Apparent Resistance

Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* as supportive of patriarchal American society

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Introduction

*The Color Purple* has been celebrated by readers all over the world for giving African-American women a voice. Its description of the protagonist’s rise from patriarchal oppression has been viewed as encouraging African-American women and challenging patriarchal social structures within the black community as well as in society at large. But the novel has also been strongly criticised for the protagonist’s more or less fantastic fate and for its harsh portrayal of African-American men.

Since I am a white Swedish woman who has never been to America, it is important to point out that I will approach the text from a European and Swedish perspective. However, a European perspective might be useful for providing new angles on problems that are brought up by the mainly American scholars discussing the text.

I seek to investigate if the novel really does challenge patriarchal American society. The analysis will start with my discussing the parts of the novel that can be seen as challenging patriarchal society in general, such as the novel’s portrayal of female bonding, alternative families and the erasure of androcentrism. The discussion will then move on to a more critical standpoint towards the novel, showing how the story in fact supports American society and patriarchal structures. I will also analyse why the story is seen as racist towards African-American men by some, and how this connects with the novel’s support of American society.

Female bonding

Rivalry between women for a man has been a classic theme in books and films throughout modern history, reflecting the patriarchal society of the Western world. Women are seldom portrayed in relationships with each other without relating to a man, and do often not even exist by themselves, but “need” the connection to a man to be allowed to be part of stories.

“Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. We are taught that our relationship with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are “natural” enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another.”

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1 hooks 1984, p 43
We women learn that we should protect male interests, because our patriarchal society has been structured by men, for men. When women obtain value only through men, rivalry arises and makes bonding between women impossible. Female bonding is threatening to a patriarchal structure, because it erases phallocentrism.

Alice Walker challenges the classic theme of rivaling women in *The Color Purple* by leading Celie and the other women in the book away from phallocentrism and its negative effects. Lindsey Tucker comments that “[s]ince a rivalry exists only when the male is the central figure, the establishment of female bonding has the effect of nullifying that rivalry and uniting everyone.”

Tucker gives examples of her statement on the bonding of rivaling women. Although Squeak and Sophia are rivals over a man (Harpo) initially, they end up taking care of each other’s children. Squeak does not become a “real individual” until she decides to help Sophia to be released from prison. Until then, she has been a silent, submissive person whose identity has been connected to her looks and her light skin, according to Tucker. Squeak has even been named by her husband Harpo, but with her new identity she insists on being called by her real name, Mary Agnes.

Another example of female bonding is the remarkably strong relationship that Celie and her sister Nettie have throughout their life. Nettie is the one person Celie feels close to in her childhood, until they are torn apart by patriarchal oppression. Nettie manages to escape from violence and abuse while Celie stays behind, transferred like goods from one violent patriarchal environment to another. Even though Celie and Nettie are separated for close to half a century without knowing whether the other is still alive, they are always each other’s nearest companions at heart.

However, female bonding leading to male decentralisation is first presented when Sugar Avery, Shug, comes into the picture. Shug’s presence in the story completely changes Celie’s life, although she is first presented as Albert’s/Mr____’s lover. Shug, Celie and Albert’s/Mr____’s threesome is a somewhat unusual relationship. It consists of two women and a man, but not with the male as the central figure of rivalry, which is the most common constellation (at least in fiction). Shug is the object of both Celie and Albert’s/Mr____’s love and desire, although Celie and Albert/Mr____ are the married couple. Here, a sort of rivalry is presented between a man and woman, for the love of a woman. Loving Shug and, foremost,

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2 Tucker, p 87
receiving her love is what is the starting point of Celie’s path towards liberation from patriarchal oppression. The rivalry between Celie and Albert/Mr____ also moves them away from the traditional patriarchal family structure, and makes their relationship more equal, because Shug is able to love them both. The close to master-and-slave relationship that Celie and Albert/Mr____ have previous to Shug’s presence in the story falls when the androcentric family structure is subverted.

**The alternative family**

Shug and Celie’s relationship to each other and to Albert/Mr___ is a very good example of how female bonding decentralises men, liberating both men and women from oppressive structures. The decentralisation of men is closely connected to the dissolving of the nuclear family, since it is based on hierarchal and patriarchal structures. *The Color Purple* shows that the nuclear family is a part of society’s centralisation of men, and it presents an alternative family structure that turns out to be less oppressive than the traditional one. Most of the nuclear family examples in *The Color Purple* are portrayed as violent and unhappy. Celie and Albert’s/Mr____’s relationship is one of master and slave. Harpo and Sophia’s marriage starts out as a happy one, but falls apart when Harpo tries to turn Sophia into a submissive wife. Celie comes from a violent upbringing with incestuous rape as a regular element. She even bears two children after repeated rapes by the man who she believes is her father. However, it turns out that Pa is in fact Celie’s stepfather and that her real father has been lynched by white people when she was little. What seems to be a traditional nuclear family in the beginning later turns out to have been a classic of the evil step parent. Interestingly enough, the case is not one of an evil stepmother, as in traditional fairytales, but a stepfather. Here, the biological father and the nuclear family constellation before his murder are portrayed as idyllic. The domestic violence does not start until the stepfather comes into the picture and Celie’s mother becomes mentally ill. The nuclear family structure is actually defended by the fact that it is Celie’s stepfather, and not her biological father, who is the reason for her horrible childhood. On the other hand, the family structure still follows traditional nuclear norms, with the husband/father as the head of the family. The fact that Pa is not the biological father does not change that Celie grows up in a family where patriarchal oppression is brought to its extreme through violence, rape and child abduction.

The nuclear family structure is challenged by the extended family ties that the central characters seem to have with each other. A lot of children are raised outside a nuclear family
context in the book and it thereby challenges the patriarchal family structures. There are several examples of people taking care of or caring for other people’s children. Celie’s children are raised in Africa by Samuel and Corrine, and also by her sister Nettie; Shug’s children are with their grandmother; Odessa takes care of Sophia’s children when she is in jail and Sophia takes care of Suzy Q when Squeak is off to pursue her singing carrier. Harpo is especially fond of Henrietta, who is the only child of Sophia’s not fathered by Harpo. The happy ending includes all the central characters in the story, making all of them part of a big family. The story is unique in the fact that no one has to be the loser. Albert/Mr____, who at first represents the evil of patriarchal oppression, is also included in the happy ending and is not shut out from the alternative family constellation. However, the all-including happy ending is not entirely unproblematic, to which I will come back further on in the essay.

The alternative family and female bonding is also found among the Olinkas, even though their society is strictly patriarchal. Although one man has several wives, there does not seem to be any rivalry among them; the wives are in fact closer to one another than to their husband. The husband is put on a pedestal and is the ultimate authority of the family, which makes him disconnected from the closeness that his wives share. The Olinka society is hierarchal and phallocentric, since women only exist in relation to men. However, in the private sphere of women’s everyday life, men play a small part. “Their life always center around work and their children and other women”3 Nettie writes in one of her letters. Since the Olinka women are often promised to their husbands when they are born, it is not surprising that they feel closer to the other wives than to their husband. The situation of the Olinka women resembles that of Celie, since she is given away at an early age to a much older man who is the undisputable authority of the family with power over his wife’s life and sexuality. (The Olinka men literally have power over their wives’ lives because, according to Olinka law, they are free to kill a wife who is suspected of witchcraft or infidelity.) Celie, like the Olinka wives, finds love and support among other women, who also eventually become her family (Shug and later Nettie). Nettie sees the resemblance between her and Celie’s relationship to Pa and the Olinka women’s relationship to their husbands:

“[The Olinka men] listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don’t even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads toward the ground. The women also do not “look in a man’s face” as they say. To “look in a man’s face” is a brazen thing to do. They

3 Walker 1982, p 167
look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? It is our own behaviour around Pa."

Although Olinka families consist of one husband and several wives, a parallel could still be drawn to the phallocentric nuclear family structure that Nettie and Celie are used to back home. These family structures are both created to maintain a patriarchal society by keeping power and property in a patrilineal heritance from father to son/s. However, as provoking as it may sound, the Olinka family structure encourages female friendship and bonding more than the Christian nuclear family, since non-related females belong within the same judicial family. Of course, the society is still phallocentri cally structured and excluding of women.

The erasing of androcentrism

By helping and encouraging each other, the marginalised women in the book move away from the androcentric world view, thus beginning their resistance of patriarchal oppression. The decentralization of men among the women in the novel is emphasised not only by Tucker but also by Eva Boesenberg: “The women increasingly recognize each other’s centrality in their lives and modify their earlier exclusive focus on their male partner.” The men, on the other hand, are not as quick to realise that they are no longer the center of the women’s lives. Boesenberg refers to a telling example, where Grady tries to answer Shug’s question of why women care so much about what other people think. “Well, say Grady, trying to bring light. A woman can’t get a man if peoples talk.” The women respond by bursting into laughter, while the men seem unaware of what is so funny about Grady’s statement. Like Boesenberg acknowledges, Grady and the other men’s self-centeredness (i.e. phallocentricity) is astounding. Boesenberg also points out that it is Celie and Shug that start laughing, after they have made eye-contact, because of their feelings towards each other. They are certainly not concerned about pleasing men. Their sexual relationship has erased the last social area within which women are dependent on men. Linda Abbandonato acknowledges the importance of Celie’s sexual orientation to the novel: “[...] [it] provides an alternative to the heterosexual paradigm of the conventional marriage plot: her choice of lesbianism is politically charged [...]” Celie and Shug’s rejection of the need of a penis for sexual pleasure can be seen as a

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4 Walker 1982, p 163
5 Boesenberg, p 228
6 Walker 1982, p 203
7 Boesenberg, p 228
8 Abbandonato, p1108
metaphor for the erasing of the phallocentric world view. However, there is a problem with
the depiction of their relationship that undermines its political power, which will be discussed
in the next chapter.

Shug changes Celie’s life in a lot of ways and she is also the one who introduces the
“alternative”, gender-less God to Celie, in contrast to the Christian view of a white male
authority. Shug’s revision of the traditional Christian God is an epiphany for Celie and with
its erasing of the largest symbol of phallocentric hierarchy she is liberated from the role of the
oppressed victim.

"[Man] try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he
everywhere, you think he God. But he aint. Whenever you trying to pray,
and man plop himself up on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say
Shug."  

Celia now has the strength to start living her own life, instead of serving as property in
someone else’s. She takes the decision of accompanying Shug to Memphis and finally stands
up to Mr.____ when he objects: “It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your
dead body just the welcome mat I need.”

She also stops addressing God in her letters, and starts to write to Nettie instead,
ending every letter with “Amen”. The hierarchal relationship of Lord and subject has thereby
been replaced by the equality of sisterhood.

The novel supports female bonding and decentralization of men, but the story is not
unproblematic and it has been criticised for various reasons. The analysis will now turn to a
more critical standpoint, discussing some of the criticism *The Color Purple* has received from
readers and scholars and how the story in some ways undermines its own purposes.

**Homosexuality made safe**

Shug and Celie’s relationship may represent the decentralization of men, but there is one thing
that is strikingly peculiar with it; it does not seem to upset anyone in the otherwise intolerant
society they live in. bell hooks does not agree that Celie and Shug’s relationship is politically
charged, because of the low response it receives from the surrounding society. In all aspects
of her life Celie has been controlled by men, but as hooks points out, her sexual desire for a

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9 Walker 1982, p 198
10 Walker 1982, p 202
woman does not seem to disturb anyone. Her husband and master, who controls her every move, and who is otherwise extremely concerned about how a good wife should behave, does not seem to have any problem with his wife having a sexual relationship with a woman, apart from being jealous of her for being with Shug.

“Their sexual desire for women and her sexual encounter with Shug is never a controversial issue even though it is the catalyst for her resistance to male domination, for her coming to power. Walker makes the powerful suggestion that sexual desire can disrupt and subvert oppressive social structure because it does not necessarily conform to social prescription, yet this realization is undermined by the refusal to acknowledge it as threatening—dangerous.”

The conformist heterosexual society is not challenged by Celie and Shug’s relationship, since nobody sees it as a threat. Their sexual relationship is not as politically charged as Tucker suggests, because it is not at all provocative to the people around them. In fact, the reactions to a lesbian relationship between African-American women in the novel have been strong among quite a few readers and critics, which shows that homosexuality is still controversial in western society. Alice Walker herself has written about the touchiness about filming a simple kiss between Celie and Shug in the making of the motion picture based upon the novel. She also points out that “[…] there were people in the black community who adamantly opposed any display of sexual affection between Celie and Shug. There were also editorials in black newspapers condemning such behaviour. Incredibly, love between women was considered analogous to drug addiction and violence.”

When reading these comments about the reactions to displaying lesbian love and sexuality on the screen, the lack of reactions among people in Celie’s community seems even more peculiar, especially since the story is set in the first half of the 20th century. Not only is it hard to find this portrayal realistic, but most importantly it undermines the political resistance to patriarchal heterosexual norms that homo- and bisexuality in fact involve. Walker manages to support oppressive structures, by pretending that society works differently than it actually does.

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11 bell hooks, “Writing the Subject” in Gates, p 456
12 Walker 1994, p 219
“…and they lived happily ever after”

The novel certainly seems to challenge patriarchal structures by connecting women to one another instead of to men. However, there are few books that are entirely unproblematic when it comes to consistency, including The Color Purple. Several scholars have criticised the novel for being unrealistic in a lot of ways, undermining its seemingly representative role of a poor black woman’s resistance against patriarchal oppression.

The novel’s lack of credibility in telling Celie’s spectacular life story has been commented on by both bell hooks and Eva Boesenberg. The story’s exceptionally happy ending could be appealing to the common reader at a first read; it certainly was for me. But Celie’s uprising and fulfilment is one of the most criticised issues of the book, and Celie’s path towards social and financial liberation has been accused of not being credible. The fairytale ending of “living happily ever after” with everybody being friends and no one holding any grudges against anyone is too perfect to be realistic.

Boesenberg, hooks and Harris all refer to a statement Walker made in an interview in Newsweek: “I liberated Celie from her own story. I wanted her to be happy.” Walker was referring to the model for Celie’s character, her own great grandmother, who was raped by her slaveholding master as a child. Boesenberg comments on this by saying that Celie’s story has to be fictive.

“As Celie’s writing draws to a close, however, it reflects an intention analogous to the author’s, acquiescing in the structural amnesia this entails. If success, then, is tantamount to liberation from one’s history, the text must necessarily leave the precincts of realistic fiction.”

Walker may not have intended to write a perfectly realistic novel, or at least not have realism as her highest priority. Like Boesenberg says, if Celie’s character really is based upon a relative of Walker’s, and the purpose was to create a happier ending for Celie than her non-fictive model had experienced, the story must necessarily be unrealistic. Walker’s statement in Newsweek confirms this. She wanted to “liberate Celie from her own story”, because a realistic ending of the novel and of Celie’s life could never have been happy.

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13 Boesenberg, p 216; hooks in Gates, p 469
14 hooks in Gates, p 469; Harris, p 157
15 Harris, p 157
16 Boesenberg, p 216
If one agrees with the opinion of *The Color Purple* as an unrealistic novel, the question of why this has to be a problem lies close. Boesenberg and hooks share the criticism of Celie’s social and financial success without any change in society, because it supports the image of the American dream. Walker is true to the ideal of the American dream and thereby to American society, with its white patriarchal power structures. Boesenberg points at the support American society receives from Celie’s fantastic story.

“Thus the Pan-African Fourth of July Barbecue, in contrast to African-Americans’ historical reaction to this holiday, is only marginally critical of U.S.-American society and history. This is merely logical, since Celie has proven the reality of the American dream with her tale.”\(^\text{17}\)

Celie is a hard-working submissive person who eventually receives her uprising: not after having organized politically, but through individual strength and success. She has the help of her friends and is not alone in her success, but society remains unchanged. Celie is able to succeed anyway, which means that society is not responsible for her misfortunes either.

hooks’ article also criticizes Celie’s fantastic uprising and its the lack of political changes in society.

“[… ] Walker creates a fiction wherein an oppressed black woman can experience self-recovery without a dialectical process; without collective political effort; without radical change in society. […] a fiction where struggle - the arduous and painful process by which the oppressed work for liberation - has no place. This fantasy of change without effort is a dangerous one for both oppressed and oppressor. It is a brand of false consciousness that keeps everyone in place and oppressive structures intact.”\(^\text{18}\)

Whether one prefers to call it supporting the idea of the American dream or a fairy tale ending, Celie’s fate and success misses the opportunity to criticize American society. Celie can succeed in American society despite all of her hardships and her horrible childhood. If society is not to blame for the oppression of Celie and the other women, then who is? An easy answer would be the individual oppressors, i.e. black men. *The Color Purple* has received a

\(^{17}\) Boesenberg, p 217  
\(^{18}\) hooks in Gates, p 469
lot of criticism for being racist in its portrayal of black men\textsuperscript{19}, and I think that is at least partially because of the political struggle being absent from the novel which, as hooks has stated, creates a false picture of how social changes arise. The critique does not stretch beyond the small community in which Celie lives. All she needs to do is have the courage to leave it and move to the city, where success comes almost by itself. We are told that Celie cannot be successful and independent in a small black rural community, and the novel creates a false picture of patriarchal oppression as non-existent in urban settings. The American dream is fulfilled in the city, because of Celie’s entrepreneurial skills, not because of improved social conditions for African-American women.

The novel only dares to criticise within fields that are already considered “safe”. Although it certainly challenges common views on family and sexuality, it does not take the step to challenge American society politically. In the book, there are examples of white society’s oppression of black people, both among the Olinkas in Africa and among Celie’s kin in America. However, these are things that are “safe” to bring up, because this part of history was known and had been dealt with in 1982, when the book was written. The white people and society in the book are easy to put aside as part of history. Celie’s everyday struggle with abusive and oppressive (black) men is, on the other hand, still part of women’s lives and is therefore critical of today (read 1982) in that limited aspect. The book only manages to criticise on the surface, but does not challenge white American society of the time it was published. As hooks states, the book leaves out criticism of society by making Celie succeed without a change in society. Although patriarchal oppression is very much part of society in general, the characters live in a society that is portrayed as being restricted and closed. Celie’s decision to accompany Shug to Memphis following her religious epiphany is a literal as well as a symbolic decision to leave the kind of society she has lived in, i.e. a society structured by patriarchal domination. In contrast, Celie has no problems at all in the city - on the contrary she starts to build a career on her pants-making. The American dream is very much present and this maintains oppressive structures by saying that anyone can make it in American society, although not necessarily in a rural black community. A change in society is not needed, i.e. society is not to blame for any of the horrible experiences in Celie’s life.

\textsuperscript{19} Walker 1996, p 191, p 223
Victimization

Apart from the issues discussed above, hooks makes another important acknowledgement about Celie’s eventual success. American society, and Walker, has no problem giving Celie her uprising, because of her long hard endurance in being a victim. In the beginning she portrays herself as ugly, unintelligent and useless and sacrifices herself to rescue Nettie from being raped by Pa. As Albert’s/Mr____’s wife, Celie endures slave-like oppression for years. She eventually receives her uprising after decades of silent suffering. Sofia, on the other hand, is far from silent and resists patriarchal oppression from the start. Strangely enough, Sofia is not allowed to be completely restored to her old self after years of imprisonment and forced labour. Instead, she is punished for being a strong, independent person and for her refusal to be a victim.

“Unlike Celie or Shug, she [Sofia] is regarded as a serious threat to the social order and is violently attacked, brutalized and subdued. Always a revolutionary, Sofia has never been victimized or complicit in her own oppression. […] Given all the spectacular changes in The Color Purple, it is not without grave and serious import that the character who most radically challenges sexism and racism is a tragic figure who is only partly rescued – restored to only a resemblance of sanity.”20

Celie’s uprising is possible only after her having “earned” it through all the hardships she has been through. Sofia, on the other hand, has never allowed anyone to treat her badly, and for that she is punished. She is forever marked by the treatment the oppressive white society meted out to her, and is never restored to the strong independent person she once was. Sofia never receives her uprising; she is put in place and kept there.

The portrayal of African-Americans

The novel has received a lot of criticism for its portrayal of black men and for containing a racist and stereotypical image of African-Americans in general. One of the critics who accuse The Color Purple of being racist towards black men in particular is Trudier Harris. She criticises the book for maintaining the stereotypical image of African-Americans through the absence of nuclear families and the “promiscuity” of many of the characters.

20 hooks in Gates, p 462
“The book simply added a freshness to many of the ideas circulating in the popular culture and captured in racist literature that suggested that black people have no morality when it comes to sexuality, that black family structure is weak if existent at all, that black men abuse black women, and that black women who may appear to be churchgoers are really lewd and lascivious.”

Harris’ problems with the book are basically about the characters not living according to traditional Christian/American virtues. The stereotypical image of black people not living as virtuously as white people does exist, and several characters in the novel are built upon stereotypes. However, the traditional Christian virtues are challenged in the novel since Christianity itself is presented as extremely hierarchal and phallocentric. To then criticise the characters for not aspiring to these virtues is to miss the point.

One of the sexual “immoralities” that support a racist image of black people, according to Harris, is supposedly homosexuality. Harris misses the importance of Shug and Celie’s sexual relationship and its decentralization of men. Linda Abbandonato also acknowledges Harris’ mistake, when criticizing her view of Shug and Celie’s relationship as a “schoolgirl fairytale”. Shug also represents the “immorality” of promiscuity, being an (at least at first) unmarried nightclub singer with three children. Shug shows both Celie and the reader that female sexuality is not something ugly or sinful- “God loves all them feelings”. Once again, Shug’s revision of the traditional Christian God is something that Harris forgets. Shug is promiscuous, and does in a way represent one of the stereotypical pictures of African-American women, but most importantly she represents women’s right to their own sexuality.

The family structures in the book are certainly not weak, although they do not follow Christian nuclear family standards. The failed marriages are all caused by patriarchal oppression, and the fact that women leave abusive relationships is not a sign of “weak family structure”. The family ties are in fact remarkably strong, since they do not leave anyone out. Celie stays close to Nettie although they do not speak for decades; Albert/Mr____, who is initially abusive towards Celie and his children, is very much a part of the family in the end; Squeak and Sophia, initially rivals over Harpo, help each other with their children. The alternative family, discussed above, rejects the patriarchal structures that are so often a part of the traditional nuclear family.

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21 Harris, p 157
22 Abbandonato, p1112
23 Walker 1982, p 197
Domestic violence is not traditionally seen as virtuous (at least beyond a certain degree) and is of course indefensible. However, it does happen to women everywhere, independently of the colour of both the victim and the abuser.

Harris’ final example of the book maintaining a racist stereotype of African-Americans is that “black women who may appear to be churchgoers are really lewd and lascivious”. This is perhaps Harris’ most irrelevant criticism. There is really nothing contradictory about being a churchgoer and being lascivious.

Harris’ objections to the book completely miss the importance of Shug’s view of God. The Christian God is a part of the patriarchal and white oppression, and criticizing the book by referring to the characters’ lack of traditional Christian virtues is therefore utterly irrelevant.

Harris shares her criticism of the book’s hostile picture of black men with many people; in fact it is the aspect of The Color Purple that has generated most criticism. This is something that can be connected to the lack of political and social struggle in the book. As pointed out previously; when the text fails to criticise society for the horrible treatment of the women in the novel, individuals - black men - are the ones that are blamed. However, we are presented with a picture of the social inheritance of from father to son that maintains patriarchal oppression. Albert/Mr____ seems to be meanness incorporated at first, but when his father is introduced to the story, one can understand why he acts as he does. Albert’s true love Shug would not be an appropriate wife, according to Albert’s father, since she is not submissive. His (and his father’s) view of how a man should be and how a wife should act is passed on to Harpo in the next generation, which destroys his and Sophia’s marriage. As the book goes on, it does provide a nuanced picture of the abusive men (except for Pa), including them in the happy ending and in the alternative family.

The critique against the novel (and even more so against the motion picture The Color Purple) of being racist towards black men are often based on arguments like African-American women “betraying their men”, and that they should focus on the oppression that white society exercises over African-Americans. Another interesting argument is that Celie and Shug’s lesbianism would somehow undermine the relationship between black men and women.
And lesbian affairs will never replace the passion and beauty of a free black man and a free black woman. In “Purple” [the motion picture], emotional and sexual salvation for women is found in other women. That’s not the real world, as some black women, out of frustration, seem to want to believe.24

Although this quotation is taken from a newspaper article discussing the motion picture *The Color Purple*, the comment could just as easily be about the novel. As mentioned earlier in the essay, parallels have been drawn between Celie and Shug’s lesbian relationship and the critique towards the novel as portraying African-Americans in a stereotypical and racist way. It is very interesting to see how some critics are so provoked by lesbianism and male decentralisation that they even accuse it of supporting racism.

The article from which the quote above was taken was answered in the same newspaper by a woman:

“The Color Purple is not a story against black men: it is a story about black women. […] All too often, it is with such dispatch that black men come to the defense of their egos that they fail to realize that they are not the issue at hand.”25

By showing such self-centeredness, men who have criticised the novel and the motion picture confirm the phallocentricity that is shown in the book. It seems like their real concern is to protect the heterosexual norm in the society and with it men’s centralisation, because what actually provokes them about Celie’s story is that men is not in the center of it.

**Criticism and power**

The most interesting criticism Harris’ has directed at the novel is a somewhat ironical as well as unfortunate fact. Despite a theme of giving African-American women a voice, the novel has managed to silence that very same group, because it is almost impossible for them to criticise it.

“To complain about the novel is to commit treason against black women writers, yet there is much in it that deserves complaint, and there are many black women critics in this country that would rather have their wisdom-

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teeth pulled than be accused of objecting to it. After all, a large number of readers, usually vocal and white, have decided that *The Color Purple* is the quintessential statement on Afro-American women and a certain kind of black lifestyle in these United States.”

*The Color Purple* has become the novel representing African-American women (as has the motion picture based on the novel, even though there are even more things to criticise in it than there is in the novel, and even though it was made by a white male director). Harris makes a good point when she emphasizes the silencing of black women the novel has brought, because stories about black women, written by black women, rarely receive the kind of public attention and admiration that *The Color Purple* has. It has therefore been hard for African-American women to criticise. However, Harris article was published only two years after *The Color Purple* and African-American women like bell hooks and Trudier Harris, who have criticised the novel, prove that it can be done, at least by black female scholars. The number of white American women criticising the book are on the other hand rarer nowadays, I believe. This is connected to Harris’ critique about white women readers seeing the novel as “the quintessential statement of African-American woman”, which I suppose is still the case. This is actually reflected by the authors referred to in this essay, even though the critical literature used here hardly can be said to represent all articles written about the novel. It is interesting to see that the only white woman writer in my reference list who is even remotely critical of the novel is a European, Eva Boesenberg. Boesenberg makes both positive and negative comments, while the white American writers celebrate the novel without a trace of criticism. Harris and hooks are both African-American women and do both express strong criticism of *The Color Purple*, however they are both respected scholars, thus vocal. The vocal white American critics, on the other hand, still seem to find *The Color Purple* impossible to criticize, because it is still viewed as the novel representing African-American women.

**Conclusion**

*The Color Purple* challenges society in its decentralisation of men, by letting the women in the novel encourage and help one another out of patriarchal oppression. Celie and Shug’s lesbian relationship is very important for its representation of male decentralisation, since it erases phallocentrism once and for all. The erasing of patriarchal structures is also represented

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26 Harris, p 155
by the alternative family, which is more equal in its structure than the patriarchal nuclear family, indifferent of biological relationships, and includes the oppressor in fellowship with the oppressed.

However, the novel undermines the importance of Celie’s homosexuality by pretending that it is an uncontroversial issue. Readers’ and writers’ reactions to the lesbian relationship in the novel prove that homosexuality is still very provocative. It has even been used as a completely irrelevant argument in criticising the novel of being racist in its portrayal of African-Americans. The lack of credibility in Celie and Shug’s relationship being entirely unprovocative is problematic, because it ignores homosexuality as threatening towards patriarchal society.

The novel’s lack of realism is also a problem when it comes to Celie’s fantastic uprising and the story’s happy ending. It supports the picture of the American dream by letting Celie be able to rise from hardship and oppression simply through endurance and individual struggle. Her struggle is supported by women around her, but society remains unchanged throughout the story. Celie is able to rise towards personal strength and a social independence of men without any political change in society. Oppressive structures are thus kept in place and American society remains uncriticised and free from responsibility for the oppression Celie has endured. When society is not to blame, the focus will be on the black men who are the direct reason for Celie’s brutal experiences. Patriarchal oppression as social structure is taken out of the equation, leaving African-American men as scapegoats and supporting the American society which is the true source of patriarchal oppression.

My conclusion is that The Color Purple is not as critical towards society as it could have been. Celie’s story is one of love and sisterhood, but it is also one of struggle and resistance. Unfortunately, the resistance turns out to be against individuals instead of against patriarchal society and the novel is therefore not challenging American society.

The Color Purple is the story of an oppressed black woman’s path towards liberation through the help and support of other women. Although there are things worth criticising in the novel, especially about the “perfect” ending, my own first reaction after having read it was pure joy. Even having criticised the novel as much as I have in this essay I must exhort people to read it, because it is still a good book. Realistic or not, happy endings are rare and when one comes along, why not just enjoy it?
Bibliography

Primary Text:

Secondary Texts:


