

# *A Study on Celie's Trauma in The Color Purple*

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**Abstract:** Alice Walker (1944- ) is one of the remarkable contemporary African-American women writers in the United States. Her novel *The Color Purple* published in 1982 won widespread attention and acclaim from readers. Set in the rural of Southern United States in the early 20th century, *The Color Purple* describes the protagonist Celie who is cruelly abused by her stepfather and husband, and then suffers grievous psychological trauma leading to her traumatic symptoms, such as hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction. Later, with the help of other black women, Celie reestablishes the connection with herself and others, and restores autonomy, and then gradually gets rid of psychological trauma. Based on trauma theories of Sigmund Freud and Judith Herman, this paper mainly analyses Celie's traumatic symptoms to expose the physical and mental damage of male hegemony to female, and to manifest Walker's concern and sympathy for the tragic fate of black women. Besides, the exploration of Celie's recovery methods from trauma not only praises black women's dauntless spirit of fighting against inequity and oppression, but also provides feasible effective solutions for modern traumatized women to escape trauma.

## 1. Introduction

Alice Walker (1944- ) is a very popular and talented Afro-American writer in the United States. The focuses of her works are mainly on the struggles of the black, especially women, and their sufferings in a society full of racism, sexism and violence. The publication of her masterpiece, *The Color Purple* in 1982 won her three important awards in American Literature: Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, and National Book Critics Circle Award.

The story of *The Color Purple* is set in rural Georgia and focuses on the miserable life of the protagonist Celie to explore her traumatic experience. Celie is a 14-year-old black girl, who is abused and raped by her stepfather Fonso. After the death of her mother, Celie is forced to marry a widower Albert, who tortures her verbally, physically and sexually. In order to get rid of the abuse from the two brutal men, Celie's sister Nettie separates from her and goes to Africa to do missionary work. Later, Celie establishes a close sisterhood with her stepson's wife Sofia and Albert's mistress Shug. They help her rebuild self-consciousness to leave home and to set up a company.

A number of critics at home and abroad comment on this novel from various perspectives and themes, but there is still adequate research space for studies based on trauma theory. Therefore, this paper tries to interpret the protagonist Celie's trauma according to trauma theories of Freud and Herman.

## 2. Symptoms of Celie's Trauma

Generally speaking, trauma refers to “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena”.[4] After traumatic events, individuals suffer from the psychological distress and physical dysfunction that result in various symptoms, which are defined as the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by the American Psychiatric Association. Judith Herman is regarded as “one of the pioneering clinicians” in the field of trauma and “a major player in the theoretical debate”.[12] Herman constructively divides the PTSD into three categories, namely “hyperarousal”, “intrusion” and “constriction”.[7]

### 2.1 Hyperarousal

The state of hyperarousal is the most important characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder. After a traumatic experience, victims always maintain a state of highlighted vigilance or stress and their bodies are alerted to the imminent danger. They are extremely frightened by unexpected stimuli and react strongly to these associated with traumatic events. Thus, victims tend to suffer from sleep disorders and frequently wake from dreams with a start.

Celie is on the alert to her stepfather who breaks the ethical boundary to rape her on the pretext of haircut when she is 14 years old. Traumatic events in childhood promote the onset of hysteria symptoms. In *The Aetiology of Hysteria*, Freud declares that “at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrence of premature sexual experience”.[7] Celie is also trapped by the torment of incest because she is deluded into thinking that Fonso is her biological father. The horrible experience leaves a huge psychological shadow on Celie so that she always keeps a high state of alert on her stepfather, “It got to the place where everytime I saw him coming with the scissors and the comb and the stool, I start to cry”.[1] The intense stress reaction disturbs Celie with “an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with”.[11] Celie also develops a strong resistance to the scene reminding her of being raped. It is evident the victim always strives to avoid clues, which are similar to traumatic events, such as the relevant abuser, site, activity, situation and conversation. Her stepfather with the scissors and comb reminds Celie of being raped. The painful memory is like a trigger that makes her vigilant and panic. Celie's hyper-vigilance and worries are typical symptoms of PTSD.

Besides, the trauma caused by her truculent husband makes Celie be in a state of extreme tension and constant vigilance. Then the state of hyper-awareness disturbs her physiological function and leads to her sleep disorders. In addition to avoiding the similar clues that are easy to trigger traumatic memories, Celie's psychological mechanism unconsciously expects to avoid men like her stepfather, who brings her the remarkable psychological stress. Merskey points out that “[m]ore prolonged exposure to stress also tends to produce syndromes which are mainly related to anxiety and depression”.[6] So prolonged exposure to the threat of sexual violence stimulates Celie to resist stubborn and tyrannous men instinctively. Consequently, it is insufferable for Celie to marry Albert, a rude and brutal widower. The poor girl is very repulsive and feels that “it hard to think with getting married to Mr —— hanging over my head”.[1] Every step toward the marriage going against her free will seems to almost kill her. The excessive vigilance tends to result in general anxiety disorder and psychological helplessness. Therefore, when Mr —— calls Celie, she jumps every time. Celie responds intensively to unexpected stimuli and shows a strong startle reaction, which is one of obvious symptoms of PTSD. The sense of insecurity and excessive defense against threats tend to strain Celie's fragile mental state, and further disturb her normal physiological function. Thus, Celie suffers from sleep disorder, a common diagnosis, “Sometimes I git a few hours sleep. Then just when it look like it ought to be getting good, I wakes up”.[1] Therefore, sometimes Celie has

difficulty in falling asleep due to the anxiety, fear and over-alertness. Sometimes Celie awakens from nightmares and palpitates with fear because of the horrific images of trauma presenting in dreams.

## 2.2 Intrusion

The trauma recurrence mainly refers to the re-experience of past trauma through dreams, flashbacks and intrusions, thus giving rise to the aggressive behavior. Caruth also figures out that one of the symptoms of PTSD is “the intrusive reexperiencing of elements of the trauma in nightmares, flashbacks, or somatic reactions”.[3] Traumatic fragments flash in the mind and trauma memories are like indelible images causing short but intensive shock and misery. These invasive traumatic memories of Celie mainly stem from the assault by her stepfather and her husband and the disappearance of her sister. Those painful memories suddenly happen to her, forcing her to re-experience intense emotional distress. Especially, when she learns that her selfish husband has hidden her favorite sister’s letters to her, Celie cannot resist the urge to kill the man due to the rage and breakdown.

In addition to confiding in God, Celie can only choose to forget her stepfather’s sexual abuse. The victim is inclined to evade memories and perceptions connected with traumatic events. It is not until many years later that she has a chance to tell her tragic story to her friend Shug. Celie could not help crying and events in the past are like pictures emerging in her mind. Her reaction proves Freud’s idea in *Studies on Hysteria* that “[h]ysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences”.[10] A memory is difficult to fade if the reaction is repressed so its traumatic affect is still attached to memories. Celie never takes step to free herself from the trauma but avoids it constantly. Hence, these traumatic events adhere to her memory and never fade away. Once traumatic memories are triggered, it seems that they all come back to her and bring out strong impact. Celie recalls that “the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stoking” and “he don’t never look at me straight after that”.[1] The traumatic memory of being raped is so serious that Celie still remembers the bloody scenes and body aches. These cruel images and details make Celie devilishly painful but no one could relieve her inner misery.

Celie’s sister Nettie is her only source of strength. In order to get rid of the sexual harassment from her stepfather and Mr —, Nettie escapes without any news. Sofia mentions her close sisters while having a peaceful conversation with Celie. Suddenly, Past painful memories about Nettie flash back in Celie’s mind. The intrusive memory is so strong that Celie is shocked and anguished. Thus, when she learns that Mr — is hiding the letters from Nettie, she feels a sense of grievance and anger that has been suppressed for years. The unconscious impulse to kill Albert flashes through Celie’s mind constantly. On the one hand, according to “a motivated unconscious”, the core of Freud’s trauma theory, the current traumatic “may trigger early traumatic happenings” that Albert throws Nettie out of his house due to the failure to rape Nettie so that the two close sisters go through separation and isolation.[5] Those traumatic events mingle together with the fantasy that “he falling dead every which a way” in Celie’s mind.[1] On the other hand, Peter A. Levine makes an explanation about the stress reaction that individuals are compelled to burst out instantaneously under the pressure of intense horror, alarm and irritation, and take steps to fight or escape otherwise they will be drowned in collapse, defeat, depression and helplessness.[9] Unfortunately, although Celie is driven to kill Albert, she does not take actions. She is caught in a double bind or conflict, which results in her mental and physical disorders. When she opens her mouth and cannot speak a word but hiccups. She has trouble falling asleep and has no strength to cry but feels cold and dying.

## 2.3 Constriction

Faced with a dangerous situation from which there is no hope to escape, the victim's perception becomes numb or distorted. At first, her intuition and consciousness gradually develop an attitude of surrender and abandon. Then she treats herself as an observer as if torments do not happen to her. This state makes compelling demonstration of the dissociative disorders, whose essential feature is "a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment".[2] In addition, if the victim supports and sustains the violence of the abuser, she will be a complete slave to trauma.

The sexual abuse Celie experienced leads to her sense of powerlessness, because "[p]atriarchal force also relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape".[8] Moreover, Celie is imprisoned in the house of Mr — and the repetitive psychological damage is imposed on her. When Celie realizes that any kind of resistance is useless, she has to endure sufferings by numbing her consciousness. Therefore, Celie resorts to paralyzed her consciousness to escape the reality of pain. When Nettie expects her to control Mr —, she does not know how to fight, "All I know how to do is stay alive".[1] Albert's sister is angry with his tyranny and encourages Celie to struggle against his oppression. However, Celie gives up fighting and loses her autonomy, "I don't fight, I stay where I'm told".[1] The long-term trauma suppresses Celie, who is in some kind of identity crisis. Her confidence and autonomy already have ruined. Simply living replaces everything because fighting will get her in trouble.

Furthermore, depersonalization disorder, a kind of dissociative disorder, happens to Celie. According to DSM-IV, one of its diagnostic criteria is "[p]ersistent or recurrence experiences of feeling detached from, and as if one is an outside observer of, one's mental processes or body".[2] Whenever she is beaten, Celie shuts down perceptions and reduces herself to a plant that has the ability to endure sufferings without pain. She indicates herself, "Celie, you are a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man".[1] As an observer, she migrates away from helplessness and witnesses her body being abused. In fact, it is a method that Celie uses to protect herself from the insufferable torment. A tree has no sensory ability and does not be bothered by body aches and mental sufferings. She not only treats herself as a tree without emotions or perceptions, but also experiences derealization as if the world is wired and unreal. When Celie pats Harpo, she seems to be patting "another piece of wood", "a table", or "a chifferobe".[1] Celie is captured by a feeling of detachment or alienation from herself, and no longer resists, that is, gives up all her autonomy and struggles.

Significantly, when victims are totally indifferent to sufferings that others endure, they are proved to be complete surrenders. Celie absolutely surrenders to trauma when she instigates Harpo to enslave Sofia. Harpo is discontent with the disobedience of Sofia. When Harpo asks Celie about the solution to tame Sofia, she instigates Harpo to beat Sofia. Although she is a victim of domestic violence, she remains silence in face of the gross physical and sexual abuse inflicted on Sofia. What is worse, she betrays her repressed sisters and becomes an accomplice of abusive men in order to please abusers and to avoid being maltreated. Her consciousness is assimilated by the abuser and assists in a crime or evil. Facing the same physical abuse she has suffered, Celie voices for the patriarchy and even believes that women should be submissive and those who protest should be punished. From a pathetic victim to an indifferent abuser, Celie completely loses all reasonable emotions and perceptions.

## 3. Recovery from Traumas

When it comes to trauma study, strategies of recovery from trauma are of great value to traumatized individuals. The central components of trauma are feelings of disempowerment and

disconnection with self and others. Therefore, the foundation of healing lies in “the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections”.<sup>[7]</sup> With the help of other black women, Celie is inspired by their spirit of resistance and strengthens her contact with the outside, then recovers her self-awareness, and gradually gets rid of her trauma to achieve self-redemption.

### 3.1 Reconstruction of Connections

Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* holds the belief that under the positive influence of others, the trauma patient will gradually restore the precious ability of trust and she still feels autonomous while keeping in touch with others.<sup>[7]</sup> Adult trauma patients will develop loyal friendships in the process of reconstruction. Likewise, Celie shares a profound friendship with Sofia and Shug, both of whom have a great impact on her. Their close connections promote Celie to gradually recovers her sensibility from her numbness.

Celie's normal perceptions are making a comeback from numbness when she gets along well with Sofia. Besides, Sofia's attitude towards the sexes awakes Celie's self-consciousness and female cognition. Sofia and her sisters are “big strong healthy girls, look like amazons”.<sup>[1]</sup> Her husband Harpo is deeply influenced by patriarchal ideas and tries to imitate his father to beat Sofia. Sofia not only does not surrender but fights with Harpo because some women are not to be offended. She would rather get a divorce than submit to a fatuous man. Celie has great admiration for Sofia due to her indomitable spirit. Besides, Celie feels guilty about inciting Harpo to beat Sofia. Actually, a sense of guilty is a normal emotional response. Although she does something bad to Sofia on account of the subjugation to male supremacy, she is experiencing the remorse of conscience. Celie reflects on herself and makes certain that “Sofia. I sin against Sofia spirit”.<sup>[1]</sup> Celie is jealous of Sofia because she has the spirit to fight with men and Celie never dares to think of that. Guilt, jealousy and frankness are signs of a return to normal emotions. Fortunately, Sofia forgives her and they set out to make a patchwork quilt with colorful scraps donated by their black sisters. Celie names it “Sister's Choice” because every piece symbolizes a single and isolate black woman but they organize the composition as a strong whole to support each other and realize their personal values.<sup>[1]</sup> Most especially, the restoration of thoughts breaks through the constriction of the traumatized Celie's unconscious. She enlightens Harpo that instead of attempting to subdue Sofia, he should treat her with respect because they love each other and some women are not tamed by men. Celie treats gender relationships with a great level of clarity, which demonstrates the gradual transformation from a traumatized girl into a thoughtful woman.

In addition, Shug guides Celie to retrospect her past traumatic experiences, which stimulates to reconstruct a connection to her traumatic past. Narrating past traumatic occurrences is one of the effective therapies. In *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud puts forward that the victim's intense reaction to the event such as “revenge” will achieve “a completely ‘cathartic’ effect”.<sup>[10]</sup> In addition to behavioral responses, “language serves as a substitute for actions”.<sup>[10]</sup> Therefore, recalling the past trauma and narrating it in words could work as a form of relief. Herman also acknowledges the therapeutic value of retrospecting past trauma in *Trauma and Recovery* and she puts forward several steps and cautions. First of all, recalling past traumatic experiences should focus on the “a review of the patient's life before the trauma and the circumstances that led up to the event” because this method is conducive to connect the present and the past.<sup>[7]</sup> Obviously, it is the unethical incest taboo that results in the beginning of Celie's trauma. Shug helps her find out traumatic memories by asking her, “How was it with your children daddy?”.<sup>[1]</sup> After that, more and more traumatic memories occupy her mind and Celie could not restrain herself from narrating her suffering in detail. In addition, Celie recalls these memories with a strong emotional reaction, which will achieve a better therapeutic effect. Celie cannot help crying and recalls how painful, frightened and repressive she has been. Celie is so anxious and miserable because retrospecting trauma stories is like re-experiencing horrific and unbearable past traumatic events one more time. Therefore, establishing a safe environment is crucial for traumatized Celie to draw comfort from secure

connections when she is recapturing painful memories. Shug listens to her quietly and embraces Celie with her tender hands. Her company and tender loving care offer Celie courage to keep on narrating her tragic stories. After retrospectively examining her past trauma experiences, Celie acts “like a little lost baby”.[1] To some extent, her infantile behavior symbolizes her rebirth from past trauma because she is ready to create a new self after reconstructing trauma stories and re-experiencing traumatic emotions.

### 3.2 Restoration of Autonomy

The trauma deprives the victim’s strength and a sense of ownership, so the guiding principle of recovery is to restore the victim’s free will and autonomy. The first step of regaining the autonomy is “focusing on control of the body” which is a private property belonging to an individual, a substance that the individual can deal with at will.[7] Only in this way can the victim take complete control of her thoughts, words and actions. The recovery of Celie’s autonomy is mainly reflected in three aspects: the awakening of her body consciousness, the liberation of religious thought and the rise of female consciousness.

The awakening of Celie’s body begins with the acceptance that she is raped. Therefore, Celie builds up her body identity and gets rid of a sense of shame and guilt that aggravates her trauma. Most importantly, Shug instructs Celie to explore and appreciate her body so that Celie motivates her body desire and increases her mastery of body. For a long time, the traumatized Celie loses herself in self-denial and takes herself as a block of wood rather than a woman. When taking a bath for the sick Shug, she witnesses the naked woman for the first time and finds that the woman’s body is so soft and beautiful. Celie is unconscious of her body and never explores the secret of her body because being raped results in Celie’s feelings of shame, guilt and inferiority. Worse still, her stepfather denies assaulting Celie and accuses her of being indecent. And Mr ——— rapes Celie in marriage and considers it as a consensual sex. By denying the fact of raping Celie, they repudiate the value and significance of her body. However, Shug acts as Celie’s first physical influence and imparts knowledge of sexual intercourse to her. When Shug knows Celie never enjoys an orgasm because Mr ——— treats her as a sexual tool, Shug figures out the key point, “You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you”.[1] Undoubtedly, Shug confirms the rape nature of a loveless sex, which means the recognition of Celie’s body. If Celie cannot enjoy pleasure during intercourse that her body brings, she is still a virgin. The support from Shug eases Celie’s physical guilt and strengthens the connection between Celie and her body. Moreover, Shug teaches her how to get sexual pleasure by touching multiple parts of her body. She encourages Celie to appreciate her own body so as to raise her awareness, “take this mirror and go look at yourself down there”.[1] Under the guidance of Shug, Celie has a strong interest in her body. For the first time, she feels alive in the world. Maintaining focus on body is a crucial step to liberate individual’s thoughts.

Based on her bodily autonomy, Celie achieves a positive change in her thoughts, which definitely changes her behavioral pattern. From believing in God to loving herself, Celie is determined to resist her tragic and traumatic fate through her own efforts. At first, the traumatized Celie writes letters to God constantly to tell him her suffering and prays for his salvation. Shug directs Celie to realize that the God she is “praying and writing to is a man” and acts like other men “trifling, forgetful and lowdown”.[1] From Shug’s point of view, man corrupts everything because he tries to convince you that he is everywhere. Celie fully notices that God is a man who does not pay attention to black women’s sufferings. Shug enlightens Celie that God loves everything that common people love and God is nothing but inside of an individual. Exploring inside promotes individuals to obtain inspirations and strength. Instead of writing to God, Celie takes up writing to Nettie. She is recovering from her trauma and becoming more and more self-conscious because “the longing for freedom from religious persecution” could dissolve “religious superstition and offer freedom from emotional tyranny of hysteria”.[13]

Celie’s complete restoration of her sovereignty is the decision to leave the prison of her family

and to pursue a new life in Memphis. Mr —— is still trying to keep Celie under control, but Celie protests angrily, “You a lowdown dog is what’s wrong (...) It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation”.[1] For the first time, Celie defies the autarchy and arbitrary decision of Mr ——. Celie spurns his despicable behavior so that the shocked Mr —— is struck dumb. It is almost comforting to know that Celie is getting over the effects of past traumatic events because she is successful in releasing her repressed emotions through taking revenge on Mr ——. At first, Celie endures suffering by repressing and numbing her emotions and consciousness. Then her traumatic stress is fading away through narrating her traumatic stories. In the end, her trauma almost disappears due to her energetic reaction to traumatic events. Mr —— is provoked and attempts to punish Celie through physical violence. However, Celie could not resist any more and retaliates against his attacks. In order to prevent Celie from leaving home, Mr —— keeps belittling her, but Celie’s consciousness awakes and she intends to live a free and independent life. She voices for herself powerfully that “I’m pore, I’m back, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here”.[1] Celie sets off with Shug bravely and establishes her own company by making pants. With economic and spiritual independence, Celie finally gets rid of the psychological trauma and achieves the real equality with men in spirit.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study of Celie’s psychological trauma reveals the multiple oppression that black women suffer and criticizes the trampling of women’s physical freedom and spiritual independence in the patriarchal society. Besides, this paper awakens women to pay more attention to their bodies and desires so as to eliminate gender discrimination by establishing an intact self-identity. Meanwhile, this academic paper provides enlightenment for people who are caught by trauma in modern society, and makes them learn more about symptoms and causes of trauma so that they can take measures to avoid trauma experiences in advance. In addition, these effective healing strategies are beneficial for victims to maintain a positive attitude and to follow the scientific guidance so as to experience partial or full relief from trauma.

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