

Freudian Repression represented in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*:

A Psychological Study

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Abstract

Alice Walker is considered one of the most important figures of African American Literature. In her novel *The Color Purple*, she tries to reflect the sufferings of the black American female. The purpose of this research is to shed the light on repression according to Freud represented by Celia, the main female character of *The color Purple*. The framework of the research is based on Freud's theory of repression. The result of the research reveals that Freudian repression in the character of Celia gives her a true chance to change positively at the end of the novel.

Keywords: *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker, Oppression, Freudian repression

Introduction

Repression is defined as a type of "psychological defense mechanism". It refers to keep certain feelings, thoughts and

wants out of the awareness of the conscious. The aim behind this kind of mechanism is to hide the undesirable thoughts or desires out of the conscious mind to stop or reduce anxiety. This means that the subconscious mind will block those unacceptable thoughts or feelings because they may be seen as destructive and disruptive to one's psychological stability, well-being and self-image. (Freud, in Breuer & Freud, 1895, p. 157). Freud indicated that "the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious" (Freud, 1915, p. 147). This involves pushing disturbing or painful thoughts into the unconscious to remain unaware of them. He stated that the "theory of repression is the corner-stone on which the whole structure of psycho-analysis rests" (Freud, 1914, p. 16). Additionally, it "is possible to take repression as a center and bring all the elements of psychoanalytic theory into relation with it" (Freud, 1925, p. 30). Consequently, others have expressed similar opinions; repression has been defined as "the keystone of psychoanalytic theory" (Holzman, 1962, p. 273), and "broadly defined, the concept of repression is at the heart of psychoanalytic theory" (Slavin, 1990, p. 308; Slavin & Grief, 1995, p. 140).

It is significant to note that repression is considered more than avoiding certain thoughts, feelings and memories, or trying not

to think of it. Real Freudian repression represented completely is hiding something from conscious awareness. When a thought, feeling, or impulse is repressed you do not even know it exists. Therefore, these hidden feelings may remain to exert an influence on your actions and relationships. To understand how repression works, it is essential to look at Freud's description of the mind. Freud perceived of the human mind as being much like an iceberg. In this iceberg, one can see only the small tip of it, which refers to the fact that only a small part of the iceberg is actually visible above the water surface. This is very similar to the conscious mind.

According to Freud, there are two kinds of repression: Primary repression and repression proper. Primary repression is to hide undesirable material before it ever reaches consciousness. This process happens wholly automatically. While the information may be hidden from awareness, however, it can sometimes come into awareness in disguised way. The second kind is repression proper. It happens when a person becomes conscious of repressed material but then intentionally tries to remove it from awareness (Freud, 1939, pp. 116–7). In fact, the definition of repression invoked here is “the selective forgetting of materials that cause the individual pain” (Holmes, 1990, p. 86).

It is clear that both kinds of repression are forgetting the unwanted desires, feelings and thoughts away from the awareness whether unconsciously or deliberately.

African American literature emerged as one of the main part of American Literature after 1970s. Most of the African-American writers of 20th century; dealt with experiences of Blacks especially Alice Walker. She has focused on suffering and struggling of Blacks in the United States. She "...deepen[s] our understanding of the limitations and possibilities of lives of black Americans..." (Bell, 1987, p. 269). Alice Walker a novelist, essayist, poet, literary critic and activist was significantly affected by Russian Novelists as Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Gogol and. Although Walker grew up in the traditionally so-called deprived environment, she was continued by her community and by the awareness that she could choose her own identity. Walker's mother gave her spiritual, social and moral support to her writings. Her works concentrated on African-American women, against societies that are sexist, racist and often violent. Her writings also exposed the African-American culture and heritage. *The Color Purple* (1982). It was her third controversial novel in an epistolary form; and this work won both a Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award. She strongly supports the rights of the black women who fight

and persist to obtain their rights and to be treated equally to men. Moreover, she shows the violence that the black women experience either socially, economically, sexually or emotionally, or because of their gender and race. Walker started to work on the theme that was faced by most of the Black women in their life within their environment. Not only do her stories focus on the ethnic violence that happens among strangers, but also the violence they practice among their family members and friends. Walker is very qualified in portraying the male and female characters.

The Color Purple is an epistolary novel about Celie, a woman so down and out where she can tell her troubles only to God in the form of letters. Celie learns to lift herself from her situation with the help of another woman character in the novel. Celie pulls herself out from the sexual exploitation and brutality of men in her society. Here Celie's husband hides Nettie's letters from Celie for twenty years. In this novel, Walker brings out the voiceless women's voice, the confusion and struggles of women characters in this society to limelight.

The most crucial issue of this novel *The Color Purple* is the oppression imposed on the protagonist, Celie, because of the patriarchal system represented by her step-father and husband; and offers the steps that the main character applies to set herself

free from all the destructive consequences of racism and sexism. Alice Walker depicts the extreme oppression that the black American women face in the character of Celia. One of the ways to overcome the consequences of oppression is through 'the psychological self-defense mechanism' exemplified in Freudian repression. She shows repression as a self-defense mechanism by hiding her undesirable thoughts or desires out of the characters' conscious mind to stop or reduce their anxiety. This kind of repression enables her characters to cope with harsh reality they face and continue surviving without clear psychological problems.

The writer reflects the silence of the protagonist, Celia in the beginning of the novel as a way of pushing out the bad thoughts, feelings and events. Furthermore, Walker uses the form of epistolary to take the reader into the inner psyche of an Afro-American woman to have a complete understanding of her misery. Celia uses the primary repression and repression proper. In the beginning of the novel she uses repression proper (deliberate attempt to forget bad incidents and memories) to be able to forget bad memories out of her awareness. This makes her have the ability to be alive. At the end of the novel, Celia uses the primary repression (forgetting bad memories, thoughts and feelings unconsciously). This kind of repression is the main

reason behind the complete change of the character of Celia. Her character transformed to be a positive different female.

Review of Literature

There are different theoretical studies that include the opinions of scholars and novelists toward *The Color Purple*.

Kohlberg (1969) claimed that the moral development of humans includes six stages, starting with early childhood to the post conventional stages where ethical principles control a person. He stresses that *The Color Purple* is a magnificent way to teach moral development from character the pre-conventional stage to the post conventional stages through the main character of Celia. (P. 299)

Walker (1982) discussed the idea that racism was practiced even after the abolishment of slavery in various forms. These forms of racism had their awful consequences for the blacks. He clarified this idea in *The Color Purple* when he explained that Celia's biological father was murdered by whites who were jealous of his success (P.157)

Henderson (1989) clarified that, "while this episode exposes the economic bases of racial oppression, it also suggests the far-reaching consequences of violence directed toward black men. It is the murder of Celie's father which results in her mother's mental derangement and subsequent marriage to Alphonso".

The collapse in black family structure because of racism leads to the breakdown in the identity of Celie (1989, p. 70).

Hooks (1989) stated that the subordinate group is the material of domination, “domination always involves attempts to objectify the subordinate group. He stresses this idea in discussing *The color Purple*. He gives examples of such domination from male over female “Since Mr. _ is a headman of a family, he has the right to subjugate his children and to rape his wife and even torture her whenever he wants. (Walker, 1982, p.19). This is the fact in the black society which is clear in *The color Purple* as Hooks explained.

Lewis (1990) commented that *The color Purple* the idea of human beings who are threatened by a loss of connection with themselves, with each other, and with the world and by cultural disorder “By infusing Celie with such a capacity for growth, the author acts as a spiritual guide throughout the novel. Walker traces Celie’s journey from living in fear of a patriarchal God that is difficult to identify with to Celie’s eventual joy and acceptance of herself, others, and the serenity to be found in daily life”. (P.483)

Collins (2000) commented that in *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker portrayed the black male figure who abused his wife and Celia. This male explored the existence of love and trouble in African- American society. (P. 157)

Ray (2005) confirmed the idea of racism, “the jail that Sofia is held in is a metaphor for all black people caged by racism. For others, though they do not serve in a literal prison and instead are confined to servitude and domesticity within their homes”. The discrimination of race dominates to such an extent that Sofia is not allowed to sit in the front seat with the mayor's wife while teaching her to drive, pointing to her that “This is the South”. (P. 62)

Literary critics, such as Ross and Walton (2008) explored the themes of Celie’s psychological transformation and the development of her female identity in *The Color Purple*. They viewed how the change in Celie’s character and the repossession of her own body, which Celie believed to be the property of her husband, directly influence the process of her healing and the achievement of harmony and reconciliation with Mr. Albert.

Carmen Gillespie (2011) described that Shug was a clever character who had a rebellious spirit into Celie’s personality,

and guides her to the right way to live normally like others”. She affected the life of Celia to be better than before. She also gave Celia the chance to be mature and feel the value of life. Carmen Gillespie (2011) stated the importance of to change human’s life.(P. 63).

Andersen (2014) mentioned that Celie has learned to tear down the passive identity imposed upon her only because she is a woman. Walker also clarified her explanation on the healing power of love and the chance of change for Celie. She was an uneducated and a poor black American girl who is able to improve her situation. She was considered to be a symbol of hope that fixes deeply in the readers mind for her strength, faith and courage. (P. 65)

Analysis

In fact, women occasionally became the object of the oppression. According to Young (2004, p. 4) oppression is a kind of violence, threats, or coercion to abuse or frighten a person. This behavior can become a habit and includes an inequity of power socially or physically. The oppression can contain harassment verbally or threats, physical violence or coercion may be directed frequently towards specific victims, perhaps on the basis of religion, race, sexuality, gender or ability. The act of oppression in *The Color Purple* revolves around two

main elements: The first is Sexism (rape and incest); and second is racism (color). Those elements of oppression leads the main characters especially Celia to use self-defense mechanism of repression systematically through neglecting, isolation, exclusion avoidance of bad and humiliated thoughts and feelings.

The Color Purple (1982) is "...the story of Celie, a poor, barely literate Southern black woman who struggles to escape the brutality and degradation of her treatment by men" (Gates, Jr-Appiah, 1993, p.16). Although it is difficult to get rid of the patriarchal society, the protagonist succeeds to overcome these conditions. Black community; itself have a lot of difficulties that prevent black women from recognizing their identity. Among these handicaps, there are sexism and racism. When the two ills, racism and sexism, combine, black women in America seem to be the most defenseless group of people. As it is demonstrated in Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, even in 20th century America, black women are still the ones who are most obviously oppressed in all areas of social life firstly due to their skin color and secondly due to their sex. Celie is the character who suffers extremely from the evils of both racism and sexism, but in the end she reemerges as a woman with self-respect and dignity.

The Color Purple starts with the scene of rape. Once "...Celie is 14...stepfather, whom she believes is her father, begins to rape

her...” (Walker, 1982, p.2) She cannot tell this pain and suffering to anybody. In the very beginning, when her mother is not at home, her stepfather starts to do this. Afterwards, he says to Celia “...you better shut up and get used to it”(Walker, 1982, p. 3). The stepfather is very cruel in practicing sexual affair with Celie. Celie adopts here the technique of repression proper which Freud defines as it happens when a person becomes aware of repressed material but then purposely tries to remove it from awareness (Freud, 1939, pp. 116–7). Celie attempts purposely to not think of such incident. This “psychological self- defense mechanism” of repression proper she uses is to reduce the anxiety towards this painful situation, and at the same time to be able to survive. Therefore, she doesn’t try to resist abuse; but she feels that abuse is the natural way things should be. On the other hand, because of her deliberate attempt to accept this kind of oppression, her expressions show how difficult position she stays. “But I don’t never get used to it. And now I feel sick used to it. I be the one to cook. My mama she fuss at me a look at me. She happy, cause he good to her now. But too sick to last long” (3). Celie is confirmed that “...the black woman as oppressed ...” (Evans, 1984, p. 163) and repressed to be able to survive.

Celie, in letters she writes, is asking God to give her a sign to understand what is happening around her in the world: “I am

fourteen year old, I have been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign” to know what is the truth of what happened to me. (Walker, 1982, p. 3). These lines explain the trauma of Celia at that young age. After her mother’s death she has been taken out of school to look after the children and the house, where her stepfather’s abuse of her continues and she gives birth to two children of his. After her marriage to Albert, she could not give voice to her new pain. When Nettie comes out of her home and seeks help from Celie, Celie could not help; instead Nettie leaves the house saying she will come back. Celie wants to survive in this world. So, she never voices anything out about her physical pain and harassment she undergoes in her life. She, along the physical, verbal and emotional oppression she faced, tries to remove those violent memories out of her awareness and conscious according to Freudian theory of repression., Celie focuses on survival but states: “I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is to stay alive” (Walker, 1982, p.19).she chooses to be repressed, and forgets what is happened and pushes out all those awful memories for this is the only way to be alive. In a word, it is very obvious that through Freudian repression, Celia tries to cope with the reality she faces.

Celie’s first letters are written to God who is described as “all white, looking like some stout white man” (Walker, 1982, p.85).

According to Gates, “rather than representing the name of God as unspeakable, Walker represents Celie’s words, her letters addressed to ‘God’, as unspeakable God is Celie’s silent auditor” (Gates, 1988, p. 243). These letters to God, describing her distressed life in the hands of rapist Alphonso, are extremely painful. Nevertheless, since her troubles never come to an end even after she complains to God via letters, she feels abandoned by forgetful God, her “silent auditor”. This is the time she changes her addressee: her reader is now her beloved sister Nettie who is a missionary in Africa. Thus, for Celie writing functions as a second chance for life throughout the novel. The letters she writes break her silence and bind Celie closer to life.

Sexism does not only appear in the form of rape. Several times in the novel there are incidents of beating. Beating and rape, two overt sexist acts dehumanize Celie and lead to her objectification. Like rape, beating is almost an everyday reality; one day Celie is beaten for “dressing trampy” (Walker, 1982; 9), one day for not being more beautiful. Since she is considered as no more than a product, her father Alphonso sees nothing wrong in selling her to Mr_, known as Albert to everyone else, who really has an eye on Celie’s beloved sister, Nettie. Celie conveys this: “He [Alphonso] act like he can’t stand me no more. He say I’m evil an always up to no good. . . . I see him looking at my

little sister. She scared. But I say I'll take care of you" (Walker, 1982; 4). Alphonso wants to keep Nettie for himself, so he offers Mr_ to take Celie even though in his words, "she ain't fresh, she spoiled twice" (Walker, 1982; 9). In order to convince Mr_ to "get" Celie, Alphonso adds "she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her (Walker, 1982,p.10). Still, in Celie's words "it took Alphonso the whole spring" (Walker, 1982, p.11) to decide upon marrying Celie who, as Alphonso says "can work like a man" (Walker, 1982; 10). Walker gives detailed scenery of the awkward position Celie is put in when Mr_ comes to the house.

Alphonso manages to sell Celie to another sexist man Mr_ who is similar to Alphonso in his violence and cruelty. Like Alphonso, he sees in himself every right to oppress women, especially if they are obedient like Celie who, only in her letters, expresses the brutality she receives from Mr_: "He beat me like he beat the children. . . He say, Celie, git the belt. . . . 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" (Walker, 1982, p. 23). She tries to repress herself and forget that she is a human being.

Second element of oppression is racism. Racism is defined as a belief that members of one race gain superiority over members

of different races. In *The Color Purple*, racism is defined as a White antagonist against a helpless black person. To much awe, it is understood that none in the novel is purely one-sided evil beings. To the contrary, it is understood that they usually fall victims to some form of abuse. For instance.. Mr. —’s son Harpo thrashes his wife Sofia after Mr.— implies that he is less of a man due to Sofia’s resistance. In her novel Walker makes a strong confession and clarifies that ‘The Bright skin’ which is regarded as better than the dark skin, also gives much of the troubles. For ex. Mr.—’s criticizes his ex-wife for being too black and she was killed for being too black.

Even in black community, the degree of blackness forms the behaviors and attitudes of people. In *The Color Purple*, the mistress of Celia’s husband is a good representative of color of skin. Even though she has a dark black skin, “She is the woman in control of her life” (Walker, 1982, p. 52). She is more different than Celie. “She is beautiful and knows it, with only positive thoughts about her very black skin—since during this period the black and lighter-skinned black woman had about the same chance with black men” (52). Knowing the position in the black dominated society, Shug Avery acts independently and warns Celie not to be dependent on black males. Similarly, Mr. _____’s sister, Kate also advises Celie about fighting.

“You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can’t do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself” (Walker, 1982, p. 21). Nevertheless, Celie is afraid of black males’ brutality and states “I think about Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive” (21). Celie frees herself from her husband’s repressive control.

In Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, the protagonist Celie undergoes a remarkable personal change. She uses the Freudian primary repression because she tries unconsciously forgets the bad incidents, thoughts and feelings. After her positive change, She proves that she pushes away all disturbing memories and thoughts. For this reason, She evolves from being joyless, submissive and abused by her Pa and her husband Mr. to running her own business, owning her own house and feeling younger than ever. Celie tries along the novel to use Freudian repression to control her life and to be able to survive although the sufferings of sexism and racism. The efforts of the protagonist end in success. This proves that forgetting bad thoughts, feelings and desires one of the most elements to help the protagonist to achieve success at the end of the novel.

Conclusion

Alice Walker is a creative writer who embodies in *The Color Purple* the stereotype of blacks' sufferings in the western societies in the character of Celie who rebels against discrimination and social restrictions. She uses self-defense mechanism of repression by keeping certain feelings, thoughts and wants out of her awareness and conscious. The aim behind this kind of mechanism is achieved in this novel by surviving in spite of all the cruelty and violence she had experienced and was ready to start from the beginning and to clean forget what she had had as a frightening experience. She has developed from being an insecure and inferior girl into a strong and well-balanced woman. In this respect, it is considered a reflection of the self-discovery and re-creation of Walker's personality.

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