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„Illiterate, Raped and Abandoned: The Inner Struggle of
two young African-American Girls in *The Color Purple* and
Push“

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Feminism isn't about making women strong.
Women are already strong.
It's about changing the way the world perceives that strength.
- G. D. Anderson

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1. Introduction to Black Feminism

Black feminism was and still is strongly influenced by mainstream feminism. I agree that feminism is a popular trend in contemporary times; but in general it has become a lot more intersectional. Black feminism emerged as a response to the Black Liberation Movement and also the Women's movement. Moreover, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' in the 80's that would help to theorize black feminism. While mainstream feminism is powered mainly by white middle-class women, black feminism focuses on women of color and their empowerment, not only as women but also regarding their race and class. Black women have dealt with a double system of oppression, also known as double jeopardy; a concept developed by Frances Beale in 1972. Although white women struggled with gender and sexual oppression, they did not have to deal with racial oppression. As a result, gender oppression was the dominant struggle up until third-wave feminism began to take shape. For this thesis, I have chosen two African-American novels that develop the topic of black feminism and depict the struggle of two young black girls, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Sapphire's *Push* (1997). In order to understand black feminism, firstly, it is necessary to explain the origins of feminism as a concept. Thereafter, I will focus on black feminism, particularly in third-wave feminism and the dichotomy created between third-wave and post-feminism. To conclude, I will argue the importance of consciousness-raising novels in African-American feminist literature to understand the two objects of analysis of this dissertation.

Feminist theory was not a concept that was created from one day to another. It was a slow process over decades in which several women from different social classes and ethnicities were involved. For Estelle Freedman, feminism is rather a recent concept (3). In her novel *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (2002), Freedman states the origins of the term feminism.

[It was] first coined in France in the 1880s as *féminisme*, it spread through European countries in the 1890s and to North and South America by 1910. The term combined the French word for woman, *femme*, and *-isme*, which referred to a social movement or political ideology. [...] *féminisme* connoted that women's issues belonged to the vanguard of change. The term was always controversial, in part because of its association with radicalism and in part because proponents themselves disagreed about the label. (3)

Through many years, a great number of women did not apply that label to themselves. In fact, until the decade of the 1960s, feminism “remained a pejorative term among most progressive reformers, suffragists, and socialists around the world” (Freedman 4). Freedman defines feminism as “a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies” (7). This definition is seen as inclusive for both genders. Sarah Gamble emphasizes that another essential point of feminism is that “[it] has been one of the most far-reaching movements this century, whose influence has been felt in every area of social, political and cultural life worldwide” (vii). However, the concept and the ideas represented by feminism have not been static during the first two waves when feminism was defined and theorized. On the contrary, as a term, feminism has shifted its meaning and its definitions. This was possible due to new generations of women during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s.

First and foremost, in their novel, *Black Religion Womanist Thought and Social Justice* (2010), Dwight Hopkins and Lina Thomas state the reason why the word ‘wave’ is used in order to refer to the different feminist movements. For them, wave is a term “often used in theoretical discourse to describe a shift in focus or to distinguish one group of scholars in a certain field from a different group of scholars working in the same field” (125). Predominately, in feminist discourses, the different waves relate to different generations of women who shifted their political and ideological perspectives. Scholars prefer to use the term wave rather than the concept of generation because they regard the latter as a more static concept full of connotations. In short, whereas first-wave feminism focused primarily on women’s suffrage, second-wave feminism started including a wider range of issues such as sexuality, family, and reproductive rights. It also drew attention to domestic violence and rape. Although both waves were relevant to the history of feminism, I plan to focus on the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, also known as third-wave feminism.

However, before I analyze the main issues of third-wave feminism, I want to introduce briefly the history of African-American feminism until the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. The history of black feminism is relatively broad, thus, I attempt to highlight the most important events, figures, and dates. The development of black feminism is closely

connected with the civil rights development of the African-American citizens and the women's liberation movement in the United States. To have a whole picture of black women, it is beneficial to know the basic facts about their background. This is why it is relevant to go back to the time of slavery in order to understand black women's resistance. They were enslaved against their will and forced to work their entire lives with no rights simply due to the color of their skin. Among those arduous experiences were kidnapping, rape and physical abuse. The sons and daughters of slaves learned to resist against the white ruling power. Many women fought slavery and their masters in different ways, nevertheless, the majority remained silent seeing how their people were suffering in the hands of their white masters. Something changed after 1830 after centuries of brutality. As Paula Giddings mentions, masters were "no longer the cruel and sadistic abusers who kept slaves in submission by beating them half to death" (37). Instead, "masters provided protection, physical necessities, and minimum brutality in return for slave obedience and loyalty" (Giddings 37). However, slaves could not choose their own lives freely nor did they have control over their bodies. Victorian morals arrived in America and besides being slaves, black women also "were consigned to the other end of the scale, as mistresses, whores, or breeders" (Giddings 39). Black women no longer rebelled against their masters. Their resistance transformed and "became more covert or internalized" (Giddings 39). Moreover, they developed an awareness of their situation and created a culture of resistance against the hegemony of the white supremacy and patriarchy because they felt that they were double oppressed, firstly for being women and secondly for being black.

At that point, a new literary genre emerged, it was called slave narrative. It was such an important genre because these books written by slaves "are replete with examples of mothers attempting to impart such values to their children, often at the price of great emotional anguish" (Giddings 40). These mothers had to be harsh to their own children in order to teach them the reality of their lives. As a result, sometimes there was an emotional distance created between the mother and the child. Thus, "in the world of the slave mother, there was little room for compassion, because there was no room for weakness" (Giddings 41). After the American Civil War, three Reconstruction Amendments were promulgated. The first one was the Thirteenth Amendment, passed in 1865. It abolished slavery in the United States but in American society, black women were still seen as 'others'. Although they were free, their role in the household did not

change and often black women were placed in the domestic sphere. In fact, “domesticity had a central position in the cult idea. The true woman’s exclusive role was as homemaker, mother, housewife, and family tutor of the social and moral graces” (Giddings 43). Black women activists began to demand more attention from black women by withstanding the racism and classism of society

African-American feminism has a long and tough history. Scholars have arrived to a consensus by considering Sojourner Truth as one of the first black feminists. Also, she is considered an early articulator of the African-American feminism. Sojourner Truth gave a speech called “Ain’t I a Woman?” at the Women’s Rights Convention in Ohio in 1851. Some decades later, this speech created a worldwide impact. Primarily, because Truth questioned the reasons why black women were excluded within the feminist movement and said: “[d]at man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best palce everywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriage, or ober mudpuddles, or gibbs me any best place! And a’n’t I a woman?” (qtd. in Gamble 187). She claimed that society did not see black women as women. Neither did they have a voice and power over their future, nor the control over their own bodies. There were also other prominent women such as Mary Church Terrell, Anna Cooper or Maria W. Stewart who were pioneers of black feminism. For instance, Maria Stewart believed “in keeping with the Victorian ethics, [...] black women had an important part to play in the race’s moral and intellectual development” (Giddings 46). However, Stewart seemed to accept the established doctrine of submissiveness (Giddings 47). She argued that morals were not inherent to a certain social status or race. Moreover, Stewart claimed in her speeches that black women could do more against the oppression they were suffering. Together, Stewart and Truth challenged the previous thoughts about black womanhood and tried to create a female consciousness. In her speeches, Truth alleged that “black women had already proven their inherent strengths—both physical and psychological” (Giddings 51). Meanwhile, black men “attempted to vindicate their manhood largely through asserting their authority over women. For their part, women sometimes welcomed that assertion, sometimes were forced to acquiesce to it, and sometimes resisted it” (Giddings 57). Black men felt that their manhood was diminished in comparison to white men. Thus, many took their own frustration out on black women who were oppressed by a ‘double jeopardy’.

New ideas flourished with the turn of the century, “in addition to the practical things that needed to be done to assure progress, black women had to confront and redefine morality and assess its relationship to true womanhood” (Giddings 81). As black women were still vulnerable to the views of society, black women activists demanded to construct and defend new criteria of what they understood true womanhood to be. Also, they longed to be permitted to speak out loud and directly address why they were left excluded from their communities and societies just for the reason of gender, race, and class. Black women aimed to break the prejudices that were created by race and class. They wanted to eliminate everything that kept them oppressed and seek their own liberation. Black women realized that in order to achieve their demands, they should gather together. Therefore, black women united in many associations, one of the most relevant ones was the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), whose president was Mary Church Terrell. At this time, associations became vital because “their job was to help—by word and by deed—to create that opportunity and environment for all black women” (Giddings 94). When women won their right to vote in 1917, black women realized that race was a great factor in their struggle. While the race problem existed, black women could not achieve all of their demands and rights. Soon white women realized that other women of a different race could not enjoy the same benefits that they had. Thus, unless white women activists allied with black women, no one could truly accomplish their ultimate goals. Right after World War I, there was a small shift in the racial attitudes and mentalities of society towards black communities. Black women aimed to find a common motive in order to join forces with white women and “believed that the contribution of women, both black and white, was essential to racial harmony” (Giddings 169). Little changed after World War II, “black women were insecure about their self-concept, much of their anxiety was due to confusion and guilt concerning their roles” (Giddings 246). One of the main reasons why black women felt insecure was because they were still isolated and had not found yet their space in society.

During the Civil Rights movement (1954-1968) a new generation of black women and men demanded better rights for the black community. Racial segregation was a fact of life mostly in the South and there were many black women, including Rosa Parks, who were looking forward to challenging it. They were tired of being treated as second-class citizens only because of the color of their skin. In addition, young black women realized that the freedom they were enjoying was due to decades of struggle undertaken by their

grandmothers and mothers to provide the next generations a better future. Thus, “many of the black women coming of age in the sixties not only had such women as models but were encouraged to be independent, to do what had to be done, regardless of prescribed gender roles” (Giddings 274). These young black women looked to the black women of previous generations as their role models, thereby motivating themselves to build strong self-confidence, to keep fighting for their convictions, and defending their rights to be seen as citizens with full rights. Historians have traced the roots of the women’s liberation movement back to “1961 with the President’s Commission on the Status of Women chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt” (Giddings 295). At that time, black women were working in low-paid jobs occupying low socio-economic positions. Many events happened in the decade of the 1960s, which triggered women’s discontent towards their status in society. Women had fought many years of oppression yet were still unable to break with traditional gender roles. The women’s movement gathered women from all races, and although they wanted to gain the same civil rights as men had, their approaches were different. While “white women [saw] that sexism was the enemy, black women, far more concerned about the impress of racism on their lives, believed that racial oppression was the root of their problems” (Giddings 305). There was still an implicit racism in white feminist discourses, which dissuaded many black feminists from participating in what they considered ‘white feminism’. In the end, black women realized that it was impossible to cooperate and work together with white women because there were great differences between the needs of black women and the needs of white women.

In the 1980s, black women felt that all of the civil rights that they had gained during the decade of 1960s had been ignored. Often, they faced a great dilemma because they had to choose whether to focus on their race liberation or to struggle for their gender liberation. Being positioned in one group meant to be rejected by the supporters of the other group. Moreover, black women were excluded from white feminist organizations. Contemporary black feminists established the roots of black feminism in the 1980s. One of the leading voices during that decade was bell hooks. hooks argues that black feminism differs from the established mainstream feminism because of the awareness of black women regarding their class, gender, and race status. Being conscious of their oppression allowed them to could focus on the eradication of it. Therefore, hooks was critical of the situation of many black women and analyzed how oppression affected them. Furthermore, she provided solutions and tools through her books in order to break with it

and create self-awareness. Imelda Whelehan analyzes the importance of bell hooks regarding her analysis of oppression. In *Modern Feminist Thought from the Second Wave to 'Postfeminism'* (1995), Whelehan argues that hooks

has shown, white feminism was fundamentally racist in two important ways; in drawing endless analogies between 'women' and 'black', and in assuming that the word woman is synonymous with white woman, for women of other races are always perceived as 'Others', as de-humanized beings who do not fall under the heading woman. (108)

hooks "implies that divisions between black and white feminists are sustained because patriarchal notions of racial and class division are left intact, despite the fact that feminists are largely committed to radical social change, which might anticipate a dismantling of imperialist and capitalist social realities" (qtd. in Whelehan 112). Black women were aware that they ought to fight against oppression on multiple fronts, such as gender, class, and race. Consequently, they aimed to destroy the patriarchal system that kept them oppressed and silenced. A general definition of patriarchy states that, "it is the belief that women, purely and simply because they are women, are treated inequitably within a society which is organized to prioritize male viewpoints and concerns" (Gamble vii). A more elaborate definition of patriarchy is provided in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987), where Chris Weedon defines it as

power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take on many forms, from the sexual division of labor and the social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on social meaning given to biological sexual difference. (qtd. in Gamble 3)

The strength of patriarchy is illustrated by the fact that there were exclusively male voices in politics and women aimed to break with the tradition. Sandra Salmans wrote in *The New York Times* in 1984 "women have been running for office in this country before they were allowed to vote, and, while most of the first women to hold various offices have been footnotes to American history" (Salmans). There were many negative repercussions of having only men having political power because women were not present in the public sphere. Therefore, men were deciding over women's future without hearing their requests. Many feminists argued that times were changing for women and they should also be able to hold office. Gamble argues that "whilst 'old feminism' was individualist and reformist, 'women's liberation' was collective and revolutionary" (29). Women sought independence and the ability to speak for themselves.

The decades of the 1980s and 1990s led us to third-wave feminism. It was seen as a revolutionary wave because it “faced the dilemma of affirming female sexual agency in cultures that market the hyper-sexuality of young women” (Freedman xviii). On this basis, it is argued that “a critical turning point in the history of feminism occurred during the politically tumultuous 1960s. Women’s politics revived in the West, at first under the banner of ‘women’s liberation’. Although the press quickly derided adherents by calling the ‘women’s libbers’, this second wave proved quite tenacious” (Freedman 4). A new generation of women who came of age took over the usage of the term ‘feminism’ by 1980. “Anyone who challenged prevailing gender relations might now be called a feminist, whether or not they lived long before the coining of the term *feminism*, agreed with all the tenets of women’s liberation, or claimed the label” (Freedman 5). However, it was not until the decade of the 1990s when young women “promised to go beyond the second wave of feminism by forging a more racially and sexually diverse movement that emphasized female empowerment rather than male oppression” (Freedman 6). One of the leaders of this wave was Rebecca Walker, daughter of Alice Walker, who claimed, “I’m not post-feminist, I’m the Third Wave” (Walker qtd. in Freedman 6). She argued that feminism was not over, as other people have thought (Budgeon, Faludi). Instead, it kept evolving. Therefore, Walker demanded to continue and start a third-wave feminism and refused to call it post-feminism. Rebecca Walker was seen as a visible representative of the new generation of young women who aimed to keep fighting in favor of women’s best interests in all the areas. Third-wave feminism is also regarded as “a term which describes a resurgence of interest in feminist activism on the part of young women who wish to differentiate themselves from the postfeminist label” (Gamble 327). By that time, women had the desire “to readdress economic and racial inequality as well as ‘women’s issues’” (Gamble 327). However, the third wave faced harsh criticism due to its impact on society, as Gamble argues “[third-wave feminism] has yet to attain the widespread publicity and enthusiastic support enjoyed by second wave feminism at its height, and has been viewed with skepticism by many as merely a short-lived fashion rather than a genuine indication that women have reached the next stage in the feminist struggle” (327).

To acknowledge another point of view, Shelley Budgeon argues that third-wave feminism “signals a break with previous feminist theory by fundamentally challenging the dualisms associated with Western thought. Second-wave feminism effectively critiqued and destabilized the foundations of dualisms such as nature/culture and private/public, in

which women were positioned [...] as a devalued ‘other’” (4). This new wave challenged the established assumptions of existing feminist frameworks. As a result, it became “a form of feminism that focuses more upon how individual women understand and claim their own feminist identities” (Budgeon 9). Feminists, who have participated in the third wave, “declare that feminism continues to be an active and important force in contemporary society but is one that often materializes in identities and practices not immediately associated with previously established forms of feminism” (Budgeon 16). Moreover, Budgeon adds from her perspective that “feminism has been fundamentally challenged by both the loss of a unified subject ‘woman’ and a perceived lack of relevance to women’s lives, but that it is possible to develop ways of rethinking gender from a perspective that may still be identified as feminist in nature” (16). Third-wave feminism has prioritized and given importance to women’s individual experience. Women sought their own identities to create a new politicized voice, but at the same time they challenged pre-established ideas that society had of women. “The overlapping identities of women as members of classes, races, and nations raises questions about the usefulness of the category *woman* itself” (Freedman 8). Third-wave feminists wanted to emphasize that “there is no single, universal female identity, for gender has been constructed differently across place and time” (Freedman 8). Furthermore, “[b]oth liberal and radical feminists hoped to achieve gender solidarity through the politics of identity” (Freedman 89). However, black women saw themselves excluded from feminist discourses dominated by white middle-class women because they did not address issues such as race and class. “By making white women’s experience their standard, both liberal and radical feminists overlooked the perspectives of women of color” (Freedman 89). In short, black women demanded a more inclusive feminism in order to feel represented.

A dichotomy was created among women, with the first group, as mentioned above, defending third-wave feminism. The second group argued that feminism was dead and demanded to call it post-feminism. Its definition varies depending on who uses it. “Some feminists argue that post-feminism participates in the discourse of postmodernism, in that both seek to destabilize fixed definitions of gender, and to deconstruct authoritative paradigms and practices” (Gamble 298). In *Introducing Postfeminism* (1999), Sophia Phoca indicates that the origins of post-feminism come from the MLF (*Mouvement de Libération des Femmes*) in Paris in 1968 (Gamble 298-99). Regarding Gamble’s analysis, these women “publicly rejected the feminist struggle for equality with men” (298-99).

She continues and adds “[g]enerally, they support an individualistic, liberal agenda rather than a collective and political one, on which grounds their detractors frequently attack them for being pawns of a conservative ‘backlash’ against feminism, which seeks to limit its effectiveness” (298-99). Many women reacted dismissively to second-wave feminism and rejected its ideas during the subsequent decades. For Susan Faludi, post-feminism “is the backlash, and its triumph lies in its ability to define itself as an ironic, pseudo-intellectual critique on the feminist movement, rather than an overtly hostile response to it” (qtd. in Gamble 45). Thus, feminism must be more inclusive of minorities and adapt to this changing world and to modern generations if it wants to survive the coming decades. Post-feminism was created as a backlash to the previous waves but also to highlight the absences and contradictions created during second- and third-wave feminism.

Although third-wave feminism peaked in the decade of the late 1980s and 1990s it did not get the media’s attention like the previous wave. In the 1970s black feminists argued that African-American feminism was significantly lacking because they “have found little analysis that enables them to theorize about the black female experience, or upon the ways that negative images of black women are perpetuated throughout cultural history” (Whelehan 112). Some thought that one solution could be an approach to introduce feminism to younger women. Black feminists saw “writing as part of a political process of resistance, arguing that defiance is a component of the act of writing for women” (Kaplan qtd. in Gamble 129). Consequently, writers saw the opportunity to re-read previous texts with another perspective, a more feminist-oriented approach. Subsequently, it was possible to destroy the bad connotations of stereotypes, as women started “using them as a means of identifying the ways in which these restricted cultural representations underpin women’s oppression” (Gamble 129). Black feminists also had to fight against the representation of women, in novels and in society, as “sexual objects, for instance, rather than politically powerful subjects, women receive a version of femininity and womanhood that is perpetually limited and therefore limiting” (Gamble 130). Moreover, black women “initiated a redefinition of identity politics. They refused the pressures from both men of color who would subsume women’s issues and white women who would subsume race issues” (Freedman 90). Celie and Precious, the two main female characters in the two objects of analysis, *The Color Purple* and *Push*, respectively, are both young girls who have found their voices through a long process of

writing and creating self-awareness. Many black feminists addressed female awareness as writers by creating a process of breaking the silence. According to Freedman

the feminist literature of that era revealed parts of women's inner lives once kept secret: the abortions, rapes, and childhood sexual assaults; the unstated lover for other women; [...] the pain of racial discrimination and class exclusion. Dilemmas once assumed to be personal problems came to light as the product of social constraints. (312)

Freedman continues elaborating this idea of women having the power to change their future and adds "not only through words but also in their images, performances, and crafts, women throughout the world are reclaiming a heritage of creativity, exploring the 'female imaginary' in all its forms" (313). At the time, women started writing novels about women with a feminist approach and many "portrayed women not only as victims but also as complex heroines" (Freedman 313). Female writers, likewise the characters that they created, broke their silence and came of age meanwhile starting a process of writing. Barbara Findlen argues that one of the main aims of writers was

to give voice to young women's experiences and to show how these experiences are made meaningful when read from a feminist perspective. These stories are presented to the audience so that they may serve as a catalyst for consciousness and action and, ultimately, may bring about change in the lives of young women. (qtd. in Budgeon 80)

It also reflects "the view that telling stories about personal experience can function as a form of knowledge production that transcends the specificity of the location from which it is told" (Budgeon 80). Women developed a more critical and politicized voice in order to be considered and stop being ignored.

Rape is another theme, with which black feminist writers have created self-awareness and have also empowered women to break their silences in order to heal from traumatic experiences. Moreover, it is relevant because the two main female characters, Celie and Precious, have been abused and raped by their fathers. Freedman articulates that "rape has a history that is both complex and changing. Its meaning as an act of forced sexual relations differs according to the social context in which it occurs" (279). Furthermore, she argues that "in patriarchal societies, rape has often been understood as a crime against family property, not against women, while in liberal societies, rape tends to be viewed as a crime motivated by individual sexual desire" (279). However, Freedman emphasizes that "feminist analysis has re-conceptualized rape as a crime of power enacted by men to control women. In fact, all of these meanings coexist in the contemporary world and affect both individual behavior and social policy" (279). Thus, many black woman writers wrote

stories that dealt with the topic of rape in order to make it visible. For instance, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, was highly criticized because it discussed topics such as physical abuse and rape among black communities. Also black female authors "made violence against women a central concern. Both, consciousness-raising and the theoretical turn to the politics of personal life, inspired a mass anti-rape movement" (Freedman 282). To conclude, rape was one of multiple ways of violence against black women existed in their lives.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Black Feminist Thought

There has been a lot of discussion about the beginnings of black feminist thought. For Patricia Hill Collins, black feminist thought commenced “within black women’s communities, it cannot flourish isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups” (*Black* 37). Moreover, everyday life experiences narrated by black women’s standpoints were seen as the foundations of black feminist thought. Collins argues that

the black woman’s ‘standpoint’ recognizes the multitude of black women’s experiences; nevertheless, black women’s political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offer a different view of material reality than that available to other groups. (qtd. in Taylor 234)

In her article “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought” (1989), Collins states that “black women’s everyday acts of resistance challenge two prevailing approaches to studying the consciousness of oppressed groups” (746). There are several approaches concerning black feminist thought, according to Collins. The first approach claims that minorities do not realize their own oppression because they identify themselves with more powerful groups (Collins 746). The second approach defends that marginalized women are seen as lesser humans; thus, their point of view cannot be taken into consideration (Collins 747). If these two approaches are taken into account, oppressed groups suffer a great lack of motivation because they are aware of being submissive and oppressed (Collins 747), yet they do not take any political action. For this reason, self-definition is seen as the key to not only individual but also collective empowerment.

Through their everyday acts of resistance, black women face oppressive forces established by patriarchy. As a result, black women “have a self-defined standpoint on their own oppression” (Collins, *Social* 747). In Collins’s analysis, there are two interlocking elements that shape their standpoint (*Social* 747). On the one hand, “black women’s political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups” (*Social* 747). On the other hand, the second element suggests that “these experiences stimulate a distinctive black feminist consciousness concerning that material reality” (*Social* 748). In other words, oppressed and subordinated groups do not perceive reality in the same way that dominant groups do. In her article, Collins emphasizes the importance of one’s standpoint. She claims that “one key reason that standpoints of oppressed groups are

discredited and suppressed by the more powerful is that self-defined standpoints can stimulate oppressed groups to resist their domination” (*Social* 749). For this reason, black feminist thought is exceedingly relevant as it gives a voice to black women and their standpoint. Collins argues that black feminism stands for “a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” (qtd. in Taylor 235). Only when a collective consciousness is articulated, is it possible to resist oppression. For Collins, the key to black women’s survival is “black women’s ability to forge these individual [...] powerful expressions of everyday consciousness into an articulated, self-defined, collective standpoint” (*Black* 26).

Ula Taylor supports Collins’s idea. In her article “The Historical Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis” (1998), she claims that there are four major themes in Black feminist thought. Collins defends that all of them “are generated from a black woman’s standpoint” (*Black* 746). According to Taylor, Collins firstly argues that “black women empower themselves by creating self-definitions and self-valuations that enable them to establish positive, multiple images and to repel negative, controlling representations of black womanhood (234). Secondly, she also mentions the importance of how “black women confront and dismantle the ‘overarching’ and ‘interlocking’ structure of domination in terms of race, class, and gender oppression” (235). Thirdly, “black women intertwine intellectual thought and political activism” (235). Finally, the fourth major theme is that “black women recognize a distinct cultural heritage that gives them the energy and skills to resist and transform daily discrimination” (235). Collins acknowledges the importance of self-empowerment in order to be able to create a consciousness of resistance. However, one must not think that black feminist thought is exclusively concerning African-American women. For instance, in her novel *Black Feminist Thought* (1999), Collins argues that black women, intellectuals, and activists must focus in their discourses and in their everyday actions to “find ways to place their own heterogeneous experiences and consciousness at the center of any serious efforts to develop black feminist thought without having their thought become separatist and exclusionary” (37).

Having established the foundations of black feminist thought, it is worth mentioning that amongst black communities a culture of resistance has been created for years. Many black women have inherited a legacy of struggle from their ancestors. This “constitutes one of

several core themes of a black women's standpoint" (Collins, *Black* 27). Maria Stewart (1803-1879), one of the first U.S. black feminists, whose work "has aimed to foster black women's activism" (Collins, *Black* 3), already developed a "perspective on intersecting oppressions" (Collins, *Black* 27). At the same time, Stewart urged to "derogated images of black womanhood with self-defined images" (Collins, *Black* 27) to be replaced. She believed that black women could be more than mothers, they could even become intellectuals. This is why Stewart challenged women "to forge self-definitions of self-reliance and independence" (*Black* 1). Stewart's legacy has a crucial role to black feminism because she "challenged African-American women to reject the negative images of black womanhood so prominent in her times, pointing out that race, gender, and class oppression were the fundamental causes of black women's poverty" (*Black* 1). Her contribution was so relevant and still is to this day, since her work aimed to emphasize the struggle against race, gender and class oppression of black women. From that moment on, black women found the necessity to develop self-defined images of themselves increasingly relevant. Moreover, Collins claims this "independent analysis means neither that black feminist thought has relevance only for African-American women nor that we must confine ourselves to analyzing our own experiences" (*Black* 37).

The fact that black feminist thought shares a set of core themes does not mean that "African-American women respond to these themes in the same way" (Collins, *Black* 27). Although many see black women as an indivisible group, it is important to stress that as individuals, black women do not interpret their personal experiences in the same way. The "differences among individual black women produce different patterns of experiential knowledge that in turn shape individual reactions to the core themes" (Collins, *Black* 27). Collins emphasizes that it does not exist within a homogeneous black woman's standpoint. Moreover, she adds that "there is no essential or archetypal black woman whose experiences stand as normal, normative, and thereby authentic" (*Black* 28). As a collective, black women do not have the same point of view because they have encountered oppression and discrimination from different perspectives. Thus, they do not share the same experiences, although they belong to the same community. Collins argues that "since black feminist thought both arises within and aims at articulating black women's group standpoint regarding experiences associated with intersecting oppressions, stressing this group standpoint's heterogeneous composition is significant" (*Black* 28). To summarize, black feminist thought revolves around the lived experiences

of black women in a variety of contexts. Black feminist activists have demonstrated that black women are more exposed to discriminatory situations in their everyday lives because society has racist attitudes towards them. Therefore, black women have embodied and developed a consciousness of resistance.

Black feminist thought is also seen as a critical social theory. On the one hand, Patricia Hill Collins claims that within this critical approach, “black feminist thought encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing black women as a group” (*Black* 31). On the other hand, Collins defends this theory because “[it] recognizes that black women constitute one group among many that are differently placed within situations of injustice” (*Black* 31). Furthermore, Collins contends that “black feminist thought must both be tied to black women’s lived experiences and aim to better those experiences in some fashion” (*Black* 32). Somehow, black feminist thought has helped and continues helping many women to overcome past experiences, cope with them and resist in order to move forward. One of the main uses of black feminist thought, according to Collins, is that “[it] affirms, rearticulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that quite often already exists” (*Black* 32). Collins continues to elaborate her theory and adds that “this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African-American women and stimulate resistance” (*Black* 32). Having mentioned that, one must wonder how black feminist thought can coexist and operate within black feminism. The only reason is that Black feminist thought is seen “as a social justice project and must remain dynamic” (Collins, *Black* 39). Additionally, for Collins, both approaches cannot be seen as static, on the contrary: “as social conditions change, so must the knowledge and practices designed to resist them” (*Black* 39).

Thus, black women had the need to feel part of a women’s group that fought for their interests. For this reason, many tried to get closer to the feminist movement. However, once they realized that they were being marginalized, black intellectuals and activists tried to find a solution. Amidst many options, one became very popular, the term ‘womanism’. It derives from the word of ‘womanish’, which was often used by black women, especially mothers. In the next chapter, I will explain the importance of this term especially in relation to one of the novels, *The Color Purple*. Alice Walker, the author of the novel, also coined the term ‘womanist’. Walker describes herself as a womanist, and although it is not a synonym of black feminism, Walker considers that both terms are really close. On this basis, African-

American feminism and womanism were warmly welcomed by many black women because they could identify themselves and be part of a movement that considered them as active members of society.

2.2 Womanism

‘Womanist’ is a term coined by Alice Walker. It first appeared in “Coming Apart” a short story published in Laura Lederer’s anthology *Take Back the Night* in 1979. Later on, Alice Walker elaborated a full definition of womanism in her collection of nonfiction essays, *In Search of Our Mother Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). Womanist is defined in four entries as follows:

1. From womanish. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious.
2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?” Ans. “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”
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.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (12)

Alice Walker found the need “for black women to name themselves, apart from white women’s feminist ideals for them” (Hopkins and Thomas 3). Thus, Walker thought the term ‘womanist’ could respond to different circumstances that black women have been through during their daily experiences. Womanism is defined by Layli Phillips as “a social-change perspective that focuses on harmonizing and coordinating difference, ending all forms of oppression and dehumanization, and promoting well-being and commonwealth for all people, regardless of identity, social address, or origins” (xxxvi). Moreover, Phillips also uses the term womanism to talk about “the relationship between woman, social change, the struggle against oppression, and the quest for full humanity” (xx).

Although there are different definitions and approaches to womanism, I will rely on Alice Walker's approach throughout this dissertation. Phillips considers Walker's definition of womanist as "poetic in nature" (xix) because:

it became, on the one hand, immediately attractive to and resonant for many people who were searching for an alternative to feminist as an identity or praxis and, on the other hand, theoretically slippery and frustrating to scholars and activists accustomed to working within a decidedly feminist frame. (xx)

Womanism, as a concept, was welcomed by many women, especially black women and women of color. Black women were hesitant about being considered feminists and/or joining the feminist cause because they did not feel they could identify with the mainstream feminist movement. They found feminism as a limited concept because its practice often excluded them. In contrast, womanism was seen as a term that could be used every day. This is the reason why Walker urged for the necessity to "reconnect black women to black community" (Hopkins and Thomas 3). Walker's goal was not only to reintroduce black women in black communities but also to include black men. It may be assumed that many men felt uncomfortable with both feminism and womanism, although, Phillips argues that "a number of black male authors [...] had by that time clearly expressed that they felt womanism offered a more inclusive context for men's participation than feminism" (xxiii). This idea was "contrary to the separatist attitude held by many white feminists who argued that men could not be involved with [*sic*] a feminist vision" (Hopkins and Thomas 3). From a womanist lens, black women could express their everyday experiences. Thus, womanism is regarded as a social change for the reason that it aims to end with "all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension" (Phillips xx).

In order to analyze black women's oppression, Alice Walker did not agree with leaving behind aspects such as race and class (Phillips xx). According to Phillips, the relationship between womanism and feminism is important. Also, "its relationships to other critical theories and social-justice movements are equally important, despite being less frequently discussed or acknowledged" (Phillips xx). For Walker, social justice, among other aspects, is a valuable asset in the fight against oppression and inequality. Womanism, in the eyes of Alice Walker, should "share some of the same connotations as feminism but to reach beyond its gender-specific lens" (Hopkins and Thomas 3). Additionally, Phillips adds that "womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism; rather, it elevates

all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social-address categories like gender, race, or class, to a level of equal concern and action” (xxi). In sum, womanism can be seen as a concept that creates a sense of wholeness in the community and leads to the empowerment of black women.

Once the utilities of womanism have been explained, one may wonder who can be considered a womanist. Alice Walker claims that womanism is an inclusive concept. Anyone, regardless of race and class, can be a womanist. She agrees that “the womanist idea is not owned by black women and women of color, even if it was developed, launched, articulated, and elaborated primarily by black women and other women of color” (Phillips xxxvi). An important fact that should be kept in mind is that womanism is not a synonym of feminism although “the relationship between black feminism and womanism is closer than that between womanism and feminism” (Phillips xxxiv). They are close, according to Phillips, because they “have common cultural and historical origins” (xxxiv).

On the one hand, feminists have complained about womanists for being disloyal to their cause: “claiming womanism instead of feminism reflects a lack of understanding about the relationship and difference between the two entities as well as a lack of genuine appreciation for the proliferation of positionalities generated by all ideologies and critical perspectives as they evolve and differentiate” (Phillips xxxiii). It appears that they demand everyone to be feminist because it “is a superior social-justice perspective for woman” (Phillips xxxiii). On the other hand, womanism does not want to argue about whether feminism should be the ultimate goal or if it is superior to other causes. Womanism justifies it by saying that “as long as the job of social justice gets done, it scarcely matters what label it falls under; the more perspectives contributing, the better” (Phillips xxxiii). From their perspective, womanism is in constant change, moving forward in order to eliminate any type of oppression towards women.

In the following section, I will explain the importance of intersectionality in order to understand the systems of oppression regarding gender, class, and race. These approaches provide a view of the situation of the two main female characters, Celie and Precious, as an example of how many black women are doubly oppressed due to their gender and race.

2.3 Intersectionality and Oppression

From a sociological perspective and according to Patricia Hill Collins, intersectionality is defined as an “analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape black women’s experiences and, in turn, are shaped by black women” (*Black* 299). This term was theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a feminist scholar and civil rights advocate. Although Crenshaw coined the term in 1989, she elaborated and developed the concept in 1991. Anna Carastathis claims that intersectionality was a term created by Crenshaw as a “metaphor and defines it as a provisional concept suggest[ing] that the construction of certain identities or experiences as ‘intersectional’ elides the deeper critique of categorical thinking and representational territorializations that we are enjoined to undertake” (158).

Theoretically, intersectionality is a concept that acts as an analytical framework and helps to construct many women’s identities. However, in practice, Carastathis argues that many authors have used intersectionality in the context of black feminist approaches in order to “narrate their own lived experiences and to generate collective understandings of processes of exclusion and marginalization within oppressed communities and resistant collectivities” (158). In an interview with *Perspectives Magazine* (Spring 2004), Crenshaw explains how she came up with the term intersectionality: “[I was] trying to conceptualize the way the law responded to issues where both race and gender discrimination were involved” (qtd. in Thomas 2).

As a concept, intersectionality already existed in the context of feminism but none of the scholars had put it into theory. When Crenshaw developed the concept of intersectionality, it was defined within the context of feminist philosophy. White middle-class women dominated the discourses of feminist theory at the time when Crenshaw developed the term and applied it to the context of black feminism. At that moment, intersectionality was appropriated by white feminists and it was also used in mainstream feminist thought. Crenshaw continues and adds that “race, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination - that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different” (1242).

Moreover, Collins emphasizes that it was already in the 1990s when the “intersectional political agenda of feminists of color—the need to simultaneously analyze and battle dominations of gender, class, race/ethnicity, and sexuality—migrated to the mainstream of feminist scholarship and activism” (qtd. in Carastathis 42). Furthermore, Crenshaw mentions that intersectionality must be placed and used in feminist discourse in order to avoid any tension among women. Crenshaw urges to use it as a social power because intersectionality can be “the source of social empowerment and reconstruction” (1242). For Crenshaw, the main usage of intersectionality is to “[explore] the race and gender dimensions of violence against women of color” (1242). Racism and sexism are regarded as two patterns of violence and oppression that have often been in feminist discourse. For this reason, Crenshaw uses the concept of intersectionality “to denote various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women’s employment experiences” (1244). Crenshaw does not justify violence against women in the framework of race and gender alone. Moreover, Crenshaw claims that other factors lead to violence against women. She continues and says “my focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1245).

According to Crenshaw, there are three approaches concerning intersectionality. The first one deals with structural intersectionality: “the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of white women” (1245). The second one focusses on political intersectionality: “[it analyzes] how both feminist and antiracist politics have, paradoxically, often helped to marginalize the issue of violence against women of color” (1245). Finally, the third one discusses representational intersectionality: “the cultural construction of women of color. [...] The representation of women of color in popular culture can also elide the particular location of women of color, and thus become yet another source of intersectional disempowerment” (1245). In other words, it is implicit that race and class, together with gender, are important factors in women’s oppression. It leads to the introduction of a matrix of oppression, also known as the matrix of domination. This social paradigm explains the different ways that already exist regarding oppression that deal with race, class, and gender. Although they are different concepts and defined separately, they are interconnected.

Crenshaw stresses the importance of intersectionality, according to her, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account, cannot address in which particular way black women are oppressed. Many scholars (Davis, McCall, Wiegman) have argued how important intersectionality has become for black feminism. Carastathis emphasizes that intersectionality “has gained a nearly axiomatic status in feminist theory and women’s gender, and sexuality studies” (156). She states the importance of intersectionality in different theoretical fields, such as feminist philosophy, gender studies, and sexuality studies (19). Therefore, Carastathis defines intersectionality as “the way to theorize the synthesis, constitution, or interactivity of ‘race’ and ‘gender’” (19). She goes further and adds that initially intersectionality “was explicitly aimed at contesting these representational, discursive, and intersubjective dynamics within antiracist and feminist movements seeking to transform social relations” (20). Though Carastathis discusses that today intersectionality has changed and it has become “an axiom of feminist theory and research” (20). She also argues that probably Crenshaw started using intersectionality as a “politically engaged theoretical framework invested in socio-legal transformative praxis; its reduction to an additive conceptualization of oppression that reproduces exclusionary cognitive and perceptual habits thwarts its critical impetus” (22).

Intersectionality and its definition originated within social movements that fought against gender oppression and class discrimination. Also, intersectionality focuses on the violence that black women had been suffering in their daily lives due to their gender, race, and class status. Intersectionality is crucial in Carastathis’s opinion because it leads to “trace genealogies of intersectionality in historically previous intellectual and political movements” (29). If feminist approaches are combined with intersectionality as a theoretical framework, both concepts can help to identify the systems of oppression of those who are marginalized in society. Also, they can be used to distinguish how multiple factors are interconnected and how these affect women in their everyday lives. Even though Crenshaw coined and theorized a term such as intersectionality, she was not the only scholar who developed it.

Patricia Hill Collins has also defined the concept of intersectionality and introduced it to the framework of black feminism. She exchanged the term black feminist thought for intersectionality (*Intersectionality* 2). In *Gender, Black Feminism and Black Political Economy* (2000), Collins argues that it would be better to create several frameworks

inside intersectionality instead of creating a theoretical approach to it (41). Moreover, “On Violence, Intersectionality and Transversal Politics” (2017), Collins discusses the term intersectionality and provides a different approach. Collins states that “violence provides an especially rich entry point for studying the theoretical and political contours of intersectionality” (1460). Moreover, she considers that “all systems of oppression rely on violence” (1466). Violence plays a key role because it is seen as the glue of several systems of oppression. Additionally, Collins stresses that Crenshaw already “used violence against women of color to highlight the significance of intersectionality for feminist activism” (1460). In her article “Intersectionality’s Definitional Dilemmas” (2015), Collins states that intersectionality deals with “the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena” (1). She continues and argues that there are multiple definitions of intersectionality but at the same time, there is also some dispute about what intersectionality stands for. According to her article, Collins has analyzed three interdependent sets of concerns in intersectionality. The first one examines “intersectionality as a field of study that is situated within the power relations that it studies” (1). The second one investigates “intersectionality as an analytical strategy that provides new angles of vision on social phenomena” (1). Lastly, the third one analyzes “intersectionality as a critical praxis that informs social justice projects” (1).

Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins emphasize the importance of such a theoretical approach. Both authors argue that factors like class, race, gender or even sexual orientation can determine and influence one’s position in society. All the factors previously mentioned have to be taken into account as one. Consequently, they cannot be analyzed individually. For Collins and Crenshaw all the factors that shape women, in particular, black women, are interrelated. Crenshaw, for instance, has always defended that the fact of being black and a woman cannot be seen as two independent factors. For being a woman and for being black. Furthermore, Crenshaw continues and adds that, “the intersection of racism and sexism factors into black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (1244). In other words, these elements coexist together and frequently they reinforce each other.

For all these reasons, intersectionality fits in the context of black feminism and in the objects of analysis of this dissertation. Therefore, the two main characters, Celie and Precious as examples of black women, have been more oppressed in comparison to white middle-class women. One must think that in the end, both are women and thus, both are oppressed. Indeed, both are oppressed but intersectionality has been able to prove that black women have always struggled harder to be heard due to their class and/or race. For this reason, Crenshaw argues that black women have always been suffering from sexism but also from racism (Carastathis 1283). Theorizing intersectionality helps to highlight the urgency to include race and class in feminist discourses. Thus, black women can abandon their marginalized status in society, which has been created by a system of oppression. Perhaps for this reason, many scholars (Carastathis, Collins, Crenshaw) see intersectionality as a highly valuable analytical framework. For bell hooks, intersectionality is relevant because it “challenges the notion that gender was the primary factor determining a woman’s fate” (*Feminist* 14). In many ways, intersectionality’s theory has supported the vision of many black feminist activists who argued that among feminist history there has been an exclusion of black women and other women of color from the white feminist movement.

Towards second-wave feminism, many black women raised their voices demanding the reason why feminism was not taking the discrimination of race and class into account. Thus, they could not identify with the feminist movement. They claimed that feminism should be an inclusive movement. Moreover, white women maintained that they were already a homogeneous group that shared the same life experiences. However, in *Women, Race, and Class* (1983), Angela Davis discusses that this argument used by white middle- and upper-class women did not serve as an accurate representation of all women, in particular, black women (Davis 23-30). For Patricia Hill Collins, oppression is “an unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society” (*Black* 4). Race, class, gender, and sexuality, among other features, are seen as categories of oppression, especially the convergence of these. Black women have been always considered as part of an oppressed and marginalized group. However, they have always struggled and resisted. “black women as a collective, the struggle for a self-defined black feminism occurs through an ongoing dialogue whereby action and thought inform one another” (Collins, *Black* 30). Through

many generations, black women have been oppressed, although the systems of oppression and discrimination have changed over the years.

The concept of black womanhood has also become part of a system of oppression because the stereotypical images of black women have been manipulated by society. On the one hand, Patricia Hill Collins argues that “they do so by exploiting already existing symbols or creating new ones” (*Black* 69). On the other hand, Hazel Carby examines the real objective of creating stereotypes. For Carby, stereotypes are created “not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations” (qtd. in Collins, *Black* 69). Society controls the images of black women and hence, they become objects of oppression. A possible solution to break with the controlled images of black womanhood is provided by Collins who discusses that “constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to black women’s survival” (*Black* 100). In order to create their identities, black women should construct their own images out of their everyday knowledge and experiences. Dealing with stereotypes, many black women are considered strong, “referring to the way in which they perceive black women coping with oppression” (hooks, *Ain’t* 20). Probably, as bell hooks argues in her book *Ain’t I a Woman* (1981), “they ignore the reality that to be strong in the face of oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not to be confused with transformation” (20). Within patriarchal societies and following what they promulgate, women must be portrayed as fragile, naïve, weak and docile. However, society has always depicted black women as strong but with negative connotations. Thus, black women acknowledged that if they took that stereotypical image and used it in their favor, things would be different. For instance, “[it] was no longer seen as dehumanizing, it became the new badge of black female glory” (hooks, *Ain’t* 21).

In both novels, the two main female characters have been sexually abused, thus sexuality can be interpreted as a system of oppression. Furthermore, Collins argues that “sexuality can be conceptualized as a freestanding system of oppression similar to oppressions of race, class, nation, and gender, as well as part of each of these distinctive systems of oppression” (*Black* 134-35). Thus, black women who have been and still are oppressed by sexism are considered victims. It should be examined how sexuality is constructed and

how it is manipulated and linked to other factors, in order to become a system of oppression. Collins adds that “this conceptualization views sexuality as a conceptual glue that binds intersecting oppressions together” (*Black* 134-35). This demonstrates how sexuality has become a system of oppression for many black women. Black women also raised the issue of sexism and realized that “sexism could be just as oppressive as racism” (hooks *Ain’t* 14). bell hooks relates that one of the reasons was because “we clung to the hope that liberation from racial oppression would be all that was necessary for us to be free. We were a new generation of black women who had been taught to submit, to accept sexual inferiority, and to be silent” (*Ain’t* 14). Finally, black women noticed that they were equally victimized and oppressed by sexism and racism. Moreover, bell hooks adds that, “black women were told that we should find our dignity, not in liberation from sexist oppression but in how well we could adjust, adapt, and cope” (*Ain’t* 21).

For Collins, there is a connection between knowledge, consciousness and self-empowerment, therefore, she aims to develop black feminist thought in order to eradicate the different systems of oppression. Meanwhile, Collins wonders how oppression was thought and how it operated. As a result, black women created a culture of resistance that has revolved around the systems of domination that have been oppressing them. In addition, they have taken a journey of emancipation of the pre-established ideas and stereotypical images of black women. Collins mentions how problematic it is to see gender, race, class, among others, as separate systems of oppression (*Gender* 48). These systems are related to the construction of intersectionality. It “references how these systems mutually construct one another” (*Gender* 48). Collins also argues that

intersectional paradigms suggest that certain ideas and/or practices surface repeatedly across multiple systems of oppression. Serving as focal points for intersecting systems of oppression, these ideas and practices may be central to how gender, sexuality, race, class, and nation mutually construct one another. (*Gender* 48)

It has been demonstrated that intersectionality is a useful theoretical approach because it deals with and offers an explanation to the different systems of oppression. It proves that all these factors are interconnected and cannot be treated separately.

In conclusion, black feminism, among other things, focuses on equality and aims to create tools to avoid discrimination and oppression due to class, race, and gender. Thus, black women used different paradigms of intersectionality of class, racism, and sexism in order to explain the different systems of oppression that were interlocked. Therefore, one of the

main goals of black feminism is to eradicate class oppression, racism, and sexism as forms of oppression. Another thing that black feminism aims to achieve is black women's agency. In the next section, I will explain the importance of women's agency in order to break with oppression. Celie and Precious start their stories with silenced voices, as victims but in the course of the novels both transformed their voices which, led them to feel liberated.

2.4 Black Women's Agency

For Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, women "have really lived in a world that did not hear their voices and did not perceive them as legitimate actors" (2). In *We Only Talk Feminist Here* (2017), Briony Lipton and Elisabeth Mackinlay focus on the importance of agency because for them, voice "conjures a particular public expression of a certain type of perspective on self and social life" (62). At the same time, the authors also maintain that "[t]he concept of 'voice' carries with it assumptions of choice, that individuals have specific rights to 'choose'" (62). Women have been removed from social spheres and placed in the domestic sphere. In the past, they were "treated as objects in a masculine discourse and language reflects women's exclusion" (Lipton and Mackinlay 61). On the one hand, it has been argued that, "voice and the act of speaking are often understood to be an integral condition in the demonstration of women's empowerment" (Mahoney qtd. in Lipton and Mackinlay 62). On the other hand, "agency is the foundation that black women's resistance to systems of oppression is built on" (Davidson 5). Without a liberated voice, black women are condemned to live in constant oppression.

In *Black Feminist Thought* (1999), Patricia Hill Collins defines agency as "an individual or social group's will to be self-defining and self-determining" (298). There, she argues that the images of black womanhood have been controlled in order to keep women in a second position (99). In addition, Collins argues that black women "have been described as generally outspoken and self-assertive speakers, a consequence of expectations that men and women both participate in black civil society" (99). Consequently, women have rebelled and have overtaken control of their own voices to create reliable, self-defined images of their womanhood. Davidson provides a simpler definition of agency as "having the ability to act and to be recognized as an actor" (5). She adds that "[a]gency is reflective of a multiplicity of actions undertaken by black women with the intention of defying

systems of oppression and domination” (5). By searching for their own voices, black women saw an opportunity to fight against oppression.

Many authors have discussed the importance of finding one’s own voice. For instance, Audre Lorde emphasizes that women should find their own voices, individually in the context of a black community in order to achieve self-definition (36-37). Collins argues that “[f]or African-American women the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by black women’s objectification is another black woman. This process of trusting one another can seem dangerous because only black women know what it means to be black women” (*Black* 104). Another author who discusses the relevance of finding one’s voice is bell hooks, who stresses that “the ideas of coming to voice or finding one’s voice appear clichéd due to assumptions of a common women’s voice [...], coming to voice remains relevant to women in exploited and oppressed groups” (Davidson and Yancy 113). In many ways, feminism is a helpful theoretical approach because the “[f]eminist movement created the context for female bonding. We did not bond against men, we bonded to protect our interests as women” (hooks, *Feminism* 15). At the same time, feminist thought “helped us unlearn female self-hatred. It enabled us to break free of the hold patriarchal thinking had on our consciousness” (hooks, *Feminism* 14). However, bell hooks criticizes in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) that

feminism in the United States has never emerged from the women who are most victimized by sexist oppression; women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, and spiritually-women who are powerless to change their condition in life. They are a silent majority. A mark of their victimization is that they accept their lot in life without visible question, without organized protest, without collective anger or rage. (1)

Thereby, black women have always sheltered themselves in safe spaces where they could talk freely about their experiences. Anyone who was neither black nor female was excluded from these safe spaces because then black women would feel threatened. They “constitute one mechanism among many designed to foster black women’s empowerment and enhance our ability to participate in social justice projects” (Collins, *Black* 110). At the same time, people who were not included in the safe spaces were afraid of them because “[s]uch spaces simultaneously remove black women from surveillance and foster the conditions for black women’s independent self-definitions” (Collins, *Black* 111). Safe spaces were seen by many, as a route that black women took towards self-definition. Once they were empowered, black women could control the images of themselves that were

externally created and replace the negative stereotypes created with positive and self-controlled images of their womanhood.

In *Sister Outside* (1984), Audre Lorde talks about the transformation of silence into a language of action. For her, “the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger” (36). Women, especially black women, were silenced by oppressive societies and feared to speak out about their experiences since that would make them visible, which in turn made them vulnerable. “In the act of overcoming our fear of speech, of being seen as threatening, in the process of learning to speak as subjects, we participate in the global struggle to end domination” (hooks, *Talking* 43). This is a necessary step that women have to take in order to break with oppression and create their own voice. Only when women speak in a liberated voice, will it mean that they are completely free. For Lorde, the transformation of silence into a more powerful language “is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation” (36). When women are aware that it is in their own hands to take control of their own voices in order to break the silences, they will become more powerful and break the chains of oppression in all its forms. But one must differentiate between talk and speak. “To speak as an act of resistance is quite different than ordinary talk, or the personal confession that has no relation to coming into political awareness, to developing critical consciousness” (hooks, *Talking* 36). hooks defends that coming to voice is “a gesture of resistance, an affirmation of struggle” (*Talking* 43) and that all women should aim to create their own voice in order to break with silence, and consequently, with oppression.

3. *The Color Purple*

3.1 Introduction to *The Color Purple*

Many years after it was published, *The Color Purple* (1982) still remains a prominent example of African-American feminism in fiction. Alice Walker's novel has also long become an object of analysis among scholars and critics. Nowadays, *The Color Purple* is considered one of the most influential novels written by a black woman. The novel is also relevant because it unearths the oppression, the physical, and sexual abuse that black women experienced. One year after its publication, Alice Walker won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for fiction for the novel. *The Color Purple* gained such fame that it has been adapted for films and musicals. The story of Celie, the female protagonist, is a journey of survival and self-definition which ends as a fairy-tale when Celie and her sister, Nettie, are reunited. For Lauren Berlant, Alice Walker's novel takes a step further:

The Color Purple's strategy of inversion, represented in its elevation of female experience over great patriarchal events, had indeed aimed to critique the unjust practices of racism and sexism that violate the subject's complexity, reducing her to a generic biological sign. But the model of personal and national identity with which the novel leaves us uses fairytale explanations of social relations to represent itself: this fairy tale embraces America for providing the Afro-American nation with the right and the opportunity to own land, to participate in the free market, and to profit from it. (44)

The novel does not only narrate the life of Celie, but it also criticizes the society for being racist and unfair with women; especially poor and uneducated black women. Alice Walker describes a patriarchal community where women are portrayed as slaves, objects without a voice, powerless and fearing the consequences of raising their voices. In *The Color Purple*, it is explored the journey towards selfhood of a black woman who is able to embrace the difficulties she had and overcome them. At the end, Celie becomes the owner of her house, business and her life.

In the first half of the twentieth century in the South, black people were trapped in the Georgia sharecropping system which operated like an internal colony within the country (Juneja 80). *The Color Purple* narrates the life of Celie, an African-American woman who lives in rural Georgia. Om Juneja argues that like Celie, most of the women who appear in the novel are "plain, ignorant black women oppressed by a system beyond their comprehension. The oppression of these women is an outcome of American racism and

sexism which are interconnected as modes of dominance” (79). Therefore, “the oppression of black women by their husbands, brothers, lovers etc. is an outcome of this system” (Juneja 79). Alice Walker was inspired by the life of her ancestors to write a piece of fiction that not only reflected the life of black people in the south, but also the psychological and physical violence that black women endured (Juneja 80). According to Berlant, the novel “opens with Celie falling through the cracks of a language she can barely use. Her own limited understanding, her technical insecurity, and her plain sense of powerlessness are constructed in contrast to the powerful discourses that share the space with her stuttered utterances” (25). As will be explored in the next chapter, many have described Celie as a victim of racism and sexism caused by men who are part of her life. Berlant suggests that *The Color Purple* is a “womanist historical novel” (29) because

Celie and Nettie’s feminist fairy tale [...] absorbs and transforms the traditional functions of patrifocal-realist mimesis; and that this transformation makes possible the movement of *The Color Purple* into its communal model of utopian representation, in which a partnership of capitalism and sisterhood plays a central role. (29)

Furthermore, Daniel Ross claims that while Celie develops her persona, she “finds a network of friends matrifocal in structure but open to men who can put aside their desire to dominate” (15). Matrifocality focuses on women as head of families, while men play a less important role at home (Ross 15). Regarding Ross, in *The Color Purple*, “matrifocality dissolves the hierarchies that perpetuate dominance and oppression. The loss of such hierarchies changes one’s perception of the self in society and even in relation to God” (15). This is why Celie manages to evolve during the course of the novel and towards the end, achieves independence from men. There are highs and lows in Celie’s life: for instance, she has been sexually abused by her stepfather and married against her will to Mr. _____. Besides that, Celie finds love in the arms of Shug Avery, the former lover of Mr. _____. With Shug, Celie learns how to “acquire self-esteem and financial independence as a maker of pants, becoming increasingly more expressive in their fabric and design” (Scholl 115). There is a turning point in the novel when Celie discovers that Mr. _____ has been keeping from her letters from her sister Nettie, who is alive on a mission in Africa. At the end of the novel, Celie is reunited with her sister; therefore, her happiness is completed, as well as her metamorphosis of becoming a new woman.

The Color Purple “has a linear structure with events arranged in a chronological order” (Juneja 80). Celie, the first-person narrator, narrates in an epistolary narrative style her

life and the life of the people who surround her without providing any dates. Thus, the narrator does not fill the gaps, nor provides a background. For this reason, her voice becomes trustworthy because Celie tells her story from her point of view. Juneja claims that “Alice Walker wanted this novel to be very realistic, almost ‘visual’ so that the reader is able to sit down, pick up that book and see a little of Georgia from the early twenties through the sixties” (80). By using this technique, it explores the journey of a black woman from abuse to emancipation and the quest for her own identity and voice. Celie’s character is seen as a symbol of hope, due to her strength, faith, courage, and resistance. A bond of sisterhood among other women, together with creating a language of resistance, as will be explained in the following chapters, are key to achieve female emancipation.

In the next section I will focus on Celie’s journey to selfhood. Moreover, in the following sections, I will discuss the evolution of Celie’s voice and language from silence to a more elaborate and conscious voice. To conclude with the analysis of *The Color Purple*, I will describe Celie’s relationship with other women who help Celie in the creation of her own identity. Altogether, it can be seen Celie’s metamorphosis into a more mature female character.

3.2 Celie’s Metamorphosis

“You’d better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (1)¹, with this sentence Alphonso, Celie’s stepfather, warns and prohibits her to talk about the abuses she has experienced. From that moment onwards, Celie decides that the only person she can talk to is God. Thus, she starts writing series of letters to God creating a personal diary narrating her everyday life experiences and memories. For Juneja, “Celie addresses her letters to God sharing her confidences with Him, who serves as the epistolary confidant in the narrative discourse of *The Color Purple*” (83). Celie has no friends to talk to; and also, because she is warned to keep the secret of her abuses, otherwise many people could be harmed. Therefore, in the beginning, “Celie views God initially as a man with whom she can share her confidences and who can provide her the necessary protection from the world around her” (Juneja 83). Later on, besides the figure of God,

¹ Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. 1982. New York: Harvest, 2003. All subsequent page references refer to this edition.

Shug Avery appears, whose character is described by Juneja as “the female liberator who infuses self-confidence in her [Celie]” (83). The appearance of this new character makes Celie change her perspective and her attitude towards life. “Now she looks at God as a man who acts like other men” (Juneja 83). During her process of gaining self-confidence and independence, Celie wonders “What God do for me?” (193), hereafter, Celie says “he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won’t ever see again” (193). Celie is not sure anymore if God was on her side. Then, Celie claims, “the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the oter mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (193). All men, she has encountered, have only brought pain and distress into her life. Women, on the contrary, have taught her confidence, self-esteem and knowledge. Celie’s language is plain and reflects the fear she has to raise her voice.

Right when then novel starts, Celie is fourteen years old. She is a young black girl who has been sexually abused by her stepfather on several occasions. As a result, she has been pregnant twice but was never able to keep her children. Celie’s lack of education and friends, the isolation to which her father has subjected her, the fear that she may suffer from not being believed and/or the possible consequences of raising her voice aggravates Celie’s condition. Therefore, she comes to the decision to remain silent regarding the abuses. Celie decides not to tell her mother in order not to hurt her. She says “my mama fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause he good to her now” (1). Keeping her abuses a secret; Celie is saving her mother from being bothered, but at the same time, it creates a distance between them. Daniel Ross argues that “given the profound guilt and confusion that Celie must have felt about replacing her mother, in addition to the disruption of her own psychic growth and the continued brutalization to follow, it is little wonder that Celie would seek to annihilate self” (11). By the time her mother dies, Celie is pregnant for the second time. When she is asked whose child it is, Celie is terrified and answers “God’s” (2). Alphonso, Celie’s stepfather, loathes her; she is aware of it and writes “he act like he can’t stand me no more. Say I’m evil and always up to no good” (3). It becomes a nightmare to live under the same roof, but soon, Celie realizes that her father is now targeting his next victim, her sister Nettie. “I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I’ll take care of you. With God help” (3). Celie trusts that God will become the savior of both sisters. Also, she copes with abuse and violence because she has her sister by her side. Due to her stepfather’s actions toward her, she is terrified of

men. Therefore, she writes “I don’t even look at mens. That’s the truth. I look at women, thou, cause I’m not scared of them” (5). This is the reason why, Celie trusts women rather than men because they have never hurt her. Seeing a photo of Shug Avery, fascinates Celie because of her looks and says: “[a]n all night long I stare at it. And now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery. She be dress to kill, whirling and laughing” (6). She is a mysterious strong and independent woman; secretly Celie admires Shug and wants to become like her.

In the course of the novel, Celie is forced to marry Mr. _____. First, he wanted to marry Nettie but Celie’s stepfather does not allow it and as an exchange, Alphonso offers Celie. He argues, “I can’t let you have Nettie. She too young. [...] But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain’t fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don’t need a fresh woman no how” (7). Celie has to obey her father and is unwillingly married to another man. Alphonso says to Mr. _____ “you can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it” (8). This is said about Celie, who is described as cattle. Moreover, Alphonso warns Mr. _____ that Celie tells lies. Thus, Celie’s father silences her, but also, implies that Celie’s voice is not trustworthy. If she decides make the abuses public, no one will believe her.

If Celie had a tiny glimmer of hope that things would change, once she sets foot in the house, she immediately realizes that nothing has changed. She might have swapped men but the situation is the same. Mr. _____ beats her continuously and also rapes her. In order to resist, Celie creates a strategy to alienate herself from her husband’s abuses: “he beat me like he beat the children... It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man” (23). Women’s bodies have been the target of patriarchy, therefore, “women have learned to fear or even to hate their bodies” (Ross 4). Consequently, women are more likely to see their own bodies as fragmented or torn into pieces:

To confront the body is to confront not only an individual’s abuse but also the abuse of women’s bodies throughout history; as the external symbol of women’s enslavement, this abuse represents for woman a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status. As the subject of repeated rapes and beatings, Celie tries alternately to ignore and to annihilate her body. (Ross 4)

During all these years, Celie had to cope with sexual abuses and violence performed by men, firstly by her stepfather, and later by her husband. Celie has no knowledge of herself as a woman, and only when she is ready to accomplish her desire to speak up, she will

become a strong and independent woman. First, Celie must go through a process of “discovery of desire—for selfhood, for others, for community, and for a meaningful place in the Creation” (Ross 3). Thus, this metamorphosis to become a new woman can only begin with the understanding of her own body which has never belonged to her because men have taken it away. Unfortunately, as Ross highlights, “Celie’s ignorance of her body is even more shocking than her desire to annihilate it, as her language makes clear” (4). Everything changes upon Shug Avery’s arrival at the house. Shug is terribly ill and Mr. ____ orders Celie to nurse her until she is recovered. “While serving Shug in the traditional female capacity of nurse, Celie feels her first erotic stirrings and associates them with a new spirituality” (Ross 5), Celie enjoys nursing Shug and says “I wash her body, it feel like I’m praying. My hands tremble and my breath short” (49). During this nursing process, a bond between the two women is created. This bond will lead Celie to rediscover her body and her sexuality. For Ross, “Shug introduces Celie to the mysteries of the body and sexual experience, making possible both Celie’s discovery of speech and her freedom from masculine brutality” (5). Before Celie develops her sexuality, she must understand how her body operates. For that, Shug encourages Celie to look herself at the mirror and learn about her body. Celie is not comfortable and she claims that it feels “like us been doing something wrong” (79). Even though Celie feels uncomfortable looking herself in the mirror, she still did it and by doing it, she overcomes the shame. “In discovering and accepting with pride her own body, Celie initiates a desire for selfhood” (Ross 5). Berlant reckons that “for Celie, [...] sexual awakening not only transforms her relation to her body and to pleasure in general but also leads to a major shift in her understanding and mastery of power in the world” (37). Once Shug is completely recovered, the roles are exchanged; now, Shug is the one who takes care of Celie. “Celie’s illness, however, is not physical but psychological: Celie lacks an identity. Shug awakens Celie’s desire for identity most explicitly when she sings a song she has written just for Celie” (Ross 10). Celie considers it, as one of the most important moments in her life and emphasizes “first time somebody made something and name it after me” (74). She has never felt relevant or special; thus, by having a song named after her, Celie starts affirming her identity as an independent woman who is not linked to any man. Altogether, “the repossession of her body encourages Celie to seek selfhood and later to assert that selfhood through spoken language. During this process, Celie learns to love herself and others and to address even her written language to a body” (Ross 4). This is one sign of Celie’s awakening. For Juneja “Celie’s journey of self-discovery is symbolic of the

‘womanist process’ embedded in the Afro-American folk-art tradition of their survival culture” (86).

There is a turning point in Celie’s life in which she wakes up and is aware of the importance of having her own voice, finally she is ready to speak up. For Ross, “[this] occurs when Celie [...] asserts her freedom from her husband and proclaims her right to exist” (3). During a dinner, Shug makes an announcement: she informs everyone who has gathered at Odessa’s house that she is leaving and taking Celie with her. Mr. ____ does not understand why Celie is planning to abandon him, as he thinks that he has done nothing wrong. Celie says: “you a lowdown dog is what’s wrong [...]. It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need” (202). Celie’s response shocks everyone because she always has kept her opinions to herself and never dared to say them out loud. She knows it and says “all round the table folkses mouths be dropping open” (202). Celie blames Mr. ____ for taking her sister Nettie away from her. Celie does not only reprimend that to Mr. ____, but also, she confronts Harpo, Mr. ____’s son. Celie tells him: “if you hadn’t tried to rule over Sofia the white folks never would have caught her” (202). Celie also disapproves Harpo’s behavior towards Sofia, his first wife. Meanwhile, Sofia, who always had encouraged Celie to speak up, is surprised by Celie’s words. “Sofia so surprise to hear me speak up she ain’t chewed for ten minutes” (202). Celie is no longer afraid to speak. During all her life, she has been abused and silenced. Men have decided over her life. Now, Celie is in love with Shug and for the first time she wants to decide something for herself. Mr. ____ tries to slap her but she has the courage to confront and face him. Mr. ____ and Harpo try to make them understand that they need a man by their side. Society has taught women that without a man in their lives, they are lost. For this reason, the women at the table begin to laugh. They are tired of being subjected to the will of a man; and therefore, want to be free and start a new life in which they can be independent. As a last resort, Mr. ____ threatens Celie and tells her that he shall not give her any of his money. Celie claims “did I ever ast you for money? [...] I never ast you for nothing. Not even for your sorry hand in marriage” (204). In order to become fully independent, Celie knows that she has to move away from her home and find an economic source to maintain herself in order not to not depend on men anymore.

Celie is not the only woman who speaks up and finds her own voice. Mary Agnes, also known as Squeak, reveals that she is going north to pursue her dreams of becoming a

singer. Harpo, her boyfriend, is shocked. Harpo claims that “everything you need I done provided for” but Mary Agnes needs to have her own dreams, to feel fulfilled as a woman and not depend on any man. Also, she claims that she wants to stop being called Squeak, her name is Mary Agnes and that is how she wants to be called. Harpo asks “Squeak, Mary Agnes, what difference do it make? [...] it make a lot, say Squeak. When I was Mary Agnes I could sing in public” (205). Being Mary Agnes, allows her to be a strong and determined woman. Squeak reminds her of the moments when she was docile, following men’s orders. Although Sofia and Mary Agnes had a difficult beginning, over time, the two women found their places in the family. Both have accepted their roles and now they can even be considered friends. Sofia becomes the person who encourages Mary Agnes to go and sing: “I’ll look after this one [child] till you come back” (207). The two women have put their differences aside and now cooperate and help each other, among other.

Before definitely leaving the house, Celie has a conversation with Mr. ____:

Mr. ____ try to act like he don’t care I’m going. You’ll be back, he say. Nothing up North for nobody like you. Shug got talent, he say. She can sing. She got spun, he say. She can talk to anybody Shug go looks, he say. She can stand up and be notice. But what you got? You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in Memphis is be Shug’s maid. Take out her slop-jar and maybe cook her food. You not that good a cook either. And this house ain’t been clean good since my first wife died. And nobody crazy or backward enough to want to marry you, neither. What you gon do? Hire yourself out to farm? He laugh. Maybe somebody let you work on they railroad. (208)

After quietly listening to Mr. ____, Celie only asks him whether more letters from Nettie have arrived. Mr. ____ still has not accepted that Celie is leaving and instead of saying farewell and wishing her a good journey, he ignores her. Celie cannot cope with anything else and says “I curse you” (209), she continues and adds: “until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble” (209). Mr. ____ cannot believe what he just heard and moreover, keeps underestimating Celie by saying: “who you think you is? [...] You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, [...] you nothing at all” (209). Without thinking about anything else, Celie repeats the curse “until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail” (209). She cannot stand any more words and tells him “[with] every lick you hit me you will suffer twice” (209). Celie has finally confronted her abuser and finishes her conversation with Mr. ____ by saying: “the jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot” (209). At

the end of the conversation, Celie meditates and says “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here” (210). Celie has become aware of the abuses that she has suffered by all men who have appeared in her life. Moreover, Celie does not want to be seen as a victim, as she grows in confidence, it will allow her to become an independent woman. Celie’s narrative has become a narrative of resistance with a more mature and politicized language. Celie is awake and although she was silenced, now she demands to be heard.

At this stage, Celie has managed to take control over her voice. Ross emphasizes that “finding the courage to speak is a major theme of *The Color Purple*. But this novel also suggests that speech cannot come from the hollow shell of selfhood that Celie presents early on” (3). Berlant describes the evolution of Celie’s voice as “this pure and disembodied voice which speaks of its liberation from the disfigured body and enacts, through disembodiment, the utopian scene of self-expression from Celie’s point of view” (38). From this moment onwards, Celie is an independent woman who has freed herself from the chains that attached her to her husband. She has replaced her silence and her weakness by a powerful voice which was destroying her submission to Mr. ____ and other men who have abused her. Celie has found the courage to fight back and to be the owner of her own life. “This revision of Celie’s point of view frees her from her imprisonment in stoic passivity” (Berlant 38). Traditionally, black women are born into a culture in which a dual oppression of women prevails due to their gender and race. By writing, Celie is telling all those moments she has been abused. Also, it allows her to create her own voice in the process of emancipation. Thus, in the following section, I will analyze Celie’s metamorphosis regarding her voice and language; and how she is able to speak her mind.

3.3 Celie’s voice and language

During Celie’s process of empowerment, her voice and language evolve into a more mature tone. Celie’s letters are written in a southern vernacular dialect with many grammatical mistakes. This is relevant because “the distinct and original narrative tone of the novel approximates it to the oral code of the vernacular idiom of the South” (Juneja 86). Juneja also argues that “Celie’s use of the bare, laconic patois of the Southern Blacks is an expression of her individual consciousness and personality. Walker also uses Celie’s idiolect as an act of defiance, a polemic against American racism and sexism” (84). In contrast to Celie’s colloquial language, Nettie’s letters to Celie are written in Standard

English. Perhaps Celie's texts are not grammatically correct, but her letters carry a sense of strength and determination. As Juneja claims, "[Nettie's] language at the end of the novel becomes stiff and unexpressive, whereas Celie's English despite its grammatical errors and simple vocabulary, is eloquent and beautiful" (84). Moreover, Diane Scholl emphasizes that "a number of critics who have protested the novel's raw language, its frank depiction of sexual expression, particularly lesbianism, and its bitter castigation of male and female sex roles" (113).

At the beginning of the novel, Alice Walker uses a language that expresses violence and submission of women. Language is a powerful tool to describe men's domination. Also, "it is often used by men to silence women" (Utter 153). An example of this is Celie's silence regarding her father's abuses. Instead, she finds her own way to express what is really happening to her and decides to start writing. Due to this resolution, she undergoes a transformation of her voice and language. Celie cannot trust anybody; thus, she writes letters to God in order to express her emotions and what it is happening in her life. Celie develops a consciousness as she addresses an unseen audience. By doing so, credit is given to Celie's voice and it is more reliable. As already mentioned, Celie writes letters to God in order to find her own voice. However, once she finds that her sister Nettie has written letters to her, she changes the addressee of her letters. Now it is not God to whom she writes anymore, but her sister Nettie. Although Nettie is in Africa, Celie trusts her. One can see a shift of perspective in Celie's letters in comparison to her prior writings. Celie has evolved and now is more confident. She narrates a story of struggle, of survival and of personal success.

The purpose of writing letters switches during the course of the novel. Through them, Celie deals with her experiences and her concerns throughout her life. Writing can be seen as a way toward freedom, as well as an act of rebellion in which she can find her voice and speak her mind. Celie's letters provide her knowledge; gradually, her confidence grows and towards the end of the novel, she becomes a new woman. Becoming literate, Celie asserts her femininity but also achieves a new and powerful voice to break years of silence. Martha Utter argues that "beyond giving Celie a resistant voice that allows her to reconfigure the rhetorical situation, [...] Walker's text also creates an alternative methodology of language" (153). In order to understand the development of Celie's voice and language in *The Color Purple*, it is also important to analyze Celie's

writings and speeches. Lauren Berlant claims that for Celie,

speech becomes the primary arena of action: the natural world lends not its material resources but a spiritual vitality that can always assert itself while the body is threatened and battered. And writing, as the fact of the letters suggests, is the place where the voice is held in trust for the absent subject who might be seeking a way of countering the patriarchal and racist practices of the social world. (38)

One may wonder why Celie decides to write about her life, addressing her letters to God, copying the style of a personal journal. Catherine Lewis proposes that “Alice Walker presents the book as the result of Celie’s silence, confusion, and frustration” (166). For Lewis, “the impetus for Celie’s writing is her rape by Alphonso” (166). Her stepfather prohibits her to tell anybody; therefore, Lewis argues that “in this threat he imposes fear and guilt of possible maternal death on the young, superstitious, and psychologically naïve Celie. Alphonso silences Celie’s voice” (164). Thus, Celie takes that order and she keeps the secret, but decides to write about her suffering and the hardships she faces.

While, Albert and Alphonso discuss the terms and conditions of the marriage between Mr.____ and Celie, Alphonso warns the future husband that Celie is a liar. By doing this, Celie’s stepfather destroys her voice and makes it appear unreliable. Lewis claims that “repeatedly in the novel other women [...] admonish her to fight or speak up for herself” (164). Once she has left her house and marries Mr.____, Celie continues to write about the frustration she has “about her separation from Nettie and about her abusive marriage to a virtual stranger” (Lewis 166). Being powerless to speak up, Celie sometimes finds other women’s help that intervene with Albert for her. For Lewis, “these women act as her voice, for she has none” (164). In fact, Shug decides to stay home once she hears that Albert beats Celie. Shug is taking over Celie’s voice because she has not learned how to put her feelings and desires into words yet. She neither has the self-confidence nor the strength to accomplish it. Moreover, when Sofia is in jail, Celie pays her a couple of visits and every time after the visit has concluded, Celie worries about Sofia’s appearance. Sofia is aware that she is weak but to calm Celie down she says “every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I’m you. I jump right up and do just what they say” (90). Saying that, Sofia mirrors Celie’s attitude towards life. Celie is docile and does as she is told; thus, she avoids any kind of trouble. Sofia’s character is strong; she is a determined woman. While being imprisoned, Sofia realizes that she has to change if she wants to survive in jail. This is why Sofia adopts Celie’s behavior and decides to remain silent. Celie is astonished, “I can’t fix my mouth to say how I feel” (90). This is a mere strategy,

as Lewis claims: “Sofia is quiet to her jailers but retains her voice in her own group [...]. Whether it is the white jailers or the black men in Celie’s life, each embodies the patriarchy, silencing the women physically, legally, or ideologically” (165).

It is a matter of time that Celie realizes she cannot continue being passive and let others speak for her. Shug’s help is priceless, and the bond created by both women also contributes to the development of Celie’s voice and language. The letters that Celie writes have adopted a more mature tone. For Lewis, “one component of Celie’s life that becomes more and more stable is her ability to relate to women. She finds her voice louder and more clearly with them first, and then she is able to eventually face the men in her life” (166). Without the aid of the women that surround her, Celie would not be able to confront men and the oppression they inflict on her. Analyzing women’s behavior, Lewis gets to the conclusion that many scholars may think women achieve what they desire the most because “they are patient, they endure, and they work hard” (170). Lewis considers this argument flimsy and so do I. In *The Color Purple*, women’s success is achieved because they fight back, resist, and learn how to live in a man’s world. Lewis claims that “much of the success in the two works depends on the women’s abilities to function in male terms in their male-dominated world” (170).

Towards the end of *The Color Purple*, Celie has learned that “language can be used to understand, rather than destroy” (Utter 53). One example of language used to understand rather than destroy is a scene in which Celie leaves Shug and returns to her former house when she receives the news that after her stepfather’s death, Nettie and she are the new owners of the house. They inherited the house once her mother died. After moving in, Celie spends some evenings with Mr.____ and the old married couple talk. Albert recognizes that it “[t]ook me long enough to notice you such good company [...]. And he laugh. He ain’t Shug, but he begin to be somebody I can talk to” (281). Martha Utter claims Albert’s acceptance is relevant because “Celie accepts that Albert is capable of using language in a constructive rather than destructive way, and she no longer denies his voice” (53). She adds, that in the end of the novel “Celie’s and Albert’s voices become agents for conversation rather than combat” (153). Celie writes “now us sit sewing and talking and smoking our pipes” (277). The time Mr.____ has spent alone, he has come to the conclusion that his behavior towards Celie has been one of the causes of her departure. As children, men are taught that they are superior to women and only using violence,

women will obey them. Therefore, Albert never saw Celie as an equal but as an inferior. However, Mr. ____ is no longer an oppressive agent: he has evolved now he regards Celie as an equal and regrets having abused her and caused any harm during her life.

Words are the most direct way of communicating. However, women in *The Color Purple* also express themselves through sewing. Utter argues that “an alternative methodology of language that replaces the phallic and destructive patriarchal discourse of the pen, which tears and rends, with a feminine (but not female) discourse of the needle, which re-mends, re-members, and remakes” (157) has been created. Quilting and sewing are recurring activities, in fact Celie appears quilting or sewing together with other women. Spending time together, women are bonding and sharing their experiences. This is already introduced right at the beginning of the novel when Sofia confronts Celie and demands to know why Celie advised and encouraged Harpo to beat her. Sofia wants to return to Celie the curtains that she once has sown to welcome her. Finally, the two women reconcile and they use these curtains to turn them into a quilt. Lewis argues that “as Celie and Sofia continue to work on the quilt, it becomes an emblem of unity among the women” (166). For Juneja, sewing and quilting “is a tradition in which the black American women, despite heavy oppression, expressed their creativity as in gardening, and cooking” (86). Moreover, “the art of quilting, [...] allowed them to satisfy their creative urge in bits and pieces of waste material to create new designs. Quilting therefore represents the two-way process of art: economy and functionalism” (Juneja 86).

Nevertheless, sewing is not just an activity performed by women in order to express their creativity, it also operates as a language. Utter claims that “weaving, embroidering, and sewing are thus important analogies for the novel’s form, but they are also important metaphors for the kind of conversation Walker envisions replacing patriarchal discourse” (155). Sometimes quilting becomes more effective than having a conversation. In Utter’s words, “sewing does more than enable conversation: sewing is conversation, a language that articulates relationships and connects and reconnects networks of individuals to create a community” (154). Through quilting, Celie “can replace the patriarchal discourse of Mr. ____” (Utter 154). As a whole, “Celie’s pen stitches together the narrative fabric of the text, remaking individual relationships and roles, replacing the violence of patriarchal discourse with a language that re-members and remakes. Celie’s pen becomes a needle, then. Yet Celie’s needle also becomes a pen” (Utter 155). Women might remain silent,

but they can express their feelings and emotions through the patterns of their quilts. Besides using the pen to write, Celie also uses the needle to narrate. Utter considers that “Celie’s narrative voice, then, is not just another square in a quilt, equal to all the other squares. Rather, in the text as a whole, narrative voices are interwoven, imbricated, threaded together, and interconnected by the needle/pen of the spinner, Celie herself” (154). Sewing does not only help Celie to achieve self-independence; “it becomes an alternative methodology of language that resists other more standard or formal discourses” (Utter 156). One might think that sewing is limited to women in the novel, but by the end of the novel, Celie even teaches Mr. ____ how to sew. Albert always wanted to learn because, as he confesses “when I was growing up [...], I use to try to sew along with mama cause that’s what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me” (238). Through sewing, Albert’s metamorphosis is completed and “becomes part of Celie’s community” (Utter 156). Thus, when Nettie returns from Africa, Celie refers both Shug and Albert as “my peoples” (250). Utter argues that “once rape has been renounced as an instrument of male domination, once the rapist has been transformed and included in a new social order where he can engage in ‘feminine’ activities and be a part of ‘feminine’ language, society can move toward a more equitable relationship between the sexes” (156).

Utter considers that the discourse of the pen and the needle are “subversively conflated, and it is finally and most incisively through this conflation and confusion that Walker’s text achieves its most radical aims” (157). On the one hand, “the pen has typically been an instrument of male empowerment, a phallic substitute instantiating men’s control over women” (157). On the other, “the needle has typically been associated with femininity, demarcating the contours and limits of women’s sphere” (157). Moreover, Utter points out and emphasizes that “when Walker’s text conflates needle and pen, then, it undermines the most basic binary structures of patriarchal society” (157). Only if the pen and the needle cannot be separated and are regarded as one, it is possible that the patriarchal discourse is erased and it becomes a narrative where masculine and feminine discourses are admitted (Utter 157).

Celie uses the pen to express her concerns to God and uses the needle to bond with other women and create her voice. Patriarchal discourse treats women as slaves, silent and invisible objects, powerless and fearing the consequences to construct a politicized

language. At the beginning of the novel, Celie does not have the tools to fight patriarchy and its discourse of dominance. Therefore, she remains confined in domestic spaces. Once Celie has learned that language is a powerful tool and grows in confidence, she fights the patriarchal discourse within it. In *The Color Purple*, female characters create a new discourse, a new subjectivity, and a new language, strong enough to be emancipated and not to follow the orders dictated by patriarchy. In the next chapter, I will describe how Celie achieves economic and personal independence partly thanks to the assistance of other women who appear in the course of her life and remain there as loyal friends. Women are key to Celie's metamorphosis and without them, it would not be possible to understand this process of emancipation and independence from men.

3.4 Celie's relationship with other women

Celie's metamorphosis into a more confident woman cannot be understood without the influence of other women who have helped Celie to reconsider the world she lives in. Unlike men in the novel, women focus on helping each other to cope with oppression in which they are subjected. Due to the time they spend together, they have created a bond of sisterhood. Celie's relationship with female characters, such as Shug Avery, Sofia and Mary Agnes, is key to understand Celie's process of emancipation. Ross argues that "[Celie] begins to find an identity through a network of female relationships with Shug, Nettie (whose letters she soon discovers), Sofia, and Mary Agnes" (6). Together, these women have created a community where they can share their experiences and express themselves without any fear. This does not only help women to understand themselves, but also to grow independent from men. In addition, they are able to learn the tools to resist the oppressive forces of patriarchy. With the support of the other women in the novel, Celie is able to get to know her body, learn about it, accept it and finally love it. Also, she is capable of liberating herself and gaining the desired independence once she is aware of the unfairness of her situation as a black woman.

In *The Color Purple*, women resolve their problems in different ways. For instance, Sofia addresses her problems with violence, in contrast to Celie, who learns that the best way to achieve her goal is with a powerful language. When Celie announces that she is moving in with Shug, breaking with her past and with Albert, she, therefore, refers to that moment as magic. She says: "Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words" (187). Ross argues that "through speech Celie establishes her freedom, breaking Albert's

hold on her. She further recognizes the power of speech when her curse on Albert sinks him into a life-threatening depression” (13). Only when Albert gives Celie the letters of her sister back, he begins a process of self-regeneration. Albert is ashamed of his behavior and realizes his role as a male oppressor. Towards the end of the novel, Mr.____ is seen as a new man, “capable of loving and sharing” (Ross 14) because his vision regarding sex differences and sexual domination is eradicated. Celie describes this change and says “now us sit sewing and talking and smoking our pipes” (238).

These friendships differ one from the other. Sofia is the first woman Celie meets “who refuses to accede to both the patriarchal and the racist demand that the black woman demonstrates her abjection to her oppressors” (Berlant 30). Sofia’s role in the novel can be described as a mentor with a rebellious spirit. Sofia’s husband, Harpo, complains that his wife does not obey him and speaks her mind. This is because Sofia is a strong woman in a historical period where women were supposed to be weak and obedient. Celie describes the situation between the married couple and says, “Harpo want to know what to do to make Sofia mind. [...] He say, I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk” (36). Sofia will not obey Harpo just because he is a man. The only solution that Harpo finds in order to solve this problem is violence. Mr.____ asks Harpo if has ever hit her, whereupon Harpo gives a negative response. To make him understand the situation Mr.____ says, “well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let’em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating” (36). Mr.____ solves everything with violence. Instead of trying to understand women’s point of view and let them speak, Mr.____ prefers to use violence and thus, forces them to obey him because he thinks that what he says prevails, in that way he controls women. Harpo agrees with his father, he also thinks that if he beats Sofia, she will calm down and obey him from now on. Mr.____ continues his reasoning and considers that “Sofia think too much of herself anyway [...]. She need to be taken down a peg” (36).

Instead of supporting Sofia and defending her in front of men, Celie sides with Mr.____’s and says “beat her” (37). Celie realizes that every time Mr.____ calls her, she jumps scared because she is afraid of him. Celie reacts like this because since she was born, she has only known violence. Her lack of education makes her think that men are superior and have control over women. She has been raised in a community that fosters violence and

submission towards women. Her ignorance makes her terrible at giving advice. She does not defend Sofia's voice, nor the strength Sofia has as a woman, instead, Celie is trying to tame her spirit. After a while, Celie witnesses a fight between Harpo and Sofia. "They fighting like two mens" (38), Celie writes. Celie does not see Sofia as a woman during the fight, nor during her daily life, mainly, because she fights back and resists. This is why Celie says "like two mens" (38). When she sets her heart on something, Sofia will not stop only because her husband tells her to. Due to her strong temperament and strength, Celie sees Sofia as a man.

Celie is having trouble to sleep because she has a bad conscience. Celie writes: "[a] little voice say, Something you done wrong. Somebody spirit you sin against. Maybe. Way late one night it come to me. Sofia. I sin against Sofia spirit" (39). She wonders and discovers why she feels uneasy. Finally, Celie has come to the conclusion that she has failed Sofia. Instead of creating a bond between women to fight together, she has allied herself with the oppressors. Once Sofia hears about Celie's advice to Harpo, she feels betrayed. Sofia argues, "[j]ust want you to know I looked to you for help" (39). Celie knows that she has committed a big mistake: "I say it cause I'm a fool. [...] I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't" (39). For the first time, Celie knows that the best thing to do is to resist and fight for her rights as a woman. First, Sofia was furious because she felt like Celie let her down, now she pities Celie. Sofia explains why she behaves in that particular way:

All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had 'I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. [...] I loves Harpo [...]. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. (40)

With this speech, Sofia makes Celie aware of the importance of women fighting each other in their struggle. After this conversation Celie realizes that "this open the way for our talk to turn another way" (40). Both have been honest and now can start creating a bond to help each other. Moreover, Sofia adds:

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. Try to make a little half stand sometime for the child but that always backfire. More she stand up for us, the harder time he give her. (41)

Sofia creates a parallelism between her mother and Celie, regarding their behavior; and Sofia recognizes that all the girls in her family stick together to fight men. Celie and Sofia have redirected the situation and what began as a dispute, is now a friendship.

Comparing Celie's and Sofia's marriage, on the one hand, in Mr.____ and Celie's relationship there is no emotional connection. On the other hand, at the beginning of Sofia and Harpo's married life there is love. Although Harpo persists in dominating Sofia, he will never accomplish his goal to turn her into a submissive woman. Celie does what she is told, obeys her husband and does not speak her mind. On the contrary, from the beginning, Sofia does what she thinks is right without considering what her husband has to say. Sofia is very confident and when she realizes that it is over with Harpo, she claims "he don't want a wife, he want a dog" (65). Finally, Sofia decides to move to her sister's house and leave Harpo behind. She decides to be happy and choose her own future rather than stay with her husband. Sofia does not want to obey the orders dictated by a patriarchal society. When Sofia is requested to work as a maid for the mayor's wife, she replies "hell no" (87). For her rude answer, the mayor slaps Sofia and she returns with a punch. While Sofia is in prison, she gets visited by Celie. Sofia confesses that during her stay: "every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump up and do just what they say" (90). Celie's leitmotif in life is not to fight, not because she does not want to, but because she wants to stay alive. She has learned that this is the best way to resist. On the contrary, Sophia defies the authority. This illustrates the struggle of race and class that black women have to face in their everyday life actions.

The second female character I would like to discuss is Shug Avery. Shug "broadens her vision by teaching self-worth and love to Celie who develops a lesbian relationship with her. Shug's singing transforms Celie's personality" (Juneja 84). Later on, Shug arrives at Mr.____'s house because "Shug Avery sick and nobody in this town want to take the Queen Honeybee in" (43). Celie secretly admires this woman's character and the strength she represents; however no one in town respects Shug because she does not obey the rules imposed by a community which promotes violence against women. Shug know that going against the community will marginalize her but she prefers to be alone and choose her life rather than be submissive. Even the preacher refers to Shug in his sermon without pronouncing her name: "[h]e 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" (46). Celie feels the need to stand up for Shug because she does not care about what people say about her. Shug has rebelled against her community and also, she has achieved economic independence to do whatever she desires and pleases.

One day, Mr.____ brings Shug Avery home in his wagon, Celie describes Shug's looks but also adds: "she look so stylish it like the trees all round the house draw themselves up tall for a better look" (45). Although Shug is very ill and needs to be taken care of, Celie is impressed by her character and strength. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, Mr.____ orders Celie to nurse Shug until she is fully recovered. Celie never complains that Mr.____'s lover is in the house; she is not jealous either. Whereas Shug is healing, Celie develops strong feelings towards her and a bond between both women is created. While combing Shug's hair, Celie says "I wash and comb out her hair. She got the nottiest, shortest, kinkiest hair I ever say, and I loves every strand of it" (53). Although Celie uses adjectives with negative connotations, regarding Shug's hair, she adores it and does not mind how it really looks. Shug also helps Celie in other aspects, and thus, Celie starts flourishing as a new woman, with more confidence. Celie also "recognizes her self-worth when Shug sings a song in her name" (Juneja 84). In this priceless moment Celie feels grateful and says "first time somebody made something and name after me" (74). Both women have conversations in which Celie admits things that she has never told to anyone before. Shug and Celie have a relationship of trust, care and love.

By the time Shug is fully recovered, she plans to leave but the two women have an important conversation:

He beat me when you not here I say.
Who do, she say, Albert?
Mr.____, I say.
I can't believe it, she say. She sit down on the bench next to me real hard, like she drop. What he beat you for? she ast.
For being me and not you.
Oh, Miss Celie, she say, and put her arms around me. (76)

As a result, Shug decides to stay and remain at Mr.____'s home until he treats Celie properly and does not beat her anymore. "I won't leave, she say, until I know Albert won't even thing about beating you" (76). Shug will not leave, not for the love she feels toward Mr.____, but because she wants to protect Celie. They seal Shug's decision with a kiss. Shug is making a promise, now it is her time to take care of Celie and heal her from all the abuses she has suffered. Shug introduces Celie into a new world where love and pleasure exist. Shug also becomes Celie's confessor, she relates the sexual encounters she has with Mr.____, and they rather sound like rape. "He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep"

(78). Shug makes Celie realize that regarding pleasure, she is still a virgin and reveals how to find pleasure without the need of a man. Also, Shug tells her that she ought to know and love herself if she wants to become a strong, and powerful woman. In the beginning, Celie says “I feel like us been doing something wrong” (79).

After a while, Shug feels like home and tells Celie, “you and Albert feel just like family now. Anyhow, once you told me he beat you, and won’t work, I felt different about him. If you was my wife, she say, I’d cover you up with kisses stead of licks, and work hard for you too” (111). Shug has become a maternal figure as well as a lover in Celie’s life. Shug would protect Celie no matter what, this is why Celie feels so comfortable with her and opens up about her past. Her father warned her not to tell anybody but Celie feels so confident with Shug that she does not mind telling her biggest secret. She shares in detail how father raped to her, and why her mother was never aware of it. By narrating these awful memories, Celie starts sobbing, Shug tries to comfort her and says: “Don’t cry. She start kissing the water as it come down side my face” (114). Thus, Shug’s help is vital to Celie. Moreover, Celie compares Mr.____ and Shug: “He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me, I say. She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth” (114). In fact, Celie realizes that their relationship has taken a step further; it is the first occasion in which Celie has kissed a woman. And it is also the first time that Celie has a sexual relationship taking into account her feelings and pleasure.

In short, for Juneja, “Shug’s love helps Celie regain her inner strength and wisdom, which liberates her from the customary image of God as a white haired man with big feet and a beard. Her journey to liberation therefore changes her perception of God” (83). Celie becomes a strong and determined woman thanks to Shug. Firstly, because Shug is a strong positive character and contributes to Celie’s process of healing. Secondly, Shug encourages other women to pursue their dreams. And thirdly, Shug also helps Celie to discover Nettie’s letters and to face Mr.____. Celie was isolated but when Shug appears everything changes; finally Celie is ready to liberate herself and develop her voice.

Celie is not the only character who undergoes a self-regenerating. This is the example of Mary Agnes, also known by her nickname Squeak, whose voice is raised in order to break with male domination. Mary Agnes is a clear example of a woman who can change her life and becomes independent. Mr.____’s son, Harpo, is firstly married to Sofia, but in the

course of the novel, Sofia decides to move out and live with her sisters, since she does not want to live with Harpo. Then, Harpo meets Mary Agnes and both decide to start a life together. Harpo says about Mary Agnes: “she a nice girl, friendly and everything, but she like me. She do anything Harpo say. He give her a little nickname, too, call her Squeak” (83). Mary Agnes, like Celie, obey what her husband says and she does not dare to speak her mind.

In the beginning, Sofia and Mary Agnes do not have a close relationship. Nonetheless, Mary Agnes is the one who helps free Sofia from prison, not before she gets raped by the warden of the prison. By telling about her rape, Mary Agnes heals and instead of being a victim, she becomes a survivor. Daniel Ross argues that “[i]ronically, Mary Agnes the victim emerges from this encounter with a new power over men in general. [...] She repudiates her derogatory nickname Squeak and demands that she be called by her real name” (13). Not only does Mary Agnes refuse to be called Squeak, but also, like Celie, she decides to leave and pursue her dreams away from home. Mary Agnes begins to sing, as a symbol of freedom; her songs are an example of the oppressive forces that black women face in their everyday actions. Mary Agnes is also questioning the double standards concerning color preference among black people. Ross emphasizes that “Mary Agnes soon emulates Shug’s success, using her voice to give her a new freedom from, and power over, men. She begins to travel, choosing when to move in and out of Harpo’s life” (13). Mary Agnes’s story foreshadows Celie’s freedom that will happen towards the end of the novel. Ross considers that “both stories [validate] the theme that strength can come from enduring oppression with as much dignity as possible and then rising to denounce it. Ultimately, the victim gains moral power over the oppressor” (13). Celie and Mary Agnes are not victims anymore, but survivors. Both have risen as strong women with a politicized language.

Celie has learned how to resist, fight back and achieve independence from men. Writing about her life is the way that Celie has chosen to heal from all her horrible experiences. Achieving economic and personal freedom from men is Celie’s ultimate goal: to become an empowered woman who is not afraid to speak her mind. Celie manages to develop her identity and is able to dissolve the perpetuation of dominance and oppression performed by men in her community and in her household. Partially, because she surrounds herself with powerful women. Celie evolves as a woman, as well as her language does.

4. *Push*

4.1 Introduction to *Push*

Sapphire's novel *Push* is "a startling tribute to the strong, urban voice of the underrepresented and abused" (Wilson 31). It was published in 1996 and until today; it is the most famous work of Ramona Lofton. Sapphire, which is her pen name, "began her career as a performance poet" (Wilson 31). *Push* has become a prominent novel which was adapted into the movie *Precious*, directed by Lee Daniels, in 2009. The movie gained a lot of recognition and won several film awards. Marlo David considers that *Push* "was published in a social and political moment characterized by intensified scapegoating of poor black mothers, and the novel invokes the controlling image of the 'welfare queen' in order to reimagine the subjectivity and citizenship of this denigrated racialized figure" (173). *Push* tells story of a young African-American teenager called Precious Jones "who suffers sexual, emotional, and physical abuse at the hands of those closest to her and as a result of a systemic oppression pervasive in urban city slums" (Wilson 31). Although the reader usually focuses on the life of Precious, in an interview, Sapphire argued that "*Push* will still be read for the linguistic attempts at using language itself as a vehicle for social change and, hopefully, for its attempts at showing the beauty of the human soul blossoming" (qtd. in Wilson 35). In fact, David emphasizes that Precious "endures a girlhood beset by neglect, emotional and sexual abuse, and incestuous rape at the hands of her parents within her home, but she acknowledges how the poverty, racism, sexism, and homophobia of the outside world structure her dismal family life and culminate in her illiteracy" (175). Likewise, Sathyaraj Venkatesan claims that Precious also deals with "her attempts to surmount these ordeals through the acquisition of literacy, particularly through writing and reading" (109).

Precious Jones is a first-person narrator and David emphasizes that *Push*'s personal narrative and voice are read "as a litany of abuse, abjection, disappointment, and failure" (180). Although Precious's voice has been silenced, the reader must rely on Precious's voice which becomes trustworthy. In addition, Venkatesan argues that *Push* is "partly autobiographical" (110), as he claims "*Push* draws upon Sapphire's experience as a literacy teacher in an alternative school" (110). In an interview, Sapphire describes Precious as "a composite of many young women I encountered when I worked as a literacy teacher in Harlem and the Bronx for 7 years" (qtd. in Keehnen). Marq Wilson

follows this argument and adds: “Sapphire persistently discusses Precious Jones as a truthful compilation of the women she encountered during her early career while teaching” (31). Sapphire emphasizes the importance to give voice to outcast women because “these circumstances exist and have existed around us, unheard and unaddressed, for many years” (Wilson 31). This is the reason why during her years as a teacher, Sapphire collected the experiences and realities of many women and decided to write a novel. On the one hand, Venkatesan argues that *Push* goes beyond and it is also “a testament to the enduring power of literacy in healing and transforming human lives” (110). On the other hand, David claims that *Push* has become “an analogy between motherhood and acts of reading and writing; she treats the emerging literacy of her central character, [...] as a metaphor for the desire to mother” (174). Motherhood and literacy are two themes that are closely interlinked; because without motherhood Precious would have not found enough reasons to keep fighting and change her future. Her desire to learn comes while she is expecting her second child and she wants him to have a better future.

Push is set in the 1980s in Harlem. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Harlem became popular during the 1920s and 1930s, when it flourished an artistic, social, and intellectual movement called the Harlem Renaissance. This was regarded as the rebirth of the African-American society. For David, “*Push* situates Harlem as a critical site for the post-Civil Rights failure that the figure of the ‘welfare queen’ enacts” (175). Moreover, he also claims that the location and the period are relevant to understand “[the] highly symbolic of the real and imagined inner city, which has become emblematic of black cultural difference in the post-Civil Rights era” (175). In the 1980s, in poor neighborhoods such as Harlem, the image of the ‘welfare queen’ was very prominent. David argues that the image of ‘welfare queen’ “relies on the beliefs that the majority of women on welfare are black and that black women are hyper-fertile breeders who purposefully have children to collect more welfare money and avoid work” (193). This argument was fostered “by President Ronald Reagan and continually fed by politicians, academics, and members of the media who draw on racist cultural theories and neoliberal political ideologies to explain black women’s failure to belong to the ideological American family” (David 175). By using this argument, the ‘welfare queen’ embodied all black women who did refuse “to conform to the norms of bourgeois family life, [it] was understood as a verification of black female difference, which hinged on ideas that black women were excessive in their sexual and reproductive lives and could never be

fully incorporated into the American Dream” (David 175). Therefore, the administration justified that black women isolated and marginalized themselves because they did not want to fit into American society. Black women have to face oppressive forces in different levels, this is why intersectionality is a useful theoretical framework to analyze the different factors that black women fight in order to destroy the stereotypes created.

Regarding the reception of *Push*, David considers that it has received “limited and uneven scholarly attention” (147). Up until recently, David claims that only few scholars have examined *Push* “as an example of a progressive or empowering maternal narrative” (174). However, for Wilson, *Push* is not exempt of controversy and argues that “many critics have deemed the novel unrealistic and exaggerated, Sapphire remains unapologetic for the seemingly insurmountable challenges her young protagonist faces: incest, illiteracy, obesity, and finally AIDS” (31). Unlike what critics might say, reading closely, Venkatesan defends that the reader finds “the liberative potential of literacy and further demonstrates how literacy enables Precious, at least temporarily, to reconcile with her traumatic past and oppressive present to forge a meaningful future” (109). Moreover, *Push* “addresses intra community issues of incest, teenage pregnancy, and the consequent injuries for black girls” (Venkatesan 109). For Wilson, “Sapphire’s greatest achievement as an artist stems from her powerful ability to give a voice to those who have not been heard” (31). Suzette Spencer also acknowledges *Push* as a powerful story

of injury, hope, the limits of hope, and relentless, sometimes faltering, determination, stories relevant to the lives and experiences of a broad racial spectrum of subjugated young women—American and not, black and not, heterosexual and lesbian—women who are differently situated, to be sure, but who are living, dying, hoping, and loving on the barbed edges of the social and the political. (53)

Personally, I consider *Push* a strong weapon to give voice and visibility to the victims of incest and violence who have been marginalized.

Rape is a controversial topic in the novel as is clearly depicted in several passages; thus, *Push* becomes a challenge for “readers who are appalled at the graphic portrayals of emotional torture and sexual abuse in this poor, black woman-headed household” (David 176). Precious is an incest survivor, therefore, many critics have argued that several passages, in which rape is portrayed, lead to create a stereotypical image of black men (Wilson 31). Not only Precious is raped by her father, but she is also abused by Mary, her mother. Régine Jean-Charles focuses on the relationship between Mary and Precious and

argues:

Sapphire propels her incest narrative into another, less conventional set of relations when Mary the mother sexually abuses Precious the daughter. [...] The author does not restrict the elaboration of her literary rape narrative to father/daughter incest but extends and explodes it, creating a subversive rape narrative in which the mother also sexually abuses her daughter. (154-55)

Perhaps, as Jean-Charles claims, “*Push* offers an alternative reading of sexual violence that resists the limits of the conventions that conscript narratives of sexual violence. The novel refigures the incest trope in an unexpected way that has generated significantly less critical attention” (155). Moreover, Janice Liddell argues that “Mary’s character violates the fundamental themes of motherhood typically found in black women’s literature and becomes a virtually inconceivable image of black motherhood” (qtd. in David 176). As a result, Mary has also become the sexual perpetrator in Precious’s life.

One of the most important themes in *Push* is literacy, as it is key to understand Precious’s metamorphosis. For Spencer, “literacy and reading are integral to the character Precious’s survival and transformation [...]” (58). In the following chapters, I will analyze “the liberative and therapeutic qualities of literacy (reading and writing) and further investigates how literacy enables Precious to become reconciled with her past and forge a meaningful future” (Venkatesan 109). Without the help of Ms. Rain, who becomes Precious’s mentor, Precious would have not been able to evolve and transform her voice.

To conclude, “*Push* presents ‘heroic maternal self-transformation’ in the character of Precious, who transgresses the bounds of the welfare queen stereotype and accesses claims of ‘good’ motherhood” (David 177). In the following sections, I will describe Precious Jones’s evolution as a woman and how she heals from a traumatic past and constructs a new life for her children and herself. In addition, I will explore the importance of literacy and agency. Ms. Rain helps Precious to gain confidence and evolve; unlike Mary, Precious’s mother, who promotes violence and does not support Precious in her path to recovery. In the final part, I will analyze the influence of *The Color Purple* in *Push*. The former novel has influenced Precious and has given her the courage and motivation to keep moving forward and seek for a better future.

4.2 Precious's journey toward womanhood

“My name is Claireece Precious Jones. I don’t know why I’m telling you that. Guess ‘cause I don’t know how far I’m gonna go with this story, or whether it’s even a story or why I’m talkin’; whether I’m gonna start from the beginning or right from here or two weeks from now” (3)². Precious is a sixteen-year-old African-American teenager who besides being illiterate, has been physically and sexually abused by her parents. Paquita De Zulueta describes Precious by saying “she is obese, illiterate, dirt poor and living in a seedy flat in Harlem” (65). Right at the beginning of the novel, Precious claims: “some people tell a story ‘n it don’t make no sense or be true. But I’m gonna try to make sense and tell the truth, else what’s the fucking use? Ain’ enough lies and shit out there already?” (3-4). Precious is writing about her life from her point of view based on her own experiences. Therefore, Wilson argues that “by telling her story, she begins to challenge the invisibility of those who are the objects of racism and other forms of oppression” (35).

Before Precious undergoes a metamorphosis, she describes herself and says

I big, I talk, I eats, I cooks, I laugh, I watch TV, do what my muver say. But I can see when the picture come back I don't exist. Don't nobody want me. Don't nobody need me. I know who I am. I know who they say I am—vampire sucking the system's blood. Ugly black grease to be wipe away, punish, kilt, changed, finded a job for. (31)

Precious is only twelve when she gave birth to her daughter, Little Mongo; however, the abuses started a long time ago. While she is at the hospital, Precious has a series of flashbacks of her childhood. In these, Precious relates the abuses carried out by her father, as she explains:

I been knowing about that since I was five or six, maybe I always known about pussy and dick. I can’t remember not knowing. No, I can’t remember a time I did not know. But thas all I knowed. I didn’t know how long it take, what’s happening inside, nothing, I didn’t know nothing. (12)

Although, her entire childhood has been destroyed by her parents, there is always a reason to keep the faith even in the worst times. Precious is aware that she is stuck in a world that she does not desire. In fact, David argues that *Push* “has shocked readers with its intense depiction of the repeated victimization of Precious: rape by her father, molestation by her mother, and neglect and abuse by both” (180). Precious realizes that if she wants

² Sapphire. *Push*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

to flee from an oppressive and abusive home, she has to create her own voice. She wishes to achieve it and says: “I wanna say I am somebody. I wanna say it on subway, TV, movie, LOUD” (31). But at the same time, she recognizes that “I see the pink faces in suits look over top of my head. I watch myself disappear in their eyes, their tesses. I talk loud but still I don’t exist” (31). Precious aims to the courage to become an independent woman, but she wonders: “[w]hy can’t I see myself, feel where I end and begin. [...] My fahver don’t see me really. If he did he would know I was like a white girl, a real person inside” (31-2). Precious argues that she is invisible in the eyes of society; it might be due to the color of her skin, or perhaps because she is obese. People have ignored her for so long and she admits that “I been out the picture so long I am used to it” (32). As David emphasizes

outside of the confines of her apartment, Precious encounters hostile education and social welfare systems that figure her as another statistic of the rising black underclass. Junkies, pimps, and prostitutes scatter the streets of her Harlem world like detritus, discarded, wasted lives that prefigure the only future Precious can imagine. (180)

Precious predicts that the future she has ahead is not bright and claims: “sometimes I wish I was not alive. But I don’t know how to die. Ain’ no plug to pull out. ‘N no matter how bad I feel my heart don’t stop beating and my eyes open in the morning” (32). Precious tries to give up, as she thinks that if she would not be alive, no one would miss her. In fact, she is not ready to change yet and says: “what for, it gonna be the same, I ain’t change. I still me, Precious” (33). Only when she meets new people who have also suffered abuses, she will feel that she is not alone anymore. Moreover, from that point forward, Precious will manage to learn the tools that allow her to change and develop her own voice.

Push reflects the failure of the educational system in poor environments. Once her school acknowledges that Precious is pregnant again, the principal decides to transfer Precious to an alternative school. Venkatesan highlights that “Precious’s old-fashioned school places little value on its students and is anything but a place of wisdom, benevolence, and protection. Ignoring her will to learn and to liberate herself, the school frustrates her learning instincts and sees her as an undeserving student” (110). Instead of using education to help Precious to escape from her abusive environment, her former school does the opposite. Venkatesan argues that “denying and disregarding her concerns, the school replicates the trauma of her home and adds to her oppression” (110). In fact, being

banned from school, makes Precious be more isolated. Precious always enjoyed to be at school, even if she was not able to learn anything. As she writes: “I always did like school, jus’ seem school never did like me” (36). Moreover, Precious is ashamed of recognizing that she is not able to read and write. Precious admits to herself “I couldn’t let him, anybody, know, page 122 look like page 152, 22, 3, 6, 5— all the pages look alike to me” (5). Nevertheless, Precious desires to change, and she says: “I really do want to learn. Everyday I tell myself something gonna happen, some shit like on TV I’m gonna break through or somebody gonna break through to me —I’m gonna learn, catch up, be normal, change my seat to the front of the class. But again, it has not been that day” (5). She is eager to learn, to be like everybody else in class but she is not aware that her background does not allow it. Her mother does not support her, because she does not understand why education is so important. School was the only place where she was safe; however, the principal, Mrs. Lichenstein, judges and reinforces Precious’s position as an outcast.

In the alternative school, David argues that Precious “encounters an unconventional teacher named Ms. Rain, who encourages Precious’s development. Precious not only learns the rudiments of reading and writing, but she also becomes a poet and enters a loving community of other women, who become a surrogate family” (180-81). Although Precious is not sure what an alternative school is or how it will help her, she does not give up on her education because “she has a feeling that it will provide an opportunity to finally get the education she has missed” (David 182). Even though Precious is not aware of it, in the moment she sets foot in the alternative school, her quest of literacy has started. Thus, Precious experiences an intense transformation “as she embarks on her literacy quest and the transformation she endured during pregnancy and childbirth. Bridged by the notion of pushing hard for a new life, literacy and childbirth function as parallel narratives” (David 182).

The first day in the alternative school, Precious feels nervous and anxious and writes “I got to get dress for school. I got to be at school by 9 a.m. Today is my first day. [...] I is ready. Ready for school. School something (this nuthin’!). School gonna help me get out dis house” (35). Education will be the key to abandon her old life and start a new one, as she emphasizes while she gets ready “I got self, pencil, and notebook. Can I get a witness! I’m outta here!” (36). David argues that

in this instant, Precious confidently invokes her personhood in relationship to the instruments of literacy—the pencil and the notebook. Her words not only

foreshadow the importance of literacy to her emotional and educational development, but they also signal a critical connection between this novel and other works by black women that correlate literacy with social recognition. (182)

Precious is foreshadowing the transformation that she will endure in the process to learn to read and write. Through literacy, Precious will become a new woman with a new and powerful language. On her way to school, on the one hand, Precious “must encounter the harsh realities of her life outside her abusive home, a set of realities dictated by her race, gender, and class” (David 183). On the other hand, Precious is overwhelmed by her hunger and goes to a chicken restaurant where she steals food. While she is running away with the food, she leaves her pencil and her notebook behind. Although it seems like an anecdote, Sapphire constructs a paradox. For David, “this episode stages a critical conflict that lies at the heart of this narrative: the difficulty for a black girl to realize the promise and hope of the American dream when she is beset by institutionalized inequalities, such as poverty, racism, sexism, and intense violence at the hands of her parents” (183). Either Precious chooses to survive or to learn.

Towards the end of the novel, Precious has moved out from her mother’s house, and she is living at Advancement House, a special place for abused women. One day, Mary visits Precious and informs her that her father has died of AIDS. Right after she is notified that she has been also infected with the AIDS virus, “Precious’s journal entries, which were expressed in rudimentary prose earlier, are replaced by poems. Plagued by existential questions such as: ‘Ms Rain I ass you wy Me?’ (89), her writing registers, for the first time, the birth of an intensely subjective voice” (Venkatesan 113). Therefore, Precious is encouraged to keep learning. Moreover, the alternative school has not only been a positive reinforcement, but also, Precious has found a group of girls whom she considers “this girlz is my friends” (95) and have become her only family in which she can rely on.

Regarding Precious’s parents, Mary Johnston, Precious mother, is the antagonistic character par excellence. Mary and Precious are very different concerning their attitude towards life. For instance, Precious has “the desire to socialize the child toward survival, and the practice of motherhood as a source of transformative power. Mary possesses none of these. She lives in isolation from other women who could help her take care of Precious” (David 176). Mary has no empathy towards Precious, in fact, as David argues “rather than protecting her daughter from sexual abuse, her mother sees her as a sexual rival for Carl’s affections and abuses Precious both physically and sexually” (180). At

the time Precious is pregnant of her first child, Mary has no idea and when she finds out, yells: “slut! Goddam slut! You fuckin’ cow! I don’t believe this, right under my nose” (9). Mary hits her several times, as a result, Precious gives birth on the kitchen’s floor. Precious lacks a maternal and loving figure, since Mary is the opposite of a caring mother who protects and takes care of her daughter. Mary cannot comprehend that her boyfriend abused her daughter; and thus, cannot be empathic and try to understand in which situation Precious is, as she says: “‘Thank you Miz Claireece Precious Jones for fucking my husband you nasty little slut!’ I feel like I’m gonna die, can’t breathe, from where I have baby start to hurt” (19). In addition, Mary blames Precious and tells her “‘Fat cunt bucket slut! Nigger pig bitch! He done quit me! He done left me ‘cause of you. What you tell them mutherfuckers at the damn hospital? I should KILL you!’” (19).

Besides physical abuses, Mary perpetuates the sexual abuses. Once Precious falls asleep in the couch Precious writes: “I feel Mama’s hand between my legs, moving up my thigh. Her hand stop, she getting ready to pinch me if I move. I just lay still, keep my eyes close. I can tell Mama’s other hand between her legs now ‘cause the smell fill the room” (21). Mary continues the abuses that her boyfriend Carl started when Precious was a baby. Consequently, “Mary fails to socialize Precious for survival and instead uses her power over her daughter to thwart Precious’s efforts at development and destroy her spirit” (David 176). Moreover, Mary benefits from the money that the welfare provides, as she lies saying that she takes care of Precious and Little Mongo. The truth is, the baby lives with Precious’s grandmother. The difference between both women is that while Mary has given up, Precious wants to change and to learn. Precious discovers that she can use “motherhood as a source of transformative power that leads her to learn to read” (David 176). Thus, she aims to challenge the stereotypes of black womanhood and black motherhood through literacy.

Carl Kenwood Jones, Precious’s father, is an omniscient character. When Precious talks about him, it is always in the past through some flashbacks. Right at the beginning of the novel, Precious recognizes that her father has committed incest. “I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver. That was in 1983. I was out of school for a year. This is gonna be my second baby” (3). Vankatesan states that “the sexual molestation by her father since the age of three robs Precious of her childhood forever” (110). Thus, for Precious, his figure remains present due to his actions, with which he has

created a great trauma on her daughter. Carl is married to another woman and he does not visit Mary and Precious regularly. The last time he was there, Mary brought him to Precious's bed. As Precious narrates:

she bring him to me. I ain' cfazy, that stinky hoe give me to him. Probably thas' what he require to fuck her, some of me. Got to where he jus' come in my room any ole time, not jus' night. He climb on me. Shut up! he say. He slap my ass, You wide as the Mississippi, don't tell me a little bit of dick hurt you heifer. Git usta it, he laff, you is usta it. I fall back on bed, he fall right on top of me. (24)

Precious keeps having flashbacks, where she re-experiences the multiple rapes performed by her father. In the flashbacks, Precious remembers how Carl tried to justify his actions by saying that she liked and enjoyed it. If Precious wants to achieve her dreams, like owning a house and raising her children; first, she has to be aware that she is an incest victim. Carl's legacy is ruinous, he has left Precious with an illness and a trauma that will take time to heal.

Mary and Carl, who are Precious's inner circle and the closest people to her, should love, educate and protect her. However, they have the worst behavior towards her. On the contrary, outsiders, such as Ms Rain or Precious's classmates, welcome and take care of her. Ms. Rain encourages Precious not to give up on her education. Although she is a mother and needs to provide for her kids, she has to learn for herself and for her children. In fact, Precious finds affection in strangers, like the paramedic who is looking after her while she is giving birth. He says "I want you to push, [...] go with it and push, Preshecita. *Push.*" (10). During this episode, Precious realizes "no man was never nice like that to me before" (11). A stranger has helped and has taken care of her. In addition, Precious breaks down in tears on the nurse's arms, as she writes: "I feel warm kindness from her I never feel from Mama and I start to cry" (18). Precious tries to overcome any situation, but she is still a child who does not understand why her parents abuse her. Thus, the warmth and the affection of the nurse make Precious burst into tears. She cannot cope with anything else and cries for different reasons, such as:

I crying for ugly baby, then I forget about ugly baby, I crying for me who no one never hold before. Daddy put his pee-pee smelling thing in my mouth, my pussy, but never hold me. I see me, first grade, pink dress dirty sperm stuffs on it. No one comb my hair. Second grade, third grade, fourth grade seem like one dark night. Carl is the night and I disappear in it. And the daytimes don't make no sense. (18)

After becoming a mother, Precious learns that motherhood gives herself more reasons to fight; now she is responsible for the life of her children and their education. For David,

Sapphire's novel constructs Precious in light of her status as a prototype of the abject and hyper-reproductive welfare queen. Depictions of biological motherhood, such as pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding appear in the novel along with other maternal experiences, such as naming, teaching, and nurturing, and both demonstrate how Precious negotiates her claim to maternal status. The relationship between embodied and non-embodied aspects of mothering undergirds Precious's 'heroic maternal self-transformation'. (180)

Moreover, sometimes in her dreams Precious hears a voice that says "Push, Precious, you gonna hafta push" (18). 'Push' becomes her leitmotif in order to resist and to find the necessary means to flee from her house. Precious has to push in several ways, to give birth, to overcome the past traumas, and to not to give up and keep fighting with perseverance in order to learn to read and write. David considers that "to push past the private shame of illiteracy into the public strength of literacy even poetry, is a metamorphosis akin to pushing past the alienating experiences of raped and forced pregnancy into the empowered status of motherhood" (183). By pushing, Precious gains the necessary confidence to become an independent woman who is able to speak her mind. Precious will set a list of priorities that will change in the course of the novel, as she evolves. She writes:

I'm changing. Things I don't care about no more: if boyz love me/extensions/new closes/what I care about is: STAYING HEALTHY/sex (____)/notebook, writing poems. (109)

Venkatesan argues that "[this] is the image of Precious who wrests control over her life, decides on her priorities and works towards her self-development. She gradually displaces the abusive memories of her father by her desire for sex with a boy" (114). Thus, Precious is healing from her past when she is able to "push [abuses] to the corner of [her] brain" (112).

Besides motherhood, literacy is key to Precious's transformation. David considers that *Push* "extends a tradition in black women's fiction that centralizes the maternal figure's quest to share her story through writing, yet Sapphire's use of experimental narrative forms, sexually explicit content, black vernacular English, and nontraditional spelling alters the literary tradition in which she participates" (191). Precious becomes a survivor because she endures a process of transformation, in which she develops her maternal figure, at the same time she achieves literacy. By embracing literacy, Precious is capable of healing and constructing a new language. In the next section, I will explore Precious's voice, which was silent at the beginning of the novel, but later on, she does not fear the consequences of raising her voice.

4.3 Healing through Literacy

“The longest journey begins with a single step” (49). This sentence alludes to a Chinese saying that Ms. Rain uses to illustrate Precious that even the longest and challenging endeavors have a starting point. *Push* narrates the life of Precious, who comes to voice and comes to age through literacy. David argues that “literacy provides opportunities for Precious to escape the social silence and invisibility imposed upon her by her race, class, and gender, exemplifying a tradition in black women’s fiction that links literacy, motherhood, and resistance” (173). Thus, literacy will also help her to heal from the abuses she had suffered. Only by constructing her own voice, Precious will become a visible citizen. In order to heal, Precious must embrace motherhood and become literate because “[they] serve as significant sources of legitimating power for women” (David 173). If motherhood and literacy are denied, Precious cannot be considered a visible citizen and therefore, she is placed in an unfair situation in society. In addition, David argues that

the bodily realities of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing, as well as the maternal experiences [...], appear in this novel as episodes that symbolize Precious’s desire to learn to read and write, while her emerging literacy in turn motivates her claims as a mother and a subject-citizen. (174)

Literacy allows Precious to step into the public sphere and control her image, as well as become an independent woman, “who can address others in her social worlds through reading and writing” (David 176). When Precious is capable to read and write, she is also creating “her own social viability and opens a path to rise above the systemic forces denigrating her very existence” (David 176). Precious’s ultimate desire to learn is motivated “by her maternal desire to care for her children; she recognizes that reading and writing are essential tools in fulfilling her desire to be a ‘good’ mother” (David 181). Precious fights for developing her own agency but also for the agencies of her children.

Before Precious is able of speaking her mind, she must turn illiteracy into literacy. To do that, she enrolls Each One/Teach One, an alternative school in Harlem. On her first day of class, moments before starting, Precious feels anxious and writes:

[t]he whole class quiet. Everybody staring at me. God don’t let me cry. I takes in air through my nose, a big big breath, then I start to walk slow to the back. But something like birds or light fly through my heart. An’ my feet stop. At the first row. An’ for the first time in my life I sits down in the front row. (40)

Precious is taking a small but very important decision. Consequently, the fear fades and

she is ready to learn. This is the first time Precious sees Ms. Rain and describes her like “[a] small dark lady with face like prune and dress from the oldern days” (40). She continues and adds “she dark, got nice face, big eyes, and hair like I already said [dreadlocky hair]” (40). Ms. Rain is a strong woman who encourages her students to write about their lives. First, Ms. Rain asks the girls to introduce themselves so everyone can know each other and create a bond among them. When it is Precious’s turn, she says: “my name Precious Jones. I was born in Harlem. My baby gonna be borned in Harlem. I like what color— yellow, thas fresh. ‘N I had a problem at my ol’ school so I come here” (46). This is the first time Precious talks in class in front of everyone. Precious realizes that there are also good things in her life, which creates a positive impact on her as she starts believing in herself. Later, Ms. Rain teaches them the alphabet and also announces that “everyday, [...] we gonna read and write in our notebooks” (49). Even if the students are scared because they do not know what to write about, she tells them “write what’s on your mind, push yourself to see letters that represent the words you’re thinking” (61). All the girls are nervous, as they can barely read or write, though, they never quit. They are perseverant because they are eager to learn. Venkatesan emphasizes that “[establishing] an unmediated relationship between writing and thinking, Ms. Rain conceives of writing not only as a means of expressing one’s experience but also as an activity that enables the mind to access one’s own experiences” (111). Ms. Rain creates a community within the class, in which they can grow up, speak their minds and become literate. For Ann Stanford, this is the beginning of “the emergence from silence within a community where they may share common pain and together find the language that will heal and empower them” (114). In addition, they are re-telling their stories and being aware of their realities. Stanford argues that

Blue Rain and the students create a classroom of collaboration and community. They learn to read and write with the raw and painful materials of their lives. As they share more and more details of their stories with one another, they become bearers both of testimony and of witness, sharing in the difficult business of uncovering truth and the language to tell it. (129)

Moreover, Precious is not isolated anymore, she is writing about her experiences in a positive context where no one is being judged and they are supporting each other. As it is emphasized, Precious learns “within the liberating context of a community of other young women. In doing so, Precious Jones and her classmates engage in a moral act of listening and telling stories that dismantles the official racist discourse about them, and they create new languages of resistance and health” (Stanford 125). Ms. Rain’s character

acts as a catalyst to encourage young girls to pursue their goals and become literate. When she is asked to read at loud, Precious explains to Ms. Rain that she has not been able to read anything in her life. Ms. Rain wants Precious to make an effort and push herself and says: “I think understand you, Precious. But for now, I want you to try, push yourself Precious, go for it” (54). Precious is able to articulate some words; therefore, she has achieved something that she had never thought being capable of. Precious says “I want to cry. I want to laugh. I want to hug Miz Rain. She make me feel good. I never readed nuffin’ before” (54-55). For Stanford, “Precious makes a shift away from a paralyzing, other-directed rage to an inner-directed love” (129). Precious is grateful with her new life and claims “I am happy to be writing. I am happy to be in school” (62). However, when she is back home, Precious feels lonely and she writes:

I go home. I’m so lonely there. I never notice before. I’m so busy getting beat, cooking, cleaning, pussy and asshole either hurting or popping. [...] I never feel the loneliness. It such a small thing compare to your daddy climb on you, your muver kick you, slave you, feel you up. But now since I been going to school I feel lonely. Now since I sit in circle I realize all my life, all my life I been outside of circle. Mama give me orders, Daddy porno talk me, school never did learn me. (62)

School has a positive effect on Precious, as she is more motivated to keep pushing and moving forward. However, in the course of the novel, Precious wants to give up because she has run away from home and wonders whether she should keep going to school. Precious wants to nurse and raise her children, but she has no resources to do it. Ms. Rain opens her eyes and says “you are learning to read and write, that is everything” (70).

Once Precious has discovered that her father has transmitted HIV to her but not to her son, she feels devastated. Precious writes “I don’t have nothing to write today—maybe never. Hammer in my heart now, beating me, I feel like my blood a giant river swell up inside me and I’m drowning. My head all dark inside. Feel like a giant river I never cross in front me now” (96). Ms. Rain tries to make Precious understand that there are moments in life that are not easy, but one must fight them. Ms. Rain wants Precious not to quit and says “if you just sit there the river gonna rise up drown you! Writing could be the boat carry you to the other side. One time in your journal you told me you had never really told your story. I think telling your story git you over that river Precious” (97). Precious screams at Ms. Rain and realizes that “I never do that before. Class look shock. I feel embarrass, stupid; sit down, I’m made a fool of myself on top of everything else. [...] ‘I’m tired’” (97). Once more, Precious hears her leitmotif when Ms. Rains says: “I know

you are but you can't stop now Precious, you gotta push.' And I do" (97). Precious is tired of everything that has happened in her life and she cannot cope with anything else. She feels exhausted because life has been rough to her. Precious needs help to get over the bad news and Rita, one of Precious's classmates, encourages her to attend a support group for incest survivors. Precious is not only amazed because, as she emphasizes "it's all kinda girls here" (129), but also because she is eager to talk. Stanford argues that "[w]hen [Precious] speaks for the first time, she raises her hand and, in that gesture, actively reverses the experience of torture, taking the inchoate silence of her victimization and giving it words of resistance" (133). Precious has changed, as she writes: "my hand is going up through the smell of Mama, my hand is pushing Daddy's dick out my face" (130). Precious realizes that not only black women have been raped. Rape has no distinction among races; therefore, Precious emphasizes and highlights "[a]ll kinda women here. Princess girls, some fat girls, old women, young women. One thing we got in common, no *the* thing, is we was rape" (130). Precious acknowledges that everything that happened to her is not her fault. She rises her voice and writes "I'm alive inside. A bird is my heart. Mama and Daddy is not win. I'm winning" (131). Moreover, now she has friends with whom she has created a sisterhood based on trust, love and support.

Literacy is key in the process of healing from the abuses. In fact, Stanford argues that "each character discovers an alternative way of thinking about herself and her realities and a new language for telling her story. This new or newly rising language, along with her connection to a healing community, becomes part of the means of each character breaking away from the entrapment of domestic violence and sexual abuse" (109-10). Although, at the beginning she is not aware that she is an incest victim, Precious is able to redefine herself and retell her story from another perspective and with a more powerful language. By doing that, Precious is not a victim anymore, but a survivor. Precious's trauma comes from a domestic atmosphere "caused by deplorable social conditions: domestic and sexual violence, literal or figural enslavement, poverty, and the damaging socially constructed stories of who they are" (Stanford 109). Therefore, all these factors have shaped Precious's character. Speaking up about her experiences allows Precious to create a distance from her past. Thus, voice and language play such an important role in Precious's life in order to heal and become a new woman. For Stanford, "healing [...]" includes a process of re-finding, retelling, and/or resisting dominant narratives based on race, ethnicity, gender, and class" (109). Precious is an example of a woman who is

devalued and does not have the resources to change her situation. As a result, Precious suffers in silence, marginalized because no one wants to help her. Ms. Rain helps Precious and the other girls in class to realize in which position they are. In consequence, Ms. Rain also gives them the means to develop their own voices in order to break the silence that kept them oppressed. In addition, “the characters move from relative silence to a resisting and empowered voice” (Stanford 114). Stanford also argues that “it is the finding, or rediscovery, of voice, the emergence from silence” (112). In *Push*, it is highlighted the importance of language and “the growing ability to use language as a naming, defining tool becomes a primary healing agent, central to each character’s emergence from powerless ability to speak to an empowered voice and consequent sense of personal agency” (Stanford 114). Thus, Precious heals when she decides to talk about it. At this point, Precious is creating a new language, which allows her to resist; moreover “with new, politicized language, stories of pain, guilt, and shame can become narratives of resistance and even stories of abundance and possibility” (Stanford 114).

Ms. Rain introduces Precious a great variety of authors such as Langston Hughes, Moira Crone, Alice Walker, among others. It is Alice Walker’s novel, *The Color Purple*, the one that interests Precious the most. As she highlights: “that book give me so much strength” (83). For David, “Sapphire’s novel uses intertextual references to Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* to encourage readers to consider how motherhood conceived through rape and incest can be reclaimed for black women characters” (173). In *The Color Purple*, Walker introduces Celie, a woman who regarding David’s opinion, “transforms herself from the darkness, silence, and ignorance of her victimization into the status of mother” (189). Celie and Precious are very similar, they are illiterate and victims of abuses who have to come to voice in order to survive. In David words’ “Celie and Precious narratively embody the worst ideological stereotypes about black mothers, yet these two women pursue literacy in resistance to the ideologies that have sought to define them” (190). In *Push*, Precious compares herself to Celie. By doing this, Precious is creating a parallelism between Celie’s and her own life. On the one hand, Stanford argues that “Precious falls in love with *The Color Purple*, identifying with Celie’s suffering and emergence [...] Walker’s affirmation of personal change and growth all stand in mimetic relation to Precious’s own processes of empowerment and liberation” (131). On the other hand, Venkatesan claims that “*The Color Purple* that impresses Precious most of all, for she finds a fictional parallel to her own abusive life in Celie” (112). Precious cries while

she reads the novel; perhaps, as Venkatesan argues, “Precious identifies what enabled Celie to move through the traumatic experiences towards healing. In the process of reading the novel, Celie emerges as a healing figure for Precious” (113). In short, “reading *The Color Purple* offers Precious a determinable experience and encourages her to press at her boundaries” (Venkatesan 113). However, Precious has some disagreements with *The Color Purple*, especially in Celie’s sexual orientation. Firstly, when Precious is crying because she is empathizing with Celie, she claims “except I ain’ no butch like Celie” (81). Precious lives in a homophobic culture that criticizes homosexuality. Ms. Rain teaches her students to challenge those archaic views. Soon after, Precious realizes:

I guess I still believe everything. Ms Rain say homos not who rape me, not homos who let me sit up not learn for sixteen years, not homos who sell crack fuck Harlem. It’s true. Ms Rain the one who put the chalk in my hand, make me queen of ABCs. (81)

Ms. Rain, the only person who has offered her help, is lesbian; thanks to her, she is now the queen of ABC’s and is learning how to read and write. Secondly, one day in class, Ms. Rain exposes the controversy that *The Color Purple* had. “Ms Rain say a group of black men wanted to stop movie from the book. Say unfair picture of nigger men. [...] Unfortunately it a picture I know” (82-83). In addition, Ms. Rain highlights the criticism that the novel had due to its fairy tale ending. Precious does not agree with Ms. Rain and writes “I would say, well shit like that can be true. Life can work out for the best sometimes. Ms Rain love *Color Purple* too but say realism has its virtues too” (83). Precious wants to believe that her life can end up like Celie’s, and she can finally have some happiness and love. However, Precious does not find any comfort in *The Color Purple* when she discovers that she has AIDS, as she realizes that she may not have her desired happy ending. Precious remains positive thanks to the advice of Ms. Rain.

To sum up, in *Push*, Precious constructs from silence, a politicized language and creates a narrative of resistance in which she is no more a victim but a survivor. Stanford argues that Precious “offers perhaps the clearest example of the power of language and naming to disrupt and transform the experience of the nearly unspeakable pain she has endured all of her life” (114). Language must be first found if Precious aims to tell her story. For Stanford, “both the spoken and the written word will become for Precious the means of powerful resistance as she struggles to find her voice through the community of women who learn to read and write together in an alternative school” (125). Moreover, thanks to this community, “Precious acquires the new, politicized language [...]. With this, she

begins to engage her world as a powerful, speaking, writing woman of agency” (Stanford 125). Precious gains confidence and respects herself; therefore, “Precious rises out of the ashes of abuse and illiteracy to name the horrors that she has experienced and to transform her life” (Stanford 134). In fact, through literacy, Precious’s character heals and is liberated. Once Precious comes to voice, she learns how to resist black motherhood’s stereotypes because she is no longer powerless and is able to change her situation. Besides, *The Color Purple* has a great influence on Precious. As Venkatesan argues, “listening to the sufferings of others and scripting her past life has a cathartic and positive personal transformation on Precious. Perhaps more significantly, after resorting to writing, Precious commands full articulation of her life and its conditions of possibility” (116). Precious heals through literacy which enables her to confront her past and create a future for herself and her children.

5. Conclusion

The feminist movement aims to gain equal rights and therefore, stop gender discrimination. However, it does not consider race, class, and sexual orientation. Mainstream feminism is developed by white middle-class women who marginalize other female minorities to gain the attention of the media, which is controlled by men. Black women have to struggle with a double system of oppression, racial and gender; in comparison to white women who have to struggle ‘only’ with gender oppression.

Black scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins highlight the need to include race, class, and sexual orientation into the feminist theory. On the one hand, black feminist thought takes black women’s everyday life experiences and standpoints into account in order to understand the causes of their oppression. By being aware of the position they are, black women can face oppressive forces established by patriarchy. On the other hand, intersectionality works as a theoretical framework that explores the multiple ways black women are oppressed.

The Color Purple and *Push* were published at different times during the post-Civil Rights era. Although both novels have been criticized because they subvert the image of black men, as they are portrayed as rapists and oppressors; they have also become novels of selfhood and sisterhood which fight the stereotypes that were created towards black women, especially black motherhood. Marlo David argues that

during this time many novels placed the maternal subjectivities of black women front and center, including stories about the figure of the enslaved black mother, but these two novels stand out for the way that they propose print literacy –reading and writing– as a viable means to challenge and critique hegemonic ideas about black motherhood as well as black women’s capacity for social and political citizenship. (192)

In the novels, both authors highlight the importance that black motherhood, as it is seen, “is not only as heroic but also as a transgressive identity for black women” (David 200). Celie and Precious use their roles as black mothers to evolve, develop their identities and to gain strength to resist.

Language is a powerful tool and yet it is often forgotten or not really thought about how patriarchal our language is, this is why Celie and Precious’s voices are so important as both women have constructed a more politicized language and have used it in their favor; thus, it has become a resource to fight against oppression. Creating their own agencies,

Celie and Precious face oppressive factors and break their silences. Their voices become reliable in the moment they decide to talk and write about their lives. The voices of many women have been silenced because they were seen as invisible humans, placed in the domestic sphere where they were isolated. Their voices were taken from them and thus, others have always decided for them. For example, Celie has no option regarding her marriage because her step-father has chosen her future husband for her. Precious has no happy memories from her childhood and it takes her a while to realize that it is not her fault but her parents. Celie and Precious have gone under a process, from being uneducated and raped and victims to be strong and independent women who have healed from the abuses they suffered and become survivors. At the end of the novels, both women are able to speak their minds. Literacy is the key to explain the transformation of both female protagonists. Both are illiterate, however, when they start writing, Celie and Precious start a path of recovery. Therefore, the pen, together with the voice, have become the most powerful weapons to fight against oppression. They become aware that men can take away everything from them but if they keep their voice and the pen, they can still fight. Gradually, Celie and Precious become free women with a powerful and politicized language.

Everything Celie and Precious have achieved would not be possible without the help of other women who act as mentors. Shug, in *The Color Purple*, and Ms. Rain, in *Push*, are two catalyst agents regarding Celie and Precious's metamorphosis. These women support them to keep evolving and fighting in order to find their voices. In both novels, a sisterhood bond is created between women which reinforce each other and create a community where women feel safe and share their experiences to help other women to heal from their traumatic pasts.

The Color Purple and *Push* are perhaps nowadays "the cultural touchstones for black women in America, a kind of lingua franca of familiarity and friendship" (Bond). Both novels have become a referent regarding African-American feminism and women's empowerment. Black feminism has turned into a more intersectional approach because it has been in constant change during the last century. Many women claimed that things ought to change and started fighting for their rights, for their place in society and for their voices. Looking back, present generations have to thank small and symbolic acts from unknown women who have laid the groundwork for new generations. Recently, women

have raised their voices again because discrimination regarding gender, races, class, and sexual orientations still exists. Domestic violence is nowadays a social scourge that kills lots of women. Although many fights have been won, many are to come, and women have to gather together in order to fight against patriarchy and oppression. There is still a lot to do in order to improve women's situation in present times and for the future generations of women who will learn that if women stop, the world stops.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Abstract

In the course of the 20th century, the concept of feminism has become a lot more intersectional. This master thesis deals with the evolution of two young African-American women in the framework of black feminism in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sapphire's *Push*. The novels were published in the post-Civil Rights era and explore the journey to selfhood of a young, illiterate and raped black woman and her desire to change and evolve in order to become an independent woman. In the first part of the thesis, theoretical concepts, such as intersectionality, womanism or black feminist thought, are developed to understand the double jeopardy and oppressive forces that black women deal in their everyday life actions. The second part of the thesis takes into account the previous theoretical approaches, and analyzes the main female protagonists, together with their processes of emancipation. Although Celie and Precious are portrayed as illiterate, abandoned, physically abused and raped women; literacy and the help and guidance of other women, who become their mentors, are key to understand the metamorphosis that both women experienced. Both illustrate that it is possible to fight against sexism, racism, and patriarchy. In addition, they destroy the previously established stereotypes regarding black womanhood and black motherhood. Thus, their will to change and aim for a better future for themselves and for their children is possible due to the confidence and strength that they have gained in the course of the novels. To conclude, the process of empowerment of the characters takes place in different ways, however, these women are able to change their status from victims to survivors.

8.2 Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Im Laufe des 20. Jahrhunderts ist der Begriff des Feminismus viel komplexer geworden. Diese Masterarbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Entwicklung zweier junger afroamerikanischer Frauen im Rahmen des schwarzen Feminismus in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* und Sapphire's *Push*. Die Romane wurden in der Zeit nach der Bürgerrechtsära veröffentlicht und erforschen die Reise einer jungen, analphabetischen und vergewaltigten schwarzen Frau sich selbst zu finden und ihr Verlangen danach, sich zu verändern und zu entwickeln, um eine unabhängige Frau zu werden. Im ersten Teil der Masterarbeit werden theoretische Konzepte, wie Intersektionalität, Womanismus oder schwarzes feministisches Denken entwickelt, um die Doppelbestrafung und die

unterdrückenden Kräfte zu verstehen, die schwarze Frauen in ihrem Alltag erfahren. Der zweite Teil der Arbeit berücksichtigt die bisherigen theoretischen Ansätze und analysiert die wichtigsten weiblichen Protagonistinnen und deren Emanzipationsprozesse. Obwohl Celie und Precious als analphabetische, ausgesetzte, körperlich misshandelte und vergewaltigte Frauen dargestellt werden; Alphabetisierung und die Hilfe und Führung anderer Frauen, die zu ihren Mentoren werden, sind der Schlüssel zum Verständnis der Metamorphose, die beide Frauen erlebten. Beide zeigen, dass es möglich ist, gegen Sexismus, Rassismus und Patriarchat zu kämpfen. Darüber hinaus zerstören sie die bisherigen Stereotypen hinsichtlich der schwarzen Frau und der schwarzen Mutterschaft. Folglich ist ihr Wille, sich zu verändern und auf eine bessere Zukunft für sich und ihre Kinder zu zielen, aufgrund des Vertrauens und der Kraft möglich, die sie im Laufe der Romane gewonnen haben. Abschließend ist festzuhalten, dass der Ermächtigungsprozess der Charaktere auf unterschiedliche Weise stattfindet, jedoch können diese Frauen ihren Status von Opfern zu Überlebenden ändern.

