

# An Interpretation on the Gender Relations in *The Color Purple*—From Oppression to Harmony

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**Abstract:** *The Color Purple* is the representative work of prominent African American women writer Alice Walker, who shows great concerns for the plight and pursuit of liberation of black women in the dual-oppression of gender and racial discrimination. It portrays black females' lengthy search for and achievement of an independent and mature female identity, represented by the protagonist Celie. In addition, Walker's emphasis on mutual women-loving support and the ultimate goal of womanism: achieve the unity and harmony of men and women, namely the integrity of the whole society is reflected in the novel. By analyzing how Celie gets rid of the chains of patriarchal constraints and pursues her female identities through physical and spiritual awakening, this thesis interprets the transformation of black male-female relationship from opposition to harmony: First, It elaborates the miserable state of existence of Celie' being oppressed and slaved by black men, then explores the process of Celie's awakening and resistance with the help of three important females, depicted as "female bonding" or sisterhood of love and support, finally gives an interpretation to the transformation of Mr\_ 's mentality and explores how Celie's independence and achievement of female identity pave the way for the construction of harmonious male and female relations, which also reflects the aim of this paper; that is to provide instructive significance for the construction of freely harmonious gender relations in modern society.

**Keywords:** *The Color Purple; womanism, sisterhood, harmonious male-female relationship; personality independence*

## 1. Introduction

Alice Walker is one of the impressive and distinguished black writer in American literature. Living in an age brimming with racial discrimination and injustice, she portraits the sufferings and tragedies of black people in her novel, especially black woman. Different from other feminists, she not only hopes to help women break the chains of racial and gender discrimination, seeks the freedom and liberation, but also shows concerns on the growth and transformation of man, hoping to achieve a harmonious relationship between men and women. She puts forward womanism, a new feminist thought that is aimed at the harmony, happiness and justice among the whole human race. It is reflected greatly in her representative, *the Color Purple*. The charm of *The Color Purple* is not only because it tells that black women are reborn from the darkness of life, she also puts emphasis on the changes of those black men who ever oppress the black women, they begin to see black women with new eyes, and reflect on their autocracy and abusive behaviors. This reflects the theme of the novel: to achieve the harmony of men and women, which can also be seen as reference to contemporary gender relationship.

Today, women have greatly improved their social status because of the development of economy, policy, culture, and ethic beliefs, however, due to the lack of the correct understanding of gender relations, we are far from entering the harmonious society in which the whole human race achieves real freedom and harmony, this research analyzes the novel from a new perspective, studies the transformation of Celie and her husband's relationship and deep-rooted causes for it, aiming to bring practical inspiration to the construct of harmonious male-female relationship in modern society.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 2. Oppression and Resignation

### 2.1 Black Men's Oppression on Celie

In patriarchal society, man possesses absolute power and privilege to control woman. "Patriarchy is

the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men-by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor-determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male”(Richardson, Victoria & Robinson, 1997)<sup>[3]</sup>. Moreover, due to racial discrimination and poor state of existence, black man vent their angers, despairs on black woman. Just as Huston says in her passage *In Their Eyes Were Watching God*, “The white man throw down the load and tell the nigger to pick it up. He picks it up because he has to, but he doesn’t tot it. He hands it to his woman folks. The nigger woman is the mule of the world so far as I can see.” (Bloom,2008)<sup>[5]</sup>.

When Celie is fourteen years old, she is repeatedly raped by her stepfather and threatened not to tell anyone but God, ”You better not never tell nobody but God,It’d kill your mammy” (Walker,1982)<sup>[4]</sup>. Apart from being the negative object of inferior sexual tool, she is repeatedly scolded and abused for no reason. “He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church.” “He beat me for dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway.” (Walker,1982). After her stepfather is tired of her, she is sent to be the wife of a widower with four children, Mr\_. He beats her whenever he likes. When asked by his son Harpo why he always beats Celie, Mr\_ gives his answer: because Celie is a woman and all women should be beaten and tamed for the sake of harmony of family. Apart from the oppression and mistreatment from her stepfather and husband, she also receives disrespect and contempt from Harpo. Influenced by his father, Harpo believes woman can be treated badly, so he does not regard Celie as his mother. When he is old enough to do homework, his aunt asks him to help Celie bring water, he is unwilling to do and asks Celie to take the burdens. He says he is a man, and he is not supposed to work, while woman is supposed to.

“Harpo, don’t let Celie be the one bring in all water.  
you a big boy now. Time for you to help out some.  
Women work,he say.  
What? she say.  
Woman work. I’m a man.” (Walker,1982).

## 2.2 Celie’s Resignation to Fate

In the Bible, Eve to Adam astray, tasting the forbidden fruit, God punished women under the wrath. God warned Eve: ”I will greatly fold to add to your pain, making you birth to more children; you wish has to meet your husband, and he will control over you absolutely”. As the faithful believers of God, all black women believe that women are born to be controlled by men, and in their eyes, man is God. Keeping such a belief in their mind, they become dumb and are willing to devote their all things to men. They submit to men’ power and will not say no to any oppression that men put on them, so it is natural to see many black females serve as the slaves for black men.

Celie is infected deeply by the principles of patriarchal society. She takes all sufferings for granted because she is educated in such way, black women have no rights to resist pains, she tells herself that she is a tree, just as she writes in the letter, “Celie, I told myself, you a tree” (Walker, 1982). Because tree can not feel pain, joy and other feelings, although she was despaired by the dark and cruel life, she has no choice but to be insensitive to all pains, and silently bearing all the sufferings. She has no one to tell but to write letter to her sister Nettie, who is forced to escape to Africa, and to the God for the sake of survival. “ Nettie, dead, she fight, she run away. what good it do? I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive”(Walker, 1982). She dares not to resist and fight for her identity consciousness and takes her subordinate status in the family for granted. She resigns to all plights and never want to fight for her independence, what’s more, there is anger in her inner world that is liable to hurt other females. Instead of helping and supporting her daughter-in-law Sophia in the fight for women’s rights and female consciousness, she is opposed to Sophia’s rebellious spirits and unyielding. When she is asked how to tame Sophia, she agrees to her husband, who wants his son to beat his wife. In this case, Celie is fully distorted and tamed by the suffering and pains she faces in the life.

## 3. Awakening and Independence

In the process of Celie’s awakening and pursuit for independence of female consciousness, three female roles play a vital role. The awakening and resistance of Celie will not be achieved without Shug. Meanwhile Nettie and Sophia have a great impact on Celie’s growth. “This female bonding enables Celie - a depressed survivor-victim of parent loss, emotional and physical neglect, rape, incest, trauma and spousal abuse- to assume her arrested development” (Proudfit, 1991)<sup>[1]</sup>. In a male-dominated

society, if woman wants to gain independence and liberation, they should unit the whole female group and get strengths from each other.

### ***3.1 Three Female models in Celie's Life***

The most influential role in the process of Celie's awakening is Shug. Shug in herself is a beautiful, charming and brave black singer. She dares to break tradition in the patriarchal society and obtains economic and mental independence through her own efforts. Her ability to attain her own identity and value wins Mr\_ 's admiration and love, also inspires Celie to find her feminine ego-subject sense. When Celie tells the feeling when she makes love with her husband: "I don't like it at all. What is it like? He git up on you, heist your nightgown round you waist,plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there."(Walker,1982), Shug asks her to stand in front of the mirror and encourages her to appreciate her naked body, for the first time Celie begins to find the physical beauty of femininity. Shug not only arouses Celie's passion for physical enjoyment, but also awakens her oppressed consciousness for identity and independence. Under the influence of Shug, Celie begins to get rid of dumbness and resignation, she learns to say no to the oppression and suffering in her life. Inspired by Shug, Celie starts her own business and attain economic independence.

Another important role is Sophia, the wife of celie's stepson Harpo. She is a fighter in *The Color Purple*." she say, All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight in my own cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men." (Walker,1982). She is strong in stature and personality. She loves her husband deeply, while she can not tolerate his oppression upon her. Sophia's rebellious spirits and determination of defending for female rights shock Celie greatly. After Sophia knows that Celie asks Harpo to tame her by beating her, she comes to Celie and talk about this issue with her, then Celie begins to understand Sophia's consciousness and from then on, she knows that black women have their value for existence, and man should not beat woman. In this case, Sophia influences Celie's awakening of female awareness.

At last, Celie's sister Nettie also lightens her way to awakening of female awareness and liberation. Nettie is always the spiritual pillar of Celie. In her young years, She spent the happiest time in her life on the company and real fun with Nettie, although Celie lives in the darkness of abuse and oppression from her stepfather, she can get warmness and love from Nettie. When Nettie finds Celie is still suffered from mistreatment and oppression after marriage, and gets used to the burdens of black female roles, she encourages Celie to fight and resist. In order to escape from the claws of oppression and abuse, Nettie is forced to leave her hometown for Africa. After she escapes, she writes twelve letters to Celie, in which she introduces a wide world to Celie and encourages her to construct her own identity. Nettie's letter impresses Celie greatly and inspires her to be brave to pursue independence and liberation.

### ***3.2 Resistance and Independence***

In the past, Celie regards man as God and dares not to oppose to her stepfather and husband, because God would not allow her to do so. So she tolerates all the suffering and pains, but later she realizes it is ridiculous to seek survival in the Bible, and God will not save her. "What God do for me? [...] [...] He give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, that God I been praying and writing to is a man. And just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown (Walker,1982).

Under the influence of Shug, Celie becomes active in the pursuit for female rights. In the twenty-first letter, Celie decides to leave Mr\_ to make for a living with Shug. She no longer resigns to her destiny and family tyranny. In order to pursue freedom and enjoy a new better life, she decides to leave Mr\_ to do business. However, Mr\_ does not agree and becomes angry with her, he wants to beat her as he did before, but Celie isn't an obedient woman like before, she holds out a knife and resists his power for the first time, and this makes Mr\_ shocked. She inherits traditional black culture and learns to do sewing for business, gradually, she is able to be independent in economy, and realizes her subjective consciousness.

Moreover, she becomes stronger in spiritual life. After getting the news that Shug falls in love with a boy and leaves her, and that Nettie and her two children are drowned in the wrecked boat, she is sad and undergoes painful psychological struggles, but soon she realizes that she can live a happy life without Shug, which means that she does not rely on others and gains spiritual independence. "Now, Is this life or not? I be so calm. If she come, I be happy. If she don't I be content. I figure his the lesson I

was suppose to learn” (Walker, 1982). Celie has grown to be a mature and independent female and she is able to confront all kinds of predicament and difficulties.

#### 4. Harmony and Integrity

Alice Walker coins the word “Womanist” in the preface of *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. In *The Color Purple*, she develops feminist thoughts and introduces womanism to readers. Womanism aims to achieve the harmony and integrity of both man and woman. In the novel, after Celie awakens and obtains spiritual and economic independence, Mr\_ begins to change his views about Celie and reconsiders his relationship with Celie. Celie’s revolt and independence prompt his husband to discover feminine value, and to understand, respect her. Thus, the transformation of Celie’s husband reflects that the relationship between him and Celie steps from opposition into harmony.

##### 4.1 Transformation of Mr\_

Mr\_, the husband of Celie, is the representative of tyrannical black male role in the novel. At the beginning, He does not regard Celie as his wife but a slave for his family and sex. He does not love Celie, so he abuses and mistreats her, and even wants to harass sexually Nettie. He infuses the values of chauvinism into his son, when Harpo confuses about his abuse for Celie, he tells his son that woman is supposed to be controlled by man and beating them is for the sake of family harmony. In Celie’s eyes, he is evil as a devil. In her letter, she calls him Mr\_ instead of his real name, Albert.

However, Celie and Shug’s left make his world collapse into chaos. He is not able to do housework, meanwhile, the guilt and fear of loneliness haunt him so that he can’t fall asleep. Tortured and suffered, he begins his new journey of life to improve himself. Celie’s success in business and independence prompt him to rethink the relationship with Celie, finally he realizes that it is wrong to hold on to his male-centered, domineering and egoistic beliefs. Therefore, he tries to break the mold and connect with Celie, though at the beginning Celie is reluctant to forgive him. He accepts the fact and continue to do something good to others. When Sophia’s daughter is ill, he makes dishes of yam himself to relieve her. On the way driving Celie home, he talks with Celie and for the first time he begins to care about Celie’s feelings and likes. When Ceie got the news that Nettie and her two children were drowned in the sea on the way coming home, in the depth of grief and sorrow, she nearly lose the hope of life, however, Mr\_’s company and care console her so much. He is the one who understand her, support her, which makes it possible for Celie to forgive him and make peace with him like friends. He even begins to do sewing and collect shells, he tells Celie “I use to try to sew along with mama cause that is what she was doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know I like it”(Walker,1982). Mr\_ removes the traditional beliefs of chauvinism, obtains liberation and becomes a new man. ”I’m satisfied this first time I ever lived on earth as a natural man.It feels like a new experience.” (Walker,1982). As a consequence, Celie recognizes his male identity and call his real name, Albert, and they start to establish an equal, harmonious relationship start a new journey with different identities.

##### 4.2 Liberation and Harmony

At the end of the novel, we see a happy ending: Leaving home and having her own business enable Celie gain freedom and identity independence, which causes Mr\_ to get rid of male-centered beliefs. They establish a harmonious relationship and both achieve liberation. To some degree, It is Celie’s efforts and fights that prompt black man to abandon the belief that man is supposed to control woman and that woman is inferior to them. Albert also tells Celie, ”Took me long enough to notice you such a good company.”(Walker,1982). It takes a long time for Albert to realize his fault, and to get rid of the darkness of patriarchal rules. In order to compensate his mistreatment and abuse to Celie, he learns to sew, which means the unity and integrity of two sexes. Just as M.Teresa Tavormina says, ”Sewing is a act of union, of collecting pieces to make a useful whole. Furthermore, sewing with others is comradely act, one that allows both speech and comfortable, supportive silence”(Tavormina,1986)<sup>[6]</sup>. Needlework is regarded as woman’s thing, but Albert is willing to work with woman.

Celie and Albert’s relationship goes from opposition to harmony shows the growth and liberation of men and women. As Walker says, ”They proceed to grow, to change, to become whole, i.e, well, by becoming more like each other, but stopping short on each other’s illness. Celie becomes more self-interested and aggressive; Albert becomes more thoughtful and considerate of others” (Walker,1982). When women have the power and ability to equal men, men don’t have to be strong all

the time and they also have chance to be sensitive. So in *The Color Purple*, Walker not only aims at describing women's miserable state of existence, process of awakening, resistance, and endeavors for independence, she also puts emphasis on black man's spiritual transformation, initiation, and liberation. In the patriarchal society, black men and women are both the victims of racial difference. It's necessary for both men and women to construct a solid union, and work together to achieve self-liberation. Under the influence of the liberation of female identity, man begins to change their views and attitudes towards woman, they introspect what they have done to women and give up their male-centered values. At the end of the novel, Albert realizes his faults and be aware of his responsibility of a husband, and he asks for marriage, however, Celie refuses his ask for proposal, because she no longer has fantasy about marriage and she feels free and happy to lead her own life. Though turning down Albert's proposal, Celie says they are still intimate friends and construct an equal and harmonious mode of gender identity., which goes toward the ultimate goal of the wholeness.

## 5. Conclusion

Alice Walker is one of the leader of the American literature. In her novel *The color Purple*, she puts emphasis on the growth and development of both man and woman.<sup>[7]</sup> Walker not only encourages woman to fight for their identity independence by describing the process of Celie's growth, also concerns about the change of man's mentality and views about feminine value. In this case, Walker aims to the achievement of the whole human race's liberation, and to build a harmonious community in which women and men respect each other, work together to improve both side's existence of life, which can provide theoretical guidance for the construction of a harmonious relationship between two sexes, namely the theme of this thesis. By analyzing the growth of Celie, we can see the transformation of Celie and her husband's relationship, and thus get the fact that man and woman build harmonious relationship on the basis of mutual self-improvement, growth, and respect. Only when woman become independent physically and spiritually, can they break the constraints and oppression of patriarchy, and succeed in finding their own value and identity. Also, the struggle for feminist rights and freedom provides new perspective for man to value and respect woman. Actually, this is still instructive in the construction of a harmonious male-female relationship. Although the society has improved greatly, booming economy and multi-culture provide more chances for women to pursue their identity and enhancement, there is still a long way to go for achieving the ultimate goal of womanism. On the one hand, many females fail to realize that they should fight for the equal economic and political rights as males, or even some well-educated and well-earned ones have realized this issue, the changes they have made are less likely to shake the beliefs of male-dominated status, so it's not easy for them to attain equal rights as men just through their own efforts. On the other hand, despite the fact that women have achieved economic and personal independence and realized they should struggle for equal rights, men in the modern world are not willing to give up the privileges which enable them the center and authority in the modern society, while the other gender to be subordinated and oppressed. "The men in this book change only when their women join together and rebel--- and then, the change is so complete as to be unrealistic." (Smith, 1993).

Thus, Walker's unique creation of Celie, transform from a poor, ugly, and subordinated object to a independent and courageous subject, set a good example for all women to obtain economic independence, refuse to the oppression and injustice imposed on them and stand up for their rights. When all women unit and rebel, it's possible for men to reflect on their beliefs and make more changes for the harmonious relationship and wellness of whole race. Based on this, this research sheds light on later study of the construction of harmonious gender relations from a new feminist perspective. Also, we hope to see more ways will be explored to tackle with the inequalities women face in the contemporary society, such as parenting, working mother's promotion and so on, in the meantime, to alleviate men's pressure and burden that patriarchal society exerts on them, which paves the way for the integrity and harmony of the whole human race.

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