



Ain Shams University

Faculty of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

**Survival, Resistance and Emancipation in
Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sapphire's *Push***

MA Thesis

in Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Master's Degree

(Literature)

Submitted to

The Department of English Language and Literature

By

Dalia Ahmad Shawky

Under the Supervision of

Prof. Faten Morsy

Dr. Sherine Mazloun

July 2017

Table of Contents

Introduction -----	(1)
Chapter 1:	
Womanism -----	(23)
Chapter 2:	
Violence in <i>The Color Purple</i> and <i>Push</i> -----	(43)
Chapter 3:	
Survival, Resistance and Emancipation -----	(62)
Conclusion: -----	(90)
Works Cited: -----	(95)
-Primary sources:	
-Secondary sources:	

Introduction

1. African Americans and their Relation to White Americans in History:

1.1.Race and Ethnicity in the American Context:

“Race” and “Ethnicity” have always enriched critical readings of African American literature since they provide a central focus in analyzing literary or other cultural texts. While both terms have been often used synonymously, there are still some intrinsic differences between both. “Race” has been used loosely to indicate practically any group of people who identify themselves separately from others. In this sense physiological characteristics, like skin tone, are combined with other distinctions in the social history of a particular group (such as original and regional race features) to distinguish and identify such groups of people. On the other hand, “ethnicity” refers more directly to non-physiological features of cultural identity: religion, shared customs and traditions, language are among such ethnic aspects in a given society or community. In the case of African Americans, the name itself is significant as it clearly indicates the origin of these Americans; namely, Africa.

Literary and cultural studies have always shared a commitment to challenging forms of oppression based on cultural or racial identity by stressing the richness and diversity of experiences of all groups and people. However, this has not always been the case. Racism and racist attitudes have been practiced for centuries in diverse fields as science, popular culture, literature and even religion. They all tended to lend powerful support to racist beliefs. History is loaded with instances where groups of people were branded sub-or even inhuman simply because of their darker color pigment, or their different language and religion.

Moreover, such groups were enslaved and subjected to other forms of physical and psychological oppression. For instance, in the U.S., if one was coming out of African ancestors, he/she would be referred to as a “Black”. In the past, racial categorizations were always affiliated to different kinds of social and economic inequality, supremacy and exclusion combined with the belief to assign superior and inferior races. Hence, the term “race”, especially in the American context, denotes what may exist between oppression and racial segregation.

1.2. Racism and its implications:

The national and regional legacies of imperialism and colonialism have always been intricately related to racial and ethnic oppression. According to the strategy of “divide and conquer”, the ruling class, usually the whites who influenced politics, education, and government with the use of wealth or power, often divided the society according to race, so as to save their interests. Therefore, as part of U.S. history, racial oppression was manifested through many distinctive forms. However, the phenomenon can be traced back to Europe. Geographical displacement and genocide were the first of these forms. A quote that was always run by the people in the 19th century was; “the only good Indian is a dead Indian”, which reflected the monstrous attitude of the European settlers toward the original inhabitants of the land (Ghani 1295-1303). Consequently, the original settlers were either driven off or killed. In the case of treaties, the land was usually delivered to the colonizers, with some rights, yet those rights were almost ignored. Many justifications were given, one of them was that the original inhabitants were savages or uncivilized, due to their “barbarian” culture, as they left their land uncultivated. Consequently, lots of displacements took place on the basis of such pretexts. Slavery came as the second form of oppression. It was well known that all the “black” people, who lived in the U.S., were coming out of slave ancestors owned by white Americans. The word “owned” had lots of connotations, as it

referred to those “black” as dehumanized personal property, or even animals. In other words, they could be whipped, sold, and even physically abused in the absence of legal restrictions or consequences to such practices. The slave masters were free to kill a slave, to split up a family by raping the women or selling the siblings. All with no law to criminate their abhorred actions. Nevertheless, not all the slave masters were aggressive with their slaves. For them, slaves were a pivotal source of business. Therefore, they should protect them to be invested properly which explains the increase in the prices of the slaves at the beginning of the 19th century when the slave trade was banned. Most of the slave owners assumed that violence was the only comprehensible language for the slaves. Due to the childish nature of the slaves, as assumed by the slave owners, they had almost no motivation to work hard except when being forced to or threatened by force. On the other hand, the slaves had to resist. Their resistance appeared in many forms such as: poor quality of work, mere destruction or at least being passive and mute as being reluctant to work. Thus, the phenomenon of runaway slaves became one of the major problems the slave owners had to face and to stop. Many of the slaves had fled away to the north where they revolted as a form of resistance which left the whites afraid or worried of the blacks. Those revolts led to the Civil War that eventually ended slavery in the U.S. Unfortunately, slavery syndromes were still there affecting the whole society. It is noteworthy that the American culture was highly influenced by the racist beliefs which constitute a strong contradiction to the principles upon which America was founded. The slaves were dehumanized at a time when American principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were being promoted. The slaves were being sold as all American products. They were lifeless miserable creatures. To overcome this paradoxical behavior, the slaves were being justified as inferior and therefore degraded and dehumanized. Consequently, the slaves were seen as creatures with no intellect and morally inferior. Accordingly, they could not be left with no

guidance, no control, and could not be liberated. As a result, second-class citizenship became a third form of oppression. The word illustrated that concept of second-class citizens as they were denied great part of their rights. For example, the police were targeting some categories of the people under the claim that the laws were very strict and firm. Meanwhile, some other categories were usually excluded from conviction and treated with high respect. For instance, it was argued that the African Americans were left behind, in New Orleans, during the Hurricane disaster in 2005, which reflected how those blacks were denied their right as equal citizens (West 8).

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the landowners lost a large number of slave farmers as a result of being emancipated. Those slaves were pursuing their life dream of becoming small farmers, despite the fact that their dream constituted a real threat to the landowners. Nevertheless, their dream was turned into reality due to the Federal Government that violated the privacy of the landowners, and dispossessed them of some of their lands. Accordingly, the sharecropping system appeared where the tenants had to pay rent to the landowners. That rent was in the form of a percentage of the total crop cultivated in the land. That system was known as Jim Crow. According to “The Oppression of Black People in the USA Today”, the blacks were treated as slaves for 150 years in America in, ironically enough, a nation made of immigrants. The blacks’ inferiority was confirmed through the apartheid system of Jim Crow. Hence, horrific examples of racism and inequality in several fields, were justified, such as in education, employment, housing and health care. Moreover, blacks were always criminalized. In other words, blacks were more likely arrested and sentenced to death than whites, and even the prison sentence was longer than the whites. Moreover, black people were constantly challenged more than whites. In general, they were more likely murdered as victims of hate crimes more than the whites. Besides, the death

penalty became a class issue, as numerous archives show that there were no rich people on the death row lists issued officially by the authorities.

In her reference to the situation in the U.S. until as recent as the seventies in Lois Tyson asserts: “Racism has not disappeared, it’s just gone underground” (Tyson 367). In other words, it was recognized by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic that to find a job for the African Americans was not an easy task although it was that easy for their white counterparts. “The prison population is largely black and brown; chief executive officers [of corporations], surgeons, and university presidents and almost all white” (Delgado and Stefancic 10-11). The colored were usually the victims, the criminals, in menial jobs, while the white were always in charge and occupied prestigious jobs. Hence, being a criminal was one of the African American characteristics. Another instance of discrimination was drug trafficking. The majority of drug users were all white, yet those who were confined to prison for drug trafficking were black (Tyson 150-151). Amongst all of these discriminating acts, there appeared a new approach to civil rights. It was that approach that touched upon all the relevant topics to race.

According to Dr. Philomena Essed, the word “racism”, according to some of the white Americans, was applied to all the violent actions or forms of abuse practiced by the white against people of color. Those activities were a daily occurrence reflecting the degree to which African Americans were marginalized. Official authorities would assume that African American writings had lots of mistakes due to their language inefficiency. Even in classrooms, teachers and lecturers always assumed that they were more inferior due to their lack of intelligence, lack of cultural elaborateness and social skills that led to unfair grading. In other words, because of that preconceived idea about the African American students, the teachers or instructors graded their

papers and exams unfairly since their evaluations were prejudiced. Hence, the black students were exempted from scholarships, marginalized from class discussions, exposed to “unbalanced curriculum” based on white experience (Tyson 371). Yet, surprisingly, one of the most abusive forms of discrimination was the whites’ denial of discrimination incidents, and the blacks being accused of being “oversensitive” about discrimination. They were accused of being oversensitive while they had to cope with those provoking examples of everyday racism, so as to get the psychological and physical health damaged, as the effects of these racism examples were successive. As a consequence, Derrick Bell had come up with the term “interest convergence” or what Delgado and Stefancic had referred to as “material determinism” (qtd in Tyson 372). In other words, the wealthy whites had usually used the poor whites and made them underpaid. Consequently, those whites who suffered from that experience, needed to feel their superiority over the blacks, so they underpaid and exploited them in retaliation. The poor whites desired to advance themselves in the material world, and hence to feel better psychologically. As a result, interest convergence became viewed as one of the major themes of racism.

On the political level, the blacks were denied the right to vote. To prove their inability, they had to pass very harsh literacy tests (especially for the blacks), not the whites. Moreover, other laws were set to deny the blacks the right to get better jobs. Such laws were set to segregate the African Americans from the white life. For example, white hotels and restaurants, schools and universities and even transportations did not allow blacks. Moreover, extra violence yet legal, targeted the black communities, such as the Ku Klux Klan who was supported by the state to threaten and to horrify the black communities. Furthermore, lynching was another form of violence against the blacks. From 1930 – 1960, between five and twenty five black men were executed

annually for rape in the U.S.A, while it was only four whites who were condemned to death for the same crime.

Many things were greatly changed after World War II. Due to a number of factors, towards the late 1950s and 1960s, the federal government support of the anti-segregation efforts resulting in civil rights legislation. Non-Citizen labor came as the fourth form of racial oppression. Despite being a multicultural society, lots of immigrants to USA, towards the middle of the 19th century were denied any access to citizenship. Until the immigration reform in 1965, for a 40 year period, all those who had access to legal immigration were white. As a consequence, diffuse discrimination came as the fifth form of racism. That term was restricted to some narrow situations and not supported legally. For instance, employers were not promoted or even hired due to their race. Similarly, landlords rented to some selected categories of people based on race, banks procedures were getting more difficult to get loans while some of the stores were dealing with the African American people differently. White people crossed the street in case of having a black one behind to avoid passing him. Eventually, a negative impact was left on any African American person's self-esteem and morale. These petty experiences resulted in low self-esteem, self-doubt and stress affecting the performance of those who were discriminated (Dike). "White privilege is a form of everyday racism... So if whites enjoy a system of everyday privileges because they are white, this means that blacks are deprived of these privileges because they are black" (Tyson 379). That sentence pinpoints that form of racism. In other words, the white privilege was taken for granted. In brief, white people never bothered themselves with the various forms of everyday racism. In fact, since some whites who were not even satisfied with their white privileges, could never do anything about their own "injustices" which were mainly of a class nature, they could never have played any role in helping their black fellows.

African Americans in the Literary History of the U.S.A:

It is noteworthy that it is only in the 1960s that the African American history became addressed in the American education. Only through the past few years when black Americans who were repressed in order to have the full dominance over the white Americans, were referred to through books (Tyson 360). In other words, nothing about slave rebellions, black life, nor black literature was mentioned various seminal texts in American history. In brief, nothing was mentioned about Harlem Renaissance including black literature, music, philosophy, painting or even the political attitude. Approaching the African American history would demolish that myth of the African American inferiority. For further explanation, while Eurocentrism is the belief in the superiority of the European culture, going deeper in the African American culture, African Americans could be boastful of their black writers. Those black writers were referred to by the American historians as they were a great asset to the American literary history, not only part of it. Yet, the situation was largely different in the case of Toni Morrison who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1993, together with some African American writers, such as Alice Walker, John Edgar Wideman, Maya Angelou, Gloria Naylor and many others. However, still the black writers were underrepresented in American literary history. Delgado and Stefancic came up with the term “white privilege” to refer to the members of the dominant race, i.e. the white race, together with the benefits going out of being whites, or even belonging to that dominant race (Delgado and Stefancic 78). Amongst those privileges, being American, meant being responsible for the American heritage, taking pride in the American accomplishments and principles on which America was established . People of colour were expected to show loyalty and pride in the nation disregarding any crimes the “nation” could have committed and even prevented from expressing any discontent or even reflecting on their racially inferior status (Delgado and Stefancic 78).

3. The African American Literature:

The slave owners spread the rumors that African slaves were not humans as they could not write poetry. Of course, they (the slave owners) made it illegal for the African slaves to read or write. Yet, due to the efforts done by those African slaves, the African American writing began in the eighteenth century just to prove that they were humans, although most of the prefaces to the texts were written by white writers, trying to prove the authenticity of those slave writers together with their narratives. For the African Americans, writing as a form of individual expression, was regarded as a luxury that they could not afford due to the oppression, and that oppressive community they used to live in. Some of the African American writers assumed that it was the writer's task to pinpoint the evils of racism, trying to illustrate how the African Americans were really humans. One of those writers was Amiri Baraka in the 1960s. His literary texts, together with some of the other writers, such as Alice Walker, represented the political and economic oppression presented in the lives of the African Americans that led to question the "greatness" of the American literature as it excluded the black writers from the American literature. Henry Louis Gates Jr., pointed out it was not fair "to deny the African Americans the process of exploring and reclaiming our cultural identity before we critique it" (qtd in Tyson 365). In his argument to prove how the African American literature was really genuine, Gates referred to several factors such as its own tradition and its own folklore originating in the roots of the African culture. Hence, it has its own politics and policies.

Stereotyping of African Americans continues to be reflected in literature. Delgado and Stefancic referred to the term "differential racialization" to highlight the fact that the African Americans were stereotyped in an illogical way (Tyson 375). That is to say, before the civil war, the African slaves were regarded as simple minded and hence, they were in need of the whites'

supervision, so as not to refer to their barbarian ways. It was that “mythical” stereotype that satisfied the white plantation owners. Such stereotypes grow from the prejudice not from reality, but it was believed that those who experienced violence or discrimination were the best to write about that experience. That idea was referred to as the voice of color. Hence, the minority writers were better to write about racism, than the white writers or thinkers, as they had experienced that themselves (Delgado and Stefancic 9). That is to say, when people were born in the same race, the same color, the same skin color, they did suffer (internally and psychologically) from the same oppression. That is why, they adopted the same voice because of the same color. Yet, still some of those minority voices denied any form of oppression or discrimination, while the others did suffer oppression. Thus, their story telling proved to be useful in informing the others about their difficult experience, such as Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell and Patricia Williams who were the pioneers of the “legal storytelling” movement. Their task was to recount their hard experience so as to change the legal system which tolerated the whites in spite of their big crimes, and pursued the blacks in spite of their small crimes.

From the above, it can be deduced that the study is informed by the tools of analysis in critical race theory. Although the theory is a literary theoretical one, its proponents start from a conviction that racism in the US cannot be confronted unless it is exposed time and again in the legal, social, practical and cultural domains. America’s ostensible liberalism which claims that the constitutional law is free from any bias or is color-blind needs to be constantly checked and challenged. They draw our attention to the importance of deconstructing this myth of American “liberalism” that assert that racial discrimination is illegal in housing and workplace according to the American constitution, yet in reality, it was there all the time and remained to be a daily occurrence (Delgado and Stefancic 21-23):

The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. . . . But in view of the constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful (qtd in Delgado and Stefancic 21).

Rights are almost procedural, in the process of getting fair treatment, yet away from the substantive fields such as: education, housing and food. Moreover, these rights are always rejected when opposed with the interests of the powerful. For example, when a speech is addressing minorities, or inferiors, it is usually tolerated. On the contrary, if a speech is addressing one in authority, it could never be acquiesced. Thus, laws are separating people, encouraging the segregation amongst the various categories of them, not to constitute respectful and close environment.

4. African American Literature as Resistance Literature:

Out of “internalized racism”, there was a call for reclaiming self-identity towards late 1960s (Tyson 362). Out of living in that racist society, the white Americans believed in their superiority, while the African Americans were psychologically programmed in their inferiority and meanness. Hence, the African Americans felt less attractive, so they often dreamed to be as beautiful as the whites, as reflected in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. This idea was referred to as intra-racial racism which was that inner belief of discriminating the African Americans because of their dark skin and their African features. That idea was also reflected in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in which Maureen Peal, the light skinned child was treated differently as if she was superior to the rest. Hence, the African Americans were logically suffering from double consciousness as a

consequence to all those variant forms of racism. It is that awareness that they belong to different or even conflicting cultures. The first is the African culture from where their roots originated, while the second is the European culture presented in the white Americans. This means that each may have two different cultures within, one at the work place, and one at home, which may, at times, result in speaking two different languages. For instance, the black vernacular English at home may be recognized as incorrect English rather than a language. Hence, for black writers, to have double consciousness means to decide on which language he/she is supposed to deliver his/her writings. For instance, Countee Cullen, Harlem Renaissance poet used to write in formal English, the language of the racist culture, rather than the black vernacular English. He wanted to prove the capability as well as the superiority of the African writers as they were able to write in a highly-refined language rather than being inferior even in their language. On the other hand, Langston Hughes, wrote all his poems in a language that reflected the African culture mixed with the blues music. Surprisingly, his poems were highly appreciated by not only the African American, but also by the white Americans as they served as the revival of the African heritage. Thus, through Cullen and Hughes, one can detect their political view reflected through the literary language and style that each had adopted (Tyson 364).

As a consequence, Derrick A. Bell Jr. had come up with the term “racial realism” (Tyson 382). The term referred to the shocking reality that lies beyond discrimination. That is to say, blacks can never be accepted as equals, even if it was the blacks’ dream for more than three hundred years. The abstract language used in the laws, at that time, that assumes the neutral protection of all the citizens led to the open interpretation of the judges to hide their personal intentions. Bell, as a university law professor, was aware of the various interpretations of the judges, whose “neutral” decisions were always to favor the white dominance. Bell wrote, “We must realize, as our slave

forebears did, that the struggle for freedom is, at bottom, a manifestation of our humanity which survives and grows stronger through resistance to oppression, even if that oppression is never overcome”(308). Bell’s concern was to keep fighting and resisting racism with the white power in front of their eyes without having the illusion that white supremacy would be eradicated.

4. Features of the African American Literature:

The use of the term “African American” has established itself as the most pertinent cultural term as well as the most politically correct. It has recently replaced terms like “Negroes”, “coloured”, or even Afro-Americans. The use of the full word “African” in place of “Afro” refers to their newly founded African heritage. Regarding Africa as home to some of the oldest civilizations in the world, they use the term “African” with pride. Because of the slave trade in the 17th, 18th Century, the African Americans arrived on the shores of North America. Their presence was a must as they were used in plantations. After a long time, those slaves were liberated, however, those free slaves were still demeaned by their counterparts. Because of their skin color, the slaves were dehumanized, as their owners denied their rights as humans. Therefore, the African American felt unwanted as they were alienated from the rest of the society. As a consequence of being disconnected and segregated away from the whites, especially since the slave owners changed the slaves’ names to add to their alienation and estrangement, they seek their identity and roots, as they felt homeless. Here, the quest for roots appeared as one of the themes in the African American literature. That is why, they need to be defined according to their original culture. Accordingly, the African American writers’ task has always been to redefine the African Americans to present them in the world as representatives of the Black Nationalism.