Gender and Sexuality in Alice Walker’s *Color Purple*

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**Abstract**

Alice Walker a black woman who won an award for her work in the novel Color Purple gives her perception on gender and sexuality in the novel. She uses various characters to engage in the topic of gender inequality and sexual orientation. The paper below pays close attention to the gender identity of the black women from the novel. From Judith Butler’s book titled Gender trouble, the paper analyzes the sexual orientation and the argument by Judith on gender equality. The paper gives the stand point of Walker on the issues of sexuality and sexual orientation. The book by Walker ends by breaking down the traditional norms on gender and sexuality. She also urges for coexistence among people from the various sexual orientations.

**Keywords:** Alice Walker, Color Purple, Gender and Sexuality, inequality & Novel.
Introduction

Gender and sexuality are distinct from each other (Barta 1). Gender is the state of being a male or a female to make social and cultural difference (Guth 3). On the other hand, sexuality entails how individuals decide to sexually express themselves in various orientations (Amey 24). Centuries ago, feminism gyrated around sexuality, culture and self-realization, and definition for the colored women. Throughout history, feminism has proven to be difficult when trying to get equal rights for both genders. The novel *Color Purple* by Alice Walker shows these hardships. Through her characters, she shows the oppression that the female gender is put through by the patriarch society, as well as the struggles of overcoming sexuality prejudices. The largely regarded notion about gender that one is either female or male is only specific to some cultures, which does not make it universal.

Alice walker became a famous writer largely due to her the novel *Color Purple*, which won an award that placed her as a creative black woman writer (Donnelly 73). The novel talks about a young girl by the name Celie. Celie was raped by her own father where she later on gave birth to two children. The father sold the two babies that Celie gave birth to. Later on, Celie was forced to marry Mr. Albert by her own Father. Celie cared a lot about her sister Nettie, who was kicked out by Mr. Albert because he was not able to rape her. Mr. Albert opted to marry Celie with the aim that she would take care of the family because he only loved Shug Avery. There was a time that Shug fell and thanks to Celie who took care of her, she managed to recover. Shug developed affection for Celie for taking care of her. When Shug was recovering, the three where in a weird harmonious relationship where Celie loved Shug, Shug loved both Mr. Albert and Celie, and Mr. Albert came to love Celie. Nettie, Celie’s sister who was kicked out, went to Africa and worked as Missionary together with Mr. Samuel who managed to adopt Celie’s kids who were sold. For many years, Nettie kept in touch with her sister Celie through letters, though Mr. Albert kept the letters from Nettie hidden. Later on, Celie managed to get the letters that were hidden by Mr. Albert with the help of Shug. Celie became very angry with Mr. Albert and opted to leave Mr. Albert’s house. Celie and Shug agreed on leaving together and started a business together. Nettie managed to go back to Celie together with Celie’s two kids. The reunion was great and Celie felt happy more than she had ever felt in her life.

Definition of Sexuality

Sexual orientation or sexuality stands for an individual’s preference for a sexual partner, be it of the same sex or the opposite sex (Joseph 37). Homosexual is a term used to refer to an individual who prefers individuals of the same sex, heterosexual refers to an individual who prefer individuals of the opposite sex, while bisexual is a term used to refer to individuals who prefer both sexes (Nemeroff and Craighead 1512). Normally, heterosexuals are considered normal while homosexuals are considered abnormal. This is because of the social and cultural ideology fostered by the society (Rahman and Jackson 2010). Where heterosexuality is dominant, the homosexuality is suppressed. In the novel, the homosexual relationship between Shug and Celie is not critiqued for being erogenous; rather, it is acclaimed.
Gender Inequality and Sexual Oppression

In *Color Purple*, the black men play the role of the bad mangos. From one point of view, they are the autocrats and considered as oppressors to females in the male dominated society. On another point of view, they are the victims of their own patriarchy. In the male dominated society where the men are the decision makers, everyone accepts it. Despite benefiting from the patriarchy however, the men are still victims (Synnot n. p.). This is because to secure his place in the family, a man has to dominate over his children and wife. This means that a boy is always forced to choose between his father and the mother, which means a choice between the two sexual dispositions. Boys often end up choosing the heterosexuality because of fear. The fear brought about by heterosexuality is the fear of feminization. Mr. Albert is the perfect example of oppression brought about by heterosexuality in the patriarch society. He is always craving for Shug, but he was made to marry Julia and Annie as his wives by his father. Powerless to challenge his father, Mr. Albert is forced to keep his relationship with Shug hidden. He is unable to live according to his heart’s desire and is a perfect example of a miserable product of patriarchy. He tries to do the same thing as his father did to him by interfering with his son’s wedding when his son was marrying Sofia. After failing to ruin his son’s wedding, he goes ahead to quell the patriarchy ideology to his son. Similar to what he learns from his father, he is trying to have complete power by controlling his son and abusing his wife.

The novel took place during a period when racism was vivid in the society. The black people in the society were at the time seen as lesser beings compared to the white people. More so, the colored people in the novel are forced into a lower class through oppression, not only because of the color of their skin, but also because they are women and lesbians. Celie who is the main character in the novel is burdened with a lot of adult responsibilities at her tender age (Dieke 39). After her mother passes away, she is taken out of school to take care of her siblings. Her father not only deprives her off a chance to get her education, but also sexually abuses her for his pleasure. Many women of color at the period were burdened with responsibilities of child care and also faced violence. These burdens were greatly attributed to their gender and social class. Due to the fact that Celie was pulled out of school at a tender age to take care of her siblings, and was denied the chance to go back to school, she ended up lacking the skills to get a job (Dieke 39). Though Celie’s father too is oppressed for being a black man, Celie goes through more oppression for being a woman. She is placed in a situation where she has no control over her social life and she becomes subordinated and oppressed. Celie’s gender makes her undergo so much oppression and due to being treated like an object for men to use and dispose of when satisfied, she undergoes a lot of changes. At some point, she admits that she has been oppressed to the point where she cannot fight back and all she knows is to stay alive. While women in the black community were oppressed and mistreated, there was a woman who defied the odds. Sofia, Harpo’s wife, fought her father, brothers and uncles since she was young. She learnt early in her life that a woman is not safe among a group of men. She even stands for her interest against her husband who tries to beat her up to make her submissive and to reduce her status in the community.
Going through molestation by her own father, Celie reserves a safe distance between herself and men. She grows with a cold insolence towards men. Her father constantly told her she was ugly and she had the ugliest smile. The constant destructive comments from her father led her to accepting that she was an ugly woman. She lost her self-confidence from the constant repudiation from men. Celie had two men in her life, but none of them showed love towards her. She was sexually abused by her father in her early life, and in her marriage life, she was mistreated by Mr. Albert, who used to urinate in her while having sex (Saidel and Hedgepeth 265). Over time, a woman has been given out in exchange for gifts or identity between clans. Celie has no identity so she is not exchanged for another identity (Joannev 166). Her father deprived her off her identity as a mother by selling her two children. She was also deprived of her identity as a wife since Mr. Albert ruled over their marriage through abuse. Celie was a suppressed black woman who had lost her identity till she met Shug. Having been mistreated by both men in her life, she feels hatred and disgust towards men. Things changed in her life after she met Shug where she realized her identity and could enjoy her life. When Celie and Shug first met, the mood was uncertain since Shug bluntly suggested that Celie was really ugly. Shug’s comments about Celie did not get to her; rather Celie helped Shug through her illness. The only person that Celie loved was however her sister. Tending to Shug was a way of Celie filling the void of sisterhood left by Nettie. When Shug announces that she has written a song about Celie, it amazes her and makes her feel special. Surprisingly, Shug says that she loves Celie and kisses her. At first Celie is surprised, but she kisses Shug back. They do this until they end up sleeping in each other’s arms. It’s clear that Shug is the reason as to why Celie becomes self-aware of her physique. Celie actually admits that she never enjoyed sex since she had been used by men to satisfy their interests rather than having mutual pleasure. Being renounced by the unfortunate heterosexual life experience, the homosexual relationship between Celie and Shug was unexpected, but felt natural to both. Naturally, Celie was not a lesbian but through life experiences, she became a homosexual. Sexual orientation is not a fixed role but rather a variable that can change. It is clear that Celie’s choice to love Shug is a free choice, and though affected by her past heterosexual relationships, she has the right to choose another orientation that suits her and satisfies her

**Sexual Identity**

The periphery between male and female is not clear in the sense that the psychological gender is not clear. Each female has some male qualities and so does Shug. She is a fortified masculine and a gentle feminine. Her individuality challenges the traditional label of a black woman. From the novel, it can be seen that she drinks and smokes and wears clothes that are not acceptable for women at the time. Her music preference also says a lot about her character. She loves blues which is a sensual and erotic form of music. It’s also clear that she is against religion. The relationship between Shug and Celie is the core relationship of the novel. The relationship between them is nurtured in a very short period of time because each one of them is able to fulfill the others wants. Celie’s need is to have a person who truly cares about her and Shug does exactly that. Shug’s need is to have a person to be there for her and care for her, which Celie does. Shug also has a peculiar desire for Mr. Albert and enjoys making love with Mr. Albert. Being bisexual reveals that she was not a typical. As the story progresses, the two ladies join
together against Mr. Albert. The novel tries to show that individuals with different sexual orientations can come together and have a common goal and work together in harmony. The fact that Shug was married brings some tension in the novel since Mr. Albert had devoted himself to loving Shug and to Celie, it was a rough fact that she loved Shug but she was already married. From Shug’s personality, she appears not be the kind of person to get married because marriage is a form of sacrifice. As portrayed by Shug, bisexuality is an identity which brings possibilities of opportunities for establishing relationships without a struggle. The novel through the characters, tries to eliminate the binary antagonism of men and women to make people understand that people can live in this world in harmony, with gender indifference not being an issue.

**Comparison of Gender Inequality and Sexual Discrimination from two Continents**

*Color Purple* gives a narration of the two sisters who were separated early in their lives, in the form of letter. The two sisters namely Celie and Nettie live in different continents and keep the hope that they will one day reunite. Celie was left in rural America, while Nettie was taken to Africa where she worked as a missionary. By taking readers through the lives of the two girls in the different continents, the novel shows the patriarchal oppression that affects black women. This way, Alice Walker is able to is able to shed light on the kind of oppression black women are put under, which has been a barrier for women to have the freedom to move forward in the society. The novel gives a picture of the kind of role black women have been given not only in the black community in America, but also in Africa. From her novel, Walker aims to back the movement that aims to improve lives of black women in patriarchal systems that pull them down. She tries however tries to show that merely solving the racial oppression in America will not better the conditions for the black women, since she illustrates that women are still oppressed within their own black communities which are not attached to American racism. An example is the Olinka tribe that Nettie lived in while in Africa. (Higginbotham and Gates 235).

Walker’s novel is able to cast the black woman’s identity by giving various illustrations of patriarchal oppression that she goes through. Walker is able to show how patriarchy as a system of oppression works in a similar way both in America and in Africa. In her novel, she says that this form of oppression has reduced black women to nothing more than statues with untapped creativity within them. It is amazing how Walker is able to contrast the lives of two women in different continents, which shows that the identity of a black woman is universal. Specifically, her work has been able to show how women’s creativity has been undermined by men who have a notion that a woman can’t be educated and should not rise to the status of a man, so as not to challenge the position that the men hold in the society. This kind of notion has led to black women’s bodies being treated as items or commodities for sexual carnality. Nevertheless, Walker liberates black women from the oppression and the role they have been given in the society. She puts forward that black women both in America and Africa still have their creativity and talent, which is portrayed through their works. This is shown by her two characters namely Celie and Shug, who form an alliance and start off a business together.
Effect of Traditional Beliefs on Gender and Sexuality

At the beginning of the novel each gender knows their role and they are unanimously accepted. The male gender has the power to control what happens in his house as well as having unchallenged power over his wife and children. The perfect example for this is when Celie was given out for marriage by her own father without her consent. From her experience, it is clear that she has no power over what happens regarding her fate since she moves from being a slave of her father to a slave of the man who married her. This shows how Celie being a woman, has been denied the freedom of choice. From the novel, it is clear how the female gender is undermined to the point where a man has the right to beat up her wife. The mentality that the only way to keep the female gender in line is to beat them up is obscure and has made the female gender subject to the male gender. In the novel, Mr Albert explains to his son Harpo, about how women should be handled. He tells him that women are like children and from time to time, one needs to let them know who has the upper hand in the house, and the best way to let them know that is by a beating. By beating their wives, men are able to satisfy their need to prove they are the heads in the family and keep the women subjects to them. Reading the novel, one gets the idea of a woman being a slave and an individual who is often talked down upon and beaten. Her role is to keep the man happy and fulfill the needs she is asked to complete.

A few characters in the novel are seen to challenge their gender roles and norms. An example is Sofia, who challenges her gender role in the novel. When they get married, Harpo comes to realize that Sofia is not a usual woman in the society. He comes to realize that Sofia knows and makes firm decisions in her life. This is not a custom in the society that is ruled with patriarch rules. She makes firm standpoints without blindly listening to her husband. Harpo is forced to reason with her and seek her input on issues. Since Harpo was taught that a man should make his woman a subject, he asks for advice and his father, who gives him the advice that he should beat her. It is clear that the notion that the female gender is inferior to the male gender is inherited from generation to generation, making it difficult for the female gender to break out of the maze of gender discrimination. Harpo does not think that beating Sofia is a good idea, but since the male elite requires him to prove his status as a man, he is forced to try. The decision to beat his wife makes his relationship move from bad to worse. This is because Sofia ends up fighting back at Harpo and she wins. Sofia’s character was defined from the beginning that she did not care what opinion people had about her. It is a great step taken by a woman as portrayed by the novel since only a few number of women would be confident enough to fight back. Sofia defines new possibilities for women as she challenges the norm that the female gender is a subject to the male gender. She claims that she truly loves Harpo, but will kill him for undermining her. Harpo is forced to accept that the period of undermining the female gender has passed and that there are women ready to stand for their beliefs. He realizes that he does not have to conform to public standards, and this made his relationship with his wife improve.

In the novel, gender roles are defined in the beginning. However, later on, the male adjust to the changing times as the roles change. The role of sewing and talking about feelings and emotions is connected to the female gender and the male gender keeps a distance from such activities. At the end of the novel, Mr. Albert sits out with Celie sewing as he talks about love
and his feelings. Another character who defies the norms of gender discrimination is Shug. It is a custom that by the age of twenty, a woman should be married and have children, but it is not so for Shug. Shug is unmarried though she has children. Being a singer, she also opts to travel and accomplish her dreams and she is set as a successful woman. Her character challenges the norms since as a woman, she is not expected to follow her ambitions, but rather more on her children and family. However, Shug’s children continue to live with her parents as she pursues her dreams. To Celie, Shug is the complete opposite of her which is why she was able to have much influence over her.

**Judith Butler’s Point of view on Gender Inequality**

Judith Butler the author of *Gender Trouble* presents an argument that gender and sexuality should be looked at in a different way. She points out that opposed to how people view gender and sexuality as merely masculine and feminine, people should view gender and sexuality as a variable or fluid (Butler 1990). People should take into consideration the way they behave at different times and in different circumstances, rather than only who they are. By trying to reconstruct the way they think about gender and sexuality, then people can move the world towards justice and equality between the two genders and break down the restriction brought about by gender roles. Butler’s argument is similar to all feminists who have the interest of attaining gender equality between the male and the female, but she uses a different approach to make her points (McIvenny 50). To face the problem of gender inequality, it is important to first define who a woman is. Since tradition, women have been seen as homogenous, but by grouping women as all alike limits their ability. Each and every woman is unique in her own way. Feminists before Judith defined a woman as womb, which is a definition that has limited the ability and perception of women. Judith disagrees with this definition and suggests that man defines a woman relative to her (Sabrosky 131).

By changing the point of view about the female gender and impeding themselves from defining a female in terms of their sex, the perception of people on the topic of gender would largely change. It is essential to realize that women are diverse and defining them as a unified group would be placing barriers on their possibilities. The constant categorizing of women as separate from men by feminists has created more harm than good in their agenda to gain gender equality. If both genders see each other as totally different, then attaining gender equality is near to impossibility. From their work, feminists have at some point labeled the “male” as the enemy, in their attempt to push for gender equality and without realizing it, they are doing harm to the little progress they achieve. A negative attitude towards the opposite gender with the aim of making progress in their social standards only creates a wider gulf between the genders. Facing the issue of gender and sexuality as politics is another mistake that the feminists make. Treating women as a political party with the agenda for equality only makes a small impact since for a political party to make its agenda known, then all members should be united and of one agenda. Having only women for one agenda and men for the other can be a difficult strategy to push for gender equality, which will only end up being ineffective.
Understanding sexuality

When it comes to sexuality, it is important to understand the sex, gender, and desire link (Valiulis and Bradley 172). In order to understand sexuality, one must first realize that sex, whether masculine or feminine, defines gender, which in turn causes desire for opposite sex. The way an individual gets their identification is linear and happens in order. As a result of that fact, there are only two possible relations. One is that an individual identifies with one sex and desires the other, and the second is that an individual identifies with one sex and desires the same sex. In reality, gender is not the main aspect of identification in human beings, but rather of performance in the various ways they behave and react to various situations. From her book, Butler supports gender trouble as a way of subverting gender roles. Challenging traditional notions about gender and sexuality would be a concrete way of changing the notion on gender identity. The way the society has come to perceive gender roles lies at the root of inequality of the sexes. Making steady steps in changing the way the society views gender roles would have a large impact over a period of time. Having no conservative roles for either gender would allow a woman to hold a powerful political office, while the man remains at home looking after the children and the society will not find it odd.

According to the novel, if a woman fails to fight back to all forms of oppression that comes her way, then she is fated to be a subject to a man. Both Sofia and Nettie play a crucial role in Celie’s life. They make Celie become assertive, empowered and independent in the end. They prove to Celie that a woman can avoid or escape the game of gender roles and the expectation bestowed on her. Sofia and Nettie are a symbol of defiance since they make their own decisions without the influence of a male figure in their lives, which displays control over their lives (Rose 65). They show Celie the path to take towards liberation. Shug plays a critical role in showing Celie how to be empowered through her sexual identity and her sexuality. Being a mistress of Mr. Albert, Shug is a representation of the sexual stereotype placed on women. Shug’s sexuality is influenced by her career as a singer. After realizing that Celie has no feelings towards men including Mr. Albert even when having sex, Shug takes it upon herself to teach Celie about her body, how to have pleasure on her own, and how to make pleasure to others. Celie is encouraged to learn more about her sexuality by explorations on her own. Her willingness to explore her sexuality plays a role in her transformation. She gets to understand that that sex is not associated with submission. Her sexual relationship with Shug allows her to reclaim the feminine relationship that she was denied by the male figures in her life. The most important thing is that Celie is able to reclaim herself and her sexual identity through support from her female counterparts. Nettie first taught Celie to have the will power to fight her opponents before she left. Meeting Shug later on in her life, Celie was taught self-value and aggression. All her relationships happen in isolation, but with Celie having access to the resources, she learns and develops independence, value and courage.

Alice Walker’s Advice on Gender and Sexual Orientation

Throughout the novel, Walker expresses the need express ones thought and feelings to be able to develop their sexuality. In the beginning, Celie is unable to express herself to the people
who oppressed her. She is used as an object and remains passive because she lacks power. Celie learns that she can create a new narrative for herself, which would counter the ideology forced upon her despite her gender. Celie’s transformation to a lady who is aware of her gender and sexuality manages to humble Mr. Albert, who treated her as an object at the beginning. The novel tries to insist on the power of assertive self-knowledge to counter oppression and discrimination among the undermined gender (Marsh 67). Some of the relationships between the women have greatly empowered them to realize that they can fight against gender discrimination and sexual abuse. Some of the relationships which were between sister to sister, teacher to pupil, friends and others sexual partners played the role of connecting these women one way or another. The characters in the novel are seen breaking down the walls on gender roles and the misconceptions about sexuality. Sofia becomes a strong woman with a say in the society. Shug teaches Celie to become assertive about their sexuality. The novel does an amazing job of subverting and defining the norms and the way both genders and the different sexual orientations are viewed.

Conclusion

In the novel, Color Purple, the author has displayed the various sexual orientations using various characters. The various sexual orientations displayed in the novel can be termed effective in representing the freedom of choice among individuals. The novel tries to create a point that heterosexuality and homosexuality are not opposites of each other, but rather two possibilities that are natural. The gender analysis from the novel shows how women have been discriminated and undermined, but in all odds, some women stand out by defying the norms and gender inequality.
References


