



Confronting the Structures of Oppression: Submission, Resilience, and Resilience in *Los ojos azules* and *El color púrpura*.

Enfrentar las estructuras de opresión: sumisión, resiliencia y resistencia en *Los ojos más azules* y *El color púrpura*.

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on and compares several aspects of the novels *Los ojos más azules* by Toni Morrison and *El color púrpura* by Alice Walker. This analysis is preceded by a brief historical background of the times when the action of the novels take place, necessary to understand the history of racial discrimination and the prejudices that sustain this discrimination to our days. The discursion shows the main female characters reacting towards the different forms of oppression and to the systematic suppression of the necessary conditions for the normal development of their self- esteem as human beings. The self-esteem of some of them is so low that they cannot recover; others rise and are able to recover their lost self-esteem. We



conclude that the lives of the characters in *Los ojos más azules* were influenced by racial, social and patriarchal prejudices, prevented from material advancement, and in some cases, how their expectations for a better life were crushed in the end leading them into catastrophic events. In *El color púrpura*, characters are able to overcome the effects of oppression with the help of the solidarity of women and their personalities can survive almost intact. Thus they show resilience in the face of adversity.

Keywords: Beauty stereotypes. Self-esteem. Submission. Solidarity.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo enfoca y compara varios aspectos de las novelas *Los ojos más azules* de Toni Morrison y *El color púrpura* de Alice Walker. El análisis está precedido por un breve contexto histórico de las novelas, necesario para comprender los sucesos que se desarrollan; la historia de la discriminación racial y los prejuicios que sustentan esta discriminación hasta nuestros días. Se discute cómo los principales personajes femeninos reaccionan ante las distintas formas de opresión y la supresión sistemática de las condiciones necesarias para el desarrollo normal de los seres humanos; unos, cuya autoestima es tan baja que no logra recuperarse y termina en locura; otros, logran recobrar esa autoestima perdida. Al seguir la línea de desarrollo de los personajes en *Los ojos más azules*, se concluye que, influenciados por prejuicios raciales, sociales y patriarcales, las expectativas de estos personajes de una mejor vida fueron aplastadas, lo que las llevó a finales catastróficos. Los personajes de *El color púrpura* son capaces de superar los efectos de la opresión, ayudados por la solidaridad de las mujeres y sus personalidades sobreviven, demostrando resiliencia y resistencia ante las adversidades.

Palabras Clave: Estereotipos de belleza. Autoestima. Sumisión. Solidaridad.



Introduction

History gives theme and material to fiction written by black women, and works of fiction written by these black women in the twentieth century rest on that history. When we read works written by authors such as Toni Morrison or Alice Walker, you can feel the influence and experience of history and the changes that have occurred.

Black women have the ability to interpret a collective history of migration, poverty and segregation. The fact that a large portion of the labor force in the United States was involved in agricultural production, had a significant influence on social relations and the formation of the American black people. This is the historical context for the discussion of black women writers whose narratives document this social phenomenon. According to Susan Willis, "there is no other body of writing that delves thoroughly into the transformation from rural to urban society and has a better grasp of understanding historical changes" [ningún otro cuerpo narrativo se ahonda tan completamente en la transformación de la sociedad rural en urbana, ni tiene mejor comprensión de los cambios históricos]¹ (1987, p. 3). The history of the relationship of black women to the history of the workforce is based on the fact that mothers are producers and workers; their representation allows black women writers to reconstruct history as a period and as a process.

Toni Morrison states at the beginning of her Nobel Prize acceptance speech that "[n]arrative has never been merely entertainment for me. It is, I believe, one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge." [narrar nunca ha sido meramente entretenimiento para mí. Es, y así lo creo, una de las formas principales en que absorbemos el conocimiento]² (1993, par. 1). This was the first motivation for this work.

Los ojos más azules (1970), is a novel that constitutes a strong indictment of American society by revealing the different biases of social oppression that destroys, by various means, the sense of self-worth of a black girl and her parents, which leads them to total alienation and self-destruction.

¹ (Own translation)

² (Own translation)



Later, we went back to the novel I had previously read, *El color púrpura*, written by Alice Walker (1983), trying to find out how the forces of social oppression had affected the main characters and compare the circumstances of these characters with those in *Los ojos más azules*, which at first glance had been thought to be the same.

During the process of reading, rereading, and comparing both novels, the apparent similarities were found to overshadow crucial differences that presented two different views of the same problem. And this became the purpose of this work, by comparing the fates of women and their families in two of the greatest novels of the narrative written by African-American women in the twentieth century. Therefore, the objective of this work is to reveal the reaction to the oppression of the main female characters of both novels, comparing them from a psychological perspective.

To achieve this objective, methods such as: critical bibliographic analysis were used to find the necessary theory related to authors and novels; the historical-logical analysis to understand the social processes related to the historical context of both novels; literary analysis from historical and psychological perspectives to analyze the resources that the authors used to create these works of art; induction-deduction to reach partial conclusions of the analysis; the comparative method to establish the similarities and differences and reach conclusions and the analysis-synthesis to synthesize the relevant information for this study.

Brief historical context

Slavery in the New World was very different from other forms of slavery in the past. There are countless slave societies where race has played a determining role in defining slavery, or in defining the relations between master and slave.

However, it was in the Americas that the nexus between race and slavery was most effectively forged. At first, the demand for labor power was insensitive to skin color. The first to travel to the Americas, especially to the northern colonies, traveled as hired or paid servants.³ But these paid

³ Paid servant is a person who signs and is obliged by a deed to work for another person for a period of time specified especially in exchange for payment of travel and living expenses, such as accommodation, clothing, food, etc.



servants were not slaves. Although many were Irish or Scottish and therefore their status was very low in the English social and political system, they were not black. Plantation owners, however, needed long-term labor power; labor power that could be handled more intrusively and that would endure or that could be replaced cheaply and easily.

From the first contacts with the African continent, English society was already at that time predisposed to consider Africans culturally different and inferior. Of course this could be said of many upstarts, including many from the Celtic periphery. But there was a different attitude towards Africans and their local descendants. Black humanity had a special place in cultural demonology. From classical texts, biblical references, early narratives of travel to Africa, and later evidence of imported Africans, the English acquired a concept of black humanity that was more mythical than real. In the eyes of the English, Africans were savages. There were very few aspects of African life that were accepted by British perceptions of civilization. Africans were barbarian people brought from a barbaric continent and totally suited to the demand for labor in the Americas. Worse, because it served to form other British attitudes towards Africans, they were pagans and not Christians, and therefore even further below their social class. Of all these distinctions, the one that was most obvious and easiest to blame as the source of all the other faults, was the question of color.

The color black has had negative and powerful cultural assumptions for Anglophones. It was a color that had long suggested dirt, sin, evil, and the devil and his agents. Black was in contrast to the range of cultural values associated with white: purity, innocence, virtue, and the Virgin Mary. As a consequence of this Africans, being black, were considered sinful and ugly while Europeans were white like purity and beauty. Here was the conflict of deeply held cultural values, which found a particular form of the apparent differences between the two great races of humanity, the white and the black.

The black slave was used by the different white elites to shape the economic development of the North American continent. It was a way of working easily adaptable to different localities and different crops. Black Africans were then replaced by their locally born descendants and thus formed a labor force for the economic exploitation of the land throughout the country. But few doubted that



slave labor was a machine that drove the colonization and economic development of vast regions of the United States. During an important period in the history of the English-speaking world, from the early seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, black slave labor was the key development of the English colonies, and was vital to the wealth and development that transformed societies on both sides of the Atlantic.

After the Civil War, millions of African Americans who had previously been slaves hoped to join society on an equal footing. But by the 1900s, new laws and traditions in both the North and south had created a segregated society that condemned Americans of color to second-class citizens. In the South, blacks were denied the right to vote, remained impoverished and abused. The sharecropping system, which kept sharecroppers in permanent debt, was the substitute for slavery. Lynchings became a common practice in the South, particularly by the Ku Kux Klan and terrible deaths and tortures were committed in the presence of crowds. Segregation also extended to shops, theaters, libraries, hospitals, and churches, where there were separate places for blacks. However, in the north they found segregation as well. Most northern blacks lived in separate neighborhoods and attended separate schools, such as various forms of segregation.

The Great Migration was the relocation of about six million African Americans from rural communities in the South to the cities of the north and west of the country between 1815 and 1960. The economic motivations for emigration were the appalling conditions in the south, the limitations of the sharecropping system, and the continued racial oppression of racist laws. Other social factors influencing emigration included inefficient basic services, low wages, the unjust legal system, inequalities in education, and deprivation of the right to vote.

When World War I required industrial workers in northern factories, many southern blacks also saw an opportunity to leave behind the oppressive economic conditions in the South. At that time there was a great shortage of workers, as a result of the loss of millions of men who left the country to serve in the army, as well as the restriction of foreign immigration. When southern blacks finally reached the north, they found work in factories, slaughterhouses, and foundries. Immigrant women spent more work, as they found work mainly as domestic workers.



This excerpt from the introduction to *We Have a Dream*, edited by Diana Wells and Peter Skutches (1987), describes very well the situation of many black immigrants to the north:

History birthed a mythic North that continued long after the Emancipation Proclamations to lure black Americans from their impoverished, meager lives on the fringes of a segregated, southern, agrarian-based, and white-dominated society. Spurred by economic hopes, dreaming of an opportunity to be more than merely nominally free, they braved a journey that more often than not led to a dead-end menial jobs and a tenement in an urban ghetto. Reality increasingly failed to support the myth of northern prosperity so that by the 1950 the dream of "The Promised Land" [...] reverberated with cruel irony.

[La historia dio a luz a un Norte mítico que continuó mucho después de las Proclamaciones de Emancipación para atraer a los estadounidenses negros de sus pobres y exiguas vidas al margen de una sociedad segregada, sureña, agraria y dominada por los blancos. Espoleados por esperanzas económicas, soñando con la oportunidad de ser más que nominalmente libres, se enfrentaron a un viaje que, en la mayoría de los casos, los condujo a trabajos serviles sin salida y a una vivienda en un gueto urbano. La realidad fracasaba cada vez más en sustentar el mito de la prosperidad del norte, de modo que en 1950 el sueño de "La tierra prometida" [...] resonaba con cruel ironía] (p. 6).⁴

African Americans sought to change segregation with legal challenges all the way to the Supreme Court, pressuring presidents to enforce equality and lobbying Congress for changes in land law. They also held marches to demonstrate violence and segregation and to change local laws.

During the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people gathered in the capital to support the law on civil rights and equality at work. Martin Luther King, Jr. presented his famous *I Have a Dream* speech at the Lincoln Memorial. In 1965, the voting rights march was organized from Selma, the capital of Alabama; this march was accompanied by police violence and the deaths of three activists. The march took place again from March 21 to 25, and they arrived at

⁴ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.



Montgomery accompanied by Federal troops. In August 1965, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, which prohibited banning the right to vote on the grounds of race.

Already at this time civil rights activists were turning their attention to racial discrimination in the urban north and west. One of the most important figures in the radical wing of the civil rights movement of this era was Malcolm X, who was assassinated in Harlem, New York in 1965. In 1968, leader Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis. By the mid-70s, the black power movement had weakened.

The Black Movement in Literature

Both the nineteenth-century narratives and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s were the source of the revival of black literature in the 1980s. The 1920s, according to some African-American critics, witnessed the first flowering of black fiction that emerged from an exceptional coincidence of social changes: first, the great emigration of blacks from rural areas to urban centers in the north; and second, that they met the blacks of the north, free since the Revolutionary Wars and liberal whites fascinated with black culture (Johnson, 1989). These were the ingredients in creating a progressive and international black consciousness and culture.

Most significant of all this was that many of the prominent leaders of this pioneering new fiction were black women who, as a group, were long the invisible authors of a literary tradition almost as old as the nation itself.

The struggle from the earliest moments of black women to educate themselves and achieve an author's voice is closely associated with the search for freedom. Consequently, this affected their struggles and their empowerment. Toni Morrison said that "their strategies of survival became our maneuvers for power" [sus estrategias de supervivencia se convirtieron en nuestras maniobras de poder]⁵ (2008, p. 31). This continuity between the past and the present is crucial for them, because it created mutual bonds and obligation and a history of artistic expression.

⁵ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.



Contemporary black women writers explore their own experiences while questioning the contexts within which they are working as women and as black people. This means that they have to re-examine the important issues that concern their situation in American society and culture. In addition, this means that they had to reevaluate their history, and observe their relationship with white men and women, with black men, with their mothers and fathers and with their children. They had to see these relationships within the social context, still affected by racism and sexism and through the English language, a slave and colonialist language, a language to which they had to give new forms. As writers who have experienced life, not only as black women but also as women artists, they feel the need to illustrate parts of their experiences as black women that have been ignored or misunderstood.

Factors that shape and influence self-esteem

One of the most serious problems that blacks in the US have had to face for centuries is the low self-esteem that leads to violence, not only against others but against themselves as well.

Self-esteem is a term used in psychology to refer to a person's general assessment or appreciation of their own worth. Self-esteem has traditionally been defined as a stable sense of self-worth and worth (Rosenberg, 1965). This term is related to similar notions such as self-worth, self-consideration, and self-respect that all encompass the individual's beliefs about himself. In addition to this, self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-identity are important parts of self-esteem. According to most psychologists, self-esteem is divided into three categories (Jacob, 2014):

1. High self-esteem
2. Healthy or adequate self-esteem
3. Low self-esteem

The first condition, high self-esteem, refers to the exaggerated opinion of oneself; narcissists are included here. According to García Penedo (2011) many people value themselves highly because of the need to confront an inferiority complex. Narcissists are emotionally vulnerable people,



especially when their own self-esteem is attacked; their reaction is to manifest aggressively and seek to degrade others by criticizing or offending them. They tend to be manipulative in relationships with other people.

In the second case. For Rogers (1961) someone with a healthy self-esteem recognizes their limitations while maintaining an individual self-satisfaction that does not require continuous reinforcement. This means that you have the ability to accept yourself by recognizing your strengths and weaknesses while recognizing your worth. They feel good about themselves and look like they deserve the respect of others.

The third condition is obvious: when a person's image and achievements are insufficient or at a low level. When a person has low self-esteem, they are constantly worried about not being good enough. Moreover, this person needs constant positive external experiences or feedback, that is, praise or flattery to counteract the negative feelings and thoughts that constantly torment him. Even so, this positive feeling is temporary. Low self-esteem is also related to the inferiority complex, because their view of themselves, their physical attributes, or their ability to perform certain tasks is never enough. In this way, these individuals believe themselves to be incapable, insignificant, unsuccessful and worthless.

Self-esteem begins to form at an early age. A child's relationship with those around him (parents, siblings, teachers, his peers) is important for the development of self-esteem. The beliefs the child has about himself reflect what he has received from all those people. If the child's relationship was healthy and full of love, and the child has received appropriate attention and affection, then the child is more likely to see himself as having value. Similarly, having achievements and failures, being recognized by an authority figure contribute to healthy self-esteem.

However, low self-esteem can also originate during childhood (García Penedo, 2011). If a person did not receive enough love from his parents, he will constantly seek approval from others and worry about not being good enough. When certain goals are not met in childhood, they make the person feel unhappy, because they were never met. In addition, without the approval of parents and their peers, Maslow (1974) suggests that the child will feel weak, inferior. Other childhood



experiences, such as being physically or sexually abused or being bullied or bullied, can lead to low self-esteem.

The period of adolescence is important for the process of the formation of self-esteem. Adolescence is a critical period for the development of personal identity, as it is the period in which the question of Who am I answered? (Domínguez, 2014). To reach a stable personal identity and self-esteem. During adolescence, the development of personal identity and self-esteem can affect different conditions, such as physical changes and psychological changes during puberty, especially in one's personal or body image. Teens tend to be more self-aware, but their assessments can be unstable even at this stage, because they rely heavily on outside opinions.

Teens have a tendency to stereotype others and themselves. A triumph or failure could raise your self-esteem excessively or lower it substantially. And, characteristic of that age, they tend to catalog or give a nickname to a person just by having performed an action or quality, which explains the cruel way in which adolescents sometimes relate to each other.

A characteristic of black women writers is that they deal with the issue of self-esteem in their works. Claudia Tate (1985) reports that the theme of self-esteem is one of the most important in the works of African-American women writers. Her argument is that most of these women writers express that: "women must assume responsibility for strengthening their self-esteem by learning to love and appreciate themselves" [las mujeres deben asumir la responsabilidad de fortalecer su autoestima aprendiendo a amarse y apreciarse a sí mismas] (p. 23).⁶ Many black writers have emphasized the power of salvation and survival through telling their own stories.

***Los ojos azules* in the Context of African-American Literature**

The novel *Los ojos más azules* was published in 1969. Toni Morrison began writing this story as a short story in 1962, and it became a novel in progress in 1965. It was written, which is revealed by the dates, during the years of the most turbulent and critical transformations of African American life.

⁶ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.



One such transformation was the recognition of the beauty of black Americans. After centuries of coveting white dolls and decades of longing to look like the white stars of Hollywood, African Americans began to desire a new standard of beauty. This new standard was to be racially inclusive, allowing black to be seen as beautiful, but the need to advocate for this new standard revealed how firmly entrenched white beauty norms were.

In a new foreword to the novel for the 1994 reprint, Morrison revealed that she took the inspiration for her novel in part from a classmate in elementary school. This childhood friend wanted to have blue eyes, but Morrison hated that image: "[...] very blue eyes in a very black skin; the harm she was doing to my concept of the beautiful" [ojos muy azules en una piel muy negra; el daño que le estaba haciendo a mi concepto de la belleza] (Morrison, 2007, p. 12) (Morrison, 2007, p. 12).⁷

The novel was widely criticized during those times because it included incest, the disintegration of a family, black people's hatred of themselves, and brutality against black people by neighbors and their families. Reading the story of the rape of an innocent girl and its ensuing madness are also painful.

More recent reviews are more varied. The article by Linda Dittmar (1990), exposes that the novel has a pessimistic tone. The author also explores the political perspective of Toni Morrison, by analyzing the narrative and verbal structure of the novel. Dittmat says that:

[...] readers experience being caught in a trap—cycle of despair—and that experience suppresses the inspirational position suggested by the text and conveys the sense that social and political change are impossible.

[los lectores experimentan estar atrapados en una trampa (ciclo de desesperación) y esa experiencia suprime la posición inspiradora sugerida por el texto y transmite la sensación de que el cambio social y político es imposible] (p. 78)⁸

⁷ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.

⁸ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.



Nonetheless, many critics disagree with the assessment of Morrison's work as overwhelmingly pessimistic, and offer several reasons for the brutality and alienation in his fiction. Byerman (1985) argues that the world of his novel serves to signal the cruel and immoral social order. Royster & Martin (1977) claim that the harsh presentation of black life in the novel is to observe the cause that led them to that state. Susan Willis (1987) also insists that Morrison's depiction of black suffering and alienation is historically correct. In addition, he believes that the dislocation experienced by black families is the result of their relocation from the rural South to the urban North.

As for *El color púrpura*, many black men were upset with Walker because she did not describe good men in the novel as working fathers and workers. Gloria Steinem (1982) noted that a high number of these negative reviews were made by black men. They feared that the truth told by black women would be used against them in a racist society.

Moreover, Mary Helen Washington (1990) examines the description of women in Walker's work. And it classifies Walker's women into three categories Washington states that most of the female characters in Walker's work belong to the first part of the circle "the suspended women... are women who are cruelly exploited, spirits and bodies mutilated, relegated to the most narrow and confining lives, sometimes driven to madness"⁹ "they are cruelly exploited women, mutilated spirits and bodies, relegated to the narrowest and most confined lives, sometimes driven to madness." [las mujeres suspendidas ... son mujeres cruelmente explotadas, espíritus y cuerpos mutilados, relegadas a las vidas más estrechas y confinadas, a veces llevadas a la locura] (p. 139)¹⁰

To the second cycle belong the black women of the decades of the 40s and 50s. In these decades many black people wanted to assimilate into the mainstream of American life, even if this meant denying their own ethnicity: "the women in this cycle are also victims, not of physical violence, but a kind of psychic violence that alienates them from their roots, cutting them off from real contact." not of physical violence, but of a kind of psychic violence that takes them away from their

⁹ Mary Helen Washington's essay "An Essay on Alice Walker" can be found at *Study Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*, (Bell et.al, 1979, pp133-149).

¹⁰ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.



roots, taking them away from real contact." [Las mujeres de este ciclo también son víctimas, no de violencia física, sino de una especie de violencia psíquica que las aleja de sus raíces, apartándolas del contacto real]. (pp. 142-143).¹¹

Women in the third cycle are women from the late '60s, and some older women in Walker's fiction exhibit the same qualities. They are influenced by the political events of the 60s and the changes that resulted from the liberation movement. As a result, they are more aware of their political and psychological oppression. In addition to their political activism, these women decided to return to their roots and traditions. Washington (1997) responds to this by saying that: "[...] as they struggle to reclaim their past and to re-examine their relationship to the black community, there is a consequent reconciliation between themselves and black men" [Mientras luchan por recuperar su pasado y reexaminar su relación con la comunidad negra, hay una reconciliación consecuente entre ellos y los hombres negros]. (p. 146).¹²

Self-esteem in *Los ojos más azules*.

Morrison added the Prologue years after the publication of *Los ojos más azules*, apparently because many had not understood the essence of the book. In that foreword, the author wanted to explain the many ways in which systematic discrimination – racial and economic – can erode a person's sense of self-worth and the terrible consequences of accepting that rejection as legitimate. Also, how self-instilled hatred can lead to the destruction of identity and self-esteem. What's more, she wanted to show that by not having a sense of belonging or not having the support of family and friends, a person cannot have the emotional strength to overcome this situation. According to Morrison, the death of self-esteem can easily occur, especially in children.

Los ojos más azules was his attempt to demonstrate how a person could be influenced by others to accept the rejection of what is beautiful or not and how a person might not recognize the

¹¹ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.

¹² Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.



qualities he possesses. In addition, how the desire to arrive at an ideal image imposed by society could turn into racial self-hatred. In Morrison's words:

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question [...] And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. Dealing with it each according to his way [...] And Pecola. She hid behind hers. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed—peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask

[Los miraba y se preguntaba por qué eran tan feos; miró de cerca y no pudo encontrar la fuente. Entonces te diste cuenta de que venía de la convicción, su convicción. Era como si un misterioso maestro omnisciente le hubiera dado a cada uno un manto de fealdad para que se lo pusiera, y todos lo hubieran aceptado sin dudarlo [...] Y tomaron la fealdad en sus manos, la arrojaron como un manto sobre ellos y anduvieron por el mundo con ella. Lidiarlo cada uno a su manera [...] Y Pecola. Ella se escondió detrás de ella. Oculta, velada, eclipsada, asomando por detrás de la mortaja muy pocas veces, y luego solo para anhelar el regreso de su máscara]. (Morrison, 1970, p. 43).

Self-esteem in *El color púrpura*

El color púrpura reveals the narrator's oppression, the horrific unrepresented treatment she had suffered, as well as the will to seek a better life. Celie expresses the impact of oppression on her spirit as well as her self-esteem. She must undergo transformation and empowerment to grow an inner strength and her ultimate victory. *El color púrpura* especially reaffirms that one of the most abused people can still be transformed. This may also be made possible by "the survival and liberation of black women through the strength and wisdom of others" [la supervivencia y liberación de las mujeres negras a través de la fuerza y la sabiduría de los demás]¹³ and "the sisterhood [women] must share

¹³ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.



with each other" [la hermandad [las mujeres] deben compartirla entre sí], as Walker has repeatedly announced (quoted in Draper, 1992 p. 1810).¹⁴

For many years, Celie was denied control of her own body and life. She was victimized as a teenager through sexual abuse, bullying, and neglect. As a result, Celie had low self-esteem and hated herself. She hardened by refraining from feeling any emotion in order to endure: "[e]verybody say how good I is to Mr. _ children. I be good to them. But I don't feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo back not even like patting a dog. It more like patting another piece of wood" [todos dicen lo bueno que soy con el Sr. _ niños. Seré bueno con ellos. Pero no siento nada por ellos. Darle palmaditas en la espalda a Harpo ni siquiera era como palmear a un perro. Es más como palmear otro trozo de madera] (Walker, 1983, pp. 28-29).¹⁵

Celie's self-esteem growth is attributed to the influence of other women. Having met Shug and Sofia, their identity begins to be rebuilt. Celie learns from them as her role models, that a woman must have self-esteem to believe she deserves better and to have the will to move forward and defend herself. The letters that Nettie, her sister, sends her contribute to the establishment of her self-esteem and the changes she undergoes after reading them, are revealed when she revisits "the vision she had of her parents and the figure of God, to whom she has directed all her fears, doubts and worries in the most difficult moments" and admits that her Pa is not her father and knows that her children are alive and In this way, she develops a new sense of her consciousness for the first time in her life and gradually regains her own self-esteem and identity.

Discussion

African American women have been subject to oppression for many years. Both novels, *Los ojos azules* and *El color púrpura* examine women's reaction to various forms of oppression. They choose either a life of submission, anguish and pain by not defending themselves from abuse or choose to become women with an emerging growth, who resist and take control of their own lives. By deciding

¹⁴ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.

¹⁵ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.



not to agree to follow their oppressors, the characters in *El color púrpura* free themselves from the patriarchal norms that oppress them. The characters in *Los ojos más azules*, on the other hand, submit completely to the authority of their abusers.

In *El color púrpura*, we can see that the ability to endure and resist under the worst circumstances is the way for Celie's survival. She manages to endure the abuse of her stepfather, the loss of her children, the cruelty of her husband, and the loss of her sister. What's more, Celie's survival comes from the discovery about herself and her connection to other women.

She finds refuge in her sister; the thought that he is going to meet with her gives him hope constantly. In addition, she learns the power of solidarity through the bond with Sofia and Shug. From Sofia she learns to confront abusive men. Sofia convinces her that she has to defend herself: "*You ought to bash Mr ____ head opens, she say. Think about heaven later*" [Deberías golpear al Sr. ____ abrirle la cabeza, dice. Piensa en el cielo después]¹⁶ (Walker, 1983, p. 39). She convinces Celie that she needs to overcome her fears and stop caring about Albert's reaction, her husband, and the consequences of his action.

On the other hand, Shug teaches her to value herself. Celie feels a strong admiration for Shug Avery before meeting her, which intensifies as they strengthen their relationship. "*Eyes big, glossy. Feverish. And mean. Like, sick as she is, if a snake cross her path, she kill it*" [Ojos grandes, brillantes. Febril. Y enfermo como está ella, si una serpiente se cruza en su camino, la mata]. (p. 42).¹⁷ Even more important is that Shug acts as a guide for Celie, as an avenue to teach her how to appreciate herself and her body. Influenced by Sofia and Shug's strength and attitude, Celie gradually recovers from the abuse she has been a victim of. His relationship with other women allows him to change from a weak and submissive woman to a free and independent woman.

Similarly, Sofia resists being subdued. She is a woman endowed with strength and does not submit to the physical abuse of the men around her. While in prison, she acts passively in order to

¹⁶ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.

¹⁷ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.



survive. She endures years of imprisonment, beatings and servitude, but her spirit is not completely broken despite her submissive outward appearance.

Good behavior ain't good enough for them, say Sofia. Nothing less than sliding on your belly with your tongue on they boots can even git they attention. I dream of murder, she say, I dream of murder sleep or wake.

[El buen comportamiento no es suficiente para ellos, dice Sofía. Nada menos que deslizarse sobre su vientre con la lengua en las botas puede incluso llamar su atención. Sueño con asesinato, dice ella, sueño con asesinato, dormir o despertar] (p. 79).¹⁸

In contrast to the aforementioned female characters, the characters in *Los ojos más azules* do not challenge oppression. On the contrary, they submit and abide by it. In Pecola Breedlove's case, her self-perceived ugliness and experience of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her parents and the community makes her unable to grow as a person. There are several reasons for the destruction of your self-esteem.

First, she is unable to overcome the extreme embarrassment of her appearance. She internalizes a self-hatred by believing that the reason for her suffering comes from a personal deficiency. Observing the behavior of other people around her, she comes to fatally believe that, if she had blue eyes, she would receive the attention and love she desires:

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different... If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes".

[A Pecola se le había ocurrido hace algún tiempo que si sus ojos, esos ojos que sostenían las imágenes, y conocían las miradas, si esos ojos suyos fueran diferentes, es decir, hermosos, ella misma sería diferente ... Si ella se viera diferente, hermosa, tal vez Cholly sería diferente, y la

¹⁸ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.



Sra. Breedlove también. Tal vez dirían: "Vaya, mira a la bella Pecola. No debemos hacer cosas malas frente a esos bonitos ojos"] (Morrison, 1970, p. 40).¹⁹

Second, she doesn't get enough support or love from her parents or real help from the community of women around her. On the contrary, her mother treats her with disdain and despises her for not being like the beautiful white girl she takes care of. That's why when Pecola is raped by her father, she breaks down psychologically and becomes more desperate to have blue eyes. After she visits the community psychic named Soaphead, who manipulates her into poisoning the landlord's dog, she goes completely crazy and believes that she really has blue eyes. As his mind is damaged beyond all hope, Pecola withdraws from reality and ends up living in the imaginary world of his trauma.

On the other hand, Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother, is a similar case. She always felt different and isolated. Pauline also suffered from her appearance for a long time. She was never singled out or noticed like her siblings, she never felt special. She blamed having an accident on one foot, which made her lim. When he moves north with his family, he realizes he didn't fit into the black middle class. In the integrated North, to be accepted you had to look like whites. But Pauline was not accepted because of her peculiar appearance and her Southern accent and background. For this reason he went to the cinema to immerse himself in the imaginary world of movies, and began to identify beauty with white actresses:

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap.

[Junto con la idea del amor romántico, conoció otra: la belleza física. Probablemente las ideas más destructivas de la historia del pensamiento humano. Ambos se originaron en la envidia, prosperaron en la inseguridad y terminaron en la desilusión. Al equiparar la belleza

¹⁹ Translation of the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.



física con la virtud, se despojó de la mente, la ató y acumuló el desprecio por sí misma a montones.] (Morrison, 1970, p. 97).²⁰

To top it off, she loses one of her incisors, which reaffirms her belief that she was very ugly. Over time she begins to treat her own family with the same contempt with which most people treated her. She internalizes that anger and throws self-hatred at her daughter, which gradually leads her to dementia. In the end she lets her physical appearance and the treatment she receives from others define her as of little value and ugly, leading her into submission.

Each female character in the two novels is the victim of unfair and abusive treatment in different ways. To reserve or expand their self-esteem, these characters make personal choices that concern their development as integral human beings. However, their reactions to oppression ultimately define their ability to endure or succumb under the pressure of abuse. Some, like Pecola and Pauline, submit completely to the control of their abusers; others, such as Celie, Shug and Sofia, refuse to submit to their oppressors.

Conclusions

History has been shown to be crucial for African-American women writers. It has remained for decades an essential part of his works, as a means of recreating situations arising from significant events, which have long had a decisive influence on black families.

By forging a link between history and fiction, these writers have enabled readers to better understand the effects of historical forces on their attempts to dehumanize the black population, which dates back to the time of the slave trade. In addition, it is extraordinary how women writers define historical events through the individual experiences of black people, which helps motivate readers.

²⁰ Translation of the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.



The traumatic consequences of inequalities, prejudices, discrimination, violence (both physical and psychological), resulted in the destruction of the self-esteem of many African Americans.

Self development begins in the early ages of childhood and adolescence. When, apart from the social forces that try to crush the black population, there is no adequate emotional gratification of parents, family and community, the results are self-hatred and destructive tendencies.

Morrison and Walker describe the social structures of oppression and how their female characters confront those structures. Some characters fight their oppressors and resist them, others endure their situation and become resilient; meanwhile, others are lost in the process, and are subjected to those structures. The characters' reactions to oppression in *Los ojos más azules* resulted in the submission of Pecola and Pauline Breedlove and the total loss of self-esteem, while in *El color púrpura* the continued resilience of Celie, Shug and Sofia led to their upward development, endurance and survival.

The female characters in *Los ojos más azules* accepted the rejection of others and despised their own race and identity. Their reaction to oppression led them to become submissive to the authority of others. Many factors exerted their influence on them. In the case of Pauline Breedlove, she was unable to develop as a healthy person, due to several unfortunate experiences in her life: the hostility of the white and black people of the north, the deformity of her body and the great poverty. On the other hand, Pecola's submission and ultimate loss of self-esteem are the result of the mistreatment of those who were supposed to protect her, the community that rejected her, and her devastating desire to have blue eyes to meet the stereotype of beauty imposed by society.

The female characters of *El color púrpura*, Celie, Shug and Sofia, managed to resist their misfortunes. They resisted oppression and refused to bow to the demands of men and their resilient attitudes eventually helped them survive. In Celie's case, she always stood firm under his suffering. At one point she began to defend herself because of the solidarity of other women and was able to regain her self-esteem. Shug always refused to tolerate the demands of society. Sofia resisted prison for many years; although in that process he lost some of his mental health, he never fully submitted.



Toni Morrison closed the circle of infertility images with which she began her novel *Los ojos más azules*, with these words "Certain seeds [the soil] will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce, and say the victim had no right to live" [Ciertas semillas [el suelo] no nutrirán, cierto fruto no dará, y cuando la tierra mata por su propia voluntad, aceptamos y decimos que la víctima no tenía derecho a vivir.]²¹ (Morrison, 1970, p. p. 160). This indicated that the search for an integral self had been fruitless; that the search for Pecola and his parents was doomed to failure.

Finally, these final lines of a poem²² by Alice Walker aptly summarize her perspective in *El color púrpura*: *the healing/of all our wounds/is forgiveness/that permits a promise/of our return/at the end*. [the healing / of all our wounds / is forgiveness / that allows a promise / of our return / in the end].²³

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²¹ Some seeds the earth will not cultivate, some fruits will not be born, and when the earth kills of its own volition, we are satisfied, and we say that the victim did not have the right to live."

²² Walker's poem "Stripping Bark from Myself" in: Walker, A. (1984). Good Night Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning. In: *Black Women Writers 1950-1980: A Critical Evaluation*, p. 475.

²³ Translation by the journal editorial team *Sincronía*.



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