

# The handmaids tale and the color purple

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“ How are the two female protagonists Offred from “ The Handmaid’s Tale” by Magaret Atwood and Celie from “ The Color Purple” by Alice Walker oppressed by men, in what ways are their situations similar and how do they deal with the pressure and abuse? ” Abstract The purpose of this essay is to look at how the two protagonist women, Offred from “ The Handmaid’s Tale” and Celie from “ The Color Purple” are treated in literature.

This essay aims to answer the question: “ How are the two protagonist women Offred from “ The handmaid’s tale” and Celie from “ The Color Purple” oppressed by the circumstances, the society they live in and the men in their lives and in what ways are their situations are similar? ”, focusing on the similarities between their situations and how they deal with the pressure and abuse. Both authors are particularly strong women in literature who write about the oppression of two women within society.

The two protagonist women, Offred and Celie, were selected because they live within similar circumstances in which they are subjugated and abused by men. The situations of the two women will be examined, compared and contrasted. The conclusion I arrived at, is that both female protagonist women suffer from oppression and abuse by the men in their lives. The two women suffer from the subjugation and live within similar circumstances in which they are exploited by their functions, surroundings and their situation.

Even though both women face many difficulties and struggle to emerge as women, they grow stronger and gain strength in their lives throughout time. Research was carried out on the internet, through literary study guides and other people’s literary criticisms. The other people’s literary criticisms were

not particularly useful, since they did not concentrate on the protagonists situation and oppression, but focused merely on how the literary works could be examined and interpreted and what the author's intentions were.

However, what I found out how both protagonists were treated within their society and how they developed over time.

Both women were very resourceful, they showed inner strength, becoming independent and stronger and gaining strength in their lives. Word count:

297 Contents Page Research Question.... pg. 4 Introduction..... pg. 4

Main Body.....pg. 4 – 12 Bibliography..... pg. 13 Research Question:

How are the two female protagonists Offred from “ The Handmaid’s Tale” by Magaret Atwood and Celie from “ The Color Purple” by Alice Walker

oppressed by men, in what ways are their situations similar and how do they deal with the pressure and abuse?

Throughout history, women have tried to oppose the male-dominated world and aimed to gain control, respectand social authority. Women were often ranked inferior to men; legal, political and social rights were restricted and controlled at the beginning of the century. It was forbidden for women to vote or to have political or social influence. They were excluded from any form of educationand had hardly any rights over their personal belongings, they were expected to work at home and take care of the children.

This literary essay will deal with the two books “ The Handmaid’s Tale” by Magaret Atwood and “ The Color Purple” by Alice Walker. It will focus on how Offred from “ The handmaid’s tale” and Celie from “ The Color Purple” are oppressed by men and in what ways their situations are similar. It will also

discuss how the two women dealt with the pressure and abuse. “The Color Purple” by Alice Walker is considered controversial in the way Celie as a woman is presented in the novel. Some have argued that it is about revenge and struggle, or a novel exploring protest against oppression.

Celie is the victim of violence and powerlessness at the beginning of the novel and feels the only person she can talk to is God; it is through her letters to him that we learn about her life and her situation. When Celie’s mother becomes ill, Celie is set to take over her mother’s responsibilities and duties. She is treated like a slave and incessantly beaten and raped by her stepfather who sells her to Mr. \_\_\_\_ to marry, who also verbally and physically abuses her. She is subservient and dependent to men, Celie must obey her husband and take care of his children and do the housework.

There are numerous scenes of violence throughout the first half of the novel, Celie is sexually abused by her father and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. In one of her letters to God, Celie writes about her children. She writes that they were conceived through incest by her stepfather and killed thereafter. Nettie who is Celie’s sister comforts Celie and takes care of her by not judging her and offering her understanding. Because Celie is not allowed to go to school but has to work at home, Nettie teaches her what she is learning at school.

In return, Celie agrees to take care of her. Throughout the novel, Alice Walker takes the young girl on a journey of self-discovery, “I feels like shit but I felt like shit before in my life (...) The first two months was hell though, I tell the world (...) And I try to teach my heart not to want nothing it cant have.” Celie also talks about her stepfather and how even though she had

children from him, she does not hate him, “ I don’t hate him (...) Look like he trying to make something out of himself. (...) When you talk to him now he really listen. Celie realizes that people can change and she believes even her stepfather has changed and has become a better person, regardless of what he has done to her. Celie escapes from her oppressive husband when she falls in love with Shug Avery, by starting a new chapter in her life, she becomes progressively independent, this helps lead her journey through self-actualization. Because Celie’s character and strength grows and develops throughout the years, she manages to get along with life “ just fine” and leads a fulfilling life.

She does not feel abhorrence or hate towards those who subjugated her and towards the end of the novel she has learnt to forgive and forget and is able to stand up for herself which illustrates her inner power and coherence with her past and the person she has become. Margaret Atwood’s Novel “ The Handmaid’s Tale” was written at the height of the feminist movement. She creates “ a lack of distance between the two societies” as Magali Cornier Michael states in “ Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse”.

She also says that story is told by a “ self-conscious first-person narrator, Offred”. She is a handmaid in the Republic of Gilead who finds it hard to adapt to the circumstances and situation of the social order. In this society, women have no rights or money unless they are married. Women are men's possessions and are treated as low-graded beings “(...) ladies in reduced circumstances. That is what we are now” . They and are grouped into categories concerning their age and fertility. Their function and status within

society is depends on heir relationship with men and their fertility. If women are fertile, it is possible for them to become sex slaves to Commanders. Infertile or “ unwomen” have to “ go to the colonies (...) with the unwomen, and starve do death. ” The wives and their daughters are the most powerful and high ranking women in the Gilead society who look down upon the other women. The aunts are those who educate and guide the Handmaids and the Marthas are elderly infertile women who serve forfamilyand household functions.

The Econowives who marry low ranking men are those with the most flexible role in the Gilead society and Handmaids are the women who are looked down upon by other women. The novel begins with an oppressed handmaid in a training camp, where the girls are educated and educated to submit to being a handmaid. Offred lived a normal life before she was taken to the training camp; throughout the novel the reader gets an insight of her life before through flashbacks. Offred lives a restricted life and struggles to deal with this, she knew a different life before and finds it hard to adapt to the new condition she has to live in.

In “ The Handmaid’s Tale”, Offred is oppressed not just by the commander and his wife Serena Joy, but also by her surroundings, the others with more power such as the Faculty of the Red Centre, but also by the regime which she lives under, Gilead. “(...) Gilead features an extremely hierarchical social structure, with men in power over women and with set classes of men and women controlling other classes. ” To keep the government in position and uphold control of society, the government setup a separation within society.

Women were allocated to groups according to their purpose and their fertility.

Also, the people had to wear uniforms based on the groups they were in. Their power to be able to choose was taken away from them. Magali Cornier Michael states this in her book “Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse”, “Gilead’s extreme categorization of its human population highlights the oppressive potential of establishing fixed boundaries (...) constructing hierarchical oppositions.” This encouraged jealousy between the different groups. Although both books are written in different time frames, future and present, the two women protagonist’s situations are similar. Both Celie and Offred are victims of society and their relationships.

There are various occasions in which Offred describes her situation, of her new life mesmerized in the red factory and the people in control. “We weren’t allowed out, except for our walks twice daily, two by two around the football field which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire.” The angels (...) were objects of fear to us. If only we could talk to them.” She describes handmaids as, “(...) ladies in reduced circumstances. That is what we are now. The circumstances have been reduced.” She also says, “We are for the breeding purposes (...) We are two-legged wombs, that’s all. The quotes describe the restrictions the handmaids had, Offred’s freedom was very limited, she is captured within those walls, and her duty is to maintain the population. Celie, too, lives in a comparable situation, in which she is imprisoned in her own home. She has no say and is told what to do not only by her stepfather but also by Mr. \_\_\_\_

when she lives with him. Mr. \_\_\_ wants to keep her inside to do the house work and take care of his children. That is Celie's main and only duty, she has no other choice than to obey her husband and stay within the boundaries of her house.

Mr. \_\_\_ tells Celie what to do and makes her work day and night, " He tell me, Wash this. Iron that. Look for this. Look for that. Find this. Find that. " And "(...) he say, You better git on back to the field. " Celie is a prisoner to her situation, her past and her situation make her feel like she has no chance of surviving without Mr. \_\_\_, " Got to stay with him. Else, what you gon do? " Mr. \_\_\_ does not take Celie out to the places he goes; she lives under his rules and restrictions, " Mr. \_\_\_ didn't want me to come. Wives don't go to places like that (...) My wife can't do this.

My wife can't do that. No wife of mines... He go on and on. " She feels she is dependant on Mr. \_\_\_ and stands no chance alone, " A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something. " Also, Celie is kept from seeing her children by her husband, " I say, (...) It been five years. " Both women are very restricted and controlled in their situations, they live under reduced conditions, they do not have the right to express and develop themselves without limits and have strict boundaries in which they are not allowed to communicate.

In the case of Offred and her obedience, has to live in a single room. The only way of communicating with others is through lip-reading or touching each others hands in the distance, " We learned to whisper almost without a sound. In the semidarkness, we could stretch out our arms (...) and touch



each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read (...) in this way we exchanged names. " The handmaids have no other way of communicating; this is the only way Offred is able to make contact with others, even for a few words she could be ruthlessly punish.

It is not just verbal communication that is punished but also writing; " writing in any case is forbidden. " What is unjustified is that " The aunts were allowed to read and write. " This is just another way of keeping the handmaids in control and subjugating them within the entire system. She longs for talk and communication with others, even if it is gossip which she used to despise and she changes her values to adjust to her new life. She describes this in the first chapter, " Sometimes I listen outside closed doors, a thing I never would have done in the time before (...) How I used to despise such talk.

Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts. " This demonstrates one of the many ways in which she is being oppressed by the people with power and by her surroundings. Celie's circumstances are similar, she has no way of communicating with her sister whom she loves " He been keeping your letters, say Shug. " Through writing prayers and letters to her sister, Celie conveys her fears, regrets and her experience throughout the book. Nettie also writes letters to her sister, not knowing that Mr. \_\_\_ is keeping them from Celie, " Any more letters from Nettie come? ...) If they did, he say, I wouldn't give ' em to you" , " The only piece of mail Mr. \_\_\_ ever put directly in my hand is a telegram that come from United States Department of Defence. It say the ship you and the children and your

husband left Africa in was sunk by German mines off the coast someplace called Gibraltar. (...) All letters I wrote to you over the years come back unopen” Mr. \_\_\_ keeps all her received letters from Nettie to ensure they do not communicate, “ Every day when Mr. \_\_\_ come from the mailbox I hope for news. But nothing come. ...) He never say nothing bout it, just put it in his inside pocket. ” Similar to Offred’s restricted way of “ communicating” with others, Celie who can hardly bear her circumstances sees no other person to talk to and no way out. Therefore she decides to write to God, “ I remember one time, you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn’t even talk about it to God you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was. ” Nettie reminds the reader of Celie’s situation in which she was too ashamed to even talk to God.

Offred differs in as much, as she knew a different life before and has to put up with the circumstances she is living in; her choices are eradicated in every day life. She used to have freedom to choose, to think and lead her own life, now she has to either become pregnant or she would have to “ Go to the colonies, (...) with the Unwomen, and starve to death. ” Offred is fully aware of the consequences if she does not get pregnant soon, therefore she is pressured to become pregnant and her time is running out, “(...) because I know. Give me children, or else I die. Offred is oppressed too by her circumstances, not just through living inside this reformatory; also her identity is taken from her and inability to communicate. She is one of many Handmaids and can therefore not be the individual she wants to be, she has to act and obey based on her alignment and purpose. Celie suffers as well, she struggles to emerge as a woman in her situation and her surroundings,

she stays isolated and has no control over her life and no power. Similar to Offred who is “ owned” by Gilead, Celie is a possession and has no choice.

Both female protagonists suffer from oppression by the men in their lives. They are physically, mentally and verbally abused. In the case of Offred’s situation, there is a vicious cycle in which she has no power against those in charge, who have power in the Gilead society, “ Gilead’s overt positioning of women as inferior to men, regardless of class, parallels or less overt ways. ” The legal system is entirely in the hands of Gilead’s hierarchy, there is no possibility of legal appeal against the laws.

The commander and the Doctor are two of the people who have power in the Gilead society; they are in the higher positions in the hierarchy and therefore also have the power to oppress those without power such as Offred. She is the commander’s victim, his possession, he has the power to throw her out if he wishes, “ He has something we don’t have, he has the word. ” Among other things, one of the ways he uses his power and control over her is by making her risk her life for his pleasure when he makes her meet him face to face in his office at night. “ My presence here is illegal.

It is forbidden for us to be alone with the commanders. It is forbidden for handmaids to be alone in a closed room with the commander (...) I could become an Unwoman. But to refuse to see him would be worse. There’s no doubt about who holds the real power. (...) Not even Serena Joy comes here. ” This confirms once again who has the power in the Gilead society and who the one a victim of the power holder is. He also asks her to kiss him, “ I want you to kiss me. ” he is playing with her as she cannot refuse even though

she wants to refuse the request. “ What he is fucking is the lower part of my body.

I do not say making love because this is not what he’s doing. What’s going on in this room (...) has nothing to do with passion or love or romance. (...) It has nothing to do with sexual desire. ” This quote is evidence for how Offred feels abused by the “ ceremony” and it shows how sex is not exciting or pleasurable, it is merely for the sake of reproducing. She is used like an object which is there only to reproduce and to fulfill her function. This is clearly one of the ways in which Offred is abused and oppressed by those in power and the regulations and control of Gilead’s forces.

The doctor also dominates her because he has the power. He offers her to get pregnant from him “ I could help you. I’ve helped others. ” Offred feels like she has to obey him and says “ I must leave the impression that I am not offended, that I’m open to suggestion. (...) The knowledge of his power hangs nevertheless in the air. ” She is aware of his power and is oppressed by him because she cannot refuse or else he could declare her as sterile and no one would question the doctor’s decision. The doctor therefore plays a key role in the subjugation of Offred.

Also, because of the male-dominated regime, women are the ones who are blamed for their failure if they cannot have a child, “ Gilead cannot admit that men have any biological deficiencies; instead, the regime blames women for all failures at reproduction. ” Celie deals with a similar situation; she is repeatedly physically and verbally abused by the men who have control of her life. She tells the reader how she was never loved and how Mr. \_\_ came

to get her after her mother died, “ My mama die (...) My sister Nettie run away. Mr. \_\_\_ come git me to take care his rotten children.

He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me. ” Her stepfather is one of the men in her life who physically and mentally abused her, he makes her promise not to tell anybody about what he has been doing to her, “ you better not never tell nobody but god. It’d kill your mammy” In one of the letters she talks about how her stepfather “ push his thing inside my pussy” and describes sex as something, which is done to her rather than something which she enjoys.

Already at a young age when Celie used to cry, her stepfather tells her to get used to it, “ I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. ” Celie’s stepfather does not respect her and intrudes upon every aspect of her life, „ He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say you gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t” Celie’s stepfather thinks poorly of her and wants to get rid of her saying “ She ugly. He say. But she ain’t no stranger tohard work. (...) You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’s gonna make you feed it or clothe it. ...) She ain’t smart either. (...) You have to watch her or she’ll give away everything you own. (...) she tell lies. ” He also says, “ got to it rid of her. (...) she a bad influence on my other girls. ” Her stepfather does not want Nettie to marry Mr. \_\_\_, he wants her to go to school and to have opportunities in life and learn things. He does not care about Celie’s schooling, “ I can’t let you have Nettie. (...) I want her to git some more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her. But I can let you

have Celie” . “ Pa took me out of school. He never care that I love it. ...) You too dumb to keep going to school. ” Another way in which Celie is oppressed is by her husband Mr. \_\_, who also brutally beats her and sexually abuses her, “ He beat me like he beat the children. ” Mr. \_\_ uses Celie to fulfill his sexual desires careless of how she feels or what she is thinking: “ Mr. \_\_ clam on top of me, do his business (...) He git up there and enjoy himself (...) no matter what I’m thinking. No matter what I feel. It just him. ” “ Most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel (...) Just do his business, get off, go to sleep. Mr. \_\_ disrespects Celie as well, “ look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. (...) you nothing at all. ” Celie is considered ugly and is discriminated due to her race and gender. Celie’s attitude shows that she is not willing to fight, she accepts that she is the victim and she is being oppressed. She lets it happen to herself, her spirit has already given up from the start. Nettie tells Celie to not let Mr. \_\_ and his children run over her and control her life but Celie says they have the power, “ Don’t let them run over you, Nettie say.

You got to let em know who got the upper hand. They got it, I say(...) but I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive. ” Offred’s attitude towards her oppression is different. Even though she has no power and cannot rebel against those with more power, deep inside her she is at war with them. Even though Offred is oppressed by the society and her surroundings, she knows her weaknesses and she knows what where her boundaries are, “ To want is to have a weakness. It’s this weakness, whatever it is, that entices me. It’s like a small crack in the wall, before now impenetrable. She controls her anger and rebellion within her, as she knows

how far she can go and where her limitations are, “ I could scream. I could run away. (...) I steel myself. ” Concluding, it can be stated that both female women protagonists suffer from oppression. The two women are not only oppressed by their surroundings and their situation, but most importantly by the men in their lives. They both struggle to emerge as women in their environments and both of them are there to serve a purpose. Both women are discriminated against in one way or another and are devalued by the men in their lives.

Offred's purpose is to reproduce and she is treated like an object and Celie's purpose is to serve as a good housewife who takes care of her husband and his children and fulfils his sexual desires. The two characters are very powerful in their contemporary context as well, even though they are emancipated and oppressed in many ways. Subjugation is reflected in today's society as well. Both women are set on their own and must deal with their situations by themselves, growing stronger and emerging and gaining strength in their lives throughout time. Word Count: 3840 Bibliography

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