New England region of the United States, because the individual is viewed as inherently good. Indeed, for Shug people do not need to rely on churches or other religious institutions to reach salvation. She believes that people “come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it” (*Color* 166). Shug notes here that one should live in the world to find God; just surviving and waiting for God’s hand to ameliorate her conditions, as Celie did earlier, is the patriarchal way.

Shug, therefore, teaches Celie to find God in herself, in nature, and in her own feelings, including even erotic ones. She tells Celie: “God love all them feelings” (*Color* 167). Then, she wants Celie to feel the sense of connection and the interrelatedness of everything in the world. God is everything, including trees, birds, air, and also “the color purple” in the field as Shug says “it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it” (*Color* 167). Shug introduces God as a concept of love rather than fear. Seemingly, even the novel’s title is derived from this philosophy.

When religion loses the limitations patriarchy imposes on it, Celie’s perception of God becomes all inclusive and whole. No longer recognizing the old white man as her God, Celie now addresses in a letter both to the God who is everything and to everything that contains godly spirit: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (*Color* 242). She takes a liberating step. Her identification with trees, birds, air and other human beings represents her new vision of life. She manages to enter into the Creation. Thus, she lives free from all kinds of oppression and feels equal to anyone or anything.

Nettie’s religion, like Celie’s, transforms from the white God to an aestheticized practice. Nettie, who goes to Africa as a missionary with her Christian God, comes back with the experience of animism. Nettie too “renounces the white God, a symbol of American racism and sexism, for African animism” (Juneja 86). She discovers a “more internal” (*Color* 218) God among the African people who worship the roofleaf plant that makes their way of life possible. She writes to Celie: “God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before” (*Color* 218). Celie, after

many years, finds the God from the “white folks’ white bible” (*Color* 166) not compatible with the reality of her life. Likewise, Nettie learns that the God that she has tried to introduce the African tribes to is incompatible with the reality of life, cultures and traditions in Africa. Having a respect for the things which are useful, the African tribes cannot accept and practice the missionaries’ teachings. Therefore, Nettie declares, “perhaps Samuel and I will found a new church in our community that has no idols in it whatsoever, in which each person’s spirit is encouraged to seek God directly” (*Color* 218).

Furthermore, Nettie with her letters from Africa broadens and reinforces the theme of female oppression. Her letters provide “a parallel between the oppressive, male-dominated Southern society that Celie has now become strong enough to rebel against and the equally oppressive and male-dominated [Olinka] society in Africa” (Winchell 94). Nettie especially denotes the similarities between the patriarchal family structure in which she and Celie grew up and the male-female relations she observes in the fictitious Olinka. In one of her letters, she clearly makes the connection:

There is a way that the [Olinka] men speak to women that reminds me too 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 (*Color* 137).

Obviously, the Olinka man, like Pa, has power over his wife. On the other hand, as in Celie’s situation, the Olinka woman is merely an object who is supposed to fulfill a submissive role. She is not allowed to go to school. She is defined just in terms of the value she has for her husband. One of the Olinka women tells Nettie that “A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something” (*Color* 132). When Nettie asks, “What can she become?”, she is told, “The mother of his children” (*Color* 132). Nettie, thus, discovers that women have status only as mothers in this society.

With Nettie's letters, Walker touches upon the issue of female circumcision or female genital mutilation, which she calls the "sexual blinding" of women. "Clitoridectomy (female circumcision or female genital mutilation) is required of young African women as part of their passage to wifehood and womanhood" (Bates 116). In one of her letters to Celie, Nettie describes it as "a bit of bloody cutting around puberty" (*Color* 196). The operation aims at removing the masculine part in the female genitalia, which silences woman body. In a way, it takes "sexual gratification out of women's control, making pleasure a practice enjoyed only by men, and relegating women servants rather than participants in the act" (Bates 118). It provides men with complete control over women and over women's bodies and sexuality. Yet, it "creates life threatening situations for women, making urination, menstruation, intercourse, and child birth extremely painful and difficult" (Bates 118).

In *The Color Purple*, Walker depicts the failure of the missionaries to prevent Olinka's practice of female genital mutilation. African women know all the difficulties and the dangers of this operation. Nonetheless, they do not oppose it because they consider it a religious duty and a tradition. They believe that if they try to change or reject this practice, it would harm both the vestiges of their tribes and their family honor. What is more, a girl feels obliged to be circumcised in order "to be accepted as a real woman" (Johnson 83). If she is not circumcised, she is considered unclean and a threat to the man's masculinity and sexual power. Within a larger framework linking Celie's Black American experiences with those of black Olinka women it is apparent that women become victims of both religious beliefs and sexist traditions.

After all the redefinitions and awakenings Celie has gone through, she becomes strong enough to fight back. She decides to go to Memphis with Shug by leaving Mr. . Yet, Mr. . thinks that Celie will fail in the world as she has neither talent, beauty, nor courage "to open [her] mouth to people" (*Color* 175). He tells Celie: "You black, you pore, you ugly" (*Color* 176). In response to his verbal abuse, Celie finally proclaims: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook [...] But I'm here" (*Color* 176). As Lauren Berlant signifies, "Celie performs her triumphant Being -'I'm here'- and asserts the supremacy of speech over the physical, material despotism characteristic of patriarchy" (227). She has learned to value herself. She has acknowledged her position

in the universe, none of these images negate the fact of her existence. What is more, turning Mr. _'s negativity back on himself, she curses him: "Until you do right by me, [...] everything you touch will crumble [...] everything you even dream about will fail [...] Every lick you bit me you will suffer twice [...] The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot" (*Color* 176).

Upon Shug's insistence, Celie finds work for herself in Memphis. She begins to sew pants and gains not only her economic independence but an address: "Celie/ Folkpants, Unlimited./ Sugar Avery Drive/ Memphis, Tennessee" (*Color* 182). While wearing pants among women is not yet a matter of cultural currency, Celie makes unisex pants. Berlant notes that "the simple message Folkpants advertises is that the pants truly are for "the people," marketed for all genders" (227). Her designs only consider the comfort and needs of each individual wearer. For instance, while making Shug's pants Celie thinks that "cause Shug eat a lot of junk on the road, and drink, her stomach bloat. So the pants can be let out without messing up the shape. Because she have to pack her stuff and fight wrinkles, these pants are soft, hardly wrinkle at all" (*Color* 180). Celie's design narrows the gap between the sexes and "celebrate[s] rather than restrict[s] people" (Walton 194).

Celie owes her new found self confidence to the lessons she has picked up from the women around her. She learns the importance of strength from Sofia; the importance of body and sexuality from Shug; and the importance of education from Nettie. Not only do they join together and rebel, but these women provide all manner of support for Celie's personal evolution, as well. They both encourage and inspire her progression from the subservient, passive woman into an economically and socially empowered woman. She, after all, creates her own self, art, and community: "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends, and time" (*Color* 183).

In *The Color Purple* the ties of sisterhood are so strong that every woman helps one another. Squeak, lover of Sofia's husband, sacrifices herself to save Sofia while she is in prison. Squeak is raped by the jailer, but she manages to free Sofia. They also share the responsibility of raising each other's children. Additionally, as a commitment to sisterhood, Nettie helps Corinne raise Adam and Olivia, Celie's children, in Africa. After Corinne's death, Nettie replaces her as a wife and mother until she yields the

children to their true mother. Nancy Tanner points out that it is “matrifocality, allowing its members to live together and to take turns caring for each others’ children” (qtd. in Ross 17). These women are all the examples of sisterhood. They live in a “matrifocal community” (Ross 14).

Indicating an inverse relationship, Albert’s downfall progresses as the relationship among the women strengthens. Albert, broken and humbled by Shug and Celie’s joint departure, deteriorates. His lifestyle decays and he begins living “like a pig. Shut up in the house so much it stunk. Wouldn’t let nobody in until finally Harpo force his way in. Clean the house, got food. Give his daddy a bath,” (*Color* 190) as Sofia tells Celie. Albert’s transformation is crystallized when he confides to Celie the lessons he has gained and his remorse for his treatment of her and Anna Julia. Considering that his wrongdoings resulted from his cowardice to stand up to his father, “the symbol of paternal law and power” (Ross 15), Albert says “my daddy was the boss. He give me the wife he wanted me to have” (*Color* 229). Celie forgives him and they unite in their love for Shug. Their reconciliation is signaled by Albert’s putting “his arms around [her] and just stood there on the porch with [her] real quiet...[Celie] bend [her] stiff neck onto his shoulder” (*Color* 230).

Indeed, Albert changes into a new person. He becomes an affectionate and tolerant man, “capable of loving and sharing” (Ross 14). His participation in traditionally feminine activities, such as cooking and washing the dishes, alongside Celie reflects the transformation in him. He also begins to sew in Celie’s store. In fact, he liked sewing when he was a child. However, he, then, never sewed due to patriarchal sanctions. “He ain’t Shug” for Celie, but “he begin to be somebody [she] can talk to” (*Color* 233). They “now sit sewing and talking and smoking [their] pipes” (*Color* 230). Celie can even confess to him, “men look like frogs to me. No matter how you kiss’em as far as I’m concern, frogs is what they stay” (*Color* 215). Therefore, when Albert proposes that they marry again, her response is “Naw, I still don’t like frogs, but let’s us be friends” (*Color* 240).

The Color Purple concludes with a celebration marking reconciliation among its characters. Indeed, the novel ends with family reunification as evidenced by the characters Celie and Nettie; Albert and Celie; Sofia and Harpo; and Celie and her

children. On the fourth of July they all “celebrate each other”, while “white people busy celebrating they independence from England” (*Color* 243). Priscilla L. Walton notes that in the novel’s final pages, “the veil over women’s faces is lifted, the barriers between the sexes are razed, and a new world is erected on the ruins, in which the sexes meet on an equal footing and celebrate each other, life, and humankind” (195).

To conclude my remarks, *The Color Purple* is a womanist novel in Alice Walker’s terms because it explores the strength of women against oppression, demonstrating the power of their love and their ability to nurture and heal each other. The characters in the novel, especially women, grow and change together with each other’s help. They love one another “sexually and/or nonsexually” and join together for the “survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (*Gardens* xi). Thus, they achieve the very sense of *The Color Purple*, “which is a quest and a celebration, a song of sorrow and of joy, of birth, rebirth, and the redeeming power of love” (Cristophe 107).

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, the black female characters in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are analyzed. The focus of the argument is the fact that in both novels, the black women characters choose to be strong enough to struggle against male dominance, racism and discrimination, the most suppressing challenges in African American women's lives. Both Morrison and Walker refuse to draw their women characters according to certain stereotypes, so they reflect their own personal views about black womanhood. In their novels, Eva, Nel, Sula, Nettie, Shug, Sofia and Celie are all assertive, powerful personalities who rebel against the deep-rooted beliefs of the white, men centred world and thus take possession of their own lives. Breaking their enforced silence as blacks and women, they are able to gain their own voices.

The women characters in both novels suffer from living in a racist and sexist world while becoming strong, self-assured and independent women. In *Sula*, the female protagonists, Sula and Nel immediately confront the fact that "they are neither white nor male". They know that "all freedom and triumph is forbidden to them" as they do not have the privileges, freedom of whites and men in their segregated town, the Bottom. Nel's enthusiasms were calmed down by her mother, Helene, who lives according to conventional values. Helene wants Nel to be a silent, traditional lady like herself, so she represses Nel's individuality, imagination and ideas. Despite her wish for creating her own "me-ness", Nel settles into a life of a housewife after her marriage. She lives as an object of the patriarchal system until she finally discovers what Sula is trying to do for a more equal life. It is the fact that social conventions and traditional notions of feminine goodness are nonsense if one cannot live his or her life in full experience, creativity and happiness. Thanks to Sula, Nel manages to open her eyes to her own self, feelings and ideas and to lead her life as a free woman though it costs her years passing under servitude and losing her close friend, Sula.

As opposed to Nel, Sula's relationship with her mother and grandmother works in unconventional terms. So do her other relations with anyone. Like Sula, her mother, Hannah, and her grandmother, Eva, are quite indifferent to social conventions. They, as the three generations of Peace women, like making love with men in the Bottom rather than following the expectations of "true" womanhood. And, they live without the help

of black men. Especially, Eva appears as a survivor figure that is courageous, confident and assertive enough to struggle against starvation, poverty and her husband's abandonment. She is the matriarch of the Peace household, who affects her daughter's and granddaughter's developments and their concepts of womanhood.

In the novel, Sula is narrated as a combination of her mother and grandmother. It is mostly Eva's strength and independence reappearing in her. Yet, Sula is more than Hannah and Eva because she wants to follow her feminist desires in contrast to the other Peace women whose lives are the results of bitter events, not their own choices. Sula chooses to live an "experimental" life. She shows no interest in marriage, in being a wife or a mother. She just stands out as an independent, strong and different woman in the midst of the town's women whose lives are limited by the duties of marriage and motherhood. However, Sula never feels satisfied with society's limits; she rejects social values and gender roles by taking the liberty for a "free fall". She, who is isolated by her close friend, Nel, and by the townspeople, dies alone, but she does not feel repentant as she is sure that she really lives in the world. And, what is more, her free female spirit never dies.

On the other hand, Celie, who is an ignored and oppressed black woman, is abused by men a lot. She suffers from brutality and oppression first in her patriarchal family in which she is treated merely as an object, especially by her stepfather. Her mother, unlike Eva, is too much a product of an oppressive environment to provide Celie with some nurturing. She is not a matriarch or a caretaker who strives to protect her daughters from their Pa's sexual and physical abuse, but she is a sole victim like Celie. Being unaware of Celie's sufferings in the hands of Alphonso, Pa, she merely considers Celie sinful and curses her after Celie has given birth to two babies born of his rape. Celie's mother does not have even a name in the novel; like Sofia's mother, she is just a weak woman character who lives under her husband's feet and never fights for herself.

Celie, then, suffers a harsher reality of patriarchal abuse upon her body with her forced marriage to Mr. _ . Albert, better known as Mr. _ . He is a brutal man similar to Eva's husband, BoyBoy, who abuses Eva and ignores his home. Mr. _ does not pay any attention to Celie, he beats and rapes her like Pa. Plus, he, too, limits Celie with the

domestic functions of cooking, cleaning and working in the fields for him and taking care of his children. Celie is denied a status as subject like Nel and like the women of the Bottom. She is silenced by abuses and is just taught to be dutiful and obedient to her Pa and husband by the patriarchal social system. Celie, in fact, does not know how to cope with these oppressions and underestimations of her. All she knows is “how to stay alive”. However, she has close female friends who lead her to fight for herself and for her rights.

As in Nel’s situation, Celie’s process of developing her own “me-ness”, which brings her independence, is inspired by and built through her close relationship with the novel’s other female characters Sofia, Nettie and Shug Avery. Sofia serves as an example of independent woman for Celie. Indeed, Sofia’s life is similar to Celie’s, Sofia, too, is exposed to men’s brutality throughout her life. Yet, Sofia has courage, determination and aptitude for self-defense to fight against her father, her brothers, cousins, uncles, and all men. She is neither submissive nor silent; she does not behave in the way “a woman is supposed to behave”. Her husband, thus, tries to calm down her dynamic, powerful character in the way the Bottom society wants to calm down Sula’s free female spirit and in the way Helene calms down Nel’s imagination, creativity and freedom. Harpo beats Sofia to make her submissive to him but she refuses men’s domination and encourages Celie not to be obedient to what men say.

Nettie, Celie’s beloved sister, is the other important name that inspires and gives Celie desire to live and to be a strong woman. Nettie with her letters not only informs Celie about the true identity of their father, their family history and Celie’s children but also broadens and reinforces the theme of female oppression. She especially narrates the patriarchal structure she observes in the fictitious Olinka in which women, like Celie, are only objects supposed to fulfil submissive roles. The Olinka woman is not allowed to go to school. She is defined just in terms of the value she has for her husband, which is parallel to Eva’s conservative idea that a woman cannot live comfortably in a society without a man. In a way, Nettie’s letters strengthen Abandonato’s claim that Celie symbolically represents everywoman with her such obvious exposition to male dominance, brutality and tyranny (302). Also, the letters urge Celie to take the control of her life.

Shug Avery is the most influential woman in Celie's life who gives Celie recognition about her own self, her sexuality, her body and feelings. Shug is beautiful, courageous, independent, powerful, confident, and everything that Celie is not. Having a free female spirit, Shug is identical to Sula. Like Sula, Shug does not accept the limitations that society imposes on a woman's life. She, as a blues singer, refuses settling for a domestic life, marriage and motherhood. And, she, too, chooses to live an experimental life and insists on enjoying all the sexual freedoms generally limited to men. Therefore, like Sula, she becomes the target for attack. While society calls Sula a "bitch", Shug is labeled as "slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner" (*Color* 40). Nonetheless, both Sula and Shug are, to use Walker's description, "outrageous, audacious, courageous, responsible, in charge" (*Gardens* xi). They are womanists who have control over their lives and fates, so they do not mind what people say. They just aim to gain possession of their own spaces in the world. Plus, they inspire their close friends to really live their lives.

With, Shug's coming into Celie's life, Celie discovers a sister, a mentor a friend and also a lover. Shug plays a crucial role especially in reconciling Celie with her own body. Under Shug's guidance, Celie replaces sexual abuse with sexual pleasure and finds herself aroused by Shug in a way that no man has ever before achieved. Celie's passion for Shug brings to mind Walker's second definition of womanism: "A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually" (*Gardens* xi). Celie and Shug are lovers in addition to being close friends. Also, Nel's and Sula's close intimacy is interpreted as lesbian relationship by some critics. However, it is mostly their friendship in nonsexual sense, which is deemed "special" and "different" (Tate 119) in *Sula*.

In both *The Color Purple* and *Sula*, the strong ties between women activate them to help one another. It is not just Sula who leads Nel to be a free woman or Sofia, Nettie, Celie and Shug are not the only ones who encourage and support one another. But, there are also other female characters such as Squeak who shares the responsibility of raising Sofia's children while Sofia is in jail. Squeak also sacrifices herself and is raped by the jailer to free Sofia. A neighbour named Mrs. Suggs takes care of Eva's children when Eva goes out of the town to find money. Nettie helps Corinne raise Adam

and Olivia, Celie's children, in Africa. She, then, replaces Corinne as a wife and mother after Corrine dies. These women are all the examples of sisterhood.

Additionally, in both novels, the black women characters are stronger, more persistent and stable than the black men characters. In *Sula*, black men appear as weak, irresponsible and flawed individuals unlike their mothers, wives or lovers. On one hand, Plum and Shadrack are tormented black men who return home from World War I as psychologically weak characters. On the other hand, BoyBoy, Eva's husband, Jude, Nel's husband, and Ajax, Sula's lover, cannot support their women and they leave them alone by running away from the Bottom when they face with a problem. And, in *The Color Purple*, black men seem to be abusive, domineering and brutal characters. Harpo, Alphonso, and Albert abuse their women both physically and psychologically. However, Harpo and Albert, in fact, are too cowardly to stand up to their fathers. In addition, they experience downfalls and deteriorate as the relationship among their women strengthens. Hence, with the exception of Alphonso, who remains an abuser until his death, Albert and Harpo reform their narrow-minded ways and become affectionate and tolerant men who participate in traditionally feminine activities, such as cooking and washing the dishes, in a way change themselves parallel to the changes in near emerging women roles.

Towards the end of *The Color Purple*, Celie progresses from the dependent, helpless, passive woman into an economically and socially empowered woman thanks to female cooperation and solidarity. She is reborn into a new world in which she delights in her own sexuality and lives in a supportive, loving community. And, in the final pages of the novel, a celebration marks reconciliation among its characters; "a new world is erected on the ruins, in which the sexes meet on an equal footing and celebrate each other, life, and humankind" (Walton 77). However, in *Sula* only the self-reliant individuals survive in the end after the Bottom destroys itself in the tunnel accident. *Sula* mainly celebrates the strong female ties and the powerful black female selves like Nel, who reclaims herself, and Sula, who is the spirit of female freedom.

Sula, Nel, Nettie, Eva, Shug, Celie are all powerful black women who resist the eradication of their selves and voices. *The Color Purple* and *Sula* are woman-centred or womanist novels which explore these women characters' strength against oppressions,

demonstrating the power of female camaraderie and women's ability to nurture and heal each other. Both of the novels insist on female self-sufficiency and criticize the commodity's denial about the value of women. And, both celebrate the free female spirits who are essential parts of black survival and solidarity.

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