

**SEXISM, RACISM AND FEMALE BONDING
IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE* AND MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY
THE CAGED BIRD SINGS***

**SEXISMO, RACISMO Y SORORIDAD EN *EL COLOR PÚRPURA* DE ALICE WALKER Y
YO SÉ POR QUÉ CANTA EL PÁJARO ENJAULADO
DE MAYA ANGELOU**



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Abstract

African American literature written by women has greatly contributed to expand the themes and aims of American literature, as it teaches readers how racism and sexism have been presented historically in literary form in the US. The purpose of this project is to investigate the interconnection of racism and sexism by comparing two novels in which we have analyzed how these two concepts interact. Moreover, it is also proved how racism and sexism are connected with violence, as gender violence is the main issue reflected in these two novels. More specifically, we have studied African American women's roles and behaviour, and how they have fought in order to survive. Finally, the analysis has underlined one of the main survival strategies employed by black women in these novels, which is female bonding. The problematic fact of being black women in a racist and sexist society is countered by those brave women, because they are able to come together and learn from each other.

La literatura Afro-Americana escrita por mujeres ha contribuido en gran medida a ampliar los temas y objetivos de la literatura Americana, ya que enseña a los lectores y lectoras cómo el racismo y el sexismo han estado presentes históricamente en forma literaria en los Estados Unidos. El propósito de este proyecto es investigar la interconexión del racismo y sexismo comparando dos novelas, en las que hemos analizado cómo estos dos conceptos interactúan. Además, también se demuestra cómo el racismo y el sexismo están conectados con la violencia. La violencia de género es el tema principal que se refleja en estas dos novelas. Más específicamente, hemos estudiado los roles y el comportamiento de las mujeres Afro-Americanas, y cómo han luchado para sobrevivir. Finalmente, el análisis ha destacado una de las principales estrategias de supervivencia empleada por las mujeres negras en estas novelas, que es el tema de la sororidad. La problemática de ser mujeres negras en una sociedad racista y sexista es contrarrestada por aquellas mujeres valientes, porque son capaces de unirse y aprender unas de otras.

Introduction

The main reason why we have chosen to undertake this study is our personal interest in African American women's experiences. The main point of this analysis is related to the importance of the interaction between racism and sexism and its relation to gender violence in African American literature authored by women, where race and gender are clearly connected. We will also focus on black women's strategies in order to survive, to be able to live without fear. In order to do so, we will study two crucial novels: the first one is called *The Color Purple* (1982), an interesting novel written by the great novelist Alice Walker. We have chosen this novel because it bluntly shows gender violence in a world dominated by black men, a patriarchal society where black male oppressors have absolute control over black women. The second novel entitled *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1969) is another brilliant work written by another excellent author, Maya Angelou. Her work has attracted our attention, due to its awesome writing style and the fact that it is very realistic. In fact, this work is an autobiographical novel based on some events in Angelou's life. Gender violence, women's roles and racism are also presented and studied in this novel.

We have selected these works, because they tell the stories of many African American women and how these stories influence the black community. Besides, these novels serve to claim the rights of black women, as they have suffered so much historically, and it is important to acknowledge their suffering, but also their survival strategies based on female bonding. Violence is implicit in both novels and is linked to racism and sexism. It is crucial to be aware of the horrible situation that black women had to suffer in a dominant racist and sexist society, where they were seen as objects by both white and black men.

Firstly, I am going to start dealing with the theoretical framework about racism and sexism from a black feminist perspective. The main part of the project is the analysis of each book, their background and their structure divided into two parts: the first section is devoted to the interaction between racism and sexism. The second section will be centered on gender violence and the relationships between the main black female and male characters that appear in the novels. Finally, we will have to pay attention to the roles of other women who appear in these works, and how they affect the main characters' lives.

We have to keep in mind several methods necessary for our study. This is a process in which we have initially undertaken the research into the primary sources. For us, it was the easiest part of

the work. After the reading and the analysis of these sources, the second method is related to the theoretical readings that are always essential for the construction of a research paper like a TFG. Thanks to those secondary sources, we were able to understand the primary sources better, and to apply the black feminist critical approach to the interpretation of the novels.

Theoretical Framework and State of the Art

The historical impact of racism and sexism on black women has been commented by many critics. We need to be aware that black women have never been able to achieve full equality in the US. In general terms, African American people have always been treated badly and discriminated against throughout American history. In the case of women, they have been doubly discriminated, not only due to their skin colour but also to gender difference. Historically, black women did not have any rights because they were considered inferior to men, both white and black. Therefore, racism and sexism have had a significant impact on these women's lives.

We have to take into account that racism has been present throughout American history. After slavery, the new forms of racism were associated with poor housing, poor health, unemployment and social problems related to poverty, as a new result of the negative effects of discrimination. Indeed, racism did not end with the abolition of slavery. Unfortunately, racial issues remained a problem for American society. We agree with Patricia Hill Collins in her book *Black Sexual Politics* (2005), where she states that the White Community continued to think that black people were inferior to them. Black folk were mistreated in the Reconstruction period and afterwards. They were considered second-class citizens and segregation continued until 1964.

Carolyn F. Gerald, in “The Black Writer And His Role” (2000), notes that “The black child growing into adulthood through a series of week-end movies, seeing white protagonists constantly before him projecting the whole gamut of human experience, is, in extreme cases, persuaded that he too must be white” (2000: 83). African American people realize they live in a white dominated society. Black men and women are part of a dominant culture, in which white people are projected as beauty and perfection symbols. White main characters convince black people of white superiority. Traditionally, whiteness symbolizes purity, goodness and superiority, while everything related to black personifies evil, impurity and inferiority.

Sandi Russel in *Render Me My Song, African-American Women Writers From Slavery To The Present* (2002) emphasizes the idea that colored people should have the same opportunities and rights as whites. He underlines how black people are not different from whites and how they should be equal to them: “All the joys and sorrows and emotions the white people feel, they feel” (2002: 21). The critic mentions emotions because we are talking about human beings and personal feelings.

Patricia Hill Collins also adds sexism. When we talk about gender issues, we are assuming that racism is also implicit: “White fear of Black sexuality is a basic ingredient of white racism” (2005: 87). It is an interesting quote that we cannot forget, because the feeling of fear of black people that white folk had of is projected. Of course, the sexual exploitation of women in the black community is also a main topic to discuss.

So, we have pointed out that the most important problem is not only racism but also sexism. In other words, sexism is intimately connected to racism, as black women have had to face racial and gender discrimination in their lives and their works. African American women have been considered inferior, so historically they have been treated cruelly in the white community, but also mistreated in the black community just for the fact of being women. And as a consequence, these black women have to stand the racist and sexist violence that society imposes on them, and unfortunately, black men have become their enemies and oppressors, so we will also analyze the conflict between black men and black women in the two novels.

In the black community, black men become patriarchal figures and women had to obey and to respect them. But we will see that, even though the patriarchal figure is essential in that community, there are many other males who do not like to impersonate a superior figure. And they provide other models of masculinity. As bell hooks says in her well-known work *Black Looks, Race and Representation* (1992): “Though I admired my father, I was more fascinated and charmed by black men who were not obsessed with being patriarchs” (1992: 88). So, we can imagine a world where dominant men would survive, but they would not be the only ones. However, traditionally most black men had more power than women, since they were the leaders of the community. Women had to submit to them and to consider themselves inferior. We would like to mention that black men wanted to be acknowledged by other white men as dominant men. But especially, they wanted black women to respect their authority over them.

But it is also important to acknowledge the many differences in age, race and sex in the

black community. It is what Audre Lorde points out in her article “Age, Race, Class, AND Sex: Women Redefining” (1995): “It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences” (1995: 286). For white women, black women are different and defined as the “other.” In other words, they become “the others” due to their differences in skin color. In literary terms, white women feminists refuse to recognize African American women's works. McDowell mentions something similar in *The Changing Same* (1995), emphasizing how these white feminists are against black women's literature: “they wanted to exclude black women writers from literature” (1995: 5). White women's literary works are to be praised as great pieces of works. However, black women will never have the opportunity of writing because they are deemed inferior, they are black and do not have neither rights nor voice. It is quite frustrating because we are talking about women, who should be together against a patriarchal society where men are always the dominant figures. The fact of being black does not have to mean that you cannot have voice or rights, they are women who should have the same opportunities as white ones.

In order to tackle black women's writing, it is important to keep in mind the concept of Double Jeopardy. In France Beale's article “Double Jeopardy” (1995), she analyzes crucial women's roles. Basically, what double jeopardy means is that black women have to face a double discrimination: the fact of being women, gender issues, and the fact of being black, racist issues. Black women are humiliated, marginalized and manipulated by dominant society. In economic terms, for instance they are exploited: “she could often find work in the white man's kitchen, however, and sometimes became the sole breadwinner of the family” (1995: 146). They are paid less and they usually hold low-paying jobs.

Male and female roles are clearly delineated: if you have a successful job, you are a real man, but if you do not have any job, you are not a man. A perfect woman is the one who stays at home caring for her children and doing house chores for her husband. African American women do not have a choice, their opinions do not matter: “Most black women have to work to help house, feed and clothe their families” (1995: 147). Historically, black women have been sexually abused and raped. We have the example of sexual discrimination of black women during slavery. Angela Davis points out: “If the most violent punishments of men consisted in floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped” (cited in King 1995: 297). The fact of being raped was not enough, they also received a lot of violent punishments too. To sum up, they have always held an inferior position in the system, because they are both women and black.

The term “Double Jeopardy” is not a new one. At the end of the nineteenth century, Anna Cooper, who was a slave but later became a great educator, spoke and wrote about the double slavery of black women. She wrote about the humiliations that black women had to face because of their race and their gender: “Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women” (cited in King 1995: 294). Despite being discriminated, these women have resisted those oppressions throughout history. For instance, Sojourner Truth, who was an activist and women's rights advocate, emphasizes the idea that women were strong survivors (cited in King 1995: 294)

We have talked about double jeopardy, but it is also important to take into account the concept of “Multiple Jeopardy.” Three common factors are connected: “racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism” (King, 1995: 297). Unfortunately, black women had many disadvantages because of their race, sex and their class position. Mainly, they were oppressed because they were female and black. So, sex and gender were the most significant issues in black women's lives.

Audre Lorde also talks about gender issues: “Black women and men have shared racist oppression and still share it, although in different ways” (1995: 287). Within the black community, we have the figure of the black male oppressor. In *Black Sexual Politics* Patricia Hill Collins explains how women had to endure black male abuse and male dominance. As we have mentioned above, they had to care for their children without any aid from this dominant figure, the father. Even though women had to bear every type of violence, they have become stronger than black male oppressors: “Black women have learned to become the Strong Black Woman (SBW),” which often means “enduring abuse, namely, physical, emotional and sexual harrassment” (2005: 208). So, they endure every difficulty. Their strength, power and constancy are the main tools in their lives.

In addition, in *Black Feminist Thought*, also by Collins, she makes a difference between the enslaved women and the non-slave women. These enslaved women were those who had to obey the necessities of their owners and they did not have to suffer dominant orders from their black male oppressor. They only had to do whatever their owners wanted (Collins, 2000: 49). Unfortunately, when these women were not slaves, they had to be enslaved to men who, in general, were the ruling figures. So, African American women had a second place within Black society. But there have been many Black feminists who have claimed black women's rights. Septima Clark describes it: “I used to feel that women couldn't speak up, because when district meetings were being held at my home... I didn't feel as if I could tell them what I had in mind... But later on, I found out that women had a

lot to say, and what they had to say was really worthwhile..." (cited in Collins 2000: 7). From there, black women have articulated their needs and opinions.

bell hooks in her work *We Real Cool* (2004) talks about black men and masculinity. She supports the idea that black men are not inherently violent. She underlines that, commenting that there are other male figures. There are many men who are neither aggressive nor rapists: "All the black men that I love see themselves as isolated, cut off from any sense of group solidarity. They see most black male leaders as ineffectual hypocrites who are simply opportunists" (2004: xv), and she continues: "Black leaders were concerned about gender roles and exceptional black men supported gender equality. Martin Delaney stressed that both genders needed to work equally for racial uplift" (2004: 6). According to hooks, most black men do not feel powerful, they feel powerless because of racism and they think women have sexual power over them. This is a main cause why black men are often angry at black women.

To analyze in depth how black women have suffered due to race and gender issues, we have chosen two great authors, they are black and women who reflect upon these issues in their well-known novels.

To start with Alice Walker, it is necessary to clarify what womanism means for her. Womanist from womanish means "a black feminist or a woman who loves other women not only in sexual issues, it does not have to refer to sexuality" (1984: xi). Everything related to women is valued: women's crucial values, culture among others. So, she is a declared feminist and a person who fights for equality. In her book *Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1984), she states: "Each woman desires a life of her own and a man who loves her and makes her feel alive" (1984: 6). In that book there is an interesting anecdote about Walker, people usually ask the typical question, that is, why black writers write the kind of books they write. Walker refers to Toni Morrison's answer, saying that she writes about what she loves to read. It attracted Walker's attention, because it would be the suitable answer that she would give.

Walker loves beauty and holds strong moral values. That is, she wants black individuals to pay attention to what they say or do to each other. However, she does not like black folk to do things to impress white people, because she thinks that if somebody fails to impress others, especially whites, they lose something precious that they once had. In *To Live Fully Here And Now* (2007) by Karla Simcikova, Walker notes that although slavery has been abolished, many forms of women's sexual abuse still persist and it is another kind of slavery.

Focusing on her literary production, she is a great novelist, poet and essayist. Walker is a symbol for readers and a great writer in African American literature. The way in which she writes is awesome. Her novel *The Color Purple* is similar to Angelou's novel, but it is not an autobiographical novel, it is fictional. Walker uses a new form in her novel, the epistolary one. She wanted to show the way in which Celie, who is the main character, talks about her feelings, her life in her own words. It works because readers begin to think about the difficult situations that poor black women suffered, we can imagine Celie's sorrows because the novel is told from a black woman's point of view. In addition, we must highlight the violence reflected in the novel. Celie is raped by a man that she believes is her father and she becomes pregnant twice. After that, the harassment continues because she has to live with another man called Albert. She never calls him by his name, but is forced to say Mr__ and to serve him, because she is treated like his slave. Walker gives us the opportunity to know a little more about the difficult situation that black women had to endure at that time.

On the other hand, Maya Angelou is a famous writer of autobiographies because of the realistic portrayal which she provides in her novels. Especially *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* is amazing, because it is so close to the fictional world. When we read her novel, we are aware that it is based on real facts. Sandi Russel comments the figure of "Silenced Women" in Angelou and Walker's work. Silenced women are those who do not have voice and choice. So, we can talk about Angelou's difficult life. She was raped when she was eight years old by her mother's boyfriend and she did not talk about it for five years, suffering in silence. In this case, it is Angelou who we see in this role in her own life as reflected in her novel.

She was also a journalist and a dance teacher during her stay in Cairo with her son. She was fluent in English, French, Italian, Spanish, Arabic and West African Fanti. Later, she worked as a dancer, singer and actress. We can imagine all Angelou's aspects, but we cannot forget her importance as a great influence in political issues, involved in Martin Luther King's work. And the most important moment whereby many people remember her was when she recited the poem "*On The Pulse Of Morning*," written for the occasion of Bill Clinton's inauguration. Apart from writing autobiographies, she also authored songs and poetry in which her life was also presented. She has been the first African American woman who was honored receiving several academic and national honors. Eventually, she became another iconic figure for African American writers.

She started writing her first autobiography when she was 42 years old. She wrote six

volumes of autobiographies. When she wrote them, she was an adult who looked through the eyes of children and young women. Her main topics are racial issues and especially black women's experiences who had to survive and to find identity through their problematic lives (Kirkpatrick 4-5).

To sum up, Walker and Angelou gave voice to black women's experiences. Thanks to their works, readers could understand what they have been suffering due to racist and sexist oppression. The difference in the skin color and the fact of being a woman were determining in their lives. These women were mistreated by the racist society and men in general. It is important to consider how brave these black women writers are, because they openly confront a racist society. Besides, these authors have taught us that sexism also affects the black community as a whole.

Analysis of the novels.

As we have stated above, the impact of sexism and racism and the subsequent survival strategies developed by black women are going to be the main guidelines of the analysis. So, we will prove the difficulty of living in a society where these women were discriminated on an everyday basis. Firstly, we will analyze *The Color Purple* by Walker.

Background

When we deal with novels in general, one of the key aspects is the point of view. If a novel is written in first person, it is usually characterized by realism as we are invited to enter into the character's experiences about life. In this novel, the point of view is the main character's who is talking about herself, her experiences and her own life: Celie, a black woman, who always writes letters to God, and later to her sister. Thanks to the epistolary form in which the novel is structured, we can understand how Celie feels. The focus of the novel is not so much on race, but on gender, as we witness the difficult situation that Celie and other women have to face for being women and black, and we will also learn about survival strategies to cope with their plight. We have another essential character, who is Nettie, her sister. Her destiny is better but she is also a black woman, and this is what the author wants to transmit, the black point of view. Celie admires Nettie, her sister is the most important person for her. We can establish a comparison between these two women: Nettie

is described as an independent woman, with a better future than Celie. Because she is much more beautiful than her sister. So, beauty is a key topic in the novel. According to the dominant ideology, everything related to blackness is awful, but not Nettie who seems to be pretty. On the one hand, we can associate ugliness with a submissive character, in this case we have the example of Celie; on the other hand, we have a pretty and independent Nettie.

In an interesting article written by Ottoh “Gendered Selves Reconstruction in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*” (2013). The critic mentions the epistolary form in which the author writes her novel, because it gives realism to the novel. We know Celie's oppressed life thanks to the letters. As we have mentioned, she has two addressees, the first one is God, and the second one is her sister Nettie. If we analyze these addressees, we can notice that she has lived two different periods in her life.

Gender Violence

To tackle gender violence in the novel, we need to reflect on gender roles and how violence is pervasive in this novel. Celie is repeatedly raped by her stepfather and her husband. Celie has suffered with her stepfather (Pa): *“He never had a kind word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t. First he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy”* (15). This is an illustrative example in which gender violence is presented in the book. That is why Celie turns to women: *“I look at women, tho, cause I’m not scared of them”* (17). Celie does not have any kind of fear about women because they would sympathise with her situation and would not hurt her. Celie has bad experiences with men, her stepfather and Mr___ have been her male oppressors throughout life. Sexual abuse and slavery imposed by Albert and Pa make Celie afraid about life in general. For this reason, women are her only allies because she is not scared of them.

Besides, we would like to delve into the idea of making love to somebody without love. Celie's feelings are deeply hurt when she has to be with her husband in bed, she feels like an object because she feels used and abused by Mr___: *“Yeah, Celie she say, I have to confess, I just love it. Don’t you? Naw, I say. Mr. _____ can tell you, I don’t like it at all. What is it like? 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” (66). It is very violent because she is forced to do something that she does not want to. It is another form of rape. But she is an obedient woman of that time, so she stays quiet and respects her husband. As a submissive woman, Celie has to do all the domestic chores and to care for her husband's children, but she does not have voice or any right because she is mistreated by everybody in the house. To a certain extent, she personifies “The angel of the house.” According to Hogan and Bradstock, it was commonly applied to those women in the nineteenth century whose role was secondary to men. They had to be pure, and uphold to a strict Christian morality. Mainly, we should know about their responsibilities in home tasks and the care for their family. The term “angel of the house” is assigned to those women who do not have any kind of rights, it means that they are the prototypical women who have to clean, to care for their children and husband, in other words, to stay home doing what they are supposed to do. Moreover, they remain isolated. Albert only wants a submissive woman, or in other words “a slave”: *“Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr. _____ say, Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—he don’t finish”* (29).

Female Bonding

Despite this oppressive situation, the other women in this novel have an important role in Celie’s life, especially Shug Avery and Sofia as the main female characters who change Celie's behaviour. Shug Avery changes Albert’s life and, of course, Celie's. The reader appreciates an interesting change in Albert’s personality when Shug is close to him, as he behaves very differently with Avery. But Mrs Shug Avery is also an essential character in Celie's life. Thanks to her, Celie becomes another person with the passing of time. Celie learns about sexuality and about other women's prototypes. They do not have to be obedient because they are equal to men. Celie admires Mrs Avery in every sense, especially the way in which Avery has a voice and does not have to submit to the man of the house. She is a woman but with a strong personality: an independent, strong and disobedient female character. Mrs Avery's presence is essential in order to understand Celie's process. Celie's knowledge about sexuality changes because she has been obliged to do what she did not want. She has been forced to marry Mr__ and then forced to have sex with someone that she does not feel neither love nor passion for. Things change when Celie discovers what she really likes. She falls in love with Mrs Shug Avery and she feels something special. In short, Mrs Avery has a great impact on Celie's life speaking about sexual issues and women's roles. When we talk about survival strategies of women in this novel, we refer to female bonding. When women come

together, they share their ideas and fight for what they desire, there is nothing stronger than that. Celie changes her life and begins to know and own herself.

The same happens with Sofia, she is another female figure associated with some traits assigned to male behaviour. Harpo is her husband and Albert (Mr___)'s son, and he always compares his life with his father's. It is frustrating for him, because he does not understand why he has the same rights and duties as his wife. Sofia's behaviour is fascinating because it is very transgressive. In this quotation: "*Mr. _____ blow smoke, look down at him, and say, Yeah, I see now she going to switch the traces on you*" (37), we can see how Mr___ realises that something is wrong in this relationship following patriarchal ideas. He knows Sofia's dominant position in their marriage. Walker wants to imagine the possibility of a different world in which the "dominant figure" can be women: "*Harpo want to know what to do to make Sofia mind. He sit out on the porch with Mr. _____. He say, I tell her one thing, She do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk*" (37). Sofia is not a submissive woman, she does whatever she decides, and does not obey her husband's orders.

Later in the novel, we see another Sofia, that is, she has changed throughout the novel because she has been punished by white society: a struggle between her and the mayor's wife sends her to prison, till then she has always been an independent woman but the prison makes her crazy. However, thanks to Harpo's family's intervention, she has to serve a White family instead of staying in prison. The new Sofia becomes the slave of that new family. So we have the disobedient Sofia vs the submissive one. It is really sad to witness how a woman who has a strong and independent nature and who is powerful as her husband, loses everything. The prison and the white house represent the dominant world in which racism is at work. Concerning Sofia's influence on Celie's life, we can observe how important the presence of this female character is. Undoubtedly, when Celie meets Sofia, her life also changes a little. She begins to understand how women can have a voice and vote for their decisions, she also begins to see how a couple can be equal. If we compare Sofia and Harpo's relationship with Mr___ and Celie's one, we might clearly see the way in which Sofia becomes a great support for Celie. And they never forget each other.

Analyzing female bonding further, when Celie writes to God, she is another Celie, she is more obedient, always serving the others. However, we have a different Celie when she starts writing to her sister. She is a woman with more ambitions and more mature. She has changed thanks to the "others." Indeed, we have other women different from Celie who teach her the true essence of life. These kinds of women in the novel are called "helper women" according to Ottob. As we have said, we have the example of Sofia, she is a strong character in the novel and can be considered a

heroine in the work. Initially in love with Harpo, her love for him dies out due to the patriarchal society of that time, a dominant society where men have control and power over women. And Sofia does not allow it and it is the main reason why Sofia's love dies. Also, Avery represents the symbol of “the other women” in that novel. They are the clear example of being a black woman with voice and choice, they are strong women and thanks to them, Celie begins to think that the world does not have to be necessarily dominated by the black male oppressor.

Nettie, Celie's sister, is also relevant in the novel. We consider her as an example of “the other women” because she is stronger than Celie, Nettie has more experience traveling with a new “family.” She is welcome in this new home, she is well educated and she has learnt a lot about many things, she is independent not like her sister Celie, who has to depend on men's necessities. At the beginning of the novel, Celie had to leave school because of her Pa, and Nettie taught her what she could. Again, we have the educated, intelligent and independent Nettie versus the opposite character, her uneducated sister. However, their love remains despite distance and time, because they do not see each other for almost thirty years.

As we have said, although women are the main aim in this analysis, men are also presented in the novel as the dominant figures. Men are usually portrayed as lazy, selfish, abusive and unkind. This is what Walker wants readers to reflect upon. We can study the figure of Albert, he is tremendously abusive and completely lazy. We can go on studying the different personalities of Albert, because he becomes another person when he is with Avery. He is different because he is in love with her. Besides him, Harpo wants to be like his father, a dominant figure and abusive person. Nevertheless, he has married another kind of woman who is Sofia. So he cannot show his dominant behaviour, and cannot be like his father.

In “Language, Gender, and Power in *The Color Purple*: Theories and Approaches,” written by Pi-Li Hsiao, he talks about men's roles in the novel. They are essential figures, with a dominant position. So the patriarchal society is pervasive in Celie's life. Pa (Celie and Nettie's stepfather) and Albert, called Mr___ by Celie, have a superior position with respect to Celie, they have authority over her. We notice several physical and linguistic scenes of violence against Celie. According to Hsiao, Celie is in silence, she is immobile, and we think that at the beginning of the novel, when she does not know Mrs Avery, but then she evolves. With the presence of Pa and Mr___, Celie has to obey and has to be a good housekeeper.

Now attention is turned to the autobiographical novel *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, written by Maya Angelou which is similar to *The Color Purple*. To start, we should mention the interesting title of the book. It may be a metaphor, we have a bird that is in a cage, the cage is a

prison and the bird has many qualities to show to the world but it cannot do anything, because it is only an animal, a simple bird. For this reason, the bird continues in the cage but it still sings. The same happens with the main character of the novel, Marguerite (Maya), she starts being a poor and a dependent girl but at the end of the novel this character changes. Society does not treat her well due to her skin colour, and she suffers a lot. We can compare Maya with Celie, they are similar characters who have turned into others with the passing of time.

Background

It is a realistic novel, since Angelou's life is displayed publicly in this book. She writes in first person, her own point of view is presented as real situations are reflected in a novel. It is a great way to understand what black women had to suffer. Racist issues in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* are present in the novel. For instance, Maya had toothache, but Maya's grandmother could not visit the black dentist because he lived too far away. So, Momma took Maya to visit the white dentist because during the Great Depression she had lent him some money and she thought he had to return the favour: "Annie, you know I don't treat nigra, colored people" (188). He excuses himself by saying that this was his policy, not to treat black people. Under these circumstances, the dentist told her that he preferred to treat an animal, not a woman whose skin color was black. This is an example of how black people were treated worse than animals: "Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (189) Apart from that, he addressed colored people in an unpleasant and derogatory way using the insulting word "nigger." The situation was shocking because animals were better treated than black people.

In fact, Bailey, Maya's brother, very soon realises that white people have more rights than blacks. He begins to see how his mother looks similar to a white woman who appears in a film, and she is perfect. But instead of being white, her mother is black. The white actress is Kay Francis and Bailey wants to watch the movie for a second time. He is sad when he watches the movie because the presence of his mother is close to him. When the movie starts, Maya laughs: "I laughed because, except that she was white, the big movie star looked just like my mother. Except that she lived in a big mansion with a thousand servants" (118). It seems a bit ironic to think about Maya's laugh watching a white movie and comparing it with her mother who is black. According to Maya, the woman that they admire in the white movie can be their mother's twin, but that cannot be possible because the woman who appears in the movie is white and lives in a big mansion with several servants, and their mother is black and prettier, much prettier (119).

Thanks to Maya and Bailey's thoughts, we can see an adoration for their lovely mother

because they can see her whenever they want to. We notice that Maya admires her mother because she thinks she is much prettier than the white woman who appears in the film. Maya also thinks something similar about her father, she thinks her father behaves as a white man. And she thinks so, because he seems to be perfect also in her eyes. Everything is compared to a white world, though for Maya, her mother is prettier than a white famous woman. However, she is influenced by a white world where everything has to be beautiful, because his father seems to be perfect like many other white males. Therefore, we can imagine the racism that the author had to endure in her life.

Gender Violence

The most catastrophic part of the story begins when the reader meets Mr Freeman. He is Maya's mother's first couple. Maya and Bailey move from one place to another one between their father and mother's houses, and it is the time that they have to spend with their mother. In this part of the story, what Maya undergoes is similar to what Celie did. Like Celie, she was raped by her stepfather. They are only black girls who lose their virginity and innocence by force. Focusing on that, Maya has many moments in which she describes how she feels: *"I hesitated for two reasons: he was holding me too tight to move, and I was sure that any minute my mother or Bailey or the Green Hornet would bust in the door and save me"* (78). And he even threatens her: *"If you scream, I'm gonna kill you. And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey"* (78). Maya suffers more and more, and she does not understand why she is so badly mistreated by Mr Freeman. If Maya says something about the sexual abuse that she receives from her stepfather, he will probably kill her brother. But the worst thing is the brutality: *"Then there was the pain," "The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't," "I thought I had died"* (78). Readers witness the horrible situation, they empathise with Maya's plight. We can see much violence here, the act of raping an eight-year-old child, and the threats that Mr Freeman voices.

Female Bonding

However, the novel presents moments of development in relation to women's thoughts, Maya evolves and becomes more mature thanks to the presence of other female figures. That help her to overcome challenges, and it happens with the presence of Momma. Momma is Maya and Bailey's paternal grandmother, but she is as a surrogate mother for them. She is probably the "other

woman” for Maya. We have the example of a liberal woman, independent, strong and a heroine. We have to underline the idea of heroism, as in many moments in the book Maya compares her Momma with a heroine. When Maya was only ten years old, she lived another terrific experience. White children came to Momma’s store in order to make fun of her and Willie (Maya and Bailey’s uncle), but the only thing that Momma did was to pray. In relation to this situation, she did not do anything because she could not, as she was a black woman and they were white children. She was aware of the situation that she had to stand and she only prayed because it was the only thing that she could do. She wanted the event to be over as soon as possible without any danger. In the end, the white children left the store and Maya thought: “*I knew Momma had won*” (33). In addition, Momma is a hard-working person, she has the only store in the black community of Stamps, Arkansas.

We should also highlight the character of Vivian, Maya and Bailey’s mother. She is also important in the novel, because she is strong and independent. She is similar to Momma. At the beginning of the novel we are not sure about Vivian's intentions, or what her personality is like. But as the novel progresses, we notice how she cares a lot for her daughter. She is another heroine. She does not know anything about the sexual abuses that Maya is submitted to by Mr Freeman. However, when she discovers the truth, she immediately kicks him out of the house. She is a female character with a determined behaviour, because she fights for her children, in this case, for Maya. At the end of the novel, Maya is pregnant and her mother supports her. Maya admires her mother, and the support she receives from her. Finally, she is another person, more mature, who has learnt so much about life, she can live without the presence of her inseparable brother. We started the novel with a girl whose name was Maya protected by her Momma and her lovely brother but with time, she becomes another one, a resilient character, with more responsibilities than before, and able to face the difficulties of life, thanks to the help of other women such as Momma and her mother.

Conclusion

After comparing the two novels written by Angelou and Walker, we have noticed how these two works share some similarities. It is essential to understand the main topics about racism, sexism and female bonding in these two novels. There is no doubt that racism is reflected in the novels. We have two main characters, and they are black. In the theoretical framework, it has been discussed how racism was a crucial topic to comment throughout American history. We have had continuous conflicts between black and white people. Humiliations, a world in which black is ugly, and everything white is beautiful. The fact of being black implies a lot of things, and it is disturbing how black descendants are forced to be slaves, and then second-class citizens.

Gender Violence is the second issue to take into account. These women have been badly mistreated due to their gender and early age. Both of them were raped by adult black men. They were treated like objects by their black male oppressors. However, we witness a great change in them as their lives change to better. They have to suffer in a patriarchal society where men are considered superior. Celie and Marguerite were raped and abused, but both show us how they become stronger than we could ever imagine.

Eventually, we must underline the idea of the influence of other women and female bonding. Even though at the beginning Celie and Marguerite have been the prototype of black women who are obedient “angels of the house,” but they learnt a lot due to the bonding with other women. Marguerite has been greatly influenced by her Momma and Vivian. And Celie by Mrs Avery, Sofia and Nettie. At the beginning of both novels, the main character seems to be weak, submissive and uninteresting. However, as the novels unfold, other types of interesting female characters, very different from the main character, are portrayed. Thanks to these other characters, Celie and Marguerite begin to change their minds. Maya and Celie survive precisely thanks to the development of survival strategies, mainly female bonding.

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