

Resistance to Lesbian Erasure: Celie's Self-discovery Through Lesbianism in *The Color Purple*

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Abstract: This paper examines the theme of lesbianism in Alice Walker's groundbreaking novel *The Color Purple* through a nuanced interpretation of the relationship between Celie and Shug, contending that their connection transcends mere friendship or sisterhood and represents a significant manifestation of lesbianism. It substantiates the individual meaning of the lesbian experience, which is not only a survival mechanism for Celie, who exists as the "other" to live in a world dominated by whites and males, but also a catalyst for her personal growth, self-discovery, and empowerment. Furthermore, it also analyzes how Walker's descriptions of Celie's lesbian love break the silence of lesbian erasure based on the salvific wish imposed on lesbian women within the black community and deconstruct "unnatural" lesbianism under heteronormality. By shedding light on the overlooked significance of lesbian relationships, this study offers insights into the experiences of marginalized black women, enriching the understanding of *The Color Purple*.

Keywords: Black women, Lesbianism, Lesbian erasure, *The Color Purple*.

1. Introduction

The Color Purple, Alice Walker's iconic modern classical work, has sparked numerous discussions in academia, with feminism being the most widely debated topic. Studies conducted on *The Color Purple* have explored various complex themes, including race, gender, sexuality, and identity. In this regard, Dwight McBride notes that while scholarly discourse, popular cultural forms, and political discourse often present numerous visions of the black community, they rarely encompass the experiences of lesbians (207).

In the realm of African American literature interpretation, white feminists tend to emphasize the shared female experience of oppression within a patriarchal society, whereas womanists direct their attention to the distinct experiences of black women. However, both white feminists and womanists often display a tendency to disregard or downplay the importance of lesbianism, thereby marginalizing gender minorities, particularly black lesbians, within the dominant heterosexual framework. The absence, distortion and exclusion of lesbians or lesbianism, which is called "lesbian erasure", has been seen for a long history time. Lesbian erasure throughout history indicates that prejudice, misrepresentation and heteronormativity have taken precedence in society, leaving the lesbian community misrepresented, shunned and maligned. That is, even when lesbianism is consciously and obviously enunciated in literary texts, black lesbian experience and black lesbian writers are still being ignored as if they did not exist. Nevertheless, black lesbianism in literature is an important way to touch on broader feminism discussions as it reflects the real life of black lesbian communities. It is essential to rediscover and reaffirm the significance of black lesbian experiences in order to foster a more inclusive understanding of feminism.

In the analysis of *The Color Purple*, certain scholars tiptoed the topic of lesbianism, often characterizing the relationship between Celie and Shug as primarily rooted in friendship or sisterhood. This portrayal effectively renders their lesbian

experience invisible and overlooked. For instance, Mary Catherine Hilbert interprets the relationship between Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple* as a female friendship, serving as a metaphor for a divine-human relationship within a religious framework (60). In a similar vein, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan acknowledges the presence of desire between Celie and Shug but diminishes their lesbian relationship by emphasizing how their bond developed from the "natural bonding" that exists between women as sisters or as mother and daughter (284). Conversely, Margaret D. Kamitsuka argues that Kirk Duggan's assertion implies that lesbianism is not considered a "natural" emotion, despite Walker's depiction of Celie and Shug's lesbian love as a natural occurrence within the heterosexual community (59). It is noteworthy that there are also a few feminist critics who noticed the significance of lesbianism in this novel. Delores Williams, for instance, adopts a womanist identity-politics approach in her reading of *The Color Purple*, integrating a keen awareness of racial and sexual particularities. Similarly, Williams interprets Celie's lesbianism as integral to the novel's message about her survival and transformation as a black woman (53). Nevertheless, these scholars may have omitted certain critical aspects concerning Celie's lesbianism and its role in her personal growth. Their analysis appears to lack a comprehensive examination of the formation of Celie's lesbian identity, as well as an exploration of how her relationship with Shug contributes to her healing process, self-discovery, and development into a confident and independent woman. Furthermore, they may have overlooked the profound implications of Walker's natural depiction of lesbianism, particularly in relation to the experiences of black female minorities, which may raise questions about the complex nature and importance of Celie's lesbian relationship, as well as its profound influence on her empowering journey of finding her own subjectivity.

Therefore, this paper attempts to delve into the underestimated lesbianism in *The Color Purple*, arguing that the relationship between Celie and Shug transcends the boundaries of mere friendship or sisterhood and encompasses

a significant manifestation of lesbianism, which should not be disregarded as it holds dual implications both at the individual and societal levels. On one hand, it acts as a catalyst for Celie's personal growth and facilitates her realization of self-awakening. On the other hand, it challenges the prevailing norms of a heteronormative society, liberating black women from the burdens of self-sacrifice and offering a means to combat the discrimination faced by marginalized communities. Emphasizing lesbian identity in *The Color Purple*, this paper aims to shed light on the multifaceted dimensions and the socio-cultural significance of lesbianism within the novel, contributing to the broader scholarly discourse on gender, sexuality, and liberation.

2. Lesbianism as a Survival Mechanism

Celie's lesbian relationship with Shug serves as a survival mechanism, empowering her to gather up all the bravery to confront the miserable life. Namely, it is Celie's lesbian experience with Shug that provides her with a temporary respite from male oppression.

According to Delores Williams's womanist identity-politics reading of this book, "black lesbianism is the natural outcome of racial and sexual oppression imposed on black women by American society" (59). Consequently, black lesbianism has been used by African American women as a means to seek freedom and happiness. For one thing, Celie already harbors complicated feelings for Shug prior to their physical encounter. For instance, when faced with judgment and depreciation from Mr. ? and her stepfather, Celie finds solace by gazing at a photograph of Shug Avery. "I look into her eyes. Her eyes say Yeah, it bees that way sometime" (Walker 9). This unseen yet captivating woman's image offers Celie a source of consolation amidst her oppressive circumstances. Additionally, Celie associates Shug with the color purple, which is a symbol of hope in her dismal, suffocating and cruel life. She contemplates, "I think what color Shug Avery would wear. She like a queen to me so I say to Kate, Somethin purple, maybe little red in it too" (12). In Celie's mind, Shug probably represents her idealized image of a powerful and inspiring female figure, encouraging her to struggle to survive in a world where the oppression of black women persists.

Additionally, the love of a powerful woman like Shug provides Celie with a profound sense of security that she has never experienced in her interactions with men, which soothes Celie's emotional wounds and heals her from the lingering trauma memories inflicted by men. Drawing upon the views of Delore Williams, the role of a strong black woman like Shug serves as "a catalyst in the life of another oppressed black woman like Celie" (60). Similarly, Margaret D. Kamitsuka emphasizes that Celie's journey towards becoming a "self-confident lesbian woman" and "a fully responsible moral agent" empowers her to confront and challenge the pervasive sexism by the black men within her extended family, particularly among black men, and during this process she was healed in this lesbian relationship (60). Celie has always been suffering from men's sexual abuse with being objectified as a tool of sating lust. However, her connection with Shug introduces her to a different kind of physical intimacy—one that is consensual and pleasurable, as they are kissing and touching each other, which alleviates her fear of sexuality with men. "I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him" (Walker 11). Despite hating the touch from Mr. ?,

Celie is able to overcome her aversion to this man by placing her arm around him. Celie's act of cuddling Mr. ? does not signify a change in her attitude towards him but sees Mr. ? on the bed as a bridge that connects her with Shug, which enables her to tolerate sleeping with the man she vehemently dislikes. In this context, Celie's lesbian love serves as a spiritual inspiration that offers her invisible support to survive.

3. Liberate the Alienated Body: The First Step of Self-discovery

Lesbianism not only functions as a passive survival mechanism but also plays a significant role in her journey of self-exploration and self-discovery. Engaging in lesbian sexual experiences, Celie reclaims agency over her own body and embarks on a transformative path towards understanding her true self. Celie's personal growth is evident as she embraces her own desires and develops self-love. This journey of self-acceptance and empowerment is intertwined with her relationship with Shug, which serves as a profound illustration of love and liberation.

Throughout Celie's whole life before meeting Shug, her body is not on her own but alienated and distorted by men. From a young age, she has endured the constant sexual abuse and rape perpetrated by her stepfather, leading to multiple pregnancies and an ongoing cycle of suffering. As a result, she suddenly realizes that she is unable to bear children any more due to the long-term tortures. "A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more" (Walker 6). After entering into marriage, her body continues to be stripped of its subjectivity and ownership, becoming nothing more than the property of her husband. Celie complains that the way Mr. ? looks at her is just like he is "looking at the earth" (11), which can be seen from his scornful face. Even worse, Mr.'s description of his sexual experience with Celie as "do his business" makes Celie feel like he is "going to the toilet" on her (81). In the eyes of Mr.?, Celie's body is reduced to a mere vessel for his desires and a means of exerting power and dominance over her. Celie's body is dehumanized and alienated as an object as he refers to Celie with the word "it" and treats Celie body like a toilet for him to satisfy his biological urges.

Shaped by cultural norms and moral frameworks, the body has always been subjected to denial and suppression. Society often fosters a sense of shame to openly discuss, observe or acknowledge the body. However, within the body itself lies a potential for resistance against power and authority (Eagleton 28). More specifically, the body encompasses not only its biological significance but also plays a crucial role in shaping one's sense of self, which is a powerful tool to fight against various oppressive belief systems. According to Lewis, "Celie's articulation of sexual pleasure is also the articulation of her very body and presence" (162), which can displace imposed silence as a means of coping with abuse. Walker positions "Celie's woman-directed masturbation and vulnerability as the means through which her burgeoning self-awareness and self-love are experienced" (162). With Shug's guidance, Celie starts to explore her own body and comes to realize that the body should belong to herself, thus initiating the first step towards self-acceptance and self-discovery. For instance, Shug's encouragement for Celie to look straightforward her body and explore it signifies a crucial realization that the female body is not something to be ashamed of. Shug guides Celie to explore her body with vivid

and straightforward descriptions, “Right down there in your pussy is a little button ... It git boner and hotter and then it melt” (Walker 81). With Shug’s assistance, Celie embraces the inherent beauty and autonomy of her own body for the first time and gradually realizes that her body is an integral part of her identity, which is a starting point of her self-awareness.

4. Break Lesbian Silence Under Black Salvific Wish

The manuscript should include a conclusion. In this section, summarize what was described in your paper. Future directions may also be included in this section. Authors are strongly encouraged not to reference multiple figures or tables in the conclusion; these should be referenced in the body of the paper.

Paying attention to lesbianism in literary texts is not only significant to personal survival and self-discovery, but also meaningful to the marginalized female community like gender minorities in a larger social context. Depicting Celie’s lesbian experience with Shug, Alice Walker attempts to undermine the values of salvific wish within the black female community and confront the prevailing issue of lesbian erasure at that time.

It is worth noting that lesbian erasure is not only a result of the active removal of lesbian visibility by a wider heteronormative society, but it can also be self-imposed, as lesbian and queer women may suppress their own sexuality and identity to avoid tensions or fear of repercussions about their sexuality and identity. According to Candice Jenkins, black women are deeply affected by the values of “the salvific wish”, which is best understood as “an aspiration to save or rescue the black community ... from white racist accusations of sexual or domestic pathology through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety” (125). In alternative terms, black women have internalized these values, leading them to forgo their own lesbian experiences or deny their sexuality, as a means of safeguarding the overall perception of the black community from being stigmatized as a sexually deviant racial group.

Alice Walker has critically questioned the notion of salvific wish attributed to silence and adherence to societal norms, thereby demonstrating that the act of maintaining silence and adhering to the concept of the “salvific wish” is meaningless in improving the situation of the black community. In the past, Celie has always been an obedient, forbearing and silent girl, which corresponds to the values of salvific wish. However, her silence fails to rescue her from the unbearable life but pushes her into a more desperate abyss. Her miserable childhood is a persuasive exemplification. Celie’s first letter to God describes Alphonso’s abuse in a disturbing manner, “He never had a kine word to say to me...He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it” (Walker 1-2). Celie does shut up and remains silent throughout her whole teenage years. It is not until she seeks comfort in the arms of Shug one night that she finally opens up and sheds tears, revealing the immense pain she has endured all this time. However, even with this release, Celie cannot figure out why she has to suffer from the relentless torment and violation inflicted by Alphonso since she has always been a good girl, conforming to the salvific wish imposed on her. In fact, Celie’s experience confronts the values of the salvific wish and the politics of silence by challenging the assumption that

good girl behavior leads to personal safety and only bad girl behavior leads to violation (Lewis 161). Celie emphasizes her long-term status as being a good girl, believing that the so-called good girl behaviors can spare her from the sexual violation of men as well as spare her entire community from the racist violence of white people, but the facts are just the opposite, demonstrating that being silent is useless.

On the contrary, there is an obvious change in Celie’s life after her first articulation which originates in her lesbian experience and then grows larger, helping her to overcome various problems. For instance, When Celie decides to travel to Memphis with Shug, Mr. ? responds to Celie’s departure by hurling insults on her, saying, “ You ugly. You skinny... All you fit to do in Memphis is be Shug’s maid” (Walker 212). These words once again prove that Celie’s silence has not shielded her from insult or degradation from men. Nevertheless, this time Celie refuses to tolerate the ill judgments and instead retaliates against Mr. ? with a curse, declaring, “I curse you...Until you do right by me, everything you even dream about will fail” (213). Celie explains that the origin of her curse and newly-vocalized self-articulation goes beyond her individual body, “I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees” (213). This particular act of speaking out reaffirms her existence and experience with Mr.? in a way her silent letters are unable to do.

Celie’s evolution from a submissive and vulnerable young girl to a confident and tough-minded lesbian woman daring to speak for herself is an integral aspect of her lesbian experience with Shug. With such a powerful depiction of Celie’s drastic transformation, Walker argues against the salvific wish imposed on black lesbians, urging them to liberate themselves from the assumption that denying their same-sex desires can protect them from discrimination and prejudice. Instead, Waller advocates them to embrace and recognize their self-identity, refusing to sacrifice themselves on the altar of moral values such as the salvific wish.

5. Deconstruct “Unnatural Lesbianism” in *The Color Purple*

Alice Walker’s sincere and natural narration of Celie’s lesbian experience has undermined the salvific wish which prevents black women from recognizing their selfhood. Furthermore, through the depiction of Celie, who develops a deep emotional and intimate connection with Shug Avery, Walker challenges to break the ideology of gender binary opposition and refutes the view that lesbianism is unnatural or abnormal under the dominant discourse of heterosexuality.

From a post-structuralist perspective, the concept of “compulsory heterosexuality”, as coined by Adrienne Rich, exposes the hegemonic nature of heterosexuality and its multidimensional power to enforce conformity. Within a heteronormative society, numerous lesbians find themselves compelled to conceal their identities, existing on the periphery of social acceptance. As Rich astutely asserts, “the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women” (71). The institution and cultural mechanisms of heterosexual society like advertising, education, religion, medicine, and so forth, have manipulated discourses of natural and unnatural to produce subjects who conceive of themselves as having a coherent sexuality secure in the overlapping of biology and libido. This intricate web of power and knowledge can only

be disrupted by resignifying gender, sex, and sexuality as discursively produced or “performatively constituted” (Butler 62). In other words, lesbianism is not inborn as an unnatural feature but shaped and affected by social and cultural factors. Referring to Butler’s concept of gender performativity, one’s authentic self is not solely dictated by inherent sexuality, but rather by the actions and behaviors through which individuals express themselves. In this regard, Alice Walker skillfully constructs characters such as Celie and Shug, who embody fluidity in terms of both gender and sexuality. For example, Mr. ? expresses his admiration for Shug Avery, saying that “Shug act more manly than most men ... she upright ... Sofia and Shug not like men but they not like women either” (Walker 276). It is obvious that Celie loves an “other” whose gender identity flows and whose sexual desire encompasses multiple facets. Shug, the object of Celie’s and Mr.?’s desire, has exhibits qualities that transcend traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity. In this way, Walker can be read as interrupting the “casual relation among sex-gender-desire” and “destabilizing the heterosexually linked man-woman binary” (Kamitsuka 62). With the breakdown of the naturalized heterosexual paradigm, Celie’s lesbianism must be renegotiated as well. Her lesbian identity, rather than being deemed unnatural, is revealed to be performative. Through this lens, Walker deconstructs the prevailing notion that lesbianism is inherently unnatural, challenging such assumptions.

In essence, Alice Walker explores lesbianism as a natural and authentic expression of love and desire in *The Color Purple*. Walker portrays the lesbian connection between Celie and Shug as a deep emotional bond that not only contributes to the former’s empowerment but also transcends societal conventions. By depicting their love and intimacy with sensitivity and authenticity, Walker challenges the prevailing notion that lesbianism is unnatural or abnormal. In deconstructing the societal prejudices and stereotypes surrounding lesbianism, Walker invites readers to embrace the diversity of human experiences regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

6. Conclusion

The phenomenon of lesbian erasure extends beyond the realm of literature interpretation and permeates various aspects of our society. Throughout history, societies have been shaped by a patriarchal oppressive structure that prioritizes and centers men, leading to the marginalization and erasure of women, especially those who identify as lesbians. Even in contemporary times, despite advancements in lesbian visibility, efforts to erase lesbianism persist. The literary landscape reflects the arduous struggle faced by black lesbians in breaking free from this oppressive cycle of silencing and erasing their lesbian identities in order to seek

safety within a predominantly white and male-dominated world. While Alice Walker’s groundbreaking black lesbian novel, *The Color Purple*, stands as a courageous endeavor to resist lesbian erasure by narrating Celie’s journey of self-discovery through her lesbian relationship with Shug Avery at that time. Through her writing, Walker presents an inspirational narrative wherein a vulnerable black woman, subjected to enduring oppression, ultimately transforms into an independent and resolute lesbian woman. This empowering portrayal seeks to embolden silenced or marginalized black women to assert their sexuality, and embrace their self-identity as well as authentic selves. Celie’s lesbian experience is undoubtedly a great inspiration to black women, particularly for sexual minorities like the black queer community. Significantly, Walker’s text not only aims at encouraging personal identification but also advocates for a more inclusive and diverse society, where individuals of different races, genders and sexualities are able to dominate their own lives and manifest their true aspirations.

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