

# Interpretation of Celie's Trauma in *The Color Purple* from the Perspective of Trauma Theory

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**Abstract**— Alice Walker is a contemporary African American writer and her award-winning work "The Color Purple" maps the traumatic memory of African Americans. It describes the history of a woman changing from being humble to being independent. The heroine Celie suffered various traumas during her whole life, namely domestic violence trauma, isolation trauma and gender trauma, etc. In the end, she gained a new life through self-redemption and the help of others, eventually realizing the transformation of her life. From the perspective of trauma theory, we will focus on the process how the protagonist faces trauma, overcomes trauma and becomes a "woman warrior".

**Keywords**— *The Color Purple*, African American Women, Trauma Theory.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary Afro-American female writer, Alice Walker wins the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for her novel "The Color Purple", who has become the first black female writer to receive this award in the history of America. Her works mainly reflect racism and sexism from the black society and families, calling on black women to stand up bravely, fight against their own encounters, and strive for their rights and destiny. She especially promotes a harmonious society with gender equality as well as racial equality.

Walker's masterpiece "The Color Purple" is a model of fully promoting feminine liberalism and advocating the female consciousness of self-respect and self-improvement. This work mainly introduces the heroine's difficult survival in the gap between patriarchy and racial discrimination. She is a traditional black woman on a double marginal position. Finally, she walks out of the predicament of life and becomes the master of her own destiny with the help of her black female compatriots. From the lack of self-consciousness to the great change of her destiny through her own struggle, she finally leads a happy and free life, which highlights Walker's feminist

thinking. "The Color Purple" is full of writing about the traumatic psychology of black Americans, aiming to change the fate of black females being silenced and expressed.<sup>[1]49</sup> It is a symbol of the traumatic memory of black Americans. Therefore, exploring this novel from the perspective of trauma theory can make us profoundly aware of Alice Walker's insistence on opposing racism as well as the segregation among human beings, and of her desire for an ideal world of racial equality and gender equality.

## II. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO TRAUMA THEORY

The pathology of trauma began in the 1870s. Its initial research object is the hysteria. Jean-Martin Charcot, a pioneer in the study of hysteria, is primarily concerned with the "movement" of patients, and the symptoms of numbness, loss of senses, cramps and forgetfulness, etc. Then he makes people have a more objective understanding in hysteria.<sup>[2]19</sup> The great master of psychology, Sigmund Freud inherits and develops the theory of Jean-Martin Charcot, pointing out that hysteria is a condition of psychological trauma.<sup>[2]20</sup> Something which

was unbearably traumatic in the past leads to the inability of patients to relate to reality. When the patient makes traumatic memories reappear by talking and expressing the resulting intense emotion, the symptoms can be alleviated, which is the source of “talk therapy”.

The original meaning of the word “trauma” (in English and German) comes from the Greek and refers to the purely physical harm. Later, as psychiatry developed, it was first understood in Freud’s text as both physical and mental damage. So the modern focus and research on trauma theory can be traced back to Freud and Jung of the psychoanalytic school. The general decline of mental function and mental dysfunction caused by serious accidents were called traumatic neurosis by Freud in *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*, the effects of the traumatic experience on the patient are sustained and profound, they repeatedly impose on the patient even during sleep. In addition, in the sober condition, the patient will unconsciously produce the “obsessive repetition” of the trauma. As a result, Freud made the following assumption: there is indeed a compulsion in the mind that goes beyond the principle of pleasure.<sup>[3]17</sup> Freud also regarded the symptoms of post-traumatic stress as a result of widespread destruction of the protective barrier. Trauma is inevitable and not accidental in the early days of many ordinary people. An individual’s environment may slow or encourage these struggles, but each early stage of life has the potential to be traumatic.<sup>[4]39</sup> Carl Jung’s discussion of trauma centers on a complex of emotional events.<sup>[5]114</sup> There may be a variety of origins for disturbing people’s feelings: fathers, mothers, social relationships, inferiority, rights, etc. Any emotional event can be a complex. “Complex is a disturbing, often harmful way to interfere with our conscious life”. The term “trauma theory” was first coined by American scholar Cathy Caruth. She has further thought about psychological trauma on the basis of the analysis of Freud’s trauma theory. In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, she defines “trauma theory” as “a sudden, disastrous, unavoidable experience”, and the reactions of people to the event are often delayed, uncontrollable, and repeated through hallucinations or other intrusions.<sup>[6]5</sup> This definition highlights the psychological symptoms of

trauma and becomes an authoritative explanation of trauma psychology. Cathy Caruth concretely analyzed the psychological trauma with the specific text. Trauma is not a simple pathological phenomenon, but it is the process of revealing reality or truth through narration. Through the separation, the breakdown and the anxiety, the awakening of the individual of these different stories shows a simple decoding of the past trauma theory.

### III. CELIE’S TRAUMATIC DILEMMA

The trauma black women suffer not only comes from the society but also from their families, both physically and mentally. In the era of slavery, black slaves were regarded as the private property of slave owners. The rape of female slaves not only satisfied their sexual desire, but also was a means of their property proliferation. Moreover, the children born by the female slaves were still slaves and the property of the owners. In turn, the black men put the oppression, anger, and violence imposed on them by the white men to their wives and children. Thus black women suffered double oppression and serious physical and mental damage. As a result, they weren’t able to really love or loved too hard.<sup>[7]8</sup> The loss of the motherhood of African-American mothers is not due to the absence and variation of maternal love, but the trauma caused by the society.

*"The Color Purple"* describes the history of a woman from being humble to independent. Trauma is a major theme of the novel. The heroine Celie suffered various traumas during her whole life, namely domestic violence trauma, isolation trauma and gender trauma, etc. In the end, she constructed her own identity, established a stronger sisterhood with other black women, and eased the relationship with black men. We will focus on Celie’s struggling road from trauma to independence.

#### 3.1 Domestic Violence Trauma

The first kind of trauma Celie suffers is the domestic violence trauma. At the beginning of the story, we learned that the black girl Celie was only 14 years old. Celie's mother was frail and sick, whose physical condition was deteriorating. So she had no time to take care of Celie and gave her emotional care. Unexpectedly, her stepfather

trampled on Celia's body regardless of morals and ethics. But her mother couldn't understand Celie's pain and predicament at all. On the contrary, she thought Celia was a bad girl. Under the lies of her stepfather, Celie's mother has always believed that Celie was behaving improperly and kept cursing and reprimanding her for being clumsy. This terrible experience made Celie suffer the first trauma in her life, which caused her indelible pain in body and mind. Besides, her two kids were taken away by her step-father. After that she was no longer able to have children. It is a self-evident fact that the mental trauma is indeed fatal. "A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more."<sup>[8]7</sup> And such encounters made her naturally resentful of the sex between men and women afterwards, which has profoundly affected her subsequent marital life. "He start to choke me, saying. ou better shut up and git used to it. But I don't never git used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook."<sup>[8]3</sup> The loss of desire for sexual life is just a manifestation of the domestic violence trauma. Successively Celie has become a tool for her stepfather and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ to release their sexual desires. "Most times I pretend I ain't there. He ever know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep. She start to laugh. Do his business, she say. Do his business. Why, Miss Celie. You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you."<sup>[8]44</sup>

Since then, he has become a slave of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, not a wife. Every day, she had to wash, cook, undertake heavy housework as well as take care of the naughty kids. Even when her husband was bored, he would beat her for fun. At this time, Celia was completely unlike a person, without self and human dignity. She had never thought about the right of being a wife. In her heart, she even thought that it was justified for a husband to beat and scold his wife. She knew she shall live, but she didn't understand why she wanted to live. In the process of reading, readers will find that for Celie, the name of her father and husband are missing for a long time and her husband is even called "Mr. \_\_\_\_\_." She deliberately chose to forget this traumatic memory after being subjected to their violent oppression. Even after getting married for a long time, Celie was unconscious of her husband's name. She knew that the

man was called Albert when Shug had come to town and was talking to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. The process of remembering inflicts the psychological pain but also ascribes value to a previously repressed experience in the unconscious. This traumatic remembering is termed "pathogenic reminiscences" for the pathologic symptoms the memory causes.<sup>[8]40</sup> She accepted the name until the moment she got out of trauma.

However, the most serious effect that domestic violence brought to Celie was the urge to kill. Fanon, an outstanding theorist of racial trauma, pointed out in his article *"The Misery on Earth"* that "environmental morbid trauma manifests as a typical social morbid phenomenon, such as criminal impulse."<sup>[9]137</sup> When a person's living environment is always in a sinister state, he is inclined to be contaminated with bad habits, which may be a kind of revenge. Celie was so docile that she always chose to remain silent when beaten and ravaged like an animal. However, at the very moment she found out that her sister's letter was hidden, she launched a rebellion and tended to kill her husband many times. "I watch him so close, I begin to feel a lightening in the head. Fore I know anything I'm standing hind his chair with his azor open."<sup>[9]63</sup> "Naw, I think I feel better if I kill him, I say. I feels sickish. Numb, now."<sup>[8]73</sup> Celie couldn't control her behavior. She didn't behave as meekly as usual, and one of the most common phenomena in the history of trauma research—females' hysteria, appeared. Actually hysteria is a relatively high degree of traumatic syndrome, which prompted her to do some irrational things. In Freud's early work he argues that traumatic hysteria develops from a repressed, earlier experience of sexual assault. Until that lamentable moment she was fully aware of the unfair abuse she has suffered over the years.

### 3.2 Isolation Trauma

Celie's second trauma is the isolation trauma caused by a long-term separation from her sister. She doesn't have personal interpersonal communication, so she couldn't pour out her pains and sorrow to anyone. Even her most basic sister-bond was cut off by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, not to mention the relationship with other men, which is catalyst for turning the physical trauma into mental one.

With her simple and introverted personality, the

increasing trauma not only made her lose the enthusiasm for life, but also lost her hope for life. She began to become numb to everything around her, and assured that the world was evil and could not be changed. That last stubbornness also died out because of Nettie's disappearance. "I think bout 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." [7]<sup>16</sup> Emotional detachment, as well as dissociation or "numbing out" can frequently occur. Dissociating from the painful emotion includes numbing all emotion, and the person may seem emotionally flat, preoccupied, distant, or cold. Dissociation includes depersonalization disorder, dissociative amnesia, dissociative fugue, dissociative identity disorder, etc.

(Wikipedia) She looked numbly at everything in life. For herself, she thought she was just a tree, being lifeless like a walking dead. Perhaps this could partly explain why she would have that kind of special homosexual affection for Shug in the novel. She was so lonely that she yearned for someone to talk to.

What's more, when Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ beat her, she also became accustomed to that silently and did not think there was any unfairness. "He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man." [8]<sup>17</sup> Celie was no longer angry about the abuse she had suffered. She deservedly accepted the flogging and felt that she should be afraid of her husband and submit to him. Not only did she feel like a tree, she also treated others in a lifeless form. "Everybody say how good I is to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ children. I be good to them. But I don't feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo back not even like patting a dog. It more like patting another piece of wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chifferobe. Anyhow, they don't love me neither, no matter how good I is." [8]<sup>2</sup> All the unsympathetic response exerts an overwhelming impact on Celie, which fully demonstrates her utter despair with the world.

### 3.3 Gender Trauma

The third type of trauma is gender trauma caused by the oppression of male power from childhood. Patriarchal

society places women in a marginalized "other" position, a state of being exploited and oppressed. In the marital relationship, Celie always played a submissive role, stood all the unfair treatment and had little courage to resist. She has never had the consciousness of being a human being, let alone the female consciousness of boasting equal rights with men. The conversation between Shug and Tobias can show that even if a woman has won the approval of many men, just like Shug herself, she can't get the same rights as men. "What the world got to do with anything, I think. Then I see myself sitting there quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Us three set together against Tobias and his fly speck box of chocolate. For the first time in my life, I feel just right." [8]<sup>35</sup>

In Albert's worldview, a woman is a free nanny and a tool for venting desires, without any human dignity, freedom and rights. Celie could neither take in her own sister, nor get the letter by herself, let alone go out to see a performance or choose her favorite color to make clothes. Celie chose to endure all these unequal encounters in silence. She had no feeling, no sorrow, no anger, but just wrote to God to confide her own bitterness. And in the letter, she did not show any dissatisfaction and resistance, just something she was puzzled and confused about: "Maybe you can manifest, Tell me what happened." On the one hand, like most black women, Celie has readily acquiesced in the concept of patriarchy under long-term oppression and willingly accepted the status of being ruled and enslaved. And the root of all these was the patriarchy of the society at that time. It shows that men have absolute ruling power over women and children in the entire society and family. They are the masters and manipulators of the power of the entire society, while women are the victims and sufferers of this cruel world. Therefore, Celie was in a humble position, who was tortured and asked for help but all to no avail. On the other hand, Celie's awareness of her female identity was weaker than that of ordinary women and such a patriarchal society deprived her of the right to give a voice.

In the novel, there are actually some women who dare to rebel against male power, such as Shug and Sofia. Especially the tragic experience of Sofia makes people hold high respect for these women who rebel against male

power. However, Celie was weak and cowardly. Actually, she could realize and acknowledge that she was wishy-washy. Besides, she was severely traumatized so that she flinched and panicked all day, becoming a poor little woman. Celie was a representative of traditional black women, who was willing to accept the arrangement made by others without any compliant. Since she was born, Celie had been sneered by her father because she was not as good as Netie, and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ also loved Netie but despised her. But eventually he was forced to marry her in desperation so that she could take care of his troubled children. Celie had lived in inferiority since she was a child. Her denial of her female identity is more clearly reflected in her ignorance of her body for she has never seriously looked at her body. The fact is that she dares not look directly at herself. As some feminists advocate, women must know their body before they realize their rights. <sup>[11]89</sup> The basic reason why Celie has no identity is that she lacks female consciousness. "She say, What, too shame even to go off and look at yourself? And you look so cute too, she say, laughing. All dressed up for Harpo's, smelling good and everything, but scared to look at your own pussy." <sup>[8]44</sup> Both the physical and mental trauma lead Celie into a desperate situation, with post-traumatic stress disorder attacking her again and again.

#### IV. THE RECOVERY OF CELIE'S TRAUMA

Judith Herman, an important founder of trauma theory, believes that "the recovery of trauma is based on the regaining of the rights of victims and the establishment of new social relationships". <sup>[10]136</sup> An important way of trauma treatment is to review trauma and then understand trauma. The well-known trauma theorists and therapists Dori Laub and Judith Herman both believe that one cannot face trauma alone, the recovery of which is only possible "in establishing new relationships". <sup>[10]136</sup> Only by this, the traumatized can establish a safe living environment and restore their psychological needs such as trust, safety, intimacy, and identity. The traumatic experience of Celie uncovered the wounds of every black slave's soul, and exposed the traumatic secrets deeply rooted in the history and cultural memory of the black population. <sup>[12]124</sup>

For a long time, Celie has been traumatized by her family and the deformed love. She led a life of being humiliated and mocked by others, blindly immersing herself in the world of self-denial. Living in an atmosphere full of oppression and discrimination for a long time, she was almost on the verge of collapse. Celie thought her body was ugly and full of filth, so she hated her body. Shug is Albert's lover, who is kind, beautiful and compassionate, and dares to love and hate. Celie was in a good spirit when staying with Shug. Out of concern, Shug wanted to arouse Celie's correct understanding of herself, so she encouraged her to face her body, guiding her to take off her clothes in front of the mirror and appreciate herself. At this moment, Celie felt her body shining brightly. The awakening of body consciousness gave her a sense of existence. At the same time, Shug gently touched her, which made Celie feel happy with her whole body for the first time. Shug's care completely defeated Celie's last line of defense. She began to confide to Shug the secrets she had kept for many years, crying about her unfortunate experience of being raped by her stepfather in the past, as well as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s physical and mental harm and destruction. After learning about Celie's situation, she bravely stood up to speak for Celie and warned Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ to stop violence against Celie. With Shug's help, Celie realized the unequal treatment she had suffered for a long time. She broke with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, because she no longer tolerated his abuse and humiliation, and determined to leave him to create her own life. "Celie is coming to Memphis with me. Over my dead body, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ say. You satisfied that what you want, Shug say, cool as clabber. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ start up from his seat, look at Shug, plop back down again. He look over at me. I thought you was finally happy, he say. What wrong now? You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need." <sup>[8]94</sup> Celie's remarks shocked everyone on the spot. She no longer feared Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and fully realized that she was the master of her own life. Shug's kindness made Celie fearless when facing the unusual ups and downs in her life, freed Celie from the heavy family life, and encouraged her to embark on the road of rebelling against patriarchy.



Under the influence of Shug, Celie's consciousness, attitude, and behavior have undergone tremendous changes. She has been attracted by Shug, becoming a subject with self-worthy. She realized she had the rights and the ability to live her life without depending on men. "Did I ever ast you for money? I say. I never ast you for nothing. Not even for your sorry hand in marriage." [8]<sup>95</sup> This declaration undoubtedly made readers fully aware of the awakening of Celie's female consciousness. But the author believes that the most exciting statement in the full text is still behind. When Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ complained that Celie was ugly and insisted that she could not support herself without a skill, she said: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here." [8]<sup>97</sup> This was also the moment when Celie's female consciousness was fully awakened. Celie gradually affirmed the meaning of her existence. She no longer complained about herself, but chose to be brave to pursue her dreams, and she finally achieved self-independence through hard work and her ability to make pants. Trauma healing does not mean forgetting the past, but integrating traumatic events into life and rebuilding a new self and starting a new life.

The first is to restore contact with Nettie, who has always been Celie's spiritual sustenance. Because of Nettie's disappearance, Celie suffers a long time of isolation and loneliness, she does nothing, but keeps writing to God and her sister. [13]<sup>24</sup> When Nettie left and Shug did not arrive, Celie had been living the life of a walking dead. When learning that Nettie was still alive, Celie regained her hope in life. "When I told Shug I'm writing to you instead of to God, she laugh. Nettie don't know these people, she say. Considering who I been writing to, this strike me funny." [8]<sup>94</sup> Apparently, Celie had the hope of life again. Alice Walker focused on portraying the importance of sisterhood for the awakening of female consciousness, and advocated that the female group unite against the unjust male-dominant system.

Furthermore, it is the reconstruction of the relationship between Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, that is, Albert. Celie achieved self-independence through her own efforts and struggles and finally won the affirmation of her husband. With gradually finding the meaning and direction

of life, she finally lived a good life with her sisters and opened her own pants company, achieving financial independence. As Celie said: "I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time." [8]<sup>100</sup> Albert's heart was shocked by Celie's independence, confidence and bravery. Albert, who has always been the authoritarian, experienced the lowest point of life after Celie left and almost died of depression. So he began to examine himself, and gradually obtained Celie's forgiveness. In the end, Celie and Albert were sitting together and chatting in the sunset. At that moment, Celie even felt they were like a real couple, which showed she eventually reconciled with the past and the trauma in her heart. The author Alice Walker used a lot of symbolism to reinforce the meaning of this moment. For example, Celie started a company that produced pants, while traditionally black women could not wear pants but only bulky skirts. The pants company symbolizes that she finally got rid of the shackles of black women for she can put on her favorite purple clothes. [14]<sup>109</sup> It also indicates that Celie has changed from an enslaved and oppressed black to a real person with flesh and blood who respects and loves herself.

The last point is the transformation of the relationship between Celie and the "father". Her father's rape is the beginning of Celie's trauma. It can be said that this trauma can never be repaired if there is no change of the relationship between Celie and his father. But the novel takes this important point into consideration and finally reveals the truth that Celie's "father" was not her real father, but her stepfather. Therefore, the death of her stepfather also declared that Celie could inherit her father's legal property, which made her further realize the independence of life. Since then, Celie has got rid of the trauma, finally achieving a happy ending for her family.

## V. CONCLUSION

Celie, a black woman, suffered from domestic violence trauma, isolation trauma as well as gender trauma, struggled bravely from confusion, humiliation and sufferings, and successfully achieved self-salvation. Alice Walker devoted her life to the cause of women's liberation. Alice Walker has experienced trauma herself, which is extremely valuable for readers to interpret this novel.

Walker not only shows the trauma most contemporary women suffered, but also guides a bright path for them to understand the trauma and walk out of the trauma. In fact, many women do not realize that they have been traumatized. Just like Celie, they are accustomed to everything and accept it retrogressively. When they learn that they are deeply traumatized, more women have no choice but to wait. The traumatic reading of "*The Color Purple*" will undoubtedly help more people recognize and pay attention to the trauma in women's lives.

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