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*Intersectionality and identity and politics in Alice  
Walker's The color purple (1982) and Kiley Reid's such  
a fun age (2019)*

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## **Dedication**

To my beloved parents  
To my dear brothers and sisters  
To my dear fiancé Mustapha  
To my best friend Malha  
Whom I love very much

**Sabrina**

To my beloved parents  
To my sisters and brothers  
To my dear friends  
Whom I love very much

**Kahina**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation has attempted a comparative study of *The color purple* (1982) by Alice Walker and *Such a fun age* (2019) by Kiley Reid, through the lenses of Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and Patricia Hill Collins' Black feminist thought (1990). The first chapter has relied on Crenshaw's intersectional theory in its three overlapping layers to analyze the complex intertwining of race, gender, and class as they manifest in Walker and Reid's novels. The chapter has highlighted how intersectional barriers limit Black women's prospects and access to professional opportunities and personal freedom. The second chapter has drawn from Collins' work to examine how Black women in both novels resist dominant stereotypes and seek to reclaim and assert their identities through silence, community, and artistic expression. Ultimately, this study has shown that despite their differences in form and historical periods, both novels have portrayed Black women's struggle for self-definition in environments structured to misrepresent them. The intersectional analysis of the works has therefore not only bridged the historical gap between the two works, but has also revealed the complexity and resilience of Black women through time.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, racism, sexism, *Such a fun age*, *The color purple*...

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## **I. Introduction**

The history of the United States of America has always involved the intersection of different ethnic groups from the indigenous population of the continent to Black people brought in as slaves in the transatlantic slave trade. Though slavery was abolished in 1865 with the adoption of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, and Black people have claimed their rights on many levels, there remains to this day a racial sensitivity in the country, due to the different ideological currents that have made historical oppression less visible, but still deeply rooted in modern society. These currents range from economic inequality and educational gaps to subtle cultural codes and micro-aggressions that shape the Black American experience to this day, like racial profiling by the police, and unequal employment opportunities. To interpret such persistent realities, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is essential because it examines how overlapping identities like race, gender, and class shape the Black experience in society.

In the realm of literature, stories often serve as mirrors to these complexities of social structures and individual experiences in various forms. Literature comments on, critiques, and shapes the public awareness of the manifold issues to be found in society, and brings attention to marginalized voices in order to reclaim their narratives and self-agencies from the hegemonic influences of the dominant classes. In the United States, this is done by Black feminists or womanists who resurrected the voice of the Black woman from being controlled, silenced, or stereotyped in mainstream media. This act of defiance against the effacement of the female experience in racially, culturally, and politically charged climates saw a huge success and brought interest to the academic exploration of the components of Black women's identities as well their unique struggles that white feminism did not venture into. Crenshaw argues that "these problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140), which is what

led to the development of a framework known as the theory of intersectionality, which examines how various elements of identity such as race, sexuality, and class overlap and create an intersectional environment where various struggles collide. This means that they cannot be analyzed individually, therefore they combust into a complex dynamic of misogyny, racism, and class stratification. Crenshaw diagnosed the Black woman's life in order to expand the reach of traditional white feminism that did not take into account other ethnicities, and offer a dissection of the ramification of these inequalities on the American society. While Crenshaw's work is analytical of the issues more than liberation from them, Patricia Hill Collins expands the framework of Crenshaw's work and dives into the reclamation of agency and identity in the midst of all these complexities. Collins first identifies her individual perspective on social marginalization before defying it by insisting that Black women's living spaces function as sites for creating knowledge and existing with agency.

Applying the ideas of Crenshaw and Collins to literature then allows for a deeper understanding of how characters navigate and resist multiple axes of oppression. This comparative study between Alice Walker's *The color purple* first published in 1982 and Kiley Reid's *Such a fun age* (2019) uses these concepts to analyze the layered experiences of Black women in different historical and social contexts, revealing the continuity of the struggle for agency and equality across different historical eras. This study therefore aims to investigate the parallels and differences between these two novels, and examine how each of them portrays the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in the lives of the protagonists and then analyze the protagonists' journeys towards self-realization.

## **1. Review of the Literature**

Our two main sources are widely studied novels. On the one hand, Alice Walker's *The color purple* is set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and has won the Pulitzer prize for fiction in 1983

and has become a classic that is taught in educational institutions across the USA. On the other hand, Kiley Reid's *Such a fun age* is a debut novel that centers the life of a young woman in the digital age of 2015. It received positive reviews and was long-listed for the 2020 Booker prize. This explains the great deal of research that has been conducted on the novels from a variety of perspectives, each highlighting unique issues and themes in the works.

*The color purple* in particular is not only a popular and successful novel, but a polarizing one as well within the Black women critics. While it was highly praised by the likes of Gloria Steinam, an important figure of the 1960s wave of feminism in America, this very praise is criticized by Trudier Harris in her article entitled "*On The color purple, stereotypes, and silence*" (1984), about the vice of silence in Walker's novel. Her arguments about the shortcomings of the plot were not the only focal point of her article, which also conveyed a wider frustration with how critics were reluctant to treat the novel objectively precisely because it was written by a Black woman. Harris's opinions on the book range from discussing the plot as unrealistic and historically inaccurate, to interrogating the negative depictions of the male characters, to showing that Walker's intentions with the novel and Celie's actions directly contradict the author's statements on the importance of reclaiming Black people's experiences from the stereotypes that white people popularized. Harris's perspective is particularly refreshing in that it does not follow the standard objective and impersonal academic writing, carrying instead the issues of *The color purple* in its bones. Harris grapples with issues of silencing constructive criticism, especially in the early years of the novel, offering a realistic vantage point into the sensitivities of Black authors and their writings in the eighties America because "the media, by its very racist nature, seems to be able to focus on only one Black writer at a time" (Harris, 1984, p. 155). These strong opinions highlight racism not only in the *The color purple*, but also in invisible ways that the media

tricks readers into thinking the problem of racism has been solved (Harris, 1984). However, though Harris's frustration is understandable, her critique overlooks the deliberate use of hyperbolic suffering to highlight systemic oppression. Similarly, the male characters' extremities serve to intensify the stakes of Celie's evolution.

Another perspective comes from Marc-A Christophe in his article on existentialism, in which he analyzes it from the viewpoint of the awakening of Celie's identity separately from the one her husband had assigned her. Relying on Jean Paul Sartre's commentary on identity in dominant and subjected groups, as well as Simone de Beauvoir's views on female performativity as cited in the article of Christophe (1993), he argues that Celie's choices reflected a quiet rebellion against not only her husband, but also against the dominant patriarchal gaze, and traces her identity as it shifted from object to subject. Additionally, the critic contends with the complexities of Celie's gaining of agency, Shug's bisexuality, and the relationship between the two characters. Furthermore, he explains that the psychology behind their romance was not mere "transsexual neurosis," but a desire to capture individuality even if the model they had for individuality came from the male characters. In this regard, Christophe says that "one may contend that the so-called feminine essence is more societal than inherent, that it is more a set of learnt behaviors than predetermined ones" (Christophe, 1993, p. 287). His analysis follows the development of Celie's story until the full establishment of her identity which Christophe praises for being all-rounded and nuanced.

We also have the thorough and perceptive critique of Alice Walker's *The color purple* by Ruth El Saffar (1985) which highlights the book's multifaceted themes and cultural relevance. She indicates the amalgamation of factors that led to the unique struggles of Celie in the novel with an emphasis on her physical attributes. In addition to that, the critic maps the plotline of *The color purple* after biblical myths. She explains parallels between the setting in *The color purple* and the biblical story of Eden, specifically by tracing the symbolisms of

words mentioned in the novel such as the serpent, and folk beliefs notably in the African society where Celie's sister, Nettie resided. Celie also transcended the male-centered god narratives and through these elements of myth, the novel is brought towards a romantic archetypal ending that involves the restoration of harmony, reunion of separated characters, and the triumph of love and personal growth. El Saffar says in this regard: "in true romance fashion, all that which was separated has been brought back together, and the ones redeemed by love have been restored to their rightful place, true heirs of the Garden, true sons and daughters of love, of Spirit" (El Saffar, 1985, p. 17). All these studies do not puncture the ceiling of the readings done on Walker's *The color purple* given the possibility it harbors in its pages for manifold interpretations from various points of view that enrich the discussion on womanist literature, particularly in America.

El Saffar frames *The color purple* through mythic and romantic archetypes and presents Celie's journey as a universal narrative of redemption. Christophe, by contrast, emphasizes the social performativity that shapes Celie's identity. Together, these readings show that Walker's novel operates on multiple levels, symbolic, universal, and socially aware.

When it comes to Kiley Reid's *Such a fun age* (2019), the novel has sparked a proliferation of reviews online, with major publications engaging with the racially and politically charged atmosphere the novel took place in. The very title of the novel garnered its own articles, with Ilana Masad unfolding the many layers of meaning the title carries, from ambiguities about what it actually refers to, to it being a satirical phrase to criticize the 2015 performative white feminism that raided America, "'Fun Age' might be our own, prior to the 2016 [presidential] election – an age that was considered by some to be magically post-racist and post-sexist" (Masad, 2019). This reveals social prejudice buried under politically correct rhetoric that masked real issues of both race and gender.

The novel thus educates the readers about the complexity of sympathy from white people as they are often unaware of the unique challenges of being Black. Constance Grady offers a particularly pertinent lens to this issue, in her article provocatively entitled “*In Such a fun age, everyone wants the Black girl’s attention, but she just wants a real job*” (2020) referring to the protagonist Emira’s struggle to find real economic opportunities to build a career, and who is babysitting an upper-class family’s babies. Her article focused on the struggles of Emira in getting a real job in an environment that did not see her beyond her Blackness, and that used her to reinforce white ideas of inclusion and care. Grady explains that “she believes that if Emira can see all this about Alix [her interest in Black authors and supporting Black-owned businesses], she’ll like her; and if Emira likes her, it will prove that Alix is a good and virtuous white person who is also hip and young and Fun” (Grady, 2020).

*Such a fun age* despite its recent publication then garnered interest because of the way it exposes the micro-infringements on Black women’s liberties, as it did not shy from presenting the awkward situation Emira was placed in throughout the novel. This short review of literature demonstrates the critical range of perspectives about the two novels and expands our understanding of their success, as well as justifies this paper’s analysis on the two as the womanist issues they discuss are widely relevant to this day.

## **2. Issue and working hypothesis**

Despite their differences in timeline and background, Walker and Reid’s novels have many similarities. From the review of literature we have noticed that Walker’s *The color purple* and Reid’s *Such a fun age* have already been studied from various perspectives. Yet to our knowledge, there exists a gap in the literature in terms of a comparative study of our two primary sources that focuses on the overlapping class, gender, and racial issues in their settings, and how they affected the protagonists of each novel Celie and Emira. In order to help us understand this intersection of racism, sexism, and class, we are going to borrow

concepts from Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality to dissect the manifold struggles of Black women in its three frames: structural, political, and representational. This analysis examines how Walker through *The color purple* and Reid through *Such a fun age* showcase Black women's struggles on different levels of their existence, and elucidate the intricate role of intersectional factors in limiting their professional prospects, knowledge acquisition, or even self-perception. This will be shown in different forms each unique to its time in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup>. consequently we will learn how despite having a visibly less noticeable manifestation in the contemporary world, systemic inequalities still affect Black women and control their narratives and experience to this day. On a domestic scale, we will look into the misogyny Celie and Emira face within their lived spaces in terms of domestic abuse, traumatic events, and loss. This is done in order to touch upon the main characters' reactions against the various forms of systemic aggressions and micro-aggressions that they face by looking into how they construct meaning, knowledge, and independence in their lives. We will draw from Patricia Hill Collins' key points from *Black feminist thought* (2000) to understand how Black women reclaim agency and construct meaning in small but effective ways against prevalent systems of thought that limit their images.

### **3. Methodological outline**

This study will start with an introduction in which we give a general background about the topic and the purpose of the study. Then the review of the literature in which we mentioned some of the reviews about Reid's *Such a fun age* and Walker's *The color purple*. In the Methods and Material section we will introduce the two theories that will be used in this research by Crenshaw and Collins. We will then provide synopses of the novels followed by the Results in which we will present our main findings.

The discussion section will contain two chapters. In the first chapter, we will explore some of the core issues that women face in their societies in both novels, ranging from sexism, to racism, to social class according to Crenshaw's mapping of the three layers of intersectionality. The second chapter will rely on *Black feminist thought* (2000) to analyze women's resistance to power dynamics and their quest to regain agency over their bodies, their minds, and sexualities to create an independent structure to their lives that sustains and fulfills them. We will conclude our chapters and summarize our research and findings in the conclusion.

## **II. Methods and Materials**

This section outlines the theoretical frameworks that we will rely on to analyze our main sources *The color purple* and *Such a fun age* written by Walker and Reid respectively. We have selected two main theories that describe the main issues found in the novels, to analyze intersectional oppression and resistance strategies of the female characters. These methods are Crenshaw's intersectionality and key notions from Collins' *Black feminist thought* on identity politics and reclamation. This section also provides synopses of our primary sources.

### **1. Methods**

#### **a. Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality**

Kimberlé Crenshaw first introduced the intersection of multiple discriminatory paradigms in the context of law by referencing several cases that ignored the unique juxtaposition of race and gender into the struggles of Black women. Before publishing her article in 1989 entitled "*Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex A Black Feminist*

*Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*”, Black women’s struggles were not understood to be caused by both their race and gender:

The boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by white women's and Black men's experiences. Under this view, Black women are protected only to the extent that their experiences coincide with those of either of the two groups. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 143)

By focusing on legal cases where Black women are denied the intersection rationale, Crenshaw shows how the simplification of Black women’s struggles is problematic. This is done by putting plights of Black women into safe categories of either sexism or racism that are not separable in their case. Crenshaw adds that this happens despite much of the traditional white feminist rhetoric being inspired from Black women such as Sojourner Truth’s speech “Ain’t I a woman?” (Crenshaw, 1989). This means that sexism was traditionally only seen as a white women’s issue, which is why feminists are criticized for not including women of color. Antiracism on the other hand only focused on liberating Black men from racism, excluding the women.

Thus, Crenshaw argued for intersectionality as a meeting point for both gender and race, that distinguishes Black women and from Black men on account of their gender, and white women on account of their race. Discussions on sexual assault against Black women also show a condemning attitude against women of color because of prejudice against their gender, race, and assumptions of their “chastity.” Crenshaw concludes: “Black women are caught between ideological and political currents that combine first to create and then to bury Black women's experiences” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 160).

Additionally, we are interested in her article titled “*Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of color*” published in 1991, on the three frameworks of intersectionality, which are structural, political, and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality refers to where Black women are

situated within overlapping systems of oppression in material terms that disadvantage Black women. This means the infrastructure of society, from healthcare to housing does not take into practical consideration the interests of minority groups like Black women, which results in policy-based neglect and marginalization, the second type is political representation, and refers to the exclusion of Black women from both feminist and antiracist platforms that treat gender and race distinctly from one another. Crenshaw explains this by saying: “racism as experienced by people of color who are of a particular gender —male— tends to determine the parameters of antiracist strategies, just as sexism as experienced by women who are of a particular race —white— ground the women's movement” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). This quote encompasses the issue with how Black men lead the antiracist movement without a focus on Black women and their specific identities as not only Black but also female. This issue, Crenshaw explains risks impeding the reach of the antiracist activist discourse because it marginalizes the female gender.

The third type, representational intersectionality, looks into the media representation of women of color, and their depictions in works of literature as well, both of which are focal points in our study. Crenshaw in this paper looks into discrepancies in the ways women of color are represented in cases of violence, rape, or batter, that show a lack of outrage at assault against women of color. It also shows a reframing of narratives to marginalize and dehumanize their experiences, as well as a generalization that leads to the conflicting reception of works of literature that depict Black women’s experiences even among themselves. About this, Crenshaw says, “the real terror experienced daily by minority women is routinely concealed in a misguided (though perhaps understandable) attempt to forestall racial stereotyping” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1256). This means that by hiding their issues at home, women of color, especially Black women, want to avoid propagating the stereotypes of violence in Black households even when they suffer from abuse.

## **b. Patricia Hill Collins' *Black feminist thought***

First published in 2000 and revised in 2000, the book *Black feminist thought* has become a seminal work in feminist and antiracist theory due to its expansive analysis of the makeup of Black feminist thought and its misrepresentation by the media. The book also delves into identity politics and calls for Black women's intellectual contributions to be acknowledged as essential to dismantling the exclusionary paradigms of dominant systems of knowledge. The author draws from a plethora of Black theorists, writers, poets, and critics in building her arguments, including Kimberlé Crenshaw. By so doing, Collins acknowledges intersectionality, and furthers the claim that separatist policies affect Black women, not only at an external level, but also dictates the rhetoric used to shape Black women's experiences. She writes: "African-American women are increasingly asked why we want to 'separate' ourselves from Black men and why feminism cannot speak for all women, including us. In essence, these queries challenge the need for distinctive Black women's communities as *political* entities" (Collins, 2000, p. 110). The questions of why Black women even need to "separate" themselves from the feminist and antiracist discourses are ultimately aimed at disparaging them from diverging their self-definitions from the status-quo's built-in frame that historically only recognized the immediate oppositional binaries like woman/man, Black/white. In this light, Collins builds on prior knowledge to advocate for the continuity of this chain of thought that was started by Black women's realization of their unique positioning in society and in white households where they worked as maids. This brought the notion of the *outsider-within* that denotes the unique vantage point Black domestic workers had on the inner workings of the white families, propelling them to understand themselves better by contrast.

In the section entitled: "*Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images*," Collins explores the major misrepresentations of Black women through stereotypes that

reduce them into categories that flatten their identities and make them into caricatures instead of recognizing the multi-facetedness of identity and existence. She argues that this is done in order to control the image of the Black woman and depicting her in a manner that white people can easily understand. That which is unknown is scary, she contends, hence the oversimplification of the identity of the stranger (Black woman) in the white imagination (Collins, 2000). The most-known stereotypical depictions are that of the mammy, the Black desexualized mother-like figure who cares for white children at the expense of her own, because “by loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and ‘family’ better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power” (Collins, 2000, p. 72); the Jezebel who is an image of a hyper-sexualized Black woman that justifies sexual exploitation of Black women, and the matriarch who is a dominating emasculating woman blamed for the instability of the Black family because she fails to “model appropriate gender behavior” (Collins, 2000, p. 76). Another reductive image is the welfare mother who lives on welfare programs in the US. Collins says that “these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins, 2000, p. 69), thereby justifying the alienation of Black women from society, and putting them through harsh conditions like violence and structural marginalization.

Despite these reductive stereotypes, Black women did not forego their personal identities, and have instead been hyperaware of the white perception of them. Collins explains that: “Black women’s work and family experiences create the conditions whereby the contradictions between everyday experiences and the controlling images of Black womanhood become visible” (Collins, 2000, p. 99) which causes “demystification” of the white race in the Black woman’s mind, that allows her to separate her identity from the stereotypical images that white people have. This is done through creating communities and

organizations of Black women that understand each other's unique experiences, building friendships and mother-daughter relationships. Musical expressions like the blues and rap are also shown to transmit messages on identity, lived experiences, and even politics by assuming a stance in the face of mainstream media outlets. Additionally, Collins shows how writing functions as a site for expressing the Black woman's identity, maintaining her identity, and resisting identity effacing treatments and policies. She writes: "Traditionally, when taken together, Black women's relationships with one another, the Black women's blues tradition, and the work of Black women writers provided the context for crafting alternatives to prevailing images of Black womanhood" (Collins, 2000, p. 112).

Collins' *Black feminist thought* is a fertile ground for understanding the Black woman's lived experience and her tenacity in maintaining her identity and forging a distinct voice that carries her history, her defiance, and her significance as a meaning-making woman in the intersectional landscape. This Methods section has taken the major notions that our primary sources are ripe with, and situate the analysis of the novels within the womanist and Black feminist tradition, in order to understand the complexity of the Black woman's life and the difficulty of articulating her struggles in an environment that condones oversimplified categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

## **2. Materials**

### **a. Synopsis of Walker's *The color purple***

This classic novel by Alice Walker was first published in 1982, and is set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the south in the United States of America. The story is presented in an epistolary form, and follows the life of a Black girl as she narrates her life to God. The protagonist named Celie faces many challenges as we learn she has had two children from her

step-father who are taken away from her. She is also a child-bride who takes care of her step-children who initially abuse her.

Celie soon meets Shug Avery who is the antithesis of her personality. Shug comes to live in her house with her husband, who Celie initially only calls “mr\_\_\_\_\_.” Shug represents the Sapphic sexual awakening for the protagonist who develops a romantic and sexual attachment to Shug. This leads her to explore her identity as she learns more about God. Shug helps Celie find her sister Nettie’s letters which makes her stand up for herself and leave her abusive husband to live with Shug. Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ whose real name is Albert then goes through a difficult period where he faces his wrongdoing and eventually makes amends with Celie.

The novel’s first half is told through letters to God, whereas the second half includes the found letters from Nettie, and Celie addressing hers to her sister directly. The story ends with a reunion between every member of the family including Nettie and her children, Shug, Albert, his son Harpo, and his wife children. The last letter however famously ends with a letter is addressed to “dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God” (Walker, 2017, p. 259).

#### **b. Synopsis of Reid’s *Such a fun age***

*Such a fun age* is the debut novel of the African American writer Reid. It was published in 2019, and follows the story of Emira Tucker, a 25 year old Black woman navigating post-college adulthood, trying to get a stable job. In the meantime, Emira works as a babysitter for Alix Chamberlain, a wealthy white woman and self-branded feminist influencer, who displays interest in her babysitter out of subconscious racial bias. The plot is triggered by a late-night incident in which a security guard accuses Emira of kidnapping

Alix's toddler while shopping at a Market Depot. This incident is recorded by a white man named Kelley who reappears in the novel when he starts dating Emira.

As the story progresses, Emira learns dark truths about the histories of Alix and Kelley in regards to their treatment of Black people, and we learn that the two had dated in highschool, which sparks jealousy, old grudges, and racial tensions. The video of the supermarket incident leaks and goes viral, which prompts Emira to break up with Kelley who had been displaying micro-racist gestures. Alix uses the video to prove to Emira her desire to help her. Alix's white savior complex however, explodes in her face when Emira learns that Alix was responsible for leaking the video, and quits her job as a babysitter despite the lack of serious professional prospects. However, Emira is able to negotiate a full-time job as a typist for a low pay.

Eventually, Emira is able to secure satisfying jobs, and she is shown to maintain her important friendships. The novel ends years later with Emira deep in her thirties, and after having had multiple working positions both taking care of children, and otherwise. The novel ends with Emira reflecting on Briar, the Chamberlain toddler, and wonders what kind of person Briar will turn out to be in terms of finding herself, and whether she will "hire someone else to do it for her" (Reid, 2019, p. 305).

### III. Results

We have conducted our study on the novels *The color purple* by Walker and *Such a fun age* by Reid by relying on the critical theories of Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins in which they explained the suffering of women of color, and their resistance to limiting stereotypes. We adapted their ideas to the novels that were set in the early twentieth and twenty-first centuries respectively, but that narrated the same tensions the American society deals with in regards to gender, race, and class. This layout helped us uncover many realities that the novels expressed.

The first chapter delved into the struggles that the protagonists faced. The story of Celie in *The color purple* starts early with abuse and degradation that kept her from developing an identity of her own, an issue not unusual in the communities that battle poverty and discrimination together. The men in the novel use the women as the last hold to masculinity as the outside world castrates them from participating in a fair economic and political world. We have seen therefore that the women exist to absorb the shocks they receive outside. Additionally, the women in the novel have an awareness of misogyny making it a melting pot for many female voices to express themselves and their truths. In *Such a fun age* the prejudice against the women is less visible as it came to wear a performative cape of support and heralds mixed messages about the social place of the black woman in America. We found that Emira is treated like a token by her white boss who uses her to assuage her own white guilt. This helped us see the intersectional layers that create oppression, such as political and representational, which create structural inequalities for black women in the states.

The second chapter dealt with ways in which the main characters reacted and fought back and claimed agency from the oppressors. This revealed the manifold ways in which

black women employ their own knowledge and creative communities to assert their individual identities. The chapter revealed how the female characters resist reductive stereotypes, build relationships, and employ musical expressions in their quests for identity. In *The color purple*, Celie's individuation happened gradually thanks to her contact with other women that helped her shift from object to subject, whereas in *Such a fun age* Emira understands her life thanks to her community of supportive black women.

## **IV. Discussion**

This section of our work discusses the novels from the standpoint of intersectionality, examining how the lived experience of women of color are shaped by political and social factors that disadvantage them. These factors are built on the complex juxtaposition of historical factors like racism, sexism, and social class. Our discussion is divided into comparative chapters that study the characters of the novels in relation to their experiential situations as Black women and see how that affects their daily lives, employment opportunities, identity formation, and the merging of all these factors that informs the individuals' lives. The first chapter looks into the presentations of the novels in terms of what the settings, plotlines, and character arcs reveal about intersectional issues of Black women, and analyzes this according to Crenshaw's three forms of intersectionality. However, it is important to clarify that the three dimensions of intersectionality overlap heavily, and while this analysis recognizes their independence thematically, structural and representational intersectionalities are consequences of political discourses that marginalize women first, and women of color especially.

### **Chapter I: intersectionality in *The color purple* and *Such a fun age***

#### **1. Structural intersectionality**

Walker's *The color purple* is an unfiltered story of a young woman navigating life in the rural south of Georgia in the United States of America. It is set in the early twentieth century, and continues through the forties, intersecting therein with various political policies and cultural events that shaped the country known as the Jim Crow South. Walker writes is the voice of Celie, which is fragmented, uncertain, and often incomplete. Through her disconnection from the outside world, she writes letters to God to keep her company in her

longing for a reunion with sister Nettie, who works as a missionary in Africa. The novel unfolds in the Jim Crow South, a historical period that lasted from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century. It was marked by racial segregation, patriarchal violence, and economic disenfranchisement that wrote white supremacy into law. Police brutality was also normalized along with lynching practices and a lack of accountability against racially motivated crimes. Jim Crow South more than anything instilled a social and cultural climate in which the Blacks were not only segregated in public spheres, but also on an existential level that reinforced feelings of alienation and inferiority because of the systemic erasure attempts.

*Such a fun age* is set a century later in 2015 during the Obama presidency. This period was characterized by optimism that racism was dead since the country had a Black president. The presidential candidacy of Hillary Clinton also made it seem possible that the world was entering a post-sexism era because after race, gender was another battle that could be won in America. In the novel, Alix is a supporter of Clinton and is shown to email her campaign advisors in order to participate in their events. After being initially ignored, Alix is contacted by them after she breastfeeds her toddler in public while speaking in a panel. This shows that female empowerment was more interested in capturing the image that white women can do it all, instead of truthfully addressing the hardships and challenges that they face. When it comes to Black women, this rhetoric is even more complicated, and often ignored. In the novel, we do not get insight into the Black woman's intervention in empowerment feminism which mirrors the real life marginalization of their voices during this period of time.

Kimberlé Crenshaw in her work *"Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color"* (1991) traces the levels of oppression Black women face to a complex intersection of various historical and social conditions. The most potent of these factors are the patriarchal system and the white supremacy that cause racism

and promote sexism. References to slavery are found in *The color purple*, where direct mentions are made to the era where it was constitutionalized. The novel does not shy away from explicit and violent language, dealing with sensitive issues such as rape, lynching, and homosexuality. Most is narrated through the writings of Celie, who is removed from school after her father impregnates her. Her grammar and spelling are therefore not as sound as her sister's, yet she persistently documents her experience:

Next thing I know Miss Beasley at our house trying to talk to Pa. She say long as she been a teacher she never know nobody want to learn bad as Nettie and me. But when Pa call me out and she see how tight my dress is, she stop talking and go. (Walker, 2017, p. 12)

In this passage, Celie's and Nettie's teacher visits their house in order to convince their father to keep Celie in school. However, as soon as she saw the advanced pregnancy of Celie, she retreated. This underscores the paralysis of women against patriarchal control, both sexually and socially. The father has full control over his daughters and dictates their life without the possibility of interference from the outside. Celie in knowing this resigns to her fate, and lets her father take away her second child too. When asked whose the first child is, and where it is, Celie answers:

She ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God's. I don't know no other man or what else to say... Finally she ast Where it is? I say God took it. He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can. (Walker, 2017, p. 4)

Additionally to separating Celie from her children, her father (whom we later learn is her step-father) marries her off to an older man in search of a wife to take care of his house. Their opinions of her range from "ugly" to "she can work like a man" (Walker, 2017, p. 10). Celie then has to face constant violence from her husband (she refers to him as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ in her letters to God) as well as from his children. She dissociates during intimacy, and feels alienated from him.

The harsh realities Celie deals with are the result of the heavy burden that history caused, for not only is she a descendant from slaves, she is also facing segregation due to her race and is at the mercy of men. The tensions of racism are not exclusive to the women, however. Men are also oppressed, which makes the immediate relationships between Black men and women especially complex. The frustration that Black men feel because of the injustices of racism is then said to be taken out on Black women, as they are considered to be beneath the male gender due to the patriarchy. Crenshaw explains in her work that “violence against women of color as just another manifestation of racism. In this sense, the relevance of gender domination within the community is reconfigured as a consequence of discrimination against men” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1256). The inequality of men and women in *The color purple* then exemplifies this hierarchy of control between white people and Black women, and within the Black community between men and women. The subordination of Celie is thus seen as a realistic representation of the experiences of Black women in the Jim Crow South in which social inequality issues were not yet treated in an intersectional manner, making women of color marginalized and secondary to the overall plea for racial equality.

This overall climate, while overlapping with political truths, is what created the structural intersectionality that justified illiteracy’s spread among young women. In addition to spreading ignorance among women, structural intersectionality is also found at an economic level, one in which women of color who were subjugated in their households, and were not allowed to make money or develop their talents or profit from their crafts. Celie in the novel is gifted with the ability to sew well, and uses it to make her loved ones quilts and clothes, but her husband (whom she refers to as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ in her letters) belittles her efforts and does not acknowledge her talent.

Additionally, Sofia was also not in a position to help Celie or herself in any decent professional endeavors. Instead, when Sofia refuses the white mayor and his wife’s offer to

work as their maid, her situation gets complicated, and she is sent to prison where she is abused. Parole then forces her to work at the mayor's household against her wishes for many years during which she is only allowed to see her children once a year. Alice Walker, through the letters of Celie, gives a painful recounting of Sofia's story, when she writes:

Sofia say, Why not? They got me in a little storeroom up under the house, hardly bigger than Odessa's porch, and just about as warm in the winter time. I'm at they beck and call all night and all day. They won't let me see my children. They won't let me see no mens. Well, after five years they let me see you once a year. I'm a slave, she say. What would you call it? \_A captive, [Sofia's son] say. (Walker; 2017, pp. 95-96)

This quote is especially pertinent due to the mention of the word "slave." Sofia through her initial rebellion against the white race and assaulting the mayor sentenced herself to a fate of servitude as punishment for her independence. Walker's choice of this plotline has an ironic function that shows the futility of resistance, and a painful one that describes the economic setbacks and hurdles Black women are forced to face, if not only by their husbands (Sofia did not listen to her husband) then by law. Sofia eventually becomes reclusive and distant after her years of mandatory servitude are over, because her children no longer like her, and her family feels overborne by the constant presence of the white mayor's daughter in their lives.

A century later in *Such a fun age*, we find that these sensitivities are still present in the lives of Black women. While Emira is taken to a bar by her boyfriend Kelley, she finds the décor problematic because "on the long wall opposite were pictures of John Wayne, Pennsylvania license plates, and other sepia-colored cowboys" (Reid, 2019, p. 185). This choice of description evokes nostalgia for Americana iconography and aesthetics that are characterized by racial segregation and social stratification of the different ethnicities that make up America. It is especially pertinent that the actor John Wayne is celebrated in this bar, as he is known to perpetuate patriarchal ideals, as well as publicly embrace and promote a white supremacist and racist ideology that he openly expresses in both interviews and in his

movies. John Wayne declared his ideas on race by saying: “I believe in white supremacy until the blacks are educated to a point of responsibility. I don’t believe in giving authority and positions of leadership and judgment to irresponsible people” (John Wayne, as cited in The Guardian, 2020). Because of this, Emira felt unsettled by the aesthetics of this bar, and did not feel welcome in it as a Black woman. Later, she discusses her discomfort about it with Kelley, saying: “If you wanna go to that bar without me, whatever. Just try to remember that we have different experiences. John Wayne said a lot of fucked-up shit and I’d rather not stare at his face while I have a drink” (Reid, 2019, p. 194).

Another sensitive topic that Reid mentions in her novel in reference to Black women’s existence is their hair, primarily because of historical issues relating to slavery and the dehumanization of Black people during the times of colonization in exhibitions that showcased Black people as curiosities. Amani Morrison discusses this issue in her article entitled “*Black hair haptics: touch and transgressing the black female body*” (2018) and refers to hair a site for political transgression of Black people’s autonomy over their bodies. She lists reasons for touching Black hair such as fetishization, entitlement, and a curiosity that borders on objectification. She contends that “the touching of black women’s hair reveals scripts of perceived exoticism and pedagogical obligation. These scripts draw upon a fundamental assumption: that black women are materially available to satisfy the intrigue of others” (Morrison, 2018, p. 88). Morrison in this quote highlights that by touching a Black woman’s hair, one is expressing a racist tendency of viewing the Black woman as an object for examination. The gesture also undermines the agency of the Black woman as a person because her body is then seen to be available to assuage other people’s curiosities.

This is why Reid in *Such a fun age* recounts many instances of white characters speaking about touching Emira’s hair. For example, Kelley, her boyfriend often did without noticing Emira’s discomfort with his gestures that underscore a subtle fetishist stance:

“that she hadn’t repositioned his hands away from her hair (he’d said sorry twice and she’d said it was fine)” (Reid, 2019, 85). Another instance was when “they told her she should try wearing her hair naturally” (Reid, 2019, p. 93), and multiple other mentions of Emira pulling her hair to the side or putting her hands in her hair, which signals its importance as part of her identity, contrasted with that of Alix whose texture she often notices. It is also worth mentioning that interracial dating is discussed in the novel as a Emira dated Kelley who was white, and Zara her friend dating a White man. Emira tells her “you do you, but that boy is *real white*” (Reid, 2019, p. 9), revealing the persisting consciousness of racial tensions in relationships, where subtle power dynamics remain present even in 2015.

Expanding on Emira’s awareness of her race struggles, she also indicates sexist issues in one of her lengthiest inner thoughts while discussing the difference between a Black male and female experiences in society . She reflects on hypothetical scenarios of her future with Kelley and thinks:

*Are you gonna take our son to get his hair done? Who’s gonna teach him that it doesn’t matter what his friends do, that he can’t stand too close to white women when he’s on the train or in an elevator? That he should slowly and noticeably put his keys on the roof as soon as he gets pulled over? Or that there are times our daughter should stand up for herself, and times to pretend it was a joke that she didn’t quite catch. Or that when white people compliment her (“She’s so professional. She’s always on time”), it doesn’t always feel good, because sometimes people are gonna be surprised by the fact that she showed up, rather than the fact that she had something to say when she did. (Reid, 2019, p. 194).*

This rare instance of Emira’s internal conflict shows that the structures of white supremacy, though now illegal, are sometimes expressed in America to this day in an inconspicuous manner. This is exemplified by the bar and its implied exclusion of the Black race. Places like that reveal a sensitivity that is not allowed to be expressed readily but that occupies physical spaces that do not welcome Black people, reminiscent of segregation-era divisions of the Blacks from the whites. Emira’s awareness of this has already been established as an aversion to exclusionary discourse as seen previously. The latter monologue

however, reveals the layering of Emira's understanding of the complexities of navigating a relationship with a white man. Not only that, Emira also displays sharp knowledge of the intersectional factors that will exclusively affect her daughter like dismissal of her opinions in toxic workplaces that will disguise their racial prejudice in back-handed compliments. All this exposes a structural bias against Black women, hindering them from frequenting certain places, establishing relationships with the white race, or asserting themselves in the workplace under the implied threats of exclusion and silencing. This shows that the two novels not only reference racism casually, but embed it to the core of the plotlines in order to eviscerate the readers as to the implications of slavery.

Reid's novel *Such a fun age* contrasts *The color purple* in tone. In Walker's novel, Celie narrates directly to God, while Reid's novel tackles Black women struggles in a contemporary narrative that integrates subtle class inequalities in modern American society. Emira works as a part-time typist and babysitter for the Chamberlains' three year old Briar. The story follows not only Emira's post-college years but also the complex history of Alix the Chamberlains' wife who has had a complicated past with race and class. In fact, the novel reads as a tension-filled interaction between Emira and Alix, and between their social settings. The juxtaposition of their living conditions further highlights their differences, both in descriptions of their environments and in their conversations by relying heavily on descriptive techniques of their perfumes, living rooms, outfit choices, and vacation styles.

Kimberlé Crenshaw outlines the three dimensions of intersectionality and distinguished three layers. The structural dimension has to do with the very structures in which women of color exist such as their material environments and economic conditions. Crenshaw says that "structural intersectionality concerns the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experiences of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of white

women” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). This part will attempt to trace the structural intersectionality between Alix and Emira in the novel to showcase this.

Many events of the novel take place in the Chamberlains’ house. Subsequently, it is thoroughly described in the novel, whereas we do not get to know Emira’s place until the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the story. Alix’s home is described amply on multiple occasions, such as the following:

She lived in a three-story brownstone (seven minutes’ walk from Rittenhouse Square) on a leafy, shaded street. The house had a massive, marble-floored entryway and a charming kitchen on the second floor. The kitchen counter space was ample, and a table for six underneath a chandelier looked out to the street through a curved wall of windows. (Reid, 2019, p. 30)

From this, we see the rich neighborhood in which the Chamberlains live, which is situated in an affluent part of town in which other affluent individuals reside. This paints a stark contrast to the home of Emira, who shares a two-bedroom apartment with a roommate, and which is situated in a poor part of town in which other poor people live. This can be seen as a structural difference between the lives of the women on the basis of their socioeconomic classes, exasperated by their races. Emira’s house is described as being:

past apartment buildings built on top of one another with white bars in front of windows, some of which had cats perched behind them. Emira’s apartment building—two satellite dishes were attached to the side of it—was across the street from a basketball court currently covered in a thin layer of snow. (Reid, 2019, pp. 251-252)

This highlights the different neighborhoods their homes are situated in. For thanksgiving, Alix’s house was decorated for the occasion: “She filled the first floor of her home with pumpkins, gourds, wheat stalks, and acorns; a turkey piñata was waiting to be hung above the massive rented dining table set up in the stretch of the tiled foyer” (Reid, 2019, p. 140). Emira’s however, was not so colorful. It is described as looking like “one of those graduate college dormitories where all the rooms are exactly the same, except the corner ones are slightly bigger, or maybe they have one extra window” (Reid, 2019, p. 253), and having a

smelly staircase to her apartment. This underscores the difference between the living conditions of the two characters, and speaks of their economic status and social class. Additionally, Emira's living space in a small space is an indication that despite her education, she remains unable to live in a comfortable space, caused by precarious job opportunities.

Beyond living spaces, the novel *Such a fun age* explores many harsh realities that women of color face in the United States of America. Emira represents a large group of women who face challenges disproportionately from white women, in many areas of life like health care, housing issues, infant mortality rates, unemployment, etc. Emira suffered from poverty because of her inability to find a stable employment opportunity, making her accept to work late at night for the Chamberlains family. Reid tells us “what wasn’t funny was Emira’s current bank balance: a total of seventy-nine dollars and sixteen cents” (Reid, 2019, p. 3). In the national report on “*The Status of Women in the States: 2015*” that discusses the status of women and gives tangible statistics to back the facts, Black women constantly rate high on multiple issues, showing that they are the least protected group, the least insured, and the most likely to die of cancer, heart failure, and are employed less in most sectors. Women in general “are more likely than men to have health insurance, but face higher poverty rates than men and are much less likely to own businesses” (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2015, p. 123). This disparity is further divided when women of color are shown to be more likely to suffer from poverty and related issues.

This shows the structural inequality that women of color face in the United States of America at the time the novel is set. Emira likewise faced many issues related to trouble securing a full time job that paid well. Her anxieties are exacerbated as she nears 26 years old, the age where she will no longer be eligible to be insured under her parents’ health plan according to the Affordable Care Act. When she gets a job offer from her typing part-time job, they only offer her a 35 hour workweek which Zara, Emira’s best friend recognizes as a

tactic in order not to give her benefits, health insurance, or treat her as a full-time worker. Emira negotiates a full-time employment with The Green Party, but only after lowering her hourly rate from 16 to 13 dollars. This goes to show the precariousness of the job market for Emira despite having a bachelor's degree and typing 145 words a minute.

The novel also draws heavily from cultural references and American brands (Everlane, Madewell), singers (Whitney Houston, SZA, Childish Gambino), and personalities (John Wayne). All these elements are masterfully implemented in the plot in smooth ways that showcase racial sensitivities, biases, and the beliefs of the characters. For instance, we learn that Alix checks the lockscreen of Emira's phone obsessively, then googles the names of the music artists that Emira listens to in order to sound well-informed about the Black culture. The following lines show not only Alix's interest in learning about the artists and their songs, but also betrays a cultural shock at the nature of the lyrics of some of those songs. For Alix then, the eyebrow raise signifies a disengagement from the Black community and an absence of relatability vis-à-vis this form of expression. Reid writes:

Alix ended up Googling things like Is Childish Gambino a person or a band? How do you pronounce the name SZA? One evening, Alix memorized the name of a song and later Googled it in her room. Alix listened to the first verse in her headphones, which began with *You ain't wanna see up all this Birkin / Tear a nigga's face off, watch me be a surgeon*. Alix's eyebrows rose up into her forehead (Reid, 2019, pp. 76-77).

Not only are cultural figures seminal to the character development in the novel, but Emira also comes face to face with an emblematic personality of white supremacy, exclusion, and racism.

From the above analysis on the two novels, we see how society is structured in a way that marginalizes Black women constantly, whether it is in the 20<sup>th</sup> or the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. While Emira is more independent than Celie is in her household, *Such a fun age*'s protagonist still grapples with insidious racist discourse that is now more implied than overt, but that harms her

nonetheless. Additionally, when Sofia in *The color purple* tries to defend herself, she is reduced to a lower level than the one she is initially positioned. All this points to the gravity of the structural issues that caused illiteracy, unemployment, and reinforced gender power dynamics.

## **2. Political Intersectionality**

Political intersectionality as a concept means the overlapping of many political discourses in the creation of a disadvantageous position in society. Applied to women of color, this notion denotes the difficulty of locating the root of political obstacles that Black women face in their daily lives. Political intersectionality is the second dimension according to Crenshaw, who highlights how political movements that only focus on race or gender marginalize women of color because they do not neatly fit in these categories (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw also notes the difficulty of separating political intersectionality from the structural one, as it is the political discourse that leads to structural inequalities. Crenshaw explains that “the concept of political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). This leaves out Black women who do not see themselves in the antiracist discourse or in the feminist one, effectively making them invisible to activist groups, Crenshaw adds:

Among the most troubling political consequences of the failure of antiracist and feminist discourses to address the intersections of race and gender is the fact that, to the extent they can forward the interest of “people of color” and “women,” respectively, one analysis often implicitly denies the validity of the other. (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252)

This is important because it shows the hardships the female characters in *The color purple* and *Such a fun age* in the novel relate to their social classes just as they do to their gender.

The protagonist Celie writes letters to God in an attempt to voice her powerlessness, if not to ask for anything but God takes a passive form for most of the novel, being a white bearded man in the mind of Celie who by this imagination alone casts herself as inferior due to the tensions of race in her time. She describes him: “He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted. Blue eyes? she ast. Sort of bluish-gray. Cool. Big though. White lashes. I say” (Walker, 2017, p. 175). This understanding of God put Celie in the position of fear as he is white, submission as he is male, and inferiority as he has blue eyes and white robes (representative of the white race). This shows how the image of God can be used to control the perceptions that Black people have of themselves and of the white race, for by imagining God as a white man, Celie feels alienated from Him on grounds of both gender and race.

More than this, women of color are excluded from both the antiracist discourse and the feminist one on the ground of their different gender from the male dominated racial equality quest, and their different color from the white dominated feminist movement. Crenshaw in addition to elaborating on this dissonance, also expresses the complexity of reading *The color purple* critically, as many opposing currents of thought view Celie differently. In our review of literature, we included Trudier Harris’ criticism of Alice Walker’s depictions on the grounds of their flattening of male characters, and overt paralysis of its female characters (Harris, 1983). Crenshaw responds to these interpretations by explaining that “the claim that Celie was somehow an unauthentic character might be read as a consequence of silencing discussion of intracommunity violence” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1256), highlighting the sensitivities that exist within the Black community itself regarding the portrayal of their own, not withstanding exaggerations that are initially intended to comment on a larger scale of violence. Celie is thus seen as a political divergence from the carefully constructed antiracist discourse that hides violence in order to present a coherent image to the outside. By obscuring

the lived facts of many women of color however, this attempt to deflect from racial stereotypes of violence hurt women of color more by taking away their voices in favor of a male-led cause.

A female character from the novel that resists the antiracist and feminist movements' silencing of her voice is Sofia. Celie meets her when Harpo (the son of Mr.\_\_\_\_) marries her. Sofia is the antithesis of Celie's personality, because unlike the latter's resignation, the former passionately asserts herself and her positions and does not allow her husband to beat her up, and when Harpo feels heartbroken that Sofia does not submit to him, Celie tells him to "beat her" out of jealousy (Walker, 2017, p. 36). This counterintuitive advice that Celie gave to the male character can be seen as an expression of the frustrations women of color feel against the backdrop of inequality within themselves. Political intersectionality thus transcends the confines of larger movements' exclusions, and penetrates the very fabric of domestic and neighborly homes. Sofia's independence from Harpo, though slight, triggers the dormant jealousy of Celie about her own subjugation, and seeks to redistribute the pain that she cannot voice, although subconsciously. This reveals how political disempowerment can fracture solidarity among Black women who turn on each other when they are not offered a collective framework for resisting the multilayered oppressions they face.

Shug's position however, is different from the other ladies. Where the others struggle with being treated badly, Shug earns the respect of the men in her life, and enjoys material and professional success. Celie describes her photo by saying "She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motocar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some" (Walker, 2017, p. 8). Shug is a singer of the Blues music, giving voice to her pleas and emotions in a unique way that further complicates the oversimplification of the struggles of Black women. *The color purple* pays attention to elaborate details that show the nuanced divisions of the

categories of people it represents. Taken from the perspective of political intersectionality, the female characters of the novel each live through unique conditions that dictate the limits of their freedom, for while sexism does not severely affect Shug, it affects other female characters.

This discrepancy exists to this, day, for as a Black woman in 2015 America, Emira has to deal with racial profiling, lack of decent employment opportunities, and Alix's white savior complex. In the novel, we follow her life as she gets constantly surprised by at the ignorance of the white characters vis-à-vis the difficulties that Black women face in their lives. Emira's boss Alix treats her like a moral project that she tends to very carefully. This supersedes her small attempts at connection when she leaks the video of Emira's incident at Market Depot without her consent, acting on her behalf like a supervising agent of her life, disregarding in the process the manifold ways in which it could affect the life of Emira. Alix feels self-righteous about the video, saying repeatedly that she "did the right thing" (Reid, 2019, p. 262). Her insensitivity is paired with a patronizing attitude, hidden under thick layers of a misguided instinct for help which views Emira as an "other" that does not possess full agency of herself. It also shows that Alix infantilizes her. This is revealed in her inner thoughts while she was at Emira's house:

*This video you're embarrassed of, ... its honestly not that bad, and it shows how much you love my kid. And this water bottle you've been using? It might give you cancer so let's get you a new one made with glass or stainless steel. And this thing you did by accident? With the plants and the aquarium? It's so, so lovely and your instincts were spot on. And I know that couch is a huge investment but it's one of those things you'll want to spend money on. And these are the staple items you want to have in your closet...* (Reid, 2019, p. 261)

Alix's inner thoughts about Emira's life betray a sense of material superiority exemplified in her opinions about Emira's water bottles, decorations, and her couch. She thinks in terms of affluence that disregard Emira's financial precariousness when she nts her

to invest on a couch. Additionally, she belittles the incident that hurt Emira when she mentions that what mattered in it was not Emira's reputation or well-being, but her love for Briar. Thus, we see how the political intersectionality excludes Emira from feminist discourse that promotes equality, consent, and the freedom to choose for oneself, because Emira is not treated as a capable woman as we have seen in Alix's inner thoughts, but as a caricature of a person who is perpetually childish and unable to make sound decisions on her own, effectively reducing her identity. Hence we find that while Emira's political positioning is different from that of Celie, she remains an outsider within her professional life, and is constantly infantilized.

### **3. Representational intersectionality**

Representational intersectionality is focused on the ways women of color are portrayed and treated by the media, as opposed to people of the white race. Justifying violence on the media is done by reducing perceptions of Black victims to sensationalized stories that desensitize the receiver from engaging emotionally with their personal lives. In her seminal article "*Mapping the Margins*," Crenshaw analyzes a few cases of media representation of Black and white women in the media. Not only that, Crenshaw also examines the implicit racism of white people's apparent support of Black people's issues and comments on the complexity of representation. The extreme sensitivity of the topic of representation and support from other ethnicities figures prominently in *Such a fun age* as it deals with the media, white representation, sensationalism, and the novel itself being a heavily-discussed book on media platforms. Representational issues are also why the epistolary form of *The color purple* itself can be read as a way of resisting mainstream narratives of Black women.

By telling the story from the perspective of the protagonist with no interruptions from an outside narrator, the intimacy of the confessions made to God is made more authentic

through Celie's letters. Ping Zhou in her article entitled "*Focalization theory and the epistolary novel: a narrative analysis of the color purple*" (2009) explains the particularities of centering the writer of letters by remarking that they "can provide multiple perspectives without the obtrusiveness of an omniscient narrator. In addition, most letters contain the subjective thoughts of the letter writers, which create an effect similar to that provided in psychological novels (Zhou, 2009, p. 288). By removing a third party from the narration, Celie's letters function as diaries as well, and reveal the inner struggles of her life unflinchingly and without moderator. The language also emerges from this format as an honest depiction of her mind that helps to understand her story from her level of practicing language and speech, without elaborate metaphors or devices. Nettie's letters that come in the second half of the novel feel less candid in contrast. Although speaking of her personal life and struggles, her mastery over English conceals some of the raw emotive power that Celie has because of her irregular grammar and simple speech. However, after Celie has read the letters of Nettie, we notice changes in the ways she writes to God and to her sister by implementing new words and ideas she has learnt from her sister, thus achieving a natural evolution of Celie's voice and her personality.

It can also be argued that Nettie's and Celie's letters are themselves a subversion of the mainstream suppression of Black women's experiences in literature and art alike. Their unique experiences as Black women intersected with struggles such as poverty, estrangement, and longing, which get diluted or erased from popular outlets despite the universal themes of these problems. *The color purple* is then an authentic representation of shared psychological experiences that are usually only allowed to be expressed in stories narrated by and for white people.

In contrast to Walker's decision to give Celie a full narrative voice, Reid dramatizes the problem of representational intersectionality by focusing the limelight on a white woman

while centering a Black woman's story. Reid has positioned Alix Chamberlain at the center of the novel, imbuing her character with a multifaceted personality, a complex past, and clear motives for her actions. This is contrasted to the shallow depiction of Emira's personality that appears one dimensional when compared to the depiction of Alix. Emira does not get flashbacks to her formative years in highschool, nor does she have many inner monologues, nor an in-depth exploration of her psyche.

One might argue that this is a deliberate choice on the part of the author, who by sidelining the Black character that is supposed to be the protagonist, gives a clear look into the habitual othering of Black women in popular thought. This othering is experienced by the reader to an exhausting degree that feels satirical. Thus criticizing the representation of Black women in modern-day America that still filters their stories through the lens of white women and their experiences. Reid's narrative choice of depicting the white character as the epicenter of womanhood, morality, and feminism are then an implicit tactic of denouncing the white savior complex that Alix harbors throughout the novel by giving her a disproportionate amount of narrative arc compared to the Black character. In *Such a fun age*, Alix treats Emira as a moral project and an obsessive hobby more than a person, making her appear like an exaggerated portrayal of performative white feminism. One might also argue, from the other end of the spectrum, that this very centering of Alix's narrative might be a representational choice on the part of the author that stumbles to poignantly apply the limitations of satirical exaggeration, in that it does not adequately liberate Emira from the white-centered gaze the novel is critiquing, especially if we consider the closing chapters. By the end of the novel, we are shown Emira in her thirties reflecting on the future of Briar, instead of her own, and in so doing, the stereotype of the mammy is brought to mind and makes the readers question whether or not Emira is fully capable of escaping representational intersectionality in a novel centered around her.

The protagonist Emira is first presented to the reader as a young adult who has to leave her friend's birthday celebration to babysit a white child. After a racial profiling incident, Emira's life continues as usual until the video that documented it is leaked on social media. The responses that it garnered from the public were mixed, ranging from humor to compassion to condemnation. As days went by, Reid writes "the more it was shared, the lighter it seemed to be, which made the whole thing both better and worse" (Reid, 2019, p. 265). In the digital world, humor was used to deflect the heaviness of this racially charged incident. However, the incident was quickly seized by Laney, a news reporter who got an exclusive interview from Emira, in an attempt to get viewers, and promote Alix's upcoming. Laney even said about that "I know exactly how to plug your book without plugging your book. You know what I mean?" (Reid, 2019, p. 277). This shows the commodification of Emira's struggle for white gain that they hid in a desire to help her clear her name but did not give her a real chance to do.

Additionally, Peter Chamberlain, a news anchor, has faced criticism about making a comment on television that was both racist and sexist, when a Black student asked a white girl out to prom, saying "Let's hope that last one asked her father first" (Reid, 2019, p. 34). Although this sparked backlash from people, saying things like "ummm, why would the Black guy need to ask her dad, but the white guys don't" (Reid, 2019, p. 34), Peter's colleagues laughed off the comment and did not take it seriously, nor did it threaten Peter's job in any way. This shows that the white-owned TV channels do not feel phased that Black people took offense at this racist comment, and do not feel the need to apologize, showing there to be an insensitivity and a control of broadcasting power.

#### **4. Conclusion of the Chapter**

In this chapter, we attempted to study our primary sources based on the three layers of intersectionality that Crenshaw mapped in her work. Relying on concepts such as structural, political, and representational intersectionality, Celie and Emira emerged as two women whose struggles are caused by the very foundations of the economic and social systems they inhabit. Celie suffers from illiteracy and isolation, while Emira despite her bachelor's and network still does not find real prospects for economic growth. Set a century apart, this harsh reality of navigating the professional sphere reflects a systemic marginalization of Black women in the United States of America that feminism and antiracist movements still have not fixed as it is an issue that relates to the political atmosphere in the States having to do with the complex history of white supremacy that favors the white race to the detriment of the Blacks who suffer from exclusion and scrutiny as they attempt to assimilate.

This is seen in *The color purple* when Emira gets interrogated by a security guard at a supermarket while in the presence of a white child, and Sofia in *The color purple* when she takes a stroll to town and finds herself imprisoned for refusing to work as a maid for a white family. Additionally, the authors of the novels navigate representational loopholes in the literary world by imbuing their narratives with implicit critiques of the white dominated media framing of what it is to live as a Black woman in the United States. This is exemplified by Alice Walker's adoption of an epistolary form and irregular grammar that defies the mainstream narrative formats, and by Kiley Reid by brilliantly capturing how white people tend to dominate spaces and conversations by making Alix take up most of the novel with her inconsiderate inner thoughts and irrelevant details to the protagonist Emira.

## **Chapter II: Identity Politics in *The color purple* and *Such a fun age***

The first chapter of the discussion looked into the overlapping factors of discrimination that inform the Black woman's positioning in society. It analyzed the primary sources from Kimberlé Crenshaw's perspective in order to frame the overlapping levels of intersectionality in the settings on the novels and their effects on the lives of the characters. This chapter will build on intersectionality and read the characters' experiences through the lens of *Black feminist thought* (2000) written by Patricia Hill Collins. This helps us to understand the process of identity formation independently of the confinements of social paradigms. In order to do this, we will look into various ideas that the book discusses like the role of images, stereotypes, and clichés not only in the portrayal of Black women in literature or on screen, but also on their resistance to these corrosive representations. We will focus on how the characters of *The color purple* and *Such a fun age* reclaim their identities and find meaning in friendships, creativity, and independence.

### **1. Resisting Stereotypes**

According to Collins, stereotyping people is an attempt to simplify their identities into easily distinguishable categories in order to reduce their individuality and alleviate xenophobia. White people historically used reductive images and representations of Black people for this reason. Collins discusses controlling images by remarking that “these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins, 2000, p. 69). The systemic normalization of flattening Black women into stereotypical depictions includes images of the mammy, the jezebel, the matriarch, and other derogatory categories that ignore the individuality of each Black woman and the uniqueness of each individual experience. In the novels *The color purple* and *Such a fun age*, we meet characters on whom

these images are reinforced, but who resist them as the story goes on in favor of forming an independent self.

Part of the success Alice Walker's *The color purple* is due to the female characters' different viewpoints on life. Though told from the perspective of Celie with the exception of Nettie's letters, their personalities shine through and inform each one's unique outlook by retelling their stories faithfully to Celie's understanding. Because writing to God is the incentive to this, we see her write freely and unburdened by convention or fear of judgment. The result of this is a confessional space that is unrestricted by the white gaze or male authority, allowing Celie to tell the authentic narrative of Black women in the south. This aligns with the ideas that Patricia Hill Collins developed in her book called *Black feminist thought* (2000) upon which we will rely to understand the experiences of the Black women, and how they forge their identities separately from intersectional challenges. Collins discusses the character of Celie in her work by saying:

Like Celie in Alice Walker's *The color purple*, some women write themselves free. Sexually, physically, and emotionally abused, Celie writes letters to God when no one else will listen. The act of acquiring a voice through writing, of breaking silence with language, eventually moves her to the action of talking with others. (Collins, 2000, p. 119)

The quote touches upon the ways in which Celie resists erasure of her identity by owning her voice through her letters.

The most prominent character in the novel is Shug Avery who leads an unconventional lifestyle of singing, and being sexually and economically independent. However, despite her perceived courage and emancipation, she is not exempt from social prejudice by both men and women. Albert's father for instance, opposes to her marriage to her son when they were young. She tells Celie:

His daddy told him I'm trash, my mama trash before me. His brother say the same. Albert try to stand up for us, git knock down. One reason they give him

for not marrying me is cause I have children. But they his, I told old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. (Walker, 2017, p. 111)

This story illustrates that women's bodies were heavily monitored and judged by the men in their lives. Shug tells Celie why she was denied marriage to Albert, and blames his father for considering her "trash" for being sexually active, and having children out of wedlock even when their father was the man she wanted to marry. Albert's father whom Celie refers to as "Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_" makes more derogatory comments about Shug Avery, and spreads rumors about her when he tells his son that "she ain't even clean. I hear she got the nasty woman disease (Walker, 2017, p. 52). These ideas they have of Shug align with the stereotype of the jezebel that Collins explains is "central in this nexus of controlling images of Black womanhood" (Collins, 2000, p. 81). The image of the sexually liberated woman is weaponized against her by condemning her and limiting her prospects in life, going as far as denying her stability by marriage.

Despite these negative perceptions of Shug Avery and her awareness of her reputation, she does not try to change her identity or become a different kind of woman. She actively resists the narrative that this stereotype is trying to impose on her by remaining true to her desires and her career as a Blues singer. This tenacity is welcomed by Albert who takes her in when she is sick and introduces her to Celie with whom Shug further explores another facet of her identity which is bisexuality. By engaging in a sexual and romantic affair with Celie, she expresses her defiance and we learn about her views on life, actively presenting her multidimensional personality to the readers. In fact, the title of the novel comes from what she teaches Celie about God, and what he represents to her. Shug says: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by The Color Purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (Walker, 2017, p. 177).

Another character that resists being defined by any outside gaze, be it masculine, or white is Sofia, the wife of Albert's son Harpo. Celie writes about her as a strong woman who does not submit to anyone. The first chapter discussed her struggles with prison and Celie's jealousy, and how intersecting issues affected her life in corrosive ways. The character of Sofia can further be seen as an active resistance to the stereotype of the mammy that depicts Black women as loving nannies for white children. By going to prison, she refuses to settle for any of these roles, which despite forcing her into servitude at the mayor's home, do not make her pledge allegiance to their household. She maintains bitterness throughout the novel until she is finally free of them, and expresses annoyance at the mayor's daughter Eleanor Jane and her baby's constant presence in Sofia's house. When asked if she loves Eleanor Jane's son, she answers: "No ma'am, say Sofia. I do not love Reynolds Stanley Earl. Now. That's what you been trying to find out ever since he was born. And now you know (Walker, 2017, p. 239). She goes further: "I don't feel nothing about him at all. I don't love him, I don't hate him. I just wish he couldn't run loose all the time messing up folks stuff" (Walker, 2017, p. 240).

This actively refuses the mammy trope of loving white children, illustrated more clearly by Eleanor Jane's surprise which she expressed by saying "I just don't understand, say Miss Eleanor Jane. All the other colored women I know love children. The way you feel is something unnatural (Walker, 2017, p. 240). Her use of the word "unnatural" shows the how ingrained the mammy trope is in the white woman's head, going as far as deeming Sofia's indifference "unnatural". This latter responds in a didactic tone that mirrors Collins' resistance to the trope perfectly:

I love children, say Sofia. But all the colored women that say they love yours is lying. They don't love Reynolds Stanley any more than I do. But if you so badly raise as to ast 'em, what you expect them to say? Some colored people so scared of whitefolks they claim to love the cotton gin. (Walker, 2017, p. 240)

Sofia here is shown to have awareness of the complicated dynamics between white and Black people, but more than that, she actively resists the widespread beliefs of Black women and maintains her own identity and feelings free from the white representation.

Similarly to Eleanor Jane's view of Black women, the story of Emira, the protagonist of *Such a fun age* is filtered through the biased perspective of Alix Chamberlain also has a negative perception of Black women. In order to understand this character, we must first look into the Alix's social background in the 2010s. Kiley Reid's novel is set in 2015 under the presidency of Barak Obama, when issues of racism seemed to have ended in the United States of America. "Girl boss" feminism also seemed to fix women's problems by encouraging them to climb the corporate ladder through creating start-ups, demanding equal rights from their bosses, or joining social media platforms as influencers. In fact, 2015 brings to mind the color pink, and the positive environment that was promoted online, effectively sweeping under the rug the problems unique to women of color. In her article entitled "*How the #Girlboss has commodified feminism*" (2021), Lucy Carter states that this attitude is ultimately corrosive to women:

The very notion of associating feminism and female liberation with success within a social framework that restricts, and limits others is questionable, especially with the rise in intersectional feminism in recent years. Girl boss feminism, when placed in a wider context, doesn't benefit women as a whole as it refuses to consider the issues of race, class and sexual identity that are so prevalent in the prevention of women's freedoms worldwide. (Carter, 2021)

Indeed, this subtle exclusion of Black women's problems is an issue that *Such a fun age* does not shy away from. Emira is portrayed at the heart of the politics of the "girl boss" movement, and occupies a peculiar position as an outsider-within in the Chamberlains' home as she gets a close look at Alix's performative and materialistic lifestyle.

Alix joined the early 2010s trend of white feminism by creating an online blog where she urges women to speak up using the hashtag *#LetHerSpeak*. This branding choice reflects

the ideas of her time that encouraged expression and sharing personal success stories that overlook the initial privileges of the successful person. This online activism allowed Alix to garner enough attention to be invited to an event organized by the Clinton candidacy advisors in New York. Alix's excitement about this reflects her desire for professional climbing and aligning herself with affluent and influential society. However, moving to Philadelphia to raise her children with her husband slows down her ambitions, despite securing a book deal before her move. The deal allows her flexibility in her work even as her personal brand *#LetHer* declines.

We learn about Alix's history at the beginning of the novel which contextualizes her current lifestyle choices, and allows for a reading of the pervasiveness of her feminist persona in her daily life. When Emira enters the Chamberlains' home, Alix attempts to approach her not as a person but as a curiosity. The invasiveness of Alix into the text messages of Emira, her music taste, and the eventual leaking of her video prove Alix's misguided judgment and her lack of understanding towards the protagonist who was treated as a project more than a person. This section will elaborate on the relationship of Alix to Emira in all its infringements on her privacy and the simulation of compassion and antiracist discourse.

Kiley Reid employs a technique that reflects Alix's personality excesses back to the readers of *Such a fun age*. By keeping Emira's responses to Alix short and clipped, this latter's imposition is made to appear obnoxious and unwelcome. Reid does not often have to comment on the conversations that take place between these two characters, as Emira's speech carries a hint of disenchantment and professional obligation to engage. Alix on the other end paints herself as an overbearing boss who does not respect the boundaries of Emira, infringes on her privacy, and personal liberties many times. While these acts may be obliviously interpreted as personality quirks, Reid masterfully imbues Alix's behavior with an entitled edge. Due to the power imbalances that come with Emira's job as a babysitter, racial

tensions, and class differences between the two, Alix has the upper hand both socially and economically. Thus, she appears to misuse her privilege not to help Emira, but to prove her goodness and righteousness to her, in order to position her as morally superior as well. Alix's motives are therefore tainted by a desire rooted in performative virtue, and the need to control Emira's image.

To retaliate, Emira takes a counterintuitive route. Instead of standing up to Alix or confronting her about boundaries, she disengages mentally from participating in Alix's discourse. Emira's answers are often said without internalizing what is said to her as a form of refusing to internalize Alix's prying. For instance, when asked to share a wine bottle with Alix, her answers betray carelessness: "She blinked and said, 'I mean . . . yeah.'" and "I mean, I like it," (Reid, 2019, pp. 78-79). Emira limits her dialogue and only answers when she has to which keeps her true personality shrouded from this white lady who seems too eager to befriend her. In *Black feminist thought*, Collins reports how various Black women kept quiet as a means of resisting erasure of identity and cites an interview where a mill worker from North Carolina when she writes: "Ms. Fields wryly announces, "If they tell me something and I know I ain't going to do it, I don't tell them. I just go on and don't do it" (Carolyn Byerly, 1986 as cited in Collins, 2000, p. 98). Collins additionally explains that "silence is not to be interpreted as submission in this collective, self-defined Black women's consciousness" (Collins, 1991, p. 98). Instead, in the case of Emira, silence and aloofness become a refusal to perform emotional labor for Alix who seeks it to validate her performative inclusion of Black people.

As the novel progresses, Alix feels uncomfortable by Emira's subtle defiance, and grows more eager to show relatability. Alix's thoughts reveal how she wants to use cultural cues to signal her allyship with Emira. Reid demonstrates this with Alix's inner thoughts:

Alix fantasized about Emira discovering things about her that shaped what Alix saw as the truest version of herself. Like the fact that one of Alix's closest friends was also Black. That Alix's new and favorite shoes were from Payless, and only cost eighteen dollars. That Alix had read everything that Toni Morrison had ever written. And that out of her group of friends, Alix and Peter actually had the smallest salaries, and that Tamra was the one who always flew first class. (Reid, 2019, p. 139)

Alix namedrops Toni Morrison and wants to brag about her cheap shoes and low salary that was still much higher than Emira's in order to bait Emira into alleviating her white guilt. Therefore, Alix appears as a satirized *white savior* that is exposed for the flimsy moral code that drives her seemingly benevolent actions.

Alix's version of white saviorism is not the only form of racial entitlement that Emira meets. *Such a fun age* also incorporates a male character, Kelley, who, by fetishizing Black women, believes to be instead siding with the Black cause. Emira however, does not succumb to the white narrative that pretends to care for her, nor does she get blinded by his charm from noticing his micro-racist gestures. This underscores Emira's persisting awareness of the issues of her race despite the constant reframing and whitewashing that her narrative undergoes. For instance, when Kelley uses the word "negro," Emira wonders "shouldn't he have said 'the N-word' instead?" (Reid, 2019, p. 93). "'Inside' ideas," comments Collins, "allow Black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality" (Collins, 2000, p. 98). Emira's understanding is seen in this way to reflect on identity politics that white people tacitly try to pass as social chatter.

Kelley becomes Emira's boyfriend in the novel, and is depicted as a white older guy who fancies the company of Black people. In the scene of his entrance to the bar for his first date with Emira, "Kelley arrived with four friends, and these friends, to Emira's indisputable surprise, were all Black. Kelley looked like he was being filmed for the intro of an extremely problematic music video" (Reid, 2019, p. 64). Emira is surprised because of Kelley's positioning in the middle of the male friends. In another instance, we learn of Kelley's

attempts to dissuade Emira from working for the Chamberlains' that she recognizes as a controlling tactic. All these instances we mentioned go to show Emira's consciousness of micro-racist behaviors that the whites display. It highlights not only her awareness but her refusal to play the role they assign her, which prove how she forms her identity and maintains her own values and independence despite the towering pressures she faces. In fact, Emira throughout the story shows resilience in against the hidden racist workings of the social and work environment she constantly finds herself in. Indeed, her silence and refusal to engage is shown to be rebellion and a refusal to be defined by the other, more so than passivity on her part.

This analysis illustrates how the characters of *The color purple* and *Such a fun age* resist stereotypes effectively. Because each character's image is distorted through the lenses of the male and white characters in the novels, each of them resist the erasure of their identities in different ways. For instance, Celie reclaims agency over her story by narrating it to God in letters, while Emira refuses to entertain the white gaze by hiding her true identity from Alix. Additionally, Sofia's rebellion against the mayor, and her lack of love for the white baby show she is unwilling to succumb to the image of the mammy that Eleanor Jane has of Black women. Similarly, Emira by working for Alix understands her white bias and sees through her tactics. Another character that claims her identity is Shug Avery who can be paralleled to Emira's relationship with Kelley in that she freely chooses sexual and romantic partners, countering reductive views on women and their bodies. All this shows that the Black women of the novels actively resist the controlling images that the white and patriarchal gaze imposes on them, and instead express their identities defiantly in their respective communities.

## 2. Community as Counter-Space

In the novels *The color purple* and *Such a fun age*, friendships among Black women provide safe spaces for self-definition outside of the dominant social scripts. Collins emphasizes this in *Black feminist thought* by asserting, “this issue of Black women being the ones who really listen to one another is significant, particularly given the importance of voice in Black women’s lives” (2000, p. 103). Celie’s awakening in Walker’s *The color purple* begins after the intimacy and love she shares with Shug Avery. This latter encourages her to free herself from patriarchal doctrines in favor of liberating spiritual beliefs. Additionally, Celie’s relationship with her Sister Nettie though sustained only by letters, offers her new knowledge that helps her learn about Black people who live in Africa, thus giving her other perspectives that help reposition her in the world.

Similarly in *Such a fun age* by Reid, we find that the protagonist Emira is comforted and empowered by friend group made up of Zara, Shaunie, and Josefa. This group functions as a community that helps Emira psychologically by guiding her through her experience with performative allyship from Alix and Kelley. These friendships are central to Emira’s emotional stability and aid her with decision making, as female solidarity reflect Collins’ assertion that Black women’s community functions as a counter-hegemonic force that shapes their realities and offers an authentic mirror in which they can see potential selves beyond stereotypical constraints.

In Walker’s novel, Celie details her interest in the events that happen to the Black women around her. She notices Shug’s tone and Sofia’s pain which she describes to God faithfully. This shows that they leave strong impressions on her, teaching her about the realities of life and other women’s reactions to hardship. When Celie engages in a relationship with Shug, she starts having deep conversations with her about many topics such as love, her

struggles, and spirituality. At first, Celie thinks of God as an overbearing creature who rules the church and looks white. She tells Shug that she is not on good terms with God because:

he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown. (Walker, 2017, p. 173)

From this, we see Celie's initial conception of God as an unjust man much like the ones in her life. It is only through Shug that she lets go of this rage and finally learns that "God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (Walker, 2017, p. 176). This liberates her from the fear she has of God that is caused by the patriarchal oppression she suffers in her life. Through this spiritual epiphany, Celie learns to separate her beliefs from her lived experience, effectively reclaiming spiritual space in her heart thanks to her contact with another Black woman. Black women's connections emerge as important meeting points of minds that share similar experiences and help each other out of the shackles of systemic oppression. Shug also helps Celie separate from her husband by encouraging her passion for sewing and moving in with her. In fact, her first real creative sparks happen when Celie is filled with rage at Albert, and is told by Shug to channel it to sewing: "a needle and not a razor in my hand" (Walker, 2017, p. 132). Community as a judgment-free zone then emerges as a site for identity reclamation and striving for independence.

Emira's friendships in *Such a fun age* also understand her unique vantage point and do not reduce her into a stereotype or a means to an end. Emira's friends have different personalities and face different struggles, but they also have successes and depth. Among them, Zara is the closest to Emira, and she listens to her as she exteriorizes her stress and frustration. This role is important as it allows Emira to vent and to express joy for Shaunie's new job, therefore maintaining the bonds they share as a group. Zara also aids Emira in her eventual quitting of her job at the Chamberlains' much like Shug contributes to Celie's separation from her abusive husband. Zara also informs Emira that it was Alix who leaked the

Market Depot video where she was shown to have a verbal altercation with a security guard. However, she urges her to find a new job before quitting at the Chamberlains'. Her role then concretizes as an agent of support, stabilization, and loyalty.

Throughout the novel, Emira meets with the girl friends in bars to celebrate various occasions and birthdays. When Emira's video leaks, her girlfriends swarm around her in the bathroom in an act of solidarity, then walk her out of the bar in a protective manner Reid describes:

Zara grabbed onto Emira's hand and steered her through the crowd in a way that felt young and reminded her of college. Somehow Shaunie appeared by the stairs to the street with Emira's coat and presents, like a boyfriend who had treated his partner to a shopping spree. (Reid, 2019, p. 247)

Collins explains this unity by saying "this issue of Black women being the ones who really listen to one another is significant, particularly given the importance of voice in Black women's lives" (Collins, 2000, p. 103). Friendships in *Such a fun age* are the center of a community of Black women where Emira is free to explore her identity in nuanced ways, which contrast with her depiction in relation to the white characters. Her ease around her friends underscores the safety that other Black women represent to Emira, revealing they are not mere side plots, but pillars to identity formation, resisting stereotypes, and emotional regulation. With her Black friends, she also gets a mirror into who she might become. It is for this reason that Reid draws a parallel between her and her successful friend Shaunie at the end of the novel while updating us on Emira's professional life. She points out that: "it would take Emira four more years to receive Shaunie's starting salary of \$52K" (Reid, 2019, p. 302).

Likewise in *The color purple*, Shug is the one who informs Celie that her sister Nettie sends her letters that Albert hides from her. Nettie writes to Celie periodically as she works in Africa as a missionary. Her writing reveal stark contrast to her sister's style because Nettie is educated in school, travels to different cultures, and reads books. This gives her a fresh

perspective on many issues that Celie is not initially aware of, like the spiritual beliefs of the Olinka people, the tensions of mentioning slavery to Africans, and the sexism that exists in their tribe. These facts serve to broaden Celie's perspective on the world and understand that people live differently in different parts of the world. She also later teaches what she knows to Albert as a form of transferring knowledge with her other Black people.

Celie incorporates what Nettie tells her in her letters in her conversations. For instance, while having a conversation with Albert, Celie talks about the Olinka and says: "... their word for naked is white. But since they are covered by color they are not naked. They said anybody looking at a white person can tell they naked, but Black people can not be naked because they can not be white" (Walker, 2017, p. 249). Celie learns of the history of Black people not from a white-centered perspective, but from a Black African one, effectively helping her understand her identity better. Collins discusses knowledge as an empowering dimension that rejects ideological narratives in favor of self-definitions, and views "Black feminist epistemologies as central to our worldviews, we empower ourselves" (Collins, 2000, p. 289). Though separated by lifestyles and distance, the bond that Celie and Nettie maintain helps Celie to understand her identity better, thus fostering an epistolary community space that resists efforts of erasure.

Both of the novels share strong commitments to their female communities. By forming bonds that nourish the characters' desire for knowledge, support, and understanding, they build sites where they can express their identity freely with all that it implies, from pain, to desire, to familial love. The communities also allow them to measure their lives and potentials, for instance, Emira constantly compares her life to her friends' which motivates her to improve it. Celie equally gets inspired by Shug's liberated lifestyle which leads her to start sewing professionally and gradually build self-assurance.

### 3. Musical expression as identity

The Blues tradition in *The color purple* is active agent of self-expression that Shug uses as a resistance to patriarchal control. Through her singing career, she garners a lot of success that makes her famous, which allows her to travel across the country, enjoy financial independence, and buy a house. The Blues then offered a chance for liberation from the control of Shug's oppressive environment despite the reputation that comes with it. She is also aware that it is the music that alienated her from her family. In fact, Shug's father is a preacher. Once while Celie was in church, she heard him talking badly about Shug: "he don't call no name, but he don't have to. Everybody know who he mean. He talk bout a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner" (Walker, 2017, p. 42). The preacher casts Shug as a heretic who does not abide by the word of God.

However, to Shug, singing is not about being distant from God, on the contrary, she tells Celie that He loves all sorts of feelings: "God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like" (Walker, 2017, p. 176). This links Shug's spirituality to her Blues singing as a practice of self-love unburdened by restrictions. Collins devotes a section of her work in *Black feminist thought* to the tradition of the Blues music for Black women artists, and explains its cultural significance and purpose. Collins studies the music as a form of knowledge that Black women produce, because according to her, fewer women could read books, but most listened to their songs on the radio that understood their pleas. Additionally, the Blues music articulated the upheavals and struggles of an entire race in its lyrics that were explicit and expressive of the truths lived by Black women, from sexual longing to sexist and racist oppression. Collins explains: "many Black women Blues singers have long sung about taken-for-granted situations that affect U.S.

Black women. Through their music, they not only depict Black women's realities, they aim to shape them" (Collins, 2017, p. 34).

From this, we understand that the presence of the Blues music in the novel is not random, but has a specific purpose that goes beyond its artistic expression. It is a nod to the African American tradition that bears its soul in the rhythm of the music and expresses political defiance just as it does personal pain through lyrics that may be direct or cloaked in metaphor and figurative speech. To Shug, this music represents not only her passion but also links her to a wider art form that was born from the African American experience with all its struggles, desires, and distinct identity.

Music tastes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century evolved from the Blues, but other genres are evoked in *Such a fun age* that reflect contemporary musical and cultural trends. In fact, one of the most entertaining aspects of *Such a fun age* is its rich references to popular culture and music. Many artists are mentioned in the novel in a way that feel both organic and deeply intentional on the part of the author. The genres of music mentioned differ and serve to set the atmosphere in various scenes. From the opening chapters we see Zara, Emira, and Briar dancing to Whitney Houston in Market Depot at midnight. The music as requested by Emira, is sensitive to the child, and does not contain explicit lyrics. This pop song is juxtaposed against Rap in the novel, especially songs that contain violent lyrics that may sound shocking to certain audiences.

In an instance when Alix displays curiosity in Emira's music taste, she plays the first verse of a song by Childish Gambino and gets visibly affected by the nature of the lyrics. The explicit or violent themes evoked in African American songs is a controversial topic that stretches back decades and that caused lawsuits, cultural commentary, and academic analysis. Crenshaw studies the 2000s trial of members of a Rap band called Live 2 Crew on the charge

of obscenity in their lyrics. While feminists argued against the sexual objectification of women who are called derogatory terms in their songs, others praised the “authenticity” of the music and its refusal to conform to the white standards of art (Crenshaw, 1991). Analyzing the lyrics Black artists employ in their songs is sensitive as it requires a cross-cultural examination of the nature of art and the form of expression that deserves a pedestal. Black Rappers for instance, have long used Rap songs to differentiate their culture, and protest against the systemic exclusions and injustices they faced. By looking at the lyrics alone then, Reid shows that Alix misses the mark on the rebellious streak of Rap, and by that, she critiques the broader tendency to sanitize music or make it easily digestible for white people.

Additionally, Reid makes use of Kelley who performs allyship with Black people to showcase how the heritage of music both demonstrates belonging and exposes tacit prejudice. When Emira is in his apartment, she notices Black musicians’ records sitting in a milk crate full of albums and gets curious about it. When she inquires about the reason he has those records, Kelley replies: “because I have the music tastes of a middle-aged Black woman” (Reid, 2019, p. 70). Emira rolls her eyes at his answer as she catches the subtle commodification of Black artists’ music to signal he is progressive. Black music thus appears from this exchange to have an important function in the identity of Black people so much that it is appropriated and used as bait to signal racial camaraderie.

Thus, music genres that are traditionally performed by Black artists is seen as a site for identity, resistance, and performative allyship. On one hand, Shug uses the Blues music to express herself and resist the intersectional issues Black women faced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Such a fun age* on the other hand employs music in order to express the different racial perceptions of Black music, for while Alix raises her eyebrow at the explicit lyrics of Rap songs, Kelley catalogues Black musicians’ records to showcase his love for Black art. Both of these attitudes however demonstrate implicit prejudice and racial virtue signaling.

#### 4. Conclusion of the Chapter

This chapter saw the ways in which the Black women of our primary sources resist the erasure and control of their identities. Celie and Emira first employed silence to refuse cooperating in the ready-made image of the Black woman their societies had for them, but Celie broke free when she retaliated against Albert and decided to start her own business sewing pants. Emira is also seen to quit her job at the Chamberlains who did not appropriately treat her. Celie then forms an individual identity thanks to her contact with the women of her community, especially Shug Avery who also represented a Sapphic awakening for the character. Emira on her end is aided by her girl friends in escaping many toxic situations throughout *Such a fun age* and manages to maintain strong friendships despite occasional hardships.

The male characters in *The color purple* though often criticized for being one-dimensional and cruel, serve to highlight the women's resilience in their own private worlds independently from any supporting currents from the men, at least not until Albert undergoes character development. For Emira however, we are given supporting characters that intoxicate her with overt support that borders on manipulation and obsession. Both these extremes ultimately act as incentives for the characters' evolution towards self-reclamation and identity formation.

Additionally, the novels incorporate music as big parts of the cultural elements that Alice Walker and Kiley Reid rely on to deepen their plots. Shug Avery through Blues music resists the religious and male-centered narratives by owning her art and considering it part of her spirituality, whereas for Emira, music is an important part in understanding the performativity of the white characters in the novel who seek to show allyship through adopting Black music tastes as their own. Through borrowing from Patricia Hill Collins, we

have then come to dissect the Black feminist thought in the two novels despite their different temporal setting and political environments.

## V. Conclusion

This study attempted to analyze two successful novels written by black women through the lenses of intersectionality and black feminist thought. Our main sources are *The color purple* by Alice walker which was first published in 1982 and has since become a classic and a staple in many educational curriculums, and *Such a fun age* which was published December 31, 2019, allowing the book to be widely read during the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020. The books owe their successes to their readability and relatability of the black women that are depicted in them. From Celie and Nettie's emotional bond, to Shug's refreshing defiance, to Emira Tucker's modern day dilemmas in America, the plotlines shows many facets of what it is to be a black woman in the United States across the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Our analysis relied on two prominent critics who theorized about the lived experiences of black women as a distinct group of individuals who differ from any other category. Crenshaw argues that black women are different from both black men and white women. This makes their struggles intersect both race and gender. Crenshaw used the term "intersectionality" to refer to the juxtaposition of many issues that cause structural, political, and representational injustices for black women. Collins on the other hand is interested in the ways black women reclaim their identities and build knowledge that is uniquely theirs despite the marginalization, stereotyping, and economic inequalities they face. Together, these two theorists form a solid backbone for our dissertation when we applied their ideas on our primary sources.

The first chapter focused on intersectionality and its many manifestations in the lives of the characters of *The color purple* and *Such a fun age*, from the systemic exclusion of Celie and Emira from economic opportunities to the racial profiling of Sofia and Emira. The chapter also peeked into representational issues in the novels and grappled with the authors' choices

of which sides of the black and white characters to highlight, and to what end. This led to an understanding of Walker's epistolary narrative and Reid's centering of Alix Chamberlain despite the story being about Emira.

The second chapter then moved on to an exploration of the manifold ways in which the women resisted being reduced to clichés, and showed how Shug used unconventional ways such as the blues music, her affair with Celie, and her spiritual beliefs to de-center the white and male-dominated views of the world that reigned over most women in the novel. The chapter also looked into how silence can also be a tool for resistance if packaged in the right way as Emira did by refusing to tell her story to the white guilt-ridden characters. All in all, the chapters elucidated the intersectional disparities that black women are forced into even in the contemporary world, forcing the reader to face the implicit issues that do not get talked about often, hence the importance of novels like *Such a fun age* that bait the readers into deep reflections with its light-hearted storytelling.

Lastly, our analysis is owed to the great tradition of black women who paved the way towards a reclamation of their unique identities that resisted erasure and fought oppression in favor of giving an authentic voice to their experiences no matter the pain they carry in their folds. We suggest that the intersectional theory of Kimberlé Crenshaw and the identity politics of Patricia Hill Collins be used on more books authored by Black women who seek to anchor their experiences and their understanding as necessary to literary studies everywhere, because in our day and age, it is becoming increasingly important to understand class privilege and fight against all forms that inequality takes in our societies.

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