
RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Analysis of The Color Purple from the Perspective of Queer Theory

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ABSTRACT

The Color Purple describes how a numb black girl grows to be an independent and confident woman with the help of her sister and friends, especially her homosexual lover. Her growth reflects many aspects of queer theory: such as Celie's homosexual love with Shug, Shug's bisexuality, the reverse gender roles of Sofia and Harpo and the deconstruction of racial oppression. From the perspective of queer theory, this paper attempts to interpret Walker's hope to establish an ideal world in which gender opposition is broken and society is harmonious through the spiritual rebirth of Celie and other characters in The Color Purple.

KEYWORDS

Queer Theory; The Color Purple; gender binary; American homosexual literature

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 12 October 2024

PUBLISHED: 15 November 2024

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2024.7.11.16

1. Introduction

The Color Purple was published in 1982 by Alice Walker, a famous contemporary American black woman writer. Shortly after its publication, it became a best-seller known throughout the country and won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, American National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Through The Color Purple, Walker challenged gender hegemony and the fixed thinking mode of gender roles, and clearly expressed her desire to establish an equal and harmonious world. As a landmark in the history of black women's literature, The Color Purple not only marks the new height of Walker's novel creation, but also brings a new breakthrough to American black literature. From the unique perspective of black women, The Color Purple describes the Celie's resistance to gender oppression and her spiritual rebirth from self-denial to self-awakening with the help of her friends. Based on the Queer Theory, this paper attempts to analyze the characters in The Color Purple to interpret Walker's ideal of building an equal and harmonious world.

2. Queer Theory

Queer theory is a field of post-structuralist critical theory that emerged in the early 1990s out of the fields of queer studies and women's studies. Queer theory includes both queer readings of texts and the theorization of 'queerness' itself. Heavily influenced by the work of Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, David Halperin, José Esteban Muñoz, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, queer theory builds both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay/lesbian studies' close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. Whereas gay/lesbian studies focused its inquiries into natural and unnatural behavior with respect to homosexual behavior, queer theory expands its focus to encompass any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls into normative and deviant categories. Italian feminist and film theorist Teresa de Lauretis coined the term "queer theory" for a conference she organized at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1990 and a special issue of Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies she edited based on that conference.

Queer theory “focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire.” Queer has been associated most prominently with bisexual, lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, intersex, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Queer theory’s attempted debunking of stable (and correlated) sexes, genders, and sexualities develops out of the specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions. Queer theory examines the constitutive discourses of homosexuality developed in the last century in order to place “queer” in its historical context, and surveys contemporary arguments both for and against this latest terminology. Over the years, the theory has developed into an interdisciplinary subject, with its basis enrooted in history, sociology, literature, etc. Many scholars and theorists, Judith Butler being the pioneer, have gained fruitful results in the fields of sociology, sexology, literature, politics and many more. To sum up, queer theory aims to eliminate all discrimination and prejudice and build a harmonious social atmosphere. It is revolutionary and subversive in itself, posing a strong challenge to the traditional gender norms and sexual norms, and also has an inestimable impact on the formation of a new interpersonal relationship pattern, the creation of a new way of life in human society, and people’s way of thinking.

3. Analyzing The Color Purple from the Perspective of Queer Theory

3.1 Fight against Heterosexual Hegemony

The queer theory first challenges the dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality. According to the traditional concept, individual sexual orientation is strictly divided into homosexuality and heterosexuality. However, Judith Butler, a famous sociologist and critic of queer theory, believes that people’s homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual behavior does not come from a certain fixed identity, but like actors, it is constantly changing. Human sexuality is often ambiguous and changeable. Another important content of the queer theory is to challenge the dichotomy of men and women. It believes that the social gender of individuals does not strictly follow their biological gender, and the boundaries between men and women are often ambiguous, that is, a woman can have male characteristics at the same time, while men may also have some female characteristics.

The Color Purple further demonstrates this point of view. The heroes and heroines in the book have obvious “queer” characteristics, especially the homosexuality between Celie and Shug. Celie was raped by her stepfather when she was young and abused by her husband after marriage. Her tragic experience made her feel disgusted and afraid of men. From the moment she saw the photo of Shug, she was deeply attracted. With Shug’s encouragement and help, Celie found her own beauty and experienced the mysterious homosexual love. This love not only enriches Celie’s life and reshapes her personality, but also gives her strength and courage to change the status quo of her oppressed and enslaved life. In the face of Mr. Albert’s humiliation and contempt, Celie fought back publicly for the first time, then left him with Shug and began her new life. The success of career made Celie become confident and show her personality bravely. She began to wear men’s trousers and smoke, which was regarded as something only men could do at that time. Shug is a real feminist in Walker’s works, and also a real “queer”. As a blues singer, Shug is not only beautiful, sexy, but also rich. Different from most black women at that time, she was always in an active position in her relationship with men and was never constrained by secular norms. After becoming Celie’s good friend, Mr. Albert confessed to her that the reason why he only loved Shug all his life was that Shug was honest, frank, aboveboard and outspoken. She always sticks to her beliefs and has more manly qualities than most men. All her life, Shug lived a free life according to her own will and never changed herself because of other people’s views. While she had a male lover, she developed homosexual love with Celie. Even after she lived with Celie, she fell in love with a college boy dozens of years younger than her. As the author Walker said, “It is obvious that Shug is bisexual, while Celie is lesbian.” The queer theory emphasizes the variability and instability of sexual orientation, and believes that the existence of bisexuality is reasonable, normal, and natural. The sexual orientation of Shug and Celie fully reflects the ideas of the queer theory. The queer theory is very subversive. It challenges all strict dichotomies and enables people to get rid of all traditional ideas. Its ultimate goal is to eliminate all discrimination and prejudice and build a harmonious social atmosphere.

3.2 Struggle for Unrestrained Personality

Sofia and Harpo can best reflect the deconstruction of gender dichotomy and the struggle for unrestricted personality. Harpo is Mr. Albert’s eldest son. He is not only thin and looks like a woman, but also has a cowardly character. He has always been submissive to Mr. Albert, who is arbitrary and arrogant. On the contrary, his wife Sofia is a tall, strong, confident and decisive woman who never gives up easily. She once said to Celie, “All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy, I had to fight my uncles, I had to fight my brothers. Girls are not safe in a family of men. But I never thought I had to fight in my own house. I love Harpo. God knows I do. But I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me.” Both Harpo and Sofia have reversed gender roles. Harpo likes to do women’s work. For example, he likes to stay at home to take care of children, wash dishes and cook meals, while Sophia, on the other hand, often put on male trousers, go down to work, cut firewood, and even climb to the roof to repair the roof. At the beginning, they were satisfied with this way of life. But under the influence of patriarchal hegemony and traditional ideas at that time, especially under the influence of Harpo’s father, Harpo tried to tame and control Sophia, just as Mr. Albert controlled Celie. In the process of trying to tame Sofia with violence, Harpo failed repeatedly. Finally, he even just relied

on gluttony to make him strong. Sofia was very sad about this, so she left Harpo. After all kinds of hardships, they finally lived together, and they all followed their own personality, accepted the reversed gender roles, and lived according to their most comfortable way of life. Harpo did housework at home and took care of the children, while Sofia worked in Celie's pants shop. The reunion of the couple symbolizes the disintegration and collapse of the traditional outdated gender concept, and also represents Walker's strongest desire for people to live a harmonious and happy life. As the queer theory points out, the traditional gender binary divides people into two completely different parts and restricts them to express their true personality freely. Only by deconstructing the gender binary can people live a free life and get the right to choose their own way of life.

3.3 Revolt against Racism

Sofia is a female warrior in the novel. She is strong and fierce, and always has the courage to confront her husband and white people. One day, Sofia, her boyfriend and all her children meet the mayor and his white wife, Millie, in the street. Millie notices all Sofia's children are so clean, so she asks Sofia to work for her as maid. Sofia refused without hesitation. She said "Hell no." The mayor and his wife were very surprised. The angry mayor felt insulted and offended, so he slapped Sofia and was knocked to the ground by her in return. Then the police arrested Sofia and put her in jail. When Celie saw her in prison, she was almost beaten to death. Sofia was forced to work in the prison laundry, washing clothes all day from five to eight. Although she was a "good prisoner", she was severely abused. She has to work day and night, and even has no time to sleep. But she did not completely yield to them, and the rebellious spirit still existed in her heart. "I dream of murder", she said, "I dream of murder sleep or wake". She was sentenced to twelve years' imprisonment and released with Squeak's help after eleven and a half years. Then she had to work as a maid at the mayor's house. Her life there was very bad, as she complained to her eldest son: they get her in a little cold storeroom, and never let her see her children. This pain finally made Sofia sigh that "White folks is a miracle of affliction." Sofia is the most rebellious one in the *Color Purple*, not only towards her husband, but also the white people. In the face of gender discrimination and racism, she never changed herself and obeyed anyone. She is a perfect feminist and an ideal homosexual, who has been fighting against discrimination and injustice all her life. Her struggle against racism embodies the essence of the Queer theory: striving for a free life.

4. Conclusion

As Alice Walker's masterpiece, *The Color Purple*, perfectly embodies feminism. Driven by the demand for free life, queer theory appeared in the 1990s, which boldly and directly challenges the traditional norms on sexuality and gender, shows a way for people to live freely and also provides a new theoretical foundation for literary criticism. The main features of queer theory also permeate the novel, such as the homosexual relationship between Celie and Shug, the reverse gender roles of Sophia and Harper, and the anti-racism of the black community. Specifically, the novel reflects the characteristics of queer theory in terms of sex, gender and race. The core of queer theory is that freedom is the natural state of life. Celie finally lives such a life. After a series of sufferings, all the main characters have their own happy endings and live a harmonious and peaceful life, as expected by Walker and Queer theorists. *The Color Purple* provides a path to liberation and freedom not only for black women, but also for all oppressed women in the world.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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