

The power of sisterhood: a feminist reading of the color purple

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



The Power of Sisterhood: A Feminist Reading of The Color Purple In The Color Purple, there is clearly a Feminist Criticism approach displayed. In the opening pages, Alice Walker, examines the injustice and abuse felt by the main characters through descriptions of the events in which they suffer though. These actions interestingly follow along with the meanings of feminist Criticism. "Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women"(Tyson 83). Each of the main characters in this novel is exploited very seriously to different degrees and by separate means. The Color Purple displays the struggles woman are forced to undergo and how sisterhood bonds can help in gaining the power to overcome the oppression. The novel displays the ways in which women band together to help each other overcome their biggest struggles and advance their confidence. Throughout the novel, the sisterhood bond is used to show that through the strength, unity and support, of each woman, the main female characters are able to gain the power. Power which aids them to stand up to the men that keep them oppressed and give them the chance to live their lives. Characters such as Celie, Shug Avery, Sofia and Mary Agnes, display strong bonds in which empower them to act and support each other. One of the more noticeable bonds is that between Shug Avery and Celie. This bond seems to aid Celie to liberation in all aspects of her life. Celie describes the relationship between the two of them and says "Us sleep like sisters, me and Shug"(Walker letter 60). These two women represent both sisters and lovers in their relationship and Shug is the driving force in Celie's gained confidence. Celie strives to be like Shug. Celie admires how

she is self-confident, independent and self-sufficient. Her dream is to be like her, Shug aids Celie in appreciating the good things she has and how to gain her own confidence. " I don't know nothing bout it, I say to Shug. I don't know much. " Celie puts her life in the hands of Shug and uses her guidance to grow as a person. The two women not only share love but they also share a passion for god. Shug inspires Celie to believe in god in a new way and she becomes closer to her goal of sexual and emotional freedom. Celie announces her growth in two ways following the leadership of Shug through their sisterhood bond. She first announces at dinner she is leaving Albert and moving in with Shug, and her second big step to freedom was when she started to make pants, showing her growth and self-confidence to become more independent. To many women in this novel, sisterhood is the only reason they are able to overcome the oppression they suffer. The bonds formed are not about getting back at the males but simply helping each other cope with their own situations. ".. the importance of sisterhood to women's survival becomes especially acute when the women are victims of the combined forces of sexism and racism" (Tyson 118). These words of Lois Tyson, can directly relate to the bond formed between Sofia and Mary Agnes. Mary endures rape for Sofia so that she can be released from prison, and when Mary leaves to be a singer, Sofia in turn looks after her child. Each of the females in the novel, find a way to assist each in all aspects of their lives. Whether it be bond between mothers, lovers or children, the bonds formed help each women handle and build on their own weaknesses. All these women have learned to lean on each other to gain their own self-support, self-confidence and self-respect; they band together for support and have

demonstrated that this power is extremely strong. Celie, the narrator, is the character in which the reader associates with the most. Through the compilation of letters she writes to god, the reader becomes aware of the struggles and disadvantages she is forced to undergo and which she must overcome. As she is a poor, uneducated, fourteen-year old girl living in Georgia, she seems to have no hope in conquering the injustice. Celie is demonstrated to the reader as one that is not looked at for her sexual advances or own good looks. This leads to one of the key factors of Feminist Criticism: Institutional marriage. Celie was forced to endure torture that she could not escape from. She faced a common occurrence of both physical and sexual abuse, and was frequently belittled by Fonso. On page 18 it states, "Well, next time you come you can look at her. She ugly. Don't even look like she kin to Nettie. But she'll make the better wife. She ain't smart either, and I'll just be fair, you have to watch her or she'll give away everything you own. But she can work like a man"(Walker 18). This quote perfectly describes Celie's Feminist Criticism in the novel and portrays the foolishness and reluctance of an institutional marriage. The constant belittling that Celie is faced with demonstrates the component of male dominance in an institutional marriage. Fonso constantly belittled Celie for being ugly, and was willing to give her away to a man that did not love her, or care for any women in society. Celie was also described as a man and portrayed doing a man's work. Characters such a Celie start to believe there is no way they can escape what they are a part of. " I don't say nothing. I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told" (Walker 29). Women in an institutional marriage believe they are stuck

and that fighting or making changes will result in nothing but bad things for them. In this quote we see how Celie believes that doing nothing is what will be best for her own sake. " I open the door cautious, thinking bout robbers and murders. Horsethieves and haunts. But it Harp and Sophia. They fighting like two mens. They fight. He try to slap her. What he do that for? She reach down and grab a piece of stove wood and whack him cross the eyes. He punch her in the stomach, she double over groaning but come with both hands lock right under his privates. He roll on the floor. He grab her dress tail and pull. She stand there in her slip. She never blink a eye. He jump up to put a hammer lock under her chin, she throw him over her back. He fall bam up against the stove" (Walker 38). This is the case for most woman, they are unaware of what to do and believe they have no right in saying the situation is wrong, because they would think the man in correct. This describes the common power struggle between man and wife in an institutional marriage. Although this fight was brought on my Sofia, it is driven by Harpo's ideal role of a woman. To a man in an institutional marriage, the woman's role if to obey the orders of the man and if that is not followed, consequences are distributed. All in all the women in The Color Purple are part of a married life that leads them to believe they are worth little and have few rights of their own. Throughout this novel, Alice Walker displays the oppression the female character are forced to undergo. Through tightly linked sisterhood bonds the women are able to cope with and help each other gain the strength they need to win over the power struggle and gain their own confidence in many aspects of their lives. Through Celie's relationship with Shug Avery she grows to become a powerful self- confident woman and other characters such as

Sofia and Mary Agnes learn to lean on each other in the toughest of times.

Works Cited Tyson, Lois. "Feminist Criticism." *Critical Theory Today*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc, 1999. 82-118. Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple: a novel*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982. Print.