

A Study of Celie's Trauma and Recovery in *The Color Purple*

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Abstract

The Color Purple, written by Alice Walker, is about the life of African-American women in the Southern United States in the 1930s. The leading character, Celie, suffers from the individual trauma and the collective trauma. The thesis analyzes the trauma and recovery of Celie, and points out that nowadays black females who still suffer trauma can recover based on the treatments, such as establishment of the sense of safety, narration of traumatic experiences and reconnection with ordinary life.

Keywords

The Color Purple, The Individual Trauma, The Collective Trauma, The Recovery

1. Introduction

1) The Introduction of Alice Walker and *the Color Purple*

Alice Walker is an excellent and brilliant American writer. Being active feminist, she bravely fought against injustice and unequal phenomena. She expressed her views and opinions on some social issues in her novels. Most of her published works focused on the positions, lives and struggles of the black females under the oppression which made her become the target of critics.

The Color Purple is written in 1982 which mainly concerns that a woman gradually struggles for herself and frees her spirit from the oppressions by fighting against misfortunes, because she is in a society where women are inferior. *The Color Purple* leaves great influence on the international literary world and people begin to pay more attention to the issues on black females. *The Color Purple* is popular and acceptable all over the world and it also gives Alice Walker the qualification to win the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for Fiction.

2) The Introduction of Trauma Theory

Trauma theory first appeared in the early 1990s in the United States. Literature scholars investigate the trauma of characters based on trauma theory. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma means that the individual not only undergoes the physical damage to the body but also tolerates terrible accidents which have a negative and lasting impact on his soul and then it would damage his life and future (Caruth, 1996).

According to Kai Erikson, individual trauma mentions that a blow affects people's psyche and makes people feel hard to deal with. It's about traumatized people's own life experience, such as family or marriage experience. Collective trauma means that people in a group experience trauma, because they share something in common. Collective trauma makes people lose a common feeling which normally belongs to their group (Erikson, 1976). Traumatized people often lose the sense of safety, clear self-recognition, the interest in life and behave apathy.

Judith Herman introduced a three-stage recovery in 1992. Firstly, establishing the sense of safety means control of the body and the environment. Traumatized people need to find and secure a safe refuge and they are encouraged to trust and turn to others for support and help. Secondly, they are encouraged to tell the story of the trauma thoroughly. They can also write down their stories. Thirdly, traumatized people are supposed to create a future and engage more actively in the world (Herman, 1992).

2. Literature Review

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* draws the scholars' attention from all over the world. Most scholars explore the novel from the perspective of themes, narrative strategies and character. Hou Xiaohua (Hou, 2018) explores the double oppressions and the road to liberation such as sisterhood and financial independence of black female characters based on Womanism. Jing Yunfeng and Mao Wenxiu (Mao, 2015) investigate the themes and features of the novel as an initiation story. Chen Linling (Chen, 2017) analyzes the benefits of epistolary narrative strategies in the novel that black females' voice is fully considered. Huang Xiaohe (Huang, 2016) finds that the image of female characters and their characteristics reflect black female's sufferings under oppressions and their attitudes towards misfortunates. But scholars pay little attention to the trauma in the novel. Liu Lina (Liu, 2017) explores the novel from psychological trauma which mainly concerns about double oppressions. Shen Xin (Shen, 2017) pays attention to three kinds of trauma, domestic violence, loneliness and sexism and also aims to provide suggestions to black females to recover from trauma.

Obviously, studies on the novel based on trauma theory are not systematic and insufficient. Scholars just focus on exploring Celie's trauma and recovery from the perspectives of psychological trauma and cultural trauma. This thesis will analyze Celie's trauma and recovery from the perspective of individual trauma and collective trauma and provide some useful suggestions for traumatized black females to

recover from trauma.

3. The Symptoms of Celie's Trauma

According to trauma theory, people who suffer trauma because of traumatic events will show some related symptoms. In *The Color Purple*, Celie presents some traumatic symptoms that she loses the sense of safety, clear self-recognition and feels apathy, bored about life.

1) Lack of the Sense of Safety and Clear Self-recognition

As we know, people's sense of safety would be damaged by the trauma. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's father and husband always beat her and oppress her, and Celie doesn't have the sense of safety and she loses the control of her body and mind. "But I don't never get used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook" (Walker, 1985). She can't make sure whether she would never suffer the miserable events any more. She just obeys the oppressors' orders and doesn't dare to offend. What's more, she loses the correct recognition of herself and she thinks that she is valueless. "Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear from man" (Walker, 1985). She is no longer her true self and she becomes a thing that is portrayed by the white people and black men. Her view has been twisted which became morbid.

2) Feeling of Apathy

Traumatized people would behave apathy that they don't concern about anything of great importance. They would show a state of indifference or the suppression of emotions (Walker, 1985). In *The Color Purple*, when Celie becomes a traumatized people and she feels helpless that she can't find support and help from others, "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood" (Walker, 1985), she just keeps silent and avoids connecting with the outside world. She doesn't go out and just writes letters to God. "I don't fight, I stay here where I'm told" (Walker, 1985). She doesn't show any signs to fight against the oppressors during early days and she just becomes accustomed to being oppressed. She doesn't show any sympathy to Sofia's miserable experience and she just takes it for granted. She loses her life goal and can't see the meaning and hope of her life.

4. The Causes of Celie's Trauma

According to trauma theory, it is reasonable to infer that Celie suffers trauma based on her traumatic symptoms. Combined with Celie's experience further, it's obvious that the causes of her trauma are that she experiences individual trauma and collective trauma.

1) Individual Trauma

In *The Color Purple*, Celie experiences the torture of her father, mother and husband, which hurts her mental and physical health.

Celie has to tolerate the abuse from her father which is the main cause of her trauma. He sends Celie's two children away without telling her which makes Celie feel painful and upset and Celie loses her right and opportunity to be a mother.

He pushes Celie to do the housework and take care of the family. He prevents Celie from being educated and deprives of her opportunity to learn and improve herself. He also forces Celie to marry Albert to be his housekeeper.

As for Celie's mother, she doesn't trust Celie and thinks that Celie is a dissolute girl when she knows that Celie is pregnant. She doesn't even talk with Celie to know the truth. Celie is the victim of abnormal family. All her parents' behaviors leave traumatic memory on Celie.

At the same time, after Celie is forced to marry Albert, she doesn't enjoy marriage but experiences oppression from Albert and his son. Albert doesn't show any love and sympathy to Celie. He just wants Celie to help him look after his children and his house and he cruelly deprives Celie of the love from her sister. Although they have married for a long time, Celie even doesn't know his name and she just calls him Mr. To some extent, she suffers individual trauma from her marriage.

2) Collective Trauma

Collective trauma refers to the impact on a group because they share something in common. In *The Color Purple*, Celie is a black female who lives under the patriarchy and white-dominate society. She experiences the collective trauma from sexism and racism at that time.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie is a member of females who are oppressed by sexism under the patriarchal world, she is the victim. Her husband, her son and her father have controlled Celie that she can't gain love and other basic rights from the males. She is raped, abused and attacked by the males. She can't gain any respect from her husband and she is looked down upon by her husband and is considered as her husband's personal belongings. Her father is eager to control and govern Celie in her life, and he prevents Celie from working outside, receiving education and managing money. Celie has no chance to make decision even if it's about her own affairs. She is no longer a single person but a thing.

When talking about the trauma from racism, Celie thinks she is ugly because she is black. Her views on beauty have changed by racism. In addition, Celie tries to express her thoughts and pain by writing to God, and she keeps the faith in God. When Celie and Shug talk about their opinions on the image of God, the image of God in her heart is a white man. "He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted" (Walker, 1985). And this shows that racism traumatizes Celie for life and Celie's views on the world have been changed under the influence of racism. Although Celie isn't directly tortured by the white people, Celie still feels that she is inferior to white people and she is a member of black people who suffer from racism.

5. The Recovery of Celie's Trauma

For traumatized people, their mental health and physical health have been great influenced by the trauma they have experienced. Their normal life has been interrupted and they can't keep on living without any other worries. Therefore, it's of

great importance for traumatized people to find suitable treatments to recover from the trauma. Judith Herman's three-stage recovery will provide some guidance for them. He stresses that traumatized people can recover from the trauma by establishing the sense of safety, remembering and mourning and reconnecting with their ordinary life (Herman, 1992).

1) Establishment of the Sense of Safety

According to Herman, the first stage of recovery is to establish the sense of safety. Trauma made the traumatized people lose the sense of power and control on the body and the environment. Their self-recognition has been reconstructed. The traumatized people should learn to protect themselves from being hurt again. Thus, it's of great importance to restore the power and control by establishing the sense of safety (Herman, 1992). In *The Color Purple*, Celie experienced the traumatic events, and she has lost her control of her body because her body is often beaten and controlled by the oppressors and is always discriminated and looked down by the oppressors. Celie feels unsafe in her body, and she also keeps on denying herself. From her point of view, she thinks her body is ugly and full of bad things. She can't recognize her body correctly and holds others' opinions on her body. It's Shug who has helped her re-recognize her body. "She says. Here, take this mirror and go look at yourself..." (Walker, 1985). Shug lets Celie stand in front of the mirror and look at the figure in the mirror. Celie begins to find the beauty in her body under the influence of Shug. She learns to appreciate and enjoy her body, therefore she regains the control of her body.

What's more, after having the control of her body, Celie needs to control the environment by finding a safe refuge. In *The Color Purple*, it means Celie should fight against the oppressor and be away from the control of oppressor. Herman encourages the traumatized people to trust and turn to others for help and support in order to find a safe refuge (Herman, 1992). In *The Color Purple*, Celie makes friends with Shug and Sofia. And Shug, Sofia and Celie's sister Nettie do help Celie a lot to find a safe refuge from every aspect of her life. Under the help and support of her sister and friends, Celie begins to make attempts to fight against her husband. She is no longer silent when faced with oppressions, and she doesn't hold the apathetic attitude towards it. She isn't afraid of her husband and she realizes that they are equal. She curses her husband and disobeys him. She expresses her wishes to leave her husband and live her own life. "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" (Walker, 1985). She leaves her husband and goes to Memphis. Thus, she finds a safe refuge and she has the power and control of the environment. In conclusion, she establishes the sense of safety by controlling her body and the environment.

2) Narration of Traumatic Experience

According to Herman, the second stage of recovery is to remember and mourn. Herman thinks that for traumatized people, they have to face with the past trauma with courage and confidence, analyze the causes of trauma and tell their traumatic

experiences to other people, so that they can connect with the world by their language, recognize the trauma they have experienced correctly and recover from the trauma. Expect communicating with others, writing is another way to tell (Herman, 1992). In *The Color Purple*, Celie's father once said that "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker, 1985). Under the oppressions, Celie has difficulty in communicating with others about her traumatic experience because she can't find a person to talk with during early days and she has no courage and confidence to try. So she chooses to write to God to express herself. She mentions her traumatic experiences and her feelings and she is looking forward to gaining help from God. Such behavior is the first step to recognize her trauma clearly. Later, Shug appears and she communicates with Celie. Celie tells her sufferings and misfortunes to Shug and gains comfort and reflections from Shug. Celie also writes to her sister Nettie, and all these behaviors contribute to Celie's recovery further. Thus Celie begins to have more confidence and courage to live with the obstacles and challenges in the future. She conquers her apathy and silence, and she chooses to express. She recognizes these traumatic experiences correctly as a part of her life experience and she realizes that the symptoms of trauma are the normal reactions when people face with the extreme situations. She is not the person who is deserved to suffer the trauma and her recognition on herself moves forward. She is gradually reconstructing her self-recognition.

3) Reconnection with Ordinary Life

According to Herman, the third stage of recovery is to reconnect with ordinary life. The traumatized people need to create their own new future and engage actively in their life. They would no longer passively accept the trauma, but they would actively meet with and react. They can absorb the lessons from their traumatic experience into their life, protect themselves against future danger and take action to increase their sense of power and control (Herman, 1992). In *The Color Purple*, after Celie chooses to leave her husband and moves to new places, she works outside and begins to make pants. "How you make your living up there? he say. Making pants, I say" (Walker, 1985). She owns a company named "Folkspants, Unlimited" which attracts a lot of customers. She earns a large amount of money which satisfies her own desires and she gains financial independence. She would no longer depend on her husband and she can live by her own. She develops new relationships and new life in Memphis. She lives with Shug and reconciles with her husband. "Oh, Nettie, us have a house! A house big enough for us and our children, for your husband and Shug" (Walker, 1985). She inherits from her father that she owns her house. Celie's sister takes Celie's two children back from Africa and they reunite with each other. She is no longer show little interest in life. She lives a happy life with the people she loves. She can easily handle the obstacles in her life and becomes optimistic, energetic and enthusiastic about life. Her new life begins. She indeed recovers from the trauma and isn't affected by the trauma memories.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie, the protagonist of this novel has behaved some trau-

matic symptoms, and she can't live like a normal person. Her emotional and spiritual life have been greatly destroyed by the trauma; however, she recovers from the trauma by these three stages. She gains a new relationship, a new life and a new self at the end of this novel.

6. Conclusion

The thesis analyzes the trauma and recovery of Celie in *The Color Purple* from the perspective of individual trauma and collective trauma. Celie experiences the individual trauma from her family and her marriage and the collective trauma from racism and sexism as a black female. These traumatic experiences make Celie behave some traumatic symptoms that she doesn't have the sense of safety and she loses correct self-recognition. Fortunately, she finds some ways to recover from the trauma by establishing the sense of safety, telling the traumatic experiences and reconnecting with the ordinary life.

By analyzing Celie's trauma, it provides some suggestions for black females who want to recover from trauma nowadays. They can recognize their trauma correctly by establishing the sense of safety, narrating their story and teaming up with others to fight against the oppressor. They can build up their desire to live a new life. Under such treatments, they can recover from trauma and enjoy their life. It also helps readers comprehend the novel from the perspective of individual trauma and collective trauma which has not been explored before.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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