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Motherhood as a Creative Power in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*¹ *Alice Walker'ın The Color Purple Adlı Eserinde Yaratıcı Bir Güç Olarak Annelik* Türkan Elbayiyeveva ¹

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Abstract: This study “Motherhood as a creative power in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*” attempts to analyse Alice Walker’s ideas of motherhood by putting mothering in the centre of feminism and tries to understand how it empowers different female characters to release their artistic power in spite of childbearing or childrearing in this patriarchal society. This feminism with a mother-centred focus is called matricentric feminism by Andrea O’Reilly. This study is guided by the ideas that the mother category differs from the woman category in *The Color Purple* and how these mother characters manage to release their artistic power in spite of problems they face as women and as mothers. Besides, the key concepts such as matricentric feminism, motherhood and artistic power are defined. A new wave of feminism, matricentric feminism to empower women’s and mothers’ rights is discussed in this study. The analysis of the women’s characters with different backgrounds in *The Color Purple* will allow us to put mothering in the centre of feminism. The paper concludes that, motherhood is presented in a variety of ways, like empowered mothering, community and othermothering, the relationship between mother and daughter in relation of our foremothers’ motherhood in *The Color Purple* and this empowers the characters to release their artistic power in spite of problems they face as women and mothers.

Keywords: Motherhood, Feminism, Women

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Öz: “Alice Walker'ın *The Color Purple* adlı eserinde yaratıcı bir güç olarak annelik” adlı bu çalışma, anneliği feminizmin merkezine oturtturarak Alice Walker'ın annelik fikirlerini analiz etmeye ve farklı kadın karakterleri, çocuk doğurmaya ya da bu ataerkil toplumda çocuk yetiştirmeye rağmen sanatsal güçlerini açığa çıkarma konusunda nasıl güçlendirdiğini anlamaya çalışıyor. Bu anne merkezli feminizm tarzı, Andrea O'Reilly tarafından ana merkezli feminizm olarak adlandırılır. Bu çalışma, *The Color Purple*'daki anne kategorisinin kadın kategorisinden farklı olduğu ve bu anne karakterlerin kadın ve anne olarak karşılaştıkları sorunlara rağmen sanatsal güçlerini nasıl ortaya çıkarabildikleri fikrinden hareket etmektedir. Ayrıca ana merkezli feminizm, annelik ve sanatsal güç gibi anahtar kavramlar tanımlanmıştır. Bu çalışmada kadın ve anne haklarını güçlendirmeye yönelik yeni bir feminizm dalgası olan ana merkezli feminizm tartışılmaktadır. *The Color Purple*'daki farklı geçmişlere sahip kadın karakterlerin analizi, anneliği feminizmin merkezine koymamızı sağlayacaktır. Makale, *The Color Purple*'da anneliğin güçlendirilmiş annelik, topluluk ve diğer annelik, kadın ve anne olarak karşılaştıkları sorunlara rağmen anne ve kız arasındaki ilişkinin atalarımızın anneliğiyle ilişkisi gibi çeşitli şekillerde sunulduğu ve bunun karakterlerin sanatsal güçlerini serbest bırakmalarını sağladığı sonucuna varıyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Annelik, Feminizm, Kadın

1.Introduction

¹ This research article is written under the supervision of Professor Mine Özyurt Kılıç within the framework of discussions on “matricentric feminism” in the MA course “Women and Writing”.



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Motherhood is an important topic in contemporary women's writing, however there is little information available concerning mothers throughout our history. Motherhood, according to matricentric feminists, is the study of and for the empowerment of women, demanding mental independence and the bravery to confront conventional thinking. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker gets into this tradition, demonstrating a great creative energy inside mothers. To break the silence, each mother character employs a different strategy, such as quilting, sewing, writing letters, singing, and painting. This article focuses on the idea of motherhood and mothering, presented through empowered mothering, community and othermothering, and the relationship between mother and daughter, connecting women to one another and to nature, encouraging them to release their self-awareness, creativity and generativity. The work allows readers to study the characters' evaluations in patriarchal society and their artistic abilities empower, highlighting hardships they confront through the novel.

. . . . momma

help me

turn the face of history

to your face.

—June Jordan, “Getting Down to Get Over, Dedicated to My Mother.”

Motherhood is a major issue in modern women's writing and appears significantly in the majority of works written by women. However, looking back through our literary history, we can see that there is not enough information available about our mothers. Women writers starting from the beginning of the nineteenth century put a huge interest in finding, claiming, establishing and saving this tradition about our mothers. In her critical essay “Women and Fiction” Virginia Woolf questions what is left of our mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers? And she replies herself that “nothing but a tradition, apart from their names, the dates of their weddings, and the number of children they had, we know nothing about them” (Woolf & Bradshaw, 2009:192).

As motherhood is a contemporary area of feminism, the meaning and the purpose of motherhood are exposed to different kinds of ideas and approaches as the time passes. Scientists tend to romanticize and mythologize motherhood, suggesting that women may become more creative after having kids (Hayasaki, 2017). However, Alice Walker sees motherhood as a crucial experience for women, she does not limit their roles in the society to motherhood, but helps them to realise their power even after being a mother. Matricentric feminists also believe that motherhood is the study of and for the emancipation of women. Being a mother entails having the ability to exert control over one's life. As O'Reilly (2016) in *Matricentric Feminist Theory* portrays her true feminist mother as a woman who involves mental independence and the bravery to challenge conventional wisdom (p. 70). So, a mother must be powerful and independent enough to be able to rule over one's life. And this domineering power is deep rooted, is ready to release and escapes as in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

Before *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker (2004) in her article *in Search of Our Mother's Garden* states her grief that there is no release for creativity of our mothers in the patriarchal society and hopes for a day when they will

revaluate. According to her “our mothers and grandmothers are artists rather than saints. They anticipate the day when the mysterious force inside of them will be revealed” (p. 402). Later, in *The Color Purple* we see the appliance of the inspirational idea how mothers release their artistic power. This sadness and a long expectancy can be observed in feminist scholars Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s article named “Feminism and Queer Theory”. In the article they argue that “by reclaiming the tradition of female creation, honouring their deceased foremothers, and rejecting the oppressive cultural roles of angel and monster that patriarchal society ascribed to them, nineteenth-century women writers were able to command literary authority” (Leitch, 2010:23). In order to achieve this creative power, mothers must undermine the roles that patriarchal society has given them. Later in her *A Room’s of One’s Own*, Woolf (2012) presents a drastic image of a powerful creative force within mothers that has been disappointed for so long. “Because women have spent so much time indoors over the course of millions of years, their creative energy is now permeating the very walls. In fact, it has exceeded the capabilities of bricks and mortar to the point where it must be directed to pens and brushes, business, and politics” (p. 43).

Moreover, Woolf (2012) believes the idea of creative power is inherent in all mothers. And she in her *A Room of One’s Own* states that, “this creative power is really different from the creative power of men. And it would be a thousand pities if it were hampered or wasted, for it was acquired through decades of the most severe discipline, and there is nothing to replace it” (p. 43). However, mothers and artists have been categorized differently throughout our literary history. Joanna Russ (2015) after many decades while studying “False categorizing” in her book *How to Suppress Women’s Writing* explores how mothers are excluded from the list of the artists. “One can look to Petersen and Wilson's *Women Artists* for the worst kind of ill-intentioned renaming, particularly the removal of women artists from that group to the category of mothers, wives, daughters, or lovers of men who are artists” (p. 49).

Virginia Woolf (2012) declares that “a woman reflects her mother's life while writing” (p. 48). By thinking back through our mothers, our minds are always in search of our mothers’ creative powers. However, this creative power always remains in the shade of patriarchal society for many centuries. In the same way, Russ (2015) detects that, “patriarchal society prefers to group women as wives or mothers rather than to accept their creative power. Another option is to write, but to agree with the assumption that women's writing must be inferior to men's or that women are (or should be) anything other than writers first, such as dutiful spouses and mothers. Keeping such viewpoints is simpler for a critic than for an artist” (p. 97). Patriarchal society’s grouping women as wives or mothers, maintain inferiority to men's writing, making it easier for critics to provide their viewpoints.

However, Alice Walker’s idea of mothers and motherhood and their creative power differ from ideas of patriarchal society. Coleman (1999) remarks that “Walker flipped the concept of art on its head. She recommended that instead of gazing high, we should gaze low. She discovered a large number of mothers who were also artists on that flat ground, working for their own freedom, power, and community by utilizing their neglected arts” (p. 85). She depicts the women as powerful and capable to disrupt patriarchal order. The characters such as Celie, Sofia, Shug Avery, Mary Agnes and Nettie as well as women of Olinka tribe, especially Catherine are all different types of

women, but they are all mothers. The letters that make up the book are written by three different people: Celie writes letters to God in the first section, her sister Nettie writes letters in the second section, and Celie and Nettie correspond in the third section. Celie is an empowered mother character of the novel, who faces a lot of problems created by patriarchal society. She keeps alive after her stepfather rapes her and sells their babies. She reacts passively to her husband's abuses. She mothers her husband's children who are never grateful. However, Shug Avery's encouraging mothering helps her to open her eyes. In the end, she develops into a content, independent, and creative lady. Shug Avery is Celie's husband's mistress at the beginning. She is a blues singer who refuses to be dominated by anyone. Celie throughout the novel compares Shug Avery to her mother. To the end of the novel, they become permanent friends. Like Shug Avery, Sofia is an independent character of the novel, who refuses to obey his husband Harpo and later the rules of patriarchal society. She marries Celie's stepson Harpo and she is a decade younger than her. But she teaches self-defence and courage to Celie. Mary Agnes is Harpo's lover after Sofia leaves him. She is also abused by patriarchal society, but undergoes transformation like Celie. Celie always takes care of her sister and protects her by sacrificing herself. Nettie in her turn, becomes caretaker of her sister's children. Nettie is smart and tries to educate people in Africa. But, she also faces with abuses of African society.

Each mother character in *The Color Purple* uses their unique strategies to break the quiet that has been forced on them, including Celie, Sofia, Shug Avery, Mary Agnes, Nettie, and, to a lesser extent, Catherine. These methods are quilting, sewing, writing letters, singing and painting. As Walker says, "art is a liberating and life-saving act; it is an act of reconstruction and recovery of one's self, one's past, one's women, and one's community" (Bloom & Henderson, 1989:67). Celie is a woman who passively accepted oppression from patriarchal society. As Harpo says to Celie at the beginning of the story "he wants his wife Sofia to be as Celie. When Pa says anything, you do it, he says. You don't do anything when he says not to" (Walker, 2003:43). But then she takes a stand and discovers creative power inside herself with the help of other women characters in the story. Like, Walker (2004) asserts that "after many years, the artist who was and is my mother revealed herself to me. This is what I eventually realized" (p. 408). Dr. Sunil Garg (2020) in her article "Concept of Patriarchy and Motherhood in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" states that, "motherhood and mothering give the novel a new and emancipated dimension to its leading character Celie who attained the biological, psychological and spiritual mothering in the form of Shug Avery. Shug teaches Celie each and every lesson a mother used to teach her child and tries her best to convert a silent, suppressed and more than enough promising and obliging Celie to an outspoken, confident, energetic, satisfied and somewhat vindictive Celie" (p. 59)

In one of her letters Celie wrote that she considered Shug as her child or her mother. She says, "I treat her as if she were a doll, Olivia, or mother. I comb and pat, comb and pat, comb and pat" (Walker, 2003:57). In her *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties* Laura Umansky (1996) defines this relation of women bond to each other as positive discourse feminist view on motherhood. Positive discourse asserts that, "motherhood without patriarchy has the truly amazing potential to connect women to one another and to nature, to cultivate a liberating self-awareness, and encourage the exact creativity and generativity that the institution of motherhood

denies to women” (p. 3). Motherhood without patriarchy can connect women, promote self-awareness, and encourage creativity and generativity.

The first creative power that Celie discovers in herself is to write. As Tucker (1988) in his article represents the importance of writing for self-development: “Yet writing is more than an act of bringing ourselves into existence; it also determines the way we are shaped” (p. 81). So writing is another way of releasing artistic power in *The Color Purple*. “I recall you saying once that your life made you feel so ashamed that you couldn't even talk about it to God, so you had to write about it, no matter how horrible you thought your writing was. Now I see what you meant. And whether God reads letters or not, I know you'll keep writing them, which is enough for me” (Walker, 2003:74). This is the fact that writing is a means of articulating some ideas that women are not able to speak. This kind of art as writing of letters, saves Celie from terrific madness. She became powerful and brave enough to give a voice to her writings as well. “What's wrong is that you're a lowdown dog, I say. It's time for me to leave you and enter the Creation. And your dead body is just what I need as a welcome mat” (Walker, 2003:99). Creation seems to refer to something symbolic here. She leaves Mr_____ to Memphis where she started her business and that is discovered her creative power. Another interesting fact about female creative process mentioned in Tucker's (1988) article is Celie's inability to menstruate after two unsterile pregnancies. He claims that, “the condition can be interpreted as a hysterical symptom, but it also signals pregnancy on a metaphorical level, and Celie is definitely pregnant with her own story. If autobiography is self-mothering, Celie's body language indicates a gestation phase, a condition required for the formation of an identity that will emerge through her texts” (p. 85). Celie couldn't mother her own children, but she could not forget the basic nature of mothering and she was dying to outpour on her own children. “Consider my babies sucking them. I remember the shudder I felt at the time. A strong shiver occasionally. The best part about having infants was feeding them” (Walker, 2003:49). In spite of problems, she faces she misses the feeling of being a mother. Throughout the novel, the hope to see Nettie and her children again keeps Celie powerful. “I now know Nettie is still alive. I start to strut a little. Consider this: When she returns home, we will leave here. Her and I, as well as our two children. I'm curious what they look like” (Walker, 2003:80).

Alice Walker always relates singing in connection with the making of art. *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* she (2004) states that “what matters more than what you sung is that you preserved the idea of song in so many of our forefathers” (p. 405). Preserving song idea in forefathers is more important than singing. It is not a coincidence that Shug Avery and Mary Agnes in *The Color Purple* liberated through songs. Squeak says, "I need to sing" (Walker, 2003:100). They both make a living by performing songs.

Celie's most remarkable creation with her needle is her pants. “I haven't been able to quit making pants since we started making them down there” (Walker, 2003:104). These are truly a product of the imagination, a product of both female consciousness and female economy. “How do you make a life up there? he said. Making pants, I explain” (Walker, 2003:119). Celie is able to change her condition by discovering the power inside her. She is an example of empowered mother who become competent and confident. O'Reilly (2006) uses the term empowered

mothering to denote maternal behaviours that “resist and reject patriarchal motherhood in order to develop a more powerful form of mothering for women” (p. 67). Empowered mothering challenges patriarchal norms by offering alternative approaches to empower women, mothers, and children, rather than oppressing them. According to Baga Simparinka (2022) in his master’s thesis, “She [Celie] is a symbol of hope that impresses the readers by her strength, faith and courage” (p. 279).

Catherine, Tashi’s mother is a different important mother character in the book. She wants her daughter to get education and creative in her own sphere. Rich’s mutual empowerment thesis about mothers and daughters says that “a mother who has self-confidence, is a fighter, and is working to make her environment liveable is showing her daughter that these opportunities are possible” (qtd in O’Reilly, 24). So as she is hardworking herself, her daughter succeeds in her learning. “She is the hardest-working of Tashi’s father’s widows, and people compliment her fields for their neatness, productivity, and all-around attractiveness” (Walker, 2003:86). Empowered mothering provides women selfhood and power, benefiting both mothers and children. “Tashi must never stop learning” speaks Catherine. (Walker, 2003:86).

Furthermore, empowered mothering involves African American mothers accepting responsibility for their children through othermothering and community mothering. “Parenting by African American mothers that is practiced through othermothering and community mothering, where women accept responsibility for children not their own is another example of empowered mothering” (Green, 2019:42). While, talking about the importance of community mothering, O’Reilly (2006) states that, “to meet the requirements of black mothers, community mothering and othermothering have also developed, and they have benefited black women by empowering them and enhancing their lives” (p. 86). So, community mothering develops to empower women and improve their lives. Community mothering is depicted in *The Color Purple* as Sofia takes care of her sisters’ children while she is out to work. “Sofia, Odessa’s sister. She is the mother of the children. Her and Jack, her husband. Squeak, Harpo’s wife, and Harpo himself” (Walker, 2003:86).

Similarly, the practice of othermothering, as it developed from West African traditions, becomes in African American culture a strategy of survival in that it ensured that all children, “regardless of whether the biological mother was present or available, would receive the mothering that delivers psychological and physical wellbeing and makes empowerment possible” (O’Reilly, 2006:85) Othermothering, originating from West African traditions, is a survival strategy ensuring psychological and physical wellbeing for all children, regardless of biological mother availability. Nettie is an example of othermothering in *The Color Purple*. She takes care of her sisters’ children, educates and cares as her own children, while Celie is not able to be there. “Yes, Celie, their offspring sent by "God" are your children. And they are being raised in love, Christian kindness, and God-consciousness. And now "God" has assigned me to keep an eye on them, to protect and nurture them. To shower them with all of my feelings for you” (Walker, 2003:74).

2. Conclusion

When considered from the matricentric feminist perspective, motherhood is a crucial topic in contemporary women's writing, focusing on women's empowerment, mental independence, and confronting conventional thinking. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* explores creative energy in mothers through various strategies. The article explores motherhood, empowered mothering, community, and othermothering, connecting women to nature, self-awareness, creativity, and generativity, highlighting their struggles in patriarchal society. Consequently, this approach highlights the characters' evaluations in patriarchal society and their artistic abilities, inspiring future generations to embrace motherhood and express their creativity despite facing challenges as women and mothers.

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