

The Color Purple The Struggle to Express Themselves

There is one primordial reason why we do not doubt Europeans have taken the lead in history, in all epochs before and after 1492, and it has little to do with evidence. It is a basic belief which we inherit from prior ages of thought and scarcely realize that we hold: it is an implicit belief, not an explicit one, and it is so large a theory that it is woven into all of our ideas about history, both within Europe and without. . . (Blaut pg. 6-7).

African-American people have had to climb over many obstacles to get to their position today. First, was the selling of their people into slavery. Then, they endured slavery itself, being treated like an animal. After slavery was abolished, Colored people still had to deal with racial discrimination and hatred. If this sounds rough, black women had it worse. African-American women had to deal with all the previously mentioned things, but they were women too! Females were oppressed almost as bad as the blacks. White women were not able to vote until the 1920. Therefore colored women had a double edged sword, they had to fight for freedom, but not be to dominate as to effect the men. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is a good example of colored women's plight. Three obstacles black women had to overcome to be able to express themselves were Racism, the lack of education, and the stereo-type that women are inferior.

African-Americans have always experienced racism throughout their habitation in America. Slavery, is what caused most of the hatred towards blacks. African Americans were sold by their people and sent off to a foreign land. Colored people were used as work horses when they entered America. "It was acceptable for a white person to be lazy (in the South), and therefore, a white person takes advantage of this" (Theriault). White people wanted to keep their laziness. If the slaves were set free, then the whites would have to do more work. The slaves still fought for what they wanted, and finally won their "independence." Another dilemma was "if the south could abolish slavery, what would happen to the slaves? These slaves have been slaves for all their lives and would require education. These slaves would also require homes, some type of compensation, and more" (Theriault). Blacks were put in prison for rebelling against the white establishment. Most times these crimes were minuscule in comparison to the crimes committed against blacks or by whites. A colored person could be put in jail for looking at someone inappropriately, but if a black man was lynched, nothing happened. "I have been locked by the lawless. Handcuffed by the haters. Gagged by the greedy. And, if I know any thing at all, it's that a wall is just a wall and nothing more at all. It can be broken down" (Shakuer). This excerpt from "Affirmation" is an example of the feelings of hatred for the Whites. However, this quotation also shows the fight in the African-American race let alone its women. If the South could have kept education away from the blacks. Then ides as the one above would have never been published.

Lack of education was a way the South tried to keep the blacks

in a lower class. In *The Color Purple*, Celie is not allowed to go to school because she is to be kept barefoot and pregnant. She still received an education by learning what her little sister was teaching her, though. It was believed that if the blacks were kept uneducated then they would not know any better and would not fight for freedom. Unfortunately, for the South, the North was educating their blacks. Then these blacks were coming south and starting colleges for colored people. Booker T. Washington wrote, in his autobiography,

ONE day, while at work in the coal-mine, I happened to overhear two miners talking about a great school for coloured people somewhere in Virginia. This was the first time that I had ever heard anything about any kind of school or college that was more pretentious than the little coloured school in our town. In the darkness of the mine I noiselessly crept as close as I could to the two men who were talking. I heard one tell the other that not only was the school established for the members of any race, but the opportunities that it provided by which poor but worthy students could work out all or a part of the cost of a board, and at the same time be taught some trade or industry.

Thus the education had begun. Most coloreds were not able to read or write because they were never exposed to an education. Black women again had it worse because they were women. Women were believed to be weak and incompetent in comparison with men. This has since been disproved, but it was the practice in those days. In *The Color Purple*, Harpo, Mr. marries an independent Black woman. Sophia is bigger than Harpo and does not really do what he says. When Harpo beats Sophia to "make her mind," she beats him. The idea that a man has to beat a woman follows right along with the stereo-type that women are inferior.

The hackneyed image that women were inferior was basically just a myth. The black women in the book *The Color Purple* did all the work. Celie would get up to cook, clean, go out and work in the fields all day, then come back and cook and clean some more. Sophia would work in the fields, repair the roof, and take care of the children. The men, Mr. and Harpo, would sit and not do much. Then if the women ever said anything they would beat them. It was not until Shug Avery came along did Celie realize not to take men seriously. Ms. Avery and Celie did become lesbians, but Shug taught Celie that a person has to stand up for themselves, if they want respect. As Celie and Shug fell in love, Celie grew as a person. She started to stand up to Mr. Celie also started to wear pants. In doing so, she was showing her independence. In those days, men were only supposed to be clothed in pants. Celie was showing, in a small way, that a woman can do anything a man can. Through help from Shug, Celie started a successful business making pants for all the relatives. This is another way Shug helped Celie gain her independence. Women were supposed to rely on men for everything (i.e. food, clothing, shelter, etc.). With Celie making her own money she did not need a man. Celie and her sister Nettie also owned a house, which was left to them by their step-father. Celie is

further independent from men. Celie found a way out by acquiring a plan. This plan was patterned after an already independent woman, Shug. Shug got out by singing, Nettie by being a missionary, and Celie by making pants. Any minority that is being oppressed can learn from *The Color Purple*. A minority can pattern his/her ascent to greatness after someone who came from similar backgrounds. All minorities can take this advice to heart. Stand up for what is believed. Make a difference.

African-American women have overcome quite a bit in order to get to be where they are today. Colored women have (and are still) overcome racism, lack of education, and the myth that women are inferior. Black women have taken care of their children, men, land and themselves for years. The book *The Color Purple* shows the previous point very well. This book teaches that if there is a struggle, someone will overcome it. The book also teaches minorities a way to get out of their present situation. First, the desire has to be there, then all the minority has to do is pattern themselves after someone else who has made it out of the ghetto. Even though this book is in the great depression, the lessons it teaches can still be applied in today's society. I think it is finally time black women earn the respect they deserve. I would like to thank Alice Walker for writing a book that has opened my eyes to the struggles of African-American women. I never knew that they had to overcome so much in their community let alone the rest of the world.