



CSCCanada

Studies in Literature and Language

Vol. 13, No. 4, 2016, pp. 62-65

DOI:10.3968/8961

ISSN 1923-1555[Print]

ISSN 1923-1563[Online]

www.cscanada.netwww.cscanada.org

Gender Trouble in *The Color Purple*

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Received 12 August 2016; accepted 10 October 2016

Published online 26 October 2016

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the gender trouble in Alice Walker's novel *The color purple*. Winning the highest award in America literature—Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, Alice Walker, the contemporary American black woman writer, engages a series of gender and ethical topics in her work. She pays particular attention to the gender identity of black women who are under dual oppression. Based on *Gender Trouble* of Judith Butler, this paper analyses the three protagonists' different sexual orientation, viz, heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality. Through going deeper into the psychoanalysis of the protagonists and evaluating their choice of love object, I argue that Alice Walker intends to inform her readers that there should be no oppositions between different sexual orientation. *The Color Purple* brings about the collapse of traditional binary opposition of gender difference and the realization of the subversion of identity. And I conclude that Alice Walker yearns for the harmony coexistence of the three different sexual orientations.

Key words: *The Color Purple*; Alice Walker; Gender trouble; Sexual orientation

Wang, L. (2016). Gender Trouble in *The Color Purple*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 13(4), 62-65. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8961>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8961>

INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker is one of the most famous and beloved black women writers of our time, and this is largely due to the

novel *The Color Purple*. The book won Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award and regarded as her greatest achievement.

The novel focuses upon the growth and development of a girl named Celie. She was raped by her own father and gave birth to two babies, who were sold by her father. Then her father forced her to marry Mr. Albert. The one she cares most about was her sister Nettie. However, Mr. Albert kicked Nettie out of their house because he failed to rape her. Mr. Albert married Celie so that she could take care of the family. But Mr. Albert's true love was Shug Avery.

When Shug fell ill, Mr. Albert kept her in his house and took good care of her. Thanks to Celie's care, Shug recovered and developed a love relationship with her. Celie loves Shug, Shug loves Celie and Mr. Albert. Mr. Albert loves Celie. The three protagonists remained in a weird harmonious relationship during Shug's recovery.

Nettie, on the other hand, went to Africa and worked as a missionary with Mr. Samuel, who was proved to adopt Celie's two babies. Nettie kept writing to Celie for many years, but the letters were hidden by Mr. Albert. One day, with Shug's help, Celie discovered all the letters and made a stand by leaving Mr. Albert's house. She decided to lead an independent life with Shug and started the business of making trousers. The climax of the novel was when Nettie returned to Celie with her son and daughter. After a tearful reunion, Celie was the happiest she had ever felt in her life.

In *Sex & Gender*, Hilary M. Lips gives a clear definition of the main three different sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation refers to a person's preference for sexual partners of the same or other sex. Heterosexual is the label used for a person who prefers partners of the other sex, homosexual is the label applied to a person who prefers partners of the same sex, and the bisexual is the term used to describe a person who can be attracted to partners of either sex.

According to convention rule, heterosexual is regarded as normal, and homosexual is regarded as abnormal. But Judith Butler puts that it is the social convention or culture imposes the ideology to us. It determines what is reasonable and normal. Under the background where heterosexuality is predominating, the existence of homosexuality is suppressed. Queer Theory aims to oppose heterosexual hegemony and turn homosexuality as a common and natural behavior in our society. In *The Color Purple*, however, the homosexual relationship between Celie and Shug is not criticized for being erotic, but praised and redeemed as the subversion of traditional binary opposition between men and women. Just as Hall emphasizes:

The Color Purple reveals in explicit and implicit ways the myriad of connections between the erotic desires that individuals may feel and the ways those desires are classified, categorized, and valued socially.

Sexuality is said to be related to spirituality. If one can express his or her sexuality and love freely, he or she has already found his or her identity.

1. MR. ALBERT'S HETEROSEXUALITY: ASSIMILATION OF IDENTIFICATION UNDER THE PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

The black men in the novel play the roles of bad eggs. On the one hand, they are the oppressors of women in the patriarchal society. On the other hand, they are the victim of the patriarchy of their own.

In a patriarchy society, men are in the center and they are the role maker in their family. This is a tradition which is accepted by all the people. The men appear as the beneficial owner of the patriarchy system, however they are the victims, too. In order to ensure the position and prestige of a man, he has to dominate over his wife and children, even his is a loser in the society. Therefore, a father has absolute right in controlling his son's life.

Although Freud introduces the Oedipal complex to explain why the boy must repudiate the mother and adopt an ambivalent attitude toward the father, he remarks shortly afterward that, "It may even be that the ambivalence displayed in the relations to the parents should be attributed entirely to bisexuality and that it is not, as I have represented above, developed out of identification in consequence of rivalry". Freud means that the boy must choose not only between the two objects (father and mother), but also the two sexual dispositions. Therefore, the boy usually chooses the heterosexuality would, then, be the result, not only of the fear of castration by the father, but also the fear of castration—that is, the fear of "feminization" associated within heterosexual cultures with male homosexuality. Thus, the young boy deals with his father always by identifying himself with him.

Mr. Albert's heterosexuality is a typical example of the oppression of patriarchy and fear of castration. Mr. Albert's is always longing for Shug, but he married Annie Julia as his first wife due to his father's arrangement. As a father, old Mr. Albert has supreme power and the right to decide what kind of life his son leads. Unable to defy his father, Mr. Albert has no choice but to keep an underground relationship with Shug. He can't live following his heart. He is miserable production of patriarch society.

He does the same thing as his father does when his son Harpo is going to marry Sofia. He tries to intervene Harpo's marriage but failed. He has suffered this kind of pain of being unable to marry the one he loved in his early life. But he continues to suppress the patriarchy ideology on his son. Like his father, he is seeking absolute authority by abusing his wife and controlling his son. In fact, his cruelty is a manifestation of his weakness. Even his marriage, he seeks for the assimilation of identification with his father.

Under the patriarchy society, he is forced to live in the natural social code without passion, such as heterosexual hegemony, the rules controlling the patriarchal society.

2. CELIE'S HOMOSEXUALITY: REJECTION AND REPUDIATION FROM THE LOST LOVES

Being molested by her father, Celie keeps a safe distance with men. She has a cold attitude towards men. Furthermore, her father always tells her that she is ugly. "You got the ugliest smile in the world." Constantly abused in this way, she accepts the self-identification of being ugly. Repudiated by men, she lost confidence in herself. She identifies herself as a powerless and ugly woman.

She had two men in her life, but no love at all. In her early life, her father used her as an object of sex. During her marriage, Mr. Albert maltreated her. She felt like Mr. Albert peed on her when they had sex. She owned a marriage without love and sex.

According to *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, the object of exchange that both consolidates and differentiates kinship relationship is women, given as gifts from one patrilineal clan to another through the institution of marriage. In other words, the bride functions as a relationship term between groups of men. She does not have an identity, and neither does she exchange one identity for another. She reflects masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence.

Her father sold her children, which deprived her identity as a mother. Mr. Albert always ruled predominately in their marriage through beating and abusing, which deprived her identity as a wife. She was a

suppressed black woman and had no identity at all until she met Shug. Due to the two men's torture both mentally and physically, she hates men, or we can say, she is afraid of men. Celie can feel nothing but fear and disgust towards men. Fortunately, everything changes since she meets Shug. And it was then that she found her identity as a true woman who can enjoy herself.

The first meeting between Shug and Celie is anticlimactic, with Shug simply looking at Celie and saying "you sure is ugly". However, Celie did not mind it. Instead, she took good care of Shug when she was ill. As is known, Celie's sister Nettie has gone for many years. The only one Celie ever loved in her previous life was her sister Nettie. Taking caring of Shug filled the vacancy of her sisterhood for Nettie.

It is never too much to say that Shug's appearance radiates Celie's life, especially when Shug announces to the crowd that she had written a new song "Miss Celie's Song". Celie hums along with the tune, saying that it is the "first time somebody made something and named it after me."

Celie morosely says that "nobody ever loves me". Shug replies "I love you, Miss Celie, you have the most beautiful smile in the world" and kisses her. Celie, at first surprised, then kisses Shug back, and they continue to kiss each other and touch each other until they fall asleep in each other's arms.

Shug is responsible for Celie's self-awareness of her body. Celie never enjoyed sex, but has always been used by men rather than a participant in mutual pleasure of sex. Being repudiated by the unhappy heterosexual experiences, the lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie is not unexpected, but natural. Since Celie gets no pleasure from men, she has the right to love women instead.

In addition, Celie is not an inherent lesbian, she changed her sexual orientation through her life experience. Repudiated and rejected by the lost loves, she became a lesbian across the life span to adapt to the internal and external environments.

Based on Butler's *Gender Trouble*, she has collapsed the sex/gender distinction in order to argue that there is no one that is not always already gender. All bodies are gendered from the beginning of social existence (and there is no existence that is not social), which means that there is no "natural body" that pre-exists its cultural inscription. In addition, Butler proposes the notion of "performativity". In her opinion, one's sexual preference, the homosexual, the heterosexual and the bisexual, are not a fixed role. Sexual orientation is fluid, variable, partial and open-ended, and cannot be considered as static, stable, and unchangeable. We may conclude that Celie's love towards Shug is the free choice she made during her former sufferings. When harsh heterosexual relationship brings hurts to her, she has the right to choose another relationship where she can get security, comfort, respect and happiness. Nonetheless, this is not what Shug do.

3. SHUG'S BISEXUALITY: A CHALLENGE TO THE BINARY OPPOSITION OF MEN AND WOMEN

Judith Butler states that the boundary between male and female is unclear and ambiguous, that is to say, the physiological gender is not explicit. Every woman maintains some male qualities, so does Shug Avery. She has the androgynous personality. She has feminine gentle and masculine fortitude and independence. Shug's personality breaks the traditional label of black women. She drinks and smokes, wearing pants which are seldom wore by women then. She is eager for self-independence and love from others.

Music also indicates Shug's character. She is fond of blues. This type of music is very erotic and sensual. Her hobby reveals that she is against religion and God and in favor of hedonism. Shug is a sensual person, and her talk of "devil music" implies that she is immortal, but that was only because the churchgoers equated sex with immorality. She seeks for the thrill and excitement from different sex.

The relationship between Shug and Celie is the cornerstone of the novel. It is nurtured very quickly because each one is able to fulfill the other's need. Celie's need is to have someone to care for, while Shug needs to have someone who truly cares for her. On the other hand, Shug also enjoys making love with Mr. Albert. Her bisexuality defines she is not a usual women.

During her ailing period in Mr. Albert's house, Celie cares for her and Mr. Albert adored her. Shug's presence, like the presence of a baby, provides the entire home with stability and peace. Since Mr. Albert and Celie both love Shug, they now both have something in common. The two stand in line to protect against Old Mr. Albert. This manifests Alice Walker's ideal society where people with different sexual orientations can keep peace and coexist.

The temporary peace was broke due to Shug's marriage. It brings a moment of crisis in the novel. For Mr. Albert, her marriage is a rejection of him and his wife, since he was devoted himself to Shug. For Celie, it means the devastated heartbreak. In fact, Shug never seems to be the type of person to marry, since we always connect marriage with ideas such as sacrifice and comprise. Her new marriage is made so that she might be perceived as normal women in society. What this marriage does be given Shug freedom to pursue more personal relationships between women without disapproval from society. Having apparently closed her male relationship off by marriage Grady, she is free to deepen her bond with Celie, a person she truly loves.

To Shug, bisexuality is one of the examples of a kind of identity which suggests possibilities for coalition-building between two established extremes, rather than

diametrically opposed to one another. Under the shelter of her marriage between Grady, she can continue the love relationship between Celie, even latter, start a love affair with a 19-year-old young man named Germaine to prove herself attractive.

Not only Shug's personality, but also her sexual orientation challenges the traditional binary gender stereotype, which decides one's gender by one's biological gender and prevents people from expressing their real personalities and loves. Her choice of self-being and love objects reflects the subversion of traditional feminism.

Shug's bisexuality presents an alternate system of variability and multiplicity that is far more attractive than the normal social sexual relations portrayed in the novel. "Shug's sense of erotic and emotional potential is nonexclusive, confining itself to neither side of a heter/homo binary, nor seeing anything wrong with or impossible about multiple simultaneous connections."

As a proponent of homosexual love, the author Alice Walker has much in common with Celie in her real life since she is a prominent lesbian and feminist with bisexual orientation. Many critics even point out that Alice Walker uses the image of Shug to mirror herself in womanism movement. However, Alice Walker is not an arbitrary homosexual advocator. Her approval for homosexuality doesn't mean the disapproval or hatred of men. Her ultimate goal is to achieve "survival and wholeness of entire people, both male and female". In her novel, she encourages people with different sexual orientation to make free choice against tradition conventions and, accordingly, act through their wills. For Walker, the ideal world is like a garden of flower, where people has different gender difference and sexual orientation can live

at ease. The ultimate purpose of her writing is to eliminate the binary opposition of men and women and realize a harmonious world with gender differences.

CONCLUSION

Alice Walker displays three main different sexual orientations in *The Color Purple*. The love between them is not pornographic, but a manifestation of the freedom choice. She demonstrates that there isn't any absolute opposition in this world at all. Man and woman, heterosexuality and homosexuality are not opposites, but rather two possible positions on a continuum.

Gender analysis of the three gives us a novel perspective to break the traditional binary opposition between men and women as well as the subversion of gender identity.

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