CHAPTER III

GENERAL BACKGROUND OF BLACK AMERICAN

III.1. Black in segregation system

Setting, especially the social setting, has an important role in embodying the whole story of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The social setting in this novel refers to social condition of black American (woman) in a particular time. The duration or range of time in this story is about thirty years. In the beginning of the story, Celie is a fourteen year old girl who does not marry and has no children yet, while in the end of the story she meets her children who are about thirty years old. This reunification takes place when Nettie and Celie's two children go home to America from Africa because of the great war among European white men in Africa. The writer concludes that it is the second World War (1939 to early 1940s) for it is commited by European white men in Africa. Based on these informations the writer, furthermore, concludes that the setting of time in this story is about the first half of the twentieth century. In presenting the social background in this chapter the writer, however, does not limit strictly on the range of time above but it can be the preceeding and the later period. How was the condition

of black American society, especially the condition of black American woman, during this period ?

Blacks in the United States have a full-of-suffering history. They were brought from Africa in the seventeenth century, when a small Dutch warship sailed up the James River to the Young English colony of Jamestown, Virginia in North America (Thompson,- :3). They were to be slaved that, of course, caused them to get very bad treatment from their employers. They were exploited to work hard, and even the black women, were often sexually exploited (Low, 1981:862). Patriarchal society that gives special rights to the men over the women causes them as the most suffering group after the black men. In 1865, during the governmental administration of President Abraham Lincoln, slavery was abolished in all over the United States. It did not mean the black's condition had got better. They remained to live in a segregation system (Thompson,- :8).

Low and Virgil A. Clift, in their *Encyclopedia of Black America*, state that segregation was a way to keep Afro-Americans "in their places". It extends backward in time to the earliest periods of American history, although segregation manifested itself differently according to time and place. Slavery was essentially a system of segregation based primarily upon birth and color. Literally a racist caste system, segregation lasted in

both fact and law for 100 years or more after the constitutional end of slavery. It was formalized in many Jim Crow laws following the collapse of Reconstruction. Although at times segregation was difficult to sustain, especially in the face of its own moral wrongs and of Afro-American resistance, it was a dominant feature of American society from the time of the Civil War until the beginning of its demise following World War II. This was especially true in the South where very large numbers of Afro-American lived (1981:749).

For white, shaking hands with an Afro-American was forbidden, as was sitting or dining with them. Consequently, any public facilities for whites were separated from those for blacks, such as public transportations, schools, buildings, hotels, department stores, churches, etc. In short, segregation remained in effect, if not in law, in structure and fuction of the society (ibid, 750-752).

Especially for Afro-American woman, Low and Clift, furthermore, state that the ordeal of slavery (which lasted two and a half centuries) and of segregation (which continued for another century) have had far-reaching negative influences on them. Practically every aspect of their lives has been influenced by these ordeals : the lifestyles for survival, the relationships with mates and

children,the daily coping mechanisms, in the aspirations
and motivations for the future. The role of black women
can not be understood and explained adequately apart from
this historical background. Afro-American women have had
to endure in a society of white over black, in which, in
theory if not in practice, white women were placed upon a
pedestal, and white male expressed their supremacy over
and chauvinism concerning female and nonwhite males. Under
the systems of slavery and racial caste the Afro-American
woman was subject to abuse. The sexual impulses of the
white male master could be most easily satisfied at the
expense of the Afro-American woman's honor, privacy, and
person. Yet, the systems of slavery and caste encouraged
white and black males sexually and socially to exploit
black women. Thinking of profits or believing in the
innate inferiority of Afro-American, some slave masters
encouraged and ignored black male edvances to black
females, regarding the mating of slaves much in the same
way they did that of their livestock. The Afro-American
woman under slavery was further abused and dehumanized
when her children were stripped from her and sold under
conditions that included the likelihood that she would
never see them again.

Although chattel slavery ended with emancipation,
abuses under segregation continued. Especially in the

former slaveholding states, where the vast majority of Afro-Americans lived, black women were at a great disadvantage in protecting themselves or their property from the abuses, excesses, and humiliations of whites. In additions, the Afro-American family still had to live for the most part in the shadows of slavery : peonage, poverty, discrimination, and unemployment. As a result, education and housing for Afro-Americans were always and still are limited, inferior, and inadequate. A lack of understanding of these historical forces operating upon the black woman (and her children) have led some scholars to define the black family as "disorganized" or "unstable". Perhaps more important, this lack of understanding has perpetuated popular myths about the black woman's innate or "natural" promiscuity and fertility. A more accurate assessment would lead to the conclusion that an often inhospitable (and sometimes hostile) social environment created by a racist society has itself produced negative images of the Afro-American family in general and of the Afro-American woman in particular (ibid:750-752).

In education field, very few of blacks, especially black women, get formal education since they generally are from poor farming families. They, therefore, have to work hard both in the house and in the field since the time of

their childhood. It emerges an assumption that black women have strong physic and capability to work hard. It makes them to be considered working-machine. They, consequently, can not survive in the job-market. Their jobs are in the unskilled field with lower salary, for examples house-maid, baby-sitter, washmen, and workers in farms. The educational and economical status of black women place them on the lowest level in the society.This condition is attached stickily on Celie's character.

III.2. The myth of matriarchy

Another popular myth is that of the black "matriarch". The many studies that have examined this contention in detail have generally found it to be untrue as a generalization and unproven as a statement of fact. Passing beyond the simplistic definition of the matriarchal family as being one headed by a female, it is emphasized the pressures of socioeconomic influences that "developed in her (the black woman) those qualities which are ascocieted with a 'matriarchal' organization". The condition of slavery were probably such that no primitive culture could survive the impact of such servitude and bondage. In those families where the mother and grandmother play important roles, one can find vetiges, albeit in diluted form, of African traditions. The lebel

"matriarchal family" is a misnomer, wrongly applied to dominant women who exist in every subgroup in modern society. In conjunction with the National Urban League, responded by refuting studies that lebeled Afro-American families as matriarchal, disorganized and disintegrating (Low, 1981:862-863).

Sexism is viewed by many blacks to be a factor of minimal importance in the overall oppression of the black woman. The brunt of culpability for her unequal condition is accorded to racism. The foregoing view of black female subordination oppresses a narrow perspective on the nature of social oppression in American society. The black female condition in America has developed in a society where the dominant economic form is the market economy and the sole purpose of economic activity is the making of a pront on the part of large corporations (Freeman, 1984:557).

The ideology of racism has functioned to maintain blacks in a subordinate economic state. It has similarities of the process of racial subordination to that of female subordination. In both cases the rationale for subordination resides in characteristics ascribed by the large capitalist interests which are almost totally white male. Moreover, both forces – sexism and racism – create an occupationally segregated labor market, thereby giving rise to a situation where there are male jobs and

famale jobs, white jobs and black jobs (ibid, 558). Because of their subcultural status and the low quality of their education, black women historically have been at a disadvantage in the competition for clerical jobs (ibid, 560). Their occupations are traditionally motivated by a sense of responsibility to the financial welfare of their family (ibid:562).

Most sociologists have similar view about the myth of black matriarchy. They basically say that the idea of matriarchy is unnatural and deviant. In fact Biblical support for sexual inequality is strong, and the Christian church has played a preeminent role in validating the patriarchal nature of western culture. This view persists because of the deep religiousity of black people and most black's religions are basically Christian. For whatever reason, the church is the most important social institution in the black community. This has undoubtedly contributed in no small part to the black female's passive acceptance of her subservient societal role. Furthermore, it also pushes women into the traditional servile roles of wife and mother (ibid, 564). We, therefore, can say or conclude that the myth of matriarchal family among black families is merely a reflection of female oppression.

Meanwhile, The whites regard the Negro in America as a stranded representative of these apparently backward

peoples, in need of care and protection but hopelessly incapable of aspiring to the heights of civilization (Pole, 1978:162). Among the whites, then, emerging a popular belief that Negroes were innately inferior (ibid, 158). The history of Negroes both in Africa and the West revealed them as "indolent, playful, sensual, imitative, subservient, good-natured, versatile, unsteady in their purpose, devoted, and affectionate" (ibid, 161). The blacks, being incapable of higher attainments, were fittingly employed in laying the foundations for the South's superior civilization (ibid, 165). They even did not wish for inter-marriage between black and white. A mixture between a superior and an inferior always resulted in degeneration: "The cross between a white man and an Indian is an Indian; the cross between a white man and a Negro is a Negro; and the cross between any of the three races of Europe and a Jew is a Jew" (ibid, 233).

III.3. The black's reaction against segregation

Facing such condition Afro-American actually did not keep silent. There was, in their mind, a kind of desire for rebellion or, at least, of feeling to protest this bad condition. At the beginning they conveyed their feeling in an unconfrontative way. Art, or blues music in this case, became their tool in order to state their mind. The blues

for black Americans, from the very beginning was 'the element of pure self' (Levine,1977).

In his *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, Lawrence W. Levine states that the blues began to rise in the second half of the nineteenth century and became very popular in the twentieth century. It was the most typically Afro-American music which remained one of the chief sources of difference between black and white American throughout the nineteenth century. It could be taken as the expression of consciousness , attitudes, and experiences of large number of Negroes in America (1977:221). Its lyrics – its message – evidenced an abandonment of the sacred universe of the African and slave past, and an adjusment to modern religious consciousness (ibid:223).

He, furthermore, says that the blues became an effective medium for complaint, protest, and the venting of frustration (ibid:220). It was also used to criticize the white boss employing them. If black workers suffered, then, they hardly suffered in silence; their feeling about the white men who employed their labors were articulated frequently and publicly. These songs constituted more than conventional griping. Throughout them they ran a deep feeling of injustice and an enduring sense of being used unfairly (ibid:249).

The twentieth-century black songs , blues, pictured the conditions and problems of black American with such detailed realism that they were often accompanied by a deadening sense of despair. It became synonymous with trouble. Blues attempted to portray the entire spectrum of black experiences and reaction. Still, it contained a substantial amount of articulated troubles and misery (ibid, 255-256).

Based on the informations above, it is very possible for us to say that the blues is one of the pioneers for rebellion of black Americans against segregation system. We can also say that it is the begining phase of the nonviolent movement for the equality of civil rights. In the further development, especially after the second World War, their movement became both violent and nonviolent movements. Their violent movement constituted a reaction more against the violent treatment at the hand of white racist. Meanwhile, their non violent movement was commited by establishing some organizations aiming to abolish the segregation systems (Low,1981:243).