

Gender roles and sexism



**ASSIGN
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Sexism is, at its core, a product of gender roles. In the early twentieth century, discrimination against women through the overt use of gender roles was highly prevalent amongst men and women. In a patriarchal society, women are expected to submit to men in all areas simply because women are supposedly “ inferior” to and dependent on them. At the same time, women are encouraged into submissive, quiet roles that not only cement their status as beneath men but also give men roles with power. The cyclical nature of this systematic oppression continues its course without interference since it is considered a societal norm, and because women take on such passive roles, it gives men an excuse to justify their superiority and power over women. As a thematically driven novel, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* displays similar, reoccurring motifs concerning gender roles and sexism. Through Celie’s letters to God, the audience sees several occasions where gender roles lay hand in hand with sexism for many of the female characters and that the discrimination they face is a result of the gender values surrounding them. In work and marriage, violence, sex, and education, Alice Walker’s portrayal of gender roles in *The Color Purple* emphasizes her point that such values perpetuate sexism in society, but when the roles are reversed, sexism wanes.

Gender roles decide what kind of work women do, and it is as sexist as it is calculated. Women must marry and submit themselves to their husband and children by attending to their every need, as marriage is their only route in life, and pleasing their husband is a major part of their job. In *The Color Purple*, Carrie, Mr. ___’s sister, says, “ When a woman marry, she spose to keep a decent house and a clean family” (Walker 21). The typical role of a

housewife is to keep the home orderly, the household members fed, her children well-mannered, and her husband happy, no matter what treatment she receives in return. She has no choice other than to conform to this standard since according to societal expectations of this period, a woman who does not perform these duties well enough is considered a shameful failure. Once Celie marries Mr. __, Celie is forced to care for his “rotten children,” attend to Mr. __’s every need without complaint, cook, clean, and care for the household by herself (Walker 18). While Celie does all of the submissive, domestic jobs in the family, Mr. __ is the breadwinner. In “The Ideal Woman,” Jennifer Holt writes that the role of a mother and nurturer “denie[s] women a career or any commitment outside the home,” which constricts a woman’s world to the home and “cut[s] her role back to [a] housewife (Friedan, 1963).” Similarly, because Celie is busy being a housewife, she has no other job or source of income that she can use for herself, which makes her reliant on Mr. __’s support. This lack of freedom from her gender’s assigned duty keeps her chained to her home and constantly dependent on Mr. __ for housing, money, and protection. In return, Mr. __ has all of the power and direct control over her. Celie’s traditional role of a housewife and Mr. __’s as a breadwinner makes it very easy for Mr. __ to control Celie, as she has no means of caring for herself and works to please him so that he will keep providing for her. In Celie’s dependence on Mr. __, who holds all of the power in their relationship, Mr. __ is able to hold his power over Celie to make her do whatever he says, which only perpetuates Celie’s role as practically a servant to the family. Generally, men do not want to have their power usurped by women, so they purposely push women towards submissive, quiet roles that reinforce men’s power

through women's dependence on them (Holt). Through these gender roles, women are viewed as "lesser" than men because of their domestic jobs while men fulfil the role of providing for their wives, thus allowing men to become "more important" than and unopposable to women. Therefore, sexism takes hold of the situation, and what originally started with traditional gender roles develops into a cycle of discrimination against women for being "lesser" than men because their status in marriage and jobs mirror the same intent.

The adherence to gender roles leads to sexism, but the reversal of these roles in the workforce pushes sexism back. Throughout the majority of the novel, Celie is under Mr. ___'s control because of her dependency on his money and home. She can never go against him because doing so will leave her without his protection, and despite what little he has to offer, it is far better than nothing. However, when she leaves Mr. ___'s side, creates her own business, and is able to make an income without depending on anyone else, Celie writes to Nettie, "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends, and time" (Walker 218). For the first time in decades, Celie is free from Mr. ___'s control and can do whatever she pleases. She has work, money, friends, and time, most of which she is deprived of when she lives and relies on Mr. ___. With money and time, Celie is free to do whatever she pleases, and her company, Folkspants Unlimited, provides her with enough protection that she never has to rely on others for money ever again, least of all Mr. ___. Celie defies her role as a traditional housewife and creates her own independence in the form of work, and in owning a company, she is completely free from the monetary reliance that made her unable to defy Mr.

__ in the first place. She reverses their roles as a wife and breadwinner, which ultimately ensures her freedom and happiness in the end. By stepping away from traditional gender roles, sexism can be pushed back.

While work plays a large role in sexism, violence originating from insecurities about gender roles is also an important factor. According to Jane Collingwood's article "Violence Linked to Gender Roles," "Recent research shows that men who do not feel they live up to traditional masculine gender norms may be more prone to violence." Men are pushed towards masculinity and toughness their entire lives, as both are a measurement of pride and strength in society's eyes. To be neither is for a man to be womanly, and a feminine man is viewed as a disgrace. Insulting a man by calling him "feminine" is blatant sexism against women. It implies that it is shameful to be a woman because women are lesser than men. In addition to this, men who feel as though they "fall short of the traditional gender norms" will sometimes resort to violence to show off their strength, which will supposedly help them regain the masculinity society pushes for (Collingwood). This is shown in *The Color Purple* when Harpo begs Mr. __ and Celie for advice on how to make Sofia listen and submit to him, to which Mr. __ replies, "You ever hit her? . . . Well how you spect to make her mind? . . . You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (Walker 36). Mr. __ links violence with control, power, and manliness, all of which Harpo desires in his relationship with Sofia. The act of Harpo asking Mr. __ and Celie for advice on how to make his wife "mind" stems from his emasculation in the face of Sofia's robust actions and speech, which puts himself in a place where he is the

most feminine of the two despite their genders. Having grown up with the idea of femininity being “ lesser,” Harpo following Mr. ___’s advice to beat Sofia only exemplifies just how important conforming to gender roles is to Harpo given that he would rather beat his own wife whom he loves than risk his masculinity. In “ Black Adolescent Girls: Do Gender Role and Racial Identity: Impact Their Self-Esteem?,” Tamara R. Buckley writes, “. . . [C]onformity to traditional gender roles was considered a prerequisite for psychological well-being. However . . . researchers argue that conformity to traditional gender roles is associated with poor adjustment” (648). Buckley argues that with “ conformity of traditional gender roles” comes a psychological instability that arises from insecurity and the need to protect one’s ego. One will go to extreme lengths just to fit in with what is normal among one’s peers. Similarly, Harpo acts on his parents’ advice due to his insecurities, of which only exist because of the gender roles he grew up with. The fact that Harpo assumes that beating Sofia will make her more submissive, quiet, and mindful of him speaks volumes about violence and how some men think violence works. Women are supposed to be weaker than and obedient to men. When a man is not strong, the alternative is that he is “ womanly,” which means that he is subpar compared to the “ typical man” (Collingwood). In thinking that violence will sustain the traditional roles of manly men and submissive women, some men wrongly use violence as their key to gaining gilded masculinity. Being “ womanly” becomes an insult to men, and women are therefore degraded to lower than men. Men are also physically stronger than women in most cases; beating a woman who is far weaker gives an abusive man the illusion of masculinity and only emphasizes men’s control over women. It insinuates that because women are

overpowered by men, women must conform to what men will them to. It makes women appear weaker and subservient to men, which also happens to be their typical, assigned gender role as well, while men receive boosts to their egos for looking strong, manly, and tough again. By trying to preserve traditional gender roles, violence ensures that sexism thrives.

However, in reversing gender roles relating to violence, sexism dissipates. Usually, domestic abuse occurs when a man feels insecure about emasculation and wishes to impose his masculinity upon a woman to boost his own ego (Collingwood). In *The Color Purple*, Harpo tries the same approach on Sofia, but rather than submit herself to the abuse, Sofia fights back and says, " All my life I had to fight. . . . I loves Harpo . . . God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me" (Walker 40). Traditionally, women are not supposed to defy their husbands in any way but, rather, try to always please them. Even so, Sofia, who has fought all her life with her brothers and father, beats Harpo back even worse than he tries to beat her. As a strong, sturdy woman, Sofia easily overpowers Harpo; she loves him deeply, but she will never stand for abuse. In standing up for herself, Harpo is unable to make her " mind" him, as is what the traditional role of a wife does to her husband (Walker 36). Instead of being beat into submission herself, Sofia beats Harpo back, which is the opposite of what usually happens. Therefore, Sofia is never oppressed by Harpo's abuse because he cannot overpower her and prove his supposed dominance, and Sofia is never forced into the overbearing role of an obedient housewife. The sexist view of a submissive, mindful wife that lets domestic abuse happen does not exist for Sofia because she fights against it.

Gender roles still play a big part in the sexism surrounding each gender's sexual life. In the early nineteen-hundreds, women were extremely conservative about sex and showing skin compared to today's standards. Normally, sex is something done unto a woman by a man, not the other way around, as referenced in Celie's narration: " He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (Walker 78). Celie does not enjoy sex with Mr. __ because he simply does not care enough to pleasure her along with himself, as he sees no need to. He only " do[es] his business" and finishes without her. Celie had never even seen her own genitals until Shug mentions it, which only proves how conservative most women are about anything sexual in this period of time. Even Shug, who is an anomaly to this standard and loves sex, is seen as terribly promiscuous by most people due to her brazen sexual life. In " The Ideal Woman," Holt writes, ". . . [W]omen could find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love (Friedan, 1963)." While the notion of " fulfillment" is nowhere near what Celie experiences under Mr. __'s thumb, this is still the expectation set by society. Her sex life is extremely passive to the point of being nonconsensual, and she is so out of touch with her own sexuality that she does not even know what an orgasm feels like or what her genitals look like. Most women have their sexuality repressed so greatly that the mere mention of a woman enjoying sex is scandalizing, which is exactly what happens when Shug mentions what an orgasm feels like to Celie; Celie is extremely embarrassed, emphasizing Shug's liberal-mindedness. Even Sofia, who is pregnant at the time with Harpo's child, is accused by Mr. __ of being

a slut: " Young womens no good these days, he say. Got they legs open to every Tom, Dick, and Harry" (Walker 31). Although she is pregnant and not doing anything remotely sexual at the moment, Mr. ___ goes as far as to imply that she is a slut to her face just for not being able to prove that her child is Harpo's. Although men expect women to have sex with them, they also shame women for having " too much" sex or having sex with someone they are not married to. Another example of this is in Henry James' Daisy Miller, where Daisy is " scandalously" seen flirting with two men in public. Although she is doing nothing but light flirting and talking, Mrs. Costello, Winterbourne's aunt, condemns Daisy as disgraceful for being so coquettish and trying to fool Winterbourne with her wooing, yet for her own nephew who has been womanizing and flirting as well, she holds no judgement over him (James 83). The double standard does not work against men as it does for women because of gender values, where women must remain pure and untouched while the act of sleeping with many women is considered masculine for men. It creates and perpetuates a sexist attitude between the sexual lives of men and women through society's double standards.

One's sexual life is subject to gender roles and the discrimination accompanying it, but sexism begins to fade away once one breaks away from those values. An example of this is Shug Avery's belief about sex: " I have to confess, I just love it" (Walker 78). In a time when women are supposed to be conservative and not lustful, Shug defies this social norm brazenly. Although people view Shug as extremely promiscuous because of the way she dresses and acts, her blatant sex life adds to her overall allure. Her fame comes from her singing and talent in entertainment, but people are

also drawn to her by the way she acts. Her openness about sex and sexual appeal draw others in, and even if some consider her shameful for it, she uses it to her advantage. Whereas men can have an open sex life without shame, as seen with Mr. ___ and Shug, women are generally not allowed the same without social backlash; however, Shug purposely defies this norm, and in doing so, she adds to her charm and has fun and freedom. All while never submitting to the conservative mindset of women in her time, she is not any lesser for her sexual beliefs and habits. Without being tied to traditional gender roles and values, Shug proves that sexism can be pushed back if one embraces its reversal.

Gender roles intimately affect not only private matters such as sex but also education. In the early twentieth century, sexism was extremely obvious compared to today's standards. A girl's only duty, according to traditional gender roles, is to grow up, marry, and have children, and once she completes this, she only needs to devote her life to serving her family. Celie is pulled out of school by her stepfather during her first incestuous pregnancy. She is later seen by Miss Beasley, her former teacher, who comes to Pa to try to convince him to let Celie go back to school. Upon seeing Celie's pregnant body, Miss Beasley leaves, and Celie writes: " She say long as she been a teacher she never know nobody want to learn bad as Nettie and me. But when Pa call me out and she see how tight my dress is, she stop talking and go" (Walker 10). Miss Beasley tries to defend Celie's right to education by telling Pa that Celie truly wants to learn, but the instant she sees that Celie is pregnant, Miss Beasley gives up immediately. This is because once women or girls become pregnant, they already begin their

final stage in life where they devote their lives to carrying for their husband and children. Education still is not something absolutely needed for a girl in this period of time, so when Miss Beasley sees that Celie has her hands full with a pregnancy, education is already out of the question since all Celie is expected to be doing now is taking care of her children. Even in Africa where Western culture has yet to fully spread, Nettie writes, "The Olinka do not believe girls should be educated. When I asked a mother why she thought this, she said: A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something . . . the mother of his children" (Walker 156). Around the world, a woman's primary duty is first and foremost to her husband and then to her children. She does not deserve to be educated simply because she does not need it to fulfill her duties as a wife and mother. In both Celie and the Olinka girls' case, education is not something that they require to fulfill their traditional duties as a wife and child bearer. It is in this mentality that women become "lower" than men, as men are educated and women are not, making men more valuable to their society through their contributions (Holt). Because women are not educated, they cannot know any better and must rely on their husbands to provide for them. A lack of education severely limits women and their choices, which is only cemented by the fact that society deems it useless for women to learn when family life is all that should matter to them. This discrimination against women concerning education is encouraged by the continuous cycle of conforming to the traditional role of a wife.

Education is traditionally for men rather than women, but women who educate themselves find that the sexist ideals holding them down are

lessened. Olivia, who attends school in Africa despite the native Olinka tribe deeming girls unworthy of education, is described as “ smarter than all [of the boys], including Adam, put together” (Walker 157). Although her sex automatically puts her beneath men in social standing, knowledge is power, and Olivia educating herself gives her a better opportunity to be independent in the future. The usual source of a wife’s dependency on her husband is due to not being able to provide for herself, which originates from her lack of education or skill to do work and make money. However, in attending school, Olivia increases her skillset beyond what a typical wife needs. No man can hold her down through the excuse of ignorance. She proves that just because she is a girl does not mean that she is any lesser than boys her age, to which Nettie calls her “ smarter than” then boys that attend the same school. According to men, women should only have to know enough to be good mothers and wives, so Olivia’s intelligence already puts her ahead of such traditional values. Her ability to surpass her male peers in her studies disproves the sexist theory of women being supposedly “ incapable” of understanding schooling like men can, thereby making them “ unworthy” of education.

The Color Purple by Alice Walker discusses many controversial themes throughout its course. Two prominent themes, gender roles and sexism, play an important role in many of the characters’ lives. In particular, discrimination from men against women appear in almost every aspect of The Color Purple, ranging from the submission of women in marriage to the masculinity of men originating in their power over their wives. In work and marriage, violence, sex, and education, Walker’s depiction of gender roles in

her novel shows how it empowers and maintains sexism in society, yet when the roles are reversed, sexism begins to fade away. The opposite effect occurs, and through Celie's letters, the audience sees different but similar angles concerning female discrimination, all leading to the same conclusion: gender roles beget sexism.

Work Cited

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