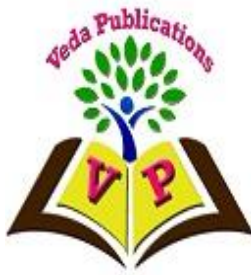




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE PORTRAYAL OF LESBIAN RELATIONSHIP IN
ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE***

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The Color Purple, penned by Alice Walker, stands as a monumental literary achievement, tackling multifaceted themes spanning race, gender, and sexuality. This research article meticulously investigates the depiction of lesbianism within the novel, centering on the complex characters of Celie and Shug Avery. Employing close textual analysis and drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as queer theory, the study meticulously dissects Walker's nuanced depiction of queer identities and relationships. Through an exploration of Celie's transformative journey and Shug Avery's unapologetic queerness, the research delves into the intricate layers of representation within the narrative. Furthermore, the analysis extends beyond individual character arcs to illuminate the broader significance of lesbianism and queer representation within the landscape of African American literature.

Keywords: *Lesbianism, queer identity, Celie, Shug Avery, representation, African American literature, race, gender, sexuality etc.*



INTRODUCTION

Humans, as the pinnacle of creation, possess an inherent need for communication and interaction with others. Azizah (2013) asserts that humans, being social beings, rely on connections with others to fulfill various needs throughout their lives. These needs encompass a spectrum of relationships and attractions, ranging from self-love (autoeroticism) to love for others of the opposite or same sex, and even to unconventional forms of attraction to other beings or objects. Consequently, the realm of human sexuality is diverse and complex, accommodating a myriad of possibilities for deviation from perceived norms. Fundamentally, humans were designed in pairs of men and women to facilitate procreation and achieve fulfillment and prosperity (Fokky, 2019). Demartoto (2010) further delineates sexuality into three key components: biological sex, gender identity, and gender roles. However, despite societal expectations, individuals often exhibit a variety of sexual orientations, including heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual attractions (Mastuti et al., 2012). Initially viewed through a lens of pathology, sexual orientation is now understood as a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and environmental factors (Brook, 2001). Sexual orientation typically begins to take shape during adolescence, influenced by factors such as physical maturity and perceptual development (Brook, 2001). While historically viewed as deviations from the norm, identities such as homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism are increasingly accepted and embraced in contemporary society. These identities, once stigmatized, have now become subjects of study and debate across various

disciplines, including biology, psychology, politics, genetics, history, and cultural studies.

Literature, as a reflection of human experience, has long grappled with the complexities of sexuality and identity. Novels, in particular, offer a rich tapestry of narratives that explore human behavior, values, and cultures. According to Hikma (2015), novels serve as fictional depictions of real-life situations, offering readers the opportunity to explore and analyze various aspects of the human condition. Through intrinsic and extrinsic elements, novels provide insight into the lives of characters and their interactions with the world around them (Abraham, 2017).

The phenomenon of sexual deviance has been a recurring theme in literature, inspiring writers to delve into the intricacies of human behavior and relationships. For instance, Hanum (2011) examined the portrayal of lesbianism in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, highlighting the protagonist Celie's experiences and the novel's exploration of lesbian identity. Similarly, Andani (2010) analyzed the characters Rafky and Valent in Andrei Aksana's *Lelaki Terindah*, investigating the psychological factors influencing their homosexuality. Another example is Purnamasari's (2013) study of homosexual life in Gusnaldi's *Pria Terakhir*, which explored societal attitudes towards homosexual relationships depicted in the novel. Additionally, Widyari (2018) examined the portrayal of women as second-class citizens in *The Color Purple*, shedding light on Celie's marginalized existence within her family and society. Building upon these existing studies, the present research seeks to further explore the portrayal of lesbianism in *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker.



Adopting a psychological approach inspired by Adler (1956), this study aims to unravel the factors influencing Celie's lesbian identity and behavior. By delving into the psychological nuances of the characters and their interactions, this research endeavors to enrich our understanding of queer representation in literature and its broader implications for academic and societal discourse.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

In the early 20th century American South, African-American women occupied a marginalized position at the intersection of race and gender. They faced systemic oppression and discrimination stemming from both racial and gender hierarchies. As descendants of enslaved Africans, they were subject to the legacy of slavery and its enduring effects on socioeconomic status, access to education, and political power. Additionally, as women in a patriarchal society, they encountered gender-based constraints that limited their autonomy and opportunities for self-determination. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* provides a poignant portrayal of the struggles faced by African-American women during this period. Through the character of Celie, Walker exposes the harsh realities of poverty, abuse, and exploitation experienced by many African-American women in the rural South. Celie's narrative reflects the intersecting oppressions of race and gender, as she grapples with the trauma of sexual abuse, the loss of agency, and the quest for self-empowerment within a hostile environment. The character of Sofia in *The Color Purple* further exemplifies the challenges confronting African-American women in the early 20th century South. Sofia's defiance of traditional gender roles and her assertive demeanor are met

with resistance and violence, highlighting the limited avenues for resistance available to African-American women within the confines of a racially stratified and patriarchal society.

In addition to the systemic inequalities faced by African-American women, lesbianism was a taboo subject in early 20th century American society. The prevailing norms of heteronormativity and patriarchal control dictated strict boundaries around acceptable expressions of sexuality, relegating non-normative sexual identities to the margins of social discourse. Lesbianism, in particular, was stigmatized and pathologized within both mainstream society and within the African-American community. Religious institutions often condemned same-sex relationships as immoral and sinful, further marginalizing individuals who deviated from heterosexual norms. As a result, lesbian women faced social ostracism, familial rejection, and legal persecution, compounding the challenges already inherent in navigating intersecting oppressions based on race and gender. Alice Walker confronts these taboos head-on in *The Color Purple* through the depiction of Celie's relationship with Shug Avery. Their intimate connection transcends societal expectations and challenges conventional notions of love and desire. Walker's portrayal of lesbianism disrupts heteronormative narratives and offers a space for the exploration of non-normative sexual identities within the context of African-American women's experiences. As Walker herself stated, "I think [The Color Purple] can be seen as the first book to really put lesbianism in the middle of the black community in a real way" (Graham R., 1986). By foregrounding lesbian relationships in her narrative,



Walker confronts the silence and erasure surrounding queer experiences within African-American communities, opening up new avenues for dialogue and representation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Queer theory emerged in the late 20th century as a critical framework for understanding and deconstructing normative notions of sexuality and gender. Rooted in the works of scholars such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michel Foucault, queer theory challenges fixed categories of identity and disrupts binary understandings of sexuality and desire. It seeks to unravel the social constructions that underpin heteronormativity and to illuminate the fluidity and complexity of human experiences.

In the context of *The Color Purple*, queer theory offers a lens through which to analyze the novel's exploration of lesbianism and non-normative sexual identities. Alice Walker disrupts conventional representations of sexuality by foregrounding the intimate relationship between Celie and Shug Avery, two African-American women who defy societal expectations and forge a deep emotional bond. Through their connection, Walker destabilizes fixed notions of sexual identity and highlights the multiplicity of desires and expressions that exist beyond heteronormative constraints. As Judith Butler contends, "gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts" (Butler, 1990, p. 25). This idea resonates with Walker's portrayal of characters whose identities are shaped by intersecting factors such as race, gender, and sexuality. Celie's journey to self-

discovery and empowerment involves a fluid negotiation of these identities, challenging essentialist understandings of identity and opening up possibilities for queer resistance and agency.

Intersectionality, a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, emphasizes the interconnected nature of social categories such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, and their impact on individual experiences of oppression and privilege. In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker deftly navigates the intersections of identity, depicting the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality intersect to shape the lives of African-American women in the early 20th century South. Celie's experiences as a black woman in a patriarchal society are profoundly shaped by intersecting forms of oppression. Her race and gender intersect to position her at the bottom of the social hierarchy, subjected to violence, exploitation, and erasure. Furthermore, Celie's journey to self-discovery and liberation is deeply intertwined with her exploration of her sexuality and desires, highlighting the interconnectedness of race, gender, and sexuality in shaping individual subjectivities. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, "intersectionality is not so much a grand theory as it is a heuristic device" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). In the case of *The Color Purple*, intersectionality serves as a tool for analyzing the complex ways in which power operates along multiple axes of identity. By attending to the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, scholars can illuminate the nuances of lesbianism in the novel and elucidate its broader significance within the context of African-American women's experiences.



PORTRAYAL OF LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker crafts a nuanced portrayal of the relationship between Celie and Shug Avery, two African-American women whose connection transcends societal norms and expectations. Celie, a victim of abuse and oppression, finds solace and companionship in Shug, a glamorous and assertive blues singer. Their relationship evolves from one of dependence and admiration to a profound emotional bond characterized by mutual support and affection. The complexity of Celie and Shug's intimacy is evident in their interactions throughout the novel. From the moment Celie lays eyes on Shug, she is captivated by her beauty and charisma, describing her as "the most beautiful woman I ever saw" (Walker, 1982, p. 42). Shug, in turn, offers Celie a glimpse into a world beyond her limited horizons, introducing her to new ideas, experiences, and forms of self-expression.

As their relationship deepens, Celie and Shug engage in acts of physical and emotional intimacy that defy societal expectations. Their love transcends conventional notions of sexuality and gender, challenging the boundaries of heteronormativity and offering a vision of queer intimacy rooted in mutual respect and understanding. Celie's relationship with Shug serves as a catalyst for her journey to self-discovery and empowerment. Through her connection with Shug, Celie begins to reclaim agency over her own body and desires, challenging the patriarchal structures that have oppressed her for so long. Shug's encouragement and affirmation empower Celie to assert herself and pursue her own happiness, marking a significant shift in her understanding of herself and her place in the world.

As Celie reflects on her relationship with Shug, she articulates the transformative effect it has had on her life: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (Walker, 1982, p. 203). This metaphorical invocation of the color purple symbolizes Celie's newfound sense of self-worth and appreciation for life's beauty, inspired by her connection with Shug. Through her relationships with both Shug and other women in her life, such as Sofia and Nettie, Celie learns to value herself and assert her own agency. Her journey to self-discovery is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative power of love and friendship.

The portrayal of lesbian relationships in *The Color Purple* also involves an exploration of power dynamics and liberation. Celie and Shug navigate the complexities of power within their relationship, negotiating issues of race, class, and gender that shape their interactions. Despite the power differentials inherent in their respective positions, Celie and Shug find common ground in their shared experiences of oppression and marginalization, forging a bond based on mutual understanding and solidarity. As Celie gains confidence and autonomy through her relationship with Shug, she begins to challenge the power structures that have kept her oppressed for so long. Her liberation is not only personal but also political, as she confronts systemic injustices and asserts her right to self-determination. In analyzing the portrayal of lesbian relationships in *The Color Purple*, scholars have highlighted the novel's subversion of dominant power dynamics and its celebration of queer intimacy as a site of resistance and liberation. As Ann duCille observes,



“Shug and Celie’s love affair brings to the forefront the political and economic issues of race, gender, and sexuality” (duCille, 1991, p. 409). Through their relationship, Celie and Shug challenge societal norms and assert their right to love and be loved on their own terms. Overall, the portrayal of lesbian relationships in *The Color Purple* is characterized by complexity, nuance, and depth, offering a rich tapestry of themes and ideas that resonate far beyond the confines of the novel.

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker grapples with the pervasive influence of Christianity and spirituality on the lives of African-American women in the early 20th century South. Christianity, as practiced by the white community, is often used as a tool of oppression and control, reinforcing patriarchal norms and justifying systems of racial and gender hierarchy. However, Walker also portrays a rich tradition of African-American spirituality that offers solace, resilience, and resistance in the face of adversity. Throughout the novel, characters such as Celie and Shug wrestle with their relationship to Christianity and spirituality, seeking to reconcile their personal beliefs with the oppressive structures of organized religion. Celie’s early encounters with Christianity are marked by trauma and abuse, as she is subjected to the violence and hypocrisy of her stepfather, who claims to speak for God. However, as Celie’s understanding of spirituality evolves, she finds solace in her connection to the natural world and to her ancestors, reclaiming a sense of agency and empowerment.

Shug Avery, on the other hand, embodies a more unconventional spirituality that challenges traditional

Christian teachings. As a blues singer, Shug finds transcendence and liberation through music and sensuality, rejecting the narrow confines of religious orthodoxy in favor of a more expansive and inclusive spirituality. Her influence on Celie encourages a reevaluation of traditional religious beliefs and practices, opening up new avenues for spiritual expression and connection. Walker’s exploration of Christianity and spirituality in *The Color Purple* reflects the complex and multifaceted nature of African-American religious experience. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of African-American women, Walker disrupts dominant narratives of religious authority and offers a more inclusive vision of spirituality rooted in resilience, creativity, and resistance.

Traditional gender roles play a significant role in shaping the lives and experiences of lesbian characters in *The Color Purple*. Within the patriarchal society depicted in the novel, women are expected to conform to rigid expectations of femininity and submission, while men hold power and authority over them. This binary understanding of gender limits the options available to women and reinforces heteronormative norms that marginalize non-normative expressions of sexuality and desire. Celie’s journey to self-discovery is deeply influenced by her experiences within the confines of traditional gender roles. As a young girl, Celie is taught to prioritize the needs and desires of others above her own, internalizing the message that her worth is contingent upon her ability to serve others. This internalized misogyny manifests in Celie’s relationships with men, particularly her abusive husband, Albert, who views her as little more than a



domestic servant. Similarly, Shug Avery's experiences as a queer woman are shaped by societal expectations of femininity and respectability. Despite her defiance of traditional gender norms through her assertive demeanor and sexual independence, Shug still grapples with feelings of shame and guilt related to her sexuality, reflecting the internalized homophobia ingrained in many queer individuals. Through the characters of Celie and Shug, Alice Walker exposes the ways in which traditional gender roles constrain and limit the lives of women, particularly those who deviate from societal norms of femininity and heterosexuality. By interrogating these norms and offering alternative models of womanhood and sexuality, Walker challenges readers to rethink their assumptions about gender and sexuality and to envision a more inclusive and equitable society.

LANGUAGE AND REPRESENTATION

Alice Walker employs a variety of linguistic strategies in *The Color Purple* to convey the experiences and perspectives of her characters, particularly as they relate to issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Through dialect, imagery, and narrative voice, Walker creates a rich and evocative linguistic landscape that reflects the complexity and diversity of African-American women's lives in the early 20th century South. One of the most striking linguistic features of the novel is its use of dialect and vernacular speech. Walker captures the cadences and rhythms of African-American English, imbuing her characters' dialogue with authenticity and depth. This linguistic authenticity allows Walker to explore the nuances of African-American culture and identity, while also

challenging dominant narratives that marginalize non-standard forms of English.

For example, Celie's narrative voice is characterized by its simplicity and directness, reflecting her limited education and rural upbringing. Her letters to God are written in a colloquial style that conveys the immediacy and intimacy of her inner thoughts and emotions. Through Celie's voice, Walker gives voice to the experiences of African-American women who have been historically silenced and marginalized. In addition to dialect, Walker employs vivid imagery and symbolism to evoke the sensory experiences of her characters and to convey deeper thematic resonances. The recurring motif of the color purple, for instance, serves as a powerful symbol of resilience, transformation, and empowerment throughout the novel. As Celie reflects, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (Walker, 1982, p. 203). This metaphorical invocation of the color purple encapsulates the novel's central themes of self-discovery and liberation, while also highlighting the importance of paying attention to the beauty and richness of life's experiences.

Through her linguistic choices, Alice Walker subverts heteronormative discourse and challenges dominant narratives of gender and sexuality. By centering the voices and experiences of queer women, Walker disrupts traditional notions of femininity and womanhood, offering alternative models of identity and desire. One way in which Walker subverts heteronormative discourse is through the representation of lesbian relationships in the novel. Celie and Shug's intimate connection defies societal expectations and challenges



conventional notions of love and desire. Through their relationship, Walker highlights the fluidity and complexity of human sexuality, refusing to reduce queer desire to simplistic categories or labels. Moreover, Walker's linguistic choices serve to validate and affirm the experiences of queer individuals within African-American communities. By giving voice to characters like Celie and Shug, who navigate the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, Walker acknowledges the diversity of African-American experiences and the importance of embracing marginalized identities. In analyzing the linguistic strategies employed by Walker, scholars have noted the novel's radical potential to disrupt hegemonic discourses and to imagine new possibilities for resistance and liberation. As Valerie Smith observes, "Walker's linguistic innovation in *The Color Purple* is not simply a matter of stylistic experimentation; rather, it represents a powerful form of political resistance" (Smith, 1995, p. 58). Through her language and representation, Walker challenges readers to rethink their assumptions about gender, sexuality, and power, and to envision a more inclusive and equitable society.

IMPACT AND LEGACY

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has made a profound impact on LGBTQ+ literature, contributing to the representation and visibility of queer experiences, particularly those of African-American women. Through its portrayal of lesbian relationships and the exploration of gender and sexuality, the novel has challenged dominant narratives of identity and offered alternative models of love, desire, and resistance. One of the novel's most significant contributions to LGBTQ+ literature lies in its

centering of queer voices and experiences within the African-American community. Prior to *The Color Purple*, queer characters, especially queer women of color, were often marginalized or relegated to the periphery of literary discourse. Walker's decision to foreground the intimate relationship between Celie and Shug Avery marked a radical departure from conventional representations of sexuality and desire, offering a more inclusive and nuanced portrayal of queer identity. Moreover, *The Color Purple* has served as a touchstone for subsequent generations of LGBTQ+ writers and activists, inspiring them to explore themes of identity, community, and resilience in their own work. The novel's exploration of intersectionality and its celebration of queer love and solidarity continue to resonate with readers across cultural and geographical boundaries, affirming the importance of diverse voices and experiences within LGBTQ+ literature.

Beyond its impact on literature, *The Color Purple* has also had a significant influence on cultural and societal attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and race. The novel's candid portrayal of issues such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, and queer desire sparked important conversations about power, privilege, and oppression within African-American communities and beyond. The novel also played a pivotal role in bringing issues of LGBTQ+ rights and representation to the forefront of public consciousness. Its adaptation into a critically acclaimed film and Broadway musical further expanded its reach, reaching audiences around the world and sparking renewed interest in Walker's powerful narrative. Moreover, *The Color Purple* has inspired a wide range of cultural productions and



adaptations, including stage plays, musicals, and academic studies. Its enduring popularity speaks to its ability to resonate with audiences across generations and cultures, testifying to the universality of its themes and the enduring relevance of its message of love, resilience, and liberation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of Celie's journey to embracing her lesbian identity in the novel *The Color Purple* reveals a complex interplay of factors that contribute to her self-discovery and empowerment. Through an analysis of various psychological theories, it becomes evident that Celie's development as a lesbian is shaped by a combination of internal and external influences, including feelings of inferiority, trauma, and the presence of a supportive and affirming partner in Shug Avery. The principle of self-personality theory emerges as a central aspect in understanding Celie's embrace of her relationship with Shug. Celie's heightened self-awareness and recognition of her love for Shug signify a shift towards self-acceptance and authenticity. Additionally, Celie's experiences of trauma and mistreatment at the hands of men contribute to her rejection of heteronormative expectations and her eventual embrace of a lesbian identity. Furthermore, the influence of social and environmental factors cannot be understated in Celie's journey towards self-discovery. The societal norms and expectations surrounding gender and sexuality, coupled with Celie's own experiences within her community, shape her perceptions of love and desire. The presence of Shug, a strong and supportive partner who challenges conventional gender roles and offers Celie

a space for self-expression, plays a pivotal role in Celie's exploration of her lesbian identity.

Overall, the portrayal of Celie's lesbianism in *The Color Purple* serves as a powerful testament to the complexity of human identity and the resilience of the human spirit. Through Celie's journey, Alice Walker invites readers to reconsider their assumptions about gender, sexuality, and power, while also celebrating the transformative power of love and solidarity. As we reflect on Celie's story, we are reminded of the importance of authenticity, self-acceptance, and the pursuit of happiness in the face of adversity. Walker's novel not only contributes to LGBTQ+ literature by providing representation and visibility to queer experiences but also challenges societal norms and fosters empathy and understanding. Its enduring legacy speaks to its ability to inspire change and spark important conversations about identity, community, and liberation. As readers continue to engage with Celie's story, they are invited to imagine new possibilities for themselves and for society, grounded in love, resilience, and the pursuit of justice.

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