

The Sources of Celie's Trauma in The Color Purple

Tingting Jiang

Nanchang Jiaotong Institute, Nanchang, Jiangxi, 330100, China

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Abstract: Alice Walker (1944—) is one of the prominent contemporary African-American women writers in the United States. Both in her life and writing Walker has devoted herself to uncovering the miserable life of black women and exploring their traumatic experiences, which are manifested in *The Color Purple*. Based on trauma theories of Sigmund Freud and Judith Herman, this paper mainly analyzes the causes of Celie's trauma, which lie in sexual abuse and domestic violence and further reveals the gender oppression behind the sources of Celie's trauma. This paper not only shows Walker's concern for oppressed African women, criticism of male hegemony in Africa and reflection on the sexual relations but also provides inspirations for women in reality to make them remain vigilant at trauma all times.

1. Introduction

The theme of *The Color Purple* mainly concentrates on the internal relation of black people. In this novel, Walker reveals that black men have dominance over women who are subordinated and treated as sexual tools and domestic slaves. "Patriarchal force also relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape" [1]. Besides, men achieve the absolute psychological surrender from women through physical violence. Exploring the causes of trauma not only provides evidence for Celie's traumatic symptoms but also points out the target that Celie is supposed to fight against while seeking recovery from trauma. Therefore, this paper chiefly digs out the causes of Celie's trauma resulting in her traumatic experiences in her daily life. Traumas from sexual abuse and domestic violence cause Celie to be a miserable prisoner and slaver of black men. In addition, although there are several academic papers studying the sources of Celie's and other characters' trauma in *The Color Purple*, something inadequate needs to be supplemented. For instance, some researchers explore trauma elements in the novel, but do not involve trauma theory. Some just give a brief introduction of trauma theory and tell a story about the novel, but fail to integrate them. Therefore, this paper mainly applies trauma theory to explore how Celie becomes the traumatized prisoner of sexual assault and domestic violence, and further uncovers the male gender hegemony in Africa.

2. Sexual abuse

In Freud's early research on hysteria, his patients are testified to sexual assault and abuse. In general, they display the extreme alarm and powerlessness. Freud explores patients' memories and finds that 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” [2]. In addition, the psychological impacts of rape garner attention of several experts. In 1972, Ann Burgess, a psychiatric nurse, and Lynda Holmstrom, a sociologist, notice that the raped women regard the experience as a long-standing trauma, and they are full of fear and depression in the process. After being raped, victims will be in an abnormal state and suffer from insomnia, nausea, nightmares, behavioral confusion and numbness because of the overwhelming domination. Celie’s trauma is rooted in her stepfather’s sexual abuse in her childhood. Besides, the marital rape from her husband reinforces Celie’s psychological trauma as well. However, it is not only the rape itself that causes her painful experiences. In effect, the social nature behind the rape, such as gender oppression, should be to blame because “it is the man who by virtue of his gender has all the power, and the woman, by virtue of hers, who is powerless” [3]. It is the social hegemonic discourse that stimulates men to apply the penis as a weapon to satisfy their sexual desire by depriving women’s sexual freedom.

Celie, a young and innocent black girl, is raped and insulted by her cruel stepfather, Fonso. Rape is a brutal violence to make Celie frightened, helpless and surrender to her stepfather’s authority. How does the abuser dominate victims through sexual abuse? According to Herman, “[t]he essential element of rape is the physical, psychological, and moral violation of the person” [2]. Celie recalls being raped by her stepfather that “he grab hold my titties[...]when that hurt, I cry. He start to chock me, saying You better shut up and git used to it” [4]. The young Celie is innocent about the immoral sex. Her body is so firmly controlled that she cannot break free and is reduced to a passive object of abuse. However, her physiological reaction indicates she always feels sick and would never get used to it. In addition, when he penetrates Celie, she feels nothing but excruciating pain. Worse still, the violent rape leaves her body bleeding profusely, “How the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stocking” [4]. The trampling of Celie’s body is the first step in the destruction of her personality and dignity. The shame of losing innocence and dignity causes individuals to lapse into self-degradation and self-abandonment. The second step to destroy victims is to intimidate them to keep silent. Her stepfather treats Celie as a sex tool and threatens her not to tell anyone but God, otherwise it would kill her mother who is badly ill. Therefore, the psychological shock prevents Celie from revealing the truth and turning to the public for help. Unfortunately, silence is an accomplice to violence. Women’s throats are obstructed by the boulder of male violence. Once they give up making their voice to tell their tragic stories, they will not get to know what happens to them and what leads to their tragic fate. Furthermore, these traumatized women will lose themselves in silence and become the absolute slaves of men because women’s silence maintain the authority of men, who are accelerated to continue the physical assault on women. Just as Cixous said, “[a] woman without a body, dumb, blind, can’t possibly be a good fighter” [5]. It is hard for Celie to be a fighter on account of the strong and evil male force. Without the protection of her family and friends, Celie remains in a precarious state of being raped and abused. Confronted with an inescapable environment of abuse, Celie just like other victims has no choice but to surrender helplessly and bear great psychological suffering alone. The third step is to attack the reliability of the victim in case she uncovers the crime. The abuser will try his best to argue plausibly so that the public does not support the victim. In general, the more powerful the abuser is, the more convincing his explanation is. Fonso requires Celie to cut his hair and rapes her. In order to avoid responsibility, he attacks Celie’s moral traits and fabricates impressive arguments to cover up his crime. He lies that Celie has a boyfriend, and sees the boy slip out the back door. Celie is slandered as a profligate and dissolute girl who is pregnant. In this way, Fonso shatters the sense of connection between Celie and the community, which causes a crisis of faith. The public may doubt Celie’s personal character and blame her debauchery rather than the incest of Fonso. Nevertheless, “[w]ithout the appropriate support most of those women will remain silent, and society as a whole will lose the contribution of our voice” [6]. Besides, if the basic trust completely disintegrates, the victim will be struck in an intense sense of guilt and inferiority. Fonso sullies Celie’s

body, dominates her consciousness and interrupts her connection with the community so that Celie surrenders to his crime and demoralizes herself with a sense of shame and guilty. In brief, the raped woman is threatened or forced to keep silent, which in turn exacerbates her tragedy of being raped. The infinite vicious circle keeps the victim trapped in the psychological trauma.

Moreover, Celie is also subjected to sexual insult from her husband Albert and loses her consciousness because of these sufferings. After the death of her mother, Fonso forces Celie to marry Albert, a widower with three children. Albert hesitates to marry her until his house is messed up by the children. He succeeds in governing Celie through the threatening sexual and physical violence. Celie dares not call him by his name but by Mr —. He takes Celie as a tool to vent his sexual desire, which is tantamount to marital rape because “[t]here is no foreplay, no talking, no intimacy and no communication” [7], and Celie never involves in the pleasure of sexual intercourse but feels unconscious even painful. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman mentions that “when the rapist is a husband or lover”, the victim will be particularly vulnerable, because “the person to whom she might ordinarily turn for safety and protection is precisely the source of danger” [2]. It seems that marital rape is more insidious since “husbands have the implicit right to impose sexual intercourse on them” [8]. This unwittingly strengthens male hegemony and increases the likelihood that women will be sexually assaulted. Celie has no sense of trust in Mr — because he is so tyrannical that he has the great desire to completely control Celie who is forced to enjoy the orgasm obediently. She suffers great trauma physically and mentally, gradually loses herself, and tells her story numbly, “Mr — clam on top of me, do his business, in ten minutes us both sleep” [4]. Mr — uses the unknown coercion and violence to have sex with Celie, who is forced to be subordinate.

3. Domestic violence

When it comes to the domestic violence, the perpetrator usually achieves dominance over the victim through three essential steps. First of all, the abuser always imprisons the victim in a fixed place, then completely dominates her body and mind through violence and coercion, and finally breaks the connection between the victim and the outside so that she is completely helpless and submissive. Celie is not allowed to visit public places except to work in the fields all the day or stay at home to be a domestic slave. Besides, Albert exerts psychological pressure on Celie and makes her submit to his supreme authority. Most importantly, Albert destroys Celie’s connections to the outside world until she finally gives up struggling and becomes an obedient victim without her normal consciousness.

The first step of taming the traumatized Celie through domestic violence is to imprison her in the house and restrict her freedom so as to shape the supreme authority of Mr — and dominate Celie’s psychological state. The house of Mr — is like a jail in which he wields supreme power. Celie is treated as a nanny to take care of Mr —’s children and keep the house clean. However, his naughty children are hostile to Celie, their stepmother. They throw stones at her and make her head bleed. Without any complaint, she bandages her head and sets about cooking for the whole family. It is almost ten o’clock every night when she finishes her chores with exhaustion. In addition, Celie works in the field the whole day like a mule. However, Mr — spends most of his time sleeping. When he wakes up, Celie is working in the field. When he gets to the field, Celie has been working for three hours. In the majority of cases, he is not responsible for labor and always throws the hoe in the field and goes home to rest, but still orders Celie to keeping toiling on farms so that she is “roasted coffee bean color now” [4]. What is more, Celie is forbidden to go out in public to have social engagements. When Shug holds a concert in Harpo’s bar, Celie is threatened to stay at home by Mr —, “My wife can’t do this. My wife can’t do that” [4]. The disconnection with the society exacerbates her disengagement from the outside and keeps her in the inescapable home. Celie is captured completely

because of Mr ———'s violent coercion so that the absolute authority is formed between them. Judith Herman states that "[c]aptivity, which brings the victim into prolonged contact with the perpetrator, creates a special type of relationship, one of coercive control" [2]. In captivity, the perpetrator Mr ——— serves as the master who intends to govern all aspects of Celie so that she becomes dependent on the house that puts restrictions on her. She convinces herself that her life will stop if she leaves the house. The psychological state of Celie is totally shaped and dominated by the faith and volition of Mr ———.

Besides, in order to achieve successful dominance, the repetitive psychological damage is imposed on Celie so that she is willing to be obedient and gradually becomes dependent on Mr ———, thus it is much harder for Celie to free herself from captivity. Mr ——— tends to instill a sense of fear via violent tactics to convince her that any resistance is futile. He is a selfish male chauvinist, considering Celie his personal property and believing that his wife should be obedient and has no right to refuse his requests. Therefore, when Mr ——— is in bad temper, he tells Celie to take off her trousers and beats her with a belt "like he beat the children" [4]. Celie always does what he requires and is willing to accept physical punishment from him numbly. Celie's horror is "increased by inconsistent and unpredictable outbursts of violence and by capricious enforcement of pretty rules" [2]. There is no denying that it is the capricious physical violence that exerts horror and powerlessness on Celie whose courage and confidence are impaired. Therefore, Celie gradually gives up resistance, "This life soon be over" [4]. Celie's body is tamed by violence. At the same time, this reaction also reflects that Celie is completely defeated and dominated psychologically. She does not dare to resist but obeys by numbing her senses. Mr ——— makes Celie believe that he is God, and the resistance is futile. The only way for Celie to survive is to be absolutely obedient and to win his sympathy. In this case, Mr ——— is not only the root of horror and humiliation but also the source of consolation and dependence for Celie. When Mr ——— intends to go Shug's concert, he requires Celie to dress him up and threatens her "[a]ny other woman be glad" [4]. Afraid of inflaming him or being replaced, she hastens to make clear that she is also willing to serve him, and any woman would be proud of him. Mr ——— just asks her real thought in a soft tone, "You think so?", which really surprises and pleases Celie [4]. Mr ——— just gives Celie a look and their eyes contact. The scene satisfies Celie easily and makes her believe that this is the closest they have ever been. In effect, for those who have been exploited and abused for a long time, some small mercies are enough to make the victim feel grateful to the abuser. Thus, Celie succumbs to her tragic fate and gradually relies on Mr ———, "No Albert there. No Shug. Nothing" [4].

The last step to control Celie completely is to prevent her from obtaining information, material help or emotional support from others so that she is absolutely isolated with the outside world. Nettie is the closest sister of Celie in this miserable world. After Nettie is abandoned by Mr ———, Celie loses contact with her and endures the pain of missing. But Mr ——— intercepts the letter from Nettie to Celie, which makes Celie mistakenly think that her sister is dead so that Celie loses her spiritual support and the hope of life, "I think about Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do?" [4]. Celie losing all her sources of strength intends to live a submissive life and believes that her life stops forever. If the victim gives up her autonomy and self-consciousness, she will lose all perceptions and emotions. When Celie's goal is just to survive, her oppressed inner world becomes more isolated and shriveled.

4. Conclusion

Celie is gradually reduced to an insensitive and submissive sexual tool and family mule on account of the sexual and domestic violence. It reflects not only Walker's concern for the tragic situation of African women but also her expectations for them who should resist oppression and pursue physical

integrity and personality independence. Moreover, the miserable experiences of African women also manifest Walker's appeal that only by giving up gender hegemony can men achieve complete selves in a harmonious relationship with women. Most importantly, Celie's traumatic experience is a reference for individuals in the real world, stimulating them to beware of traumatic events in daily life. Thus, they can take steps to avoid or get rid of them in time.

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