

Gender Roles In The Novel *The Colour Purple* By Alice Walker

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The Color Purple is often used as an example of a “woman’s novel.” For Walker, womanist writing is that which focuses on African-American women in twentieth-century America. This tradition of novels tends to deal with the oppression of African-American women, not only by means of white domination but also by specific white and black males. In this novel, we often meet women who fight against all odds for their survival and for the survival of their families. In their disjointed and dislocated communities, these women are often mothers who seek to protect and bring together their families for the sake of future generations. Other notable authors who have written in this tradition include Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou. Their female characters have been kept in cages for too long and are finally learning how to sing.

The novel consists of Celie’s diary entries, which begin when she is fourteen years old and end when she is forty-four. As readers of Celie’s entries, we are closest to her throughout and see the world predominantly through her eyes. She starts to write after she is raped by her father, who tells her that the only person she is allowed to tell is God. She begins by addressing her entries to God. Years later, when she receives her first letter from sister Nettie, the entries are made up of her letters to Nettie and the letters she receives from Nettie. By the end of the novel, thirty years after her first entry, Celie has modified her

address from "Dear God" to "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God." She has learned to accept the world and her place in it and has learned about her own faith and religious beliefs--uniquely hers, they are not the images of God she was taught to accept. Initially a very timid, vulnerable young girl, she is not only raped by her father but also, later, beaten by her husband. But Celie gains confidence and succeeds through the opportunities she takes advantage of, and she learns to love and be loved.

Womanism and Gender roles

In Walker's novel, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1984), she coined the new concept of 'womanism', a form of feminist theory applicable specifically to African-American women who claim their roots in black history, religion and culture. Walker's famous conclusion is the comparison of feminist and womanist to the colour lavender and purple.

Male dominance and womanism in *The Color Purple*

The black rural South community in which Walker sets the novel is extremely patriarchal. Most of the black male characters dominate women and do so in a violent and oppressive manner. They are not only physically violent but sexually and emotionally abusive, making the women with whom they live feel fearful, worthless and inferior.

This is particularly obvious in the life of the central character Celie, whose experiences of sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather, followed by a loveless marriage in which Celie is treated no better than a slave, embody the most brutal aspects of the dominant African-American male. Celie is expected to look after Mr_ 's children, work in the fields and submit to joyless sexual encounters with a man who treats her like an unpaid prostitute.

Attitudes of Superiority

Throughout the novel the attitude of superiority is so deeply rooted in the male characters that they don't even know when they are being objectionable. For example:

- Harpo mistakenly thinks that he can make his wife Sofia obey him by beating her and believes it is his right to do so.
- When Mary Agnes wants to establish herself as a singer, Harpo cannot understand why she should wish to be independent when he provides 'everything' in their marriage.
- When Mary Agnes helps to get Sofia out of prison, her white uncle thinks that he has an absolute right to extract payment from her in the form of sex.

Nettie's section of the narrative to an extent mirrors the American patriarchal system. The men of the Olinka tribe regard women as worthless assets, fit only for childbearing, and deny them any education. They endorse the ritual of female genital mutilation which literally marks girls as male possessions, rendering them incapable of enjoying any physical relationship when they are given in marriage to their father's choice of partner.

Women as objects of sex

It is clear that Celie and many other female characters in *The Color Purple* live in a male dominated society, where a woman's role resembles that of a slave or a sex object. This reflects African-American women in black communities in the rural South of America in the 1930s, when some of the novel's events occur. Celie's letters to God are not only a cry for help but stand as the voices of all the African-American women who faced this situation.

Walker also draws parallels with the white master/black slave relationship that existed in the United States for centuries beforehand (in which women were also regarded as property fit for sex and work). In the first part of the narrative most of the female characters are terrified of men. Like a slave, Celie dare not even look at men because she is so afraid, preferring to look at women instead.

Name an Identity of Dominance

During the time of slavery, American slaves paid particular attention to names since only those slaves with names were believed to have a genuine identity and therefore an existence as a person rather than an object. Celie only uses the title Mr_ to refer to her husband, refusing to give an identity or recognition to this dominant male. Later in the novel, when she and Mr_ have begun a tentative reconciliation, she finally allows herself to call him by his given name of Albert, signifying that she is now ready to accept him, if not as an equal then as someone she can acknowledge as an individual.

Female solidarity

It is not surprising that the African-American women in the novel turn to one another and even to the natural world, to find solidarity, companionship and comfort. The novel lays great emphasis on the bond between sisters (Nettie and Celie, Sofia and Odessa) and friends:

- Mary Agnes helps Sofia when she is in prison.
- Sofia looks after Mary Agnes' child when she goes away to be a singer.
- Albert's sister tries to intercede for Celie.
- Olivia supports and comforts Tashi in Africa.
- The Olinka women have strong friendship groups amongst themselves.

Challenging Female Masculine Roles

Women in *The Color Purple* are also shown as challenging traditional male-female roles. The relationship between Sofia and Harpo is the most obvious, with Sofia doing heavy work that is traditionally masculine and Harpo enjoying domestic tasks such as looking after children and cooking. Celie's business enterprise, making trousers for women, is a declaration of equality, although sewing is regarded as conventionally feminine. The beginning of the reconciliation between Albert and Celie comes when Albert helps her to stitch an article and admits that he likes the task.

Strength in unity

The emotional heart of the novel is Celie's liberation via her relationship with Shug Avery. Many of the women in the narrative are weak when isolated but gain confidence when they work together. The first step towards equality is the freedom to leave an intolerable situation, which Shug encourages Celie to do. Sofia suggests to Eleanor Jane that she should leave her unhappy marriage and find a job. Ironically, Eleanor Jane finds independence and starts to understand the evils of racism when she begins to look after Sofia's own daughter, Henrietta.

Shug's 'masculine' qualities

The Color Purple also identifies how masculine and feminine qualities can both be evident in males and females. Shug Avery is not a typically submissive woman, nor a victim, but independent, capable and 'outrageous' - in fact the embodiment of Walker's 'womanish' woman. Shug breaks traditional conventions about sex, speaking to women using masculine phraseology and expresses sexual desire in her own particular way, as a bisexual. She teaches Celie to learn how to love her own body, which is the beginning of Celie's journey towards

fulfillment and self-confidence. Shug's character embodies Walker's concept of womanism - the idea that every woman, with the help of other women, can learn to love herself.

With the help of Shug and Sofia, Celie finally manages to find the courage to define herself as a woman in her own right (Letters 74 and 75). She defends herself against the abusive treatment she has suffered and leaves her marital home to begin a new life in Memphis.

Choice of Freedom

It is significant that Celie's trouser making business, as well as her courage to wear garments that are traditionally male items of clothing, symbolise the equality of men and women to dress and behave the way that they want to. By choosing to wear trousers Celie celebrates her own 'masculinity' and sewing trousers 'for everyone' soon becomes the most important activity in Celie's life. In gaining financial independence, she no longer needs to be dependent on a male to provide for her. Ironically, the business of sewing is what eventually brings Celie and Albert into a better understanding of one another, with Albert acknowledging the skills and creativity of women, in which attributes he wants to share.

Outstanding Courage and Creativity of the African-American female

Walker's womanist ideology causes her to construct the novel around female characters who are largely stronger and more admirable than the men, who, taken as a group, are portrayed as inferior. There are however some male characters who are atypical:

- Odessa's husband Jack is agreeable and supportive of his wife, her sister Sofia and the rest of the extended family.

- Samuel is gentle and good, if somewhat insignificant in the way that Walker conveniently uses him to provide Nettie with a satisfactory supportive husband after the death of Corinne.
- Even Albert is partly rehabilitated towards the end of the story.

However, it is the women in the novel who exhibit the most outstanding courage, creativity and wisdom. Celie, Shug, Sofia and Mary Agnes triumph through their own efforts. Nettie at the end of the novel is a conventional wife but this is largely due to the fact that throughout the narrative she is portrayed as a sensitive and gentle woman who is able to escape the turbulent rural South and its abusive male characters.

Freedom against male domination

The theme of females achieving freedom is present throughout the novel. Celie and Nettie move from a state of near slavery at the beginning to independence at the end. Both find the power of self-expression: Nettie as a wife and teacher and Celie as a successful businesswoman who does not need a husband. Sofia is finally given freedom to live as she chooses, whilst Mary Agnes develops her own career rather than being tied to domesticity and male requirements.

The novel emphasises Walker's idea that every African-American woman, with the help of other women, can become a 'womanist' and learn to love herself. If this is possible, then mutual understanding and reconciliation between the sexes (male and female) is also possible, leading to a restoration of equality and harmony and an end to misunderstanding, oppression and violence.

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