

Celie's Growth in Spatial Dimension in the Color Purple

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Abstract

The Color Purple, the representative of Alice Walker, mainly tells the unfortunate encounters and self-growth of heroine Celie, as a black woman, living from the beginning of the 20th century to the eve of the Second World War. Black people in America still suffered from racial discrimination and oppression, even though slavery was abolished in the first half of the 20th century. Compared with black men, black women in America were more miserable because they endured dual oppressions from both white society and black men. Celie's growth process from spatial perspective witnesses the entire situation that black women lived in the same period as Celie suffered from oppressions, and it also depicts the pursuit of the black women identity and the changes of black women's status, which is Walker's wonderful wish for black women.

Keywords

Alice Walker; The Color Purple; Celie; Spatial perspective; Growth.

1. Alice Walker and The Color Purple

Alice Walker (1944-), born in Eatonton, Georgia, is a contemporary African American woman writer with great influence and distinguishable characteristics. She is a bestselling novelist in the contemporary period, and the author of three collections of short stories, three collections of essays, six volumes of poetry, and several children's books. Her works have been translated into more than two dozen languages, which mainly originate from African American people's life with different stuffs and obvious subjects. More prominently, Walker put forward the concept of womanist in the preface of her essay collection, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, because she thought feminist ignored the particular problems of colored people[1]. Womanist pays attention to the women problems from both racism and sexism, which makes up for the lack of feminism in race and is a great contribution of Walker for ethnic women and literary criticism. *The Color Purple*, her representative, which was published in 1982, "has generated critical interest in a literary career that has been, even if not widely noted, at the very least worthy of note"[2]. It won three great awards in American literature: the Pulitzer Prize, the American National Book Awards and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and has attracted the attention of many scholars up to now. The book consists of 91 letters, of which 56 are written by Celie to God, 14 by Celie to Nettie and 21 by Nettie to Celie. The story happened from early 20th century to the eve of WWII with the American southern Georgian country as background. It mainly describes the shift of a black woman under the boundary of old thoughts and her growth process, and shows the political situation and life encounters of black women under the dual suppressions of gender and race in America in that particular context. It also shows black women's resistance to the dual suppressions and their pursuit of self-improvement and wonderful life, which reflects Walker's thought of womanism.

2. Research Review

Since the *Color Purple* came out, it has attracted the attention of many scholars who carried out various studies about this book. They use different kinds of perspectives and literary criticism

theory to analyze this book. Firstly, lots of scholars mainly analyze and interpret the theme and main characters from the perspective of text content. The theme is the main focus of many researchers. Moreover, some scholars start from the perspectives of culture, linguistics, literature and so on. The literary perspective is the main perspective for the study, mainly from the aspects of feminism, writing techniques, review of the book, etc. Lastly, analysis from the perspective of research methods is mainly used for theoretical research. Feminist and womanist are the most used theories by fiction researchers. Although the research on *The Color Purple* has multi-layered and multi-faceted characteristics now, most researchers use similar research methods, research angles and research content, but lack of innovation. This thesis interprets *The Color Purple* in spatial dimension, which is beneficial to enrich the research perspective of the novel, expand the research space of the novel, and further explore the deep meaning of the text. This article mainly analyses heroine Celie's misery encounters and growth process from the three dimensions of psychological space, geographical space and social space.

3. Celie's Growth in Spatial Dimension

3.1. Celie's Encounters and Growth in Psychological Space

Psychological space shows people's true feelings. Especially the unconscious mental activities can best reflect the human heart, revealing the complexity of humanity and wholeness of human being. In *The Color Purple*, the heroine Celie's psychological activities are frequent, which reveals her psychological change process. These kinds of activities are presented through Celie's letters to God and her sister Nettie, reflecting her true psychological state. In Celie's letters to God in the first half of the book, we can see that her heart is extremely helpless and she is mentally depressed, which means that she accepts what the fate gives to her and is numbly under the oppression from the outside world. In the beginning, as a 14-year-old girl, Celie is pure and innocent. But after the physical and mental torture by her stepfather and husband, her psychology begins to become morbid. She is indifferent to the suppression by the outside world, and numbly accepts all the unfairness that happens to her. However, Celie realizes her self-growth in the end through the help of other female characters around her, which can be seen from the letter she writes to Nettie.

The Color Purple is full of Celie's submission to the oppression of black men. "In America, the social status of black women was low, and black women were at the bottom of society. The lives of black women living at the margin of society were usually described by whites or black men, which could not truly reflect the real-life status of black women"[3] under the background of the novel. In the novel, Walker makes Celie write in the first person in letters, which give her the opportunity to express herself. Then, she finds a way to talk to her heart through a private way of writing to God. The essence of a 14-year-old girl writing to the invisible God is to state her true feelings in mental space. Through this way, Celie reveals the oppression by black men. Celie's father is persecuted by the white because his successful career stimulates the envy in white people. Then her mother is kind of mad, and is cheated to marry her stepfather Alphonso. Celie's mother keeps giving birth to babies and finally dies. When Celie is raped by Alphonso and gives birth to a baby, she doesn't dare to tell her mother who the father of the baby is. Because her stepfather says, "You better never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy." [4] Even after the second baby is born, Celie doesn't reveal her stepfather's crime, but only writes it down to God. The two babies are sent away by Alphonso and Celie suffers a lot from this. When her mother dies, Celie plays the role of mother and wife in the house, taking care of brothers and sisters and satisfying Alphonso's animal desire. But after Alphonso gets sick of Celie, she is forced to marry Mr. __. In Mr. __'s house, Celie takes after his children, and endures his beating and sexual oppression, just like in Alphonso's house. Celie's husband doesn't take her as a person, but a mule, who can work in the field and take care of the family. In the process

of all these happenings, she never thinks of resisting, but just accepts blindly. "You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself." This is Mr. __'s sister Kate's words to Celie. But Celie just responds in her heart, "What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive." [4] So we can see that Celie thinks that she, as a woman, could endure all of these unfair treatments and then she could live, and couldn't get into trouble. But after meeting two other independent women--Sophia and Shug, everything changes.

The change in psychological sphere is an endless process. In the process, there are many factors influencing the formation of one's psychology, such as external environment and internal awakening. In *The Color Purple*, Celie begins to realize that when faced with the persecution of black men, she doesn't have to obey as before under the influence of independent Shug, Mr. __'s lover, and Sofia, her daughter-in-law, who both dare to resist discrimination and persecution from patriarchal society. When Celie meets Sophia and lives with her, she is astonished about Sophia's braveness to revolt her father and husband Harpo's suppression. For example, whenever Harpo tries to tame Sophia and beats her, Sophia beats back. Celie tells Harpo to beat Sophia hard in order to make it tame because she is envy about Sophia. But honestly, this also gives a fact for Celie that as a woman, she doesn't need to stand the suppression from man. Therefore, Celie's psychology begins to awaken. If Sophia makes Celie's consciousness awaken, her husband's lover Shug lets her consciousness totally awaken. Then she no longer writes to the unrealistic God, but turns to confide herself to her sister Nettie in real world and turns to believe the God which is everything living everywhere. Besides Sophia, Shug is also an independent woman who takes singing as her job. She doesn't follow man's demands and has her own thoughts. Celie likes this kind of woman, and with Shug's help, she realizes her identity as a human being and a woman, and reconstructs her self-identity as a whole human being. When she knows that Mr. __ hides her sister's letters for her, she doesn't obey the past "rules" any more and consciously disobeys her husband's commands. There is a representative scene in the book showing Celie's awareness of female in psychological level. When Mr. __'s daddy shows up and speaks ill of Shug Avery, Celie is angry and "drop little spit in Old Mr. __ water" and she thinks in her head that "next time he came I put a little Shug Avery pee in his glass" [4]. This shows that Celie doesn't fear about man now and has her own opinion about judging things. In the last letter in the book, Celie does not express her feelings to the former God, which she realizes it is a man, a white man. She turns to the new God -- "Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything" [4] to tell herself. She can face her true feelings about everything and has her self-consciousness. This means that she has achieved her own psychological maturity.

Celie turns from submission at the beginning to independence in mental space at the end. Through encounters and growth, Celie finds the true self. But we must know Celie's experience of growth in consciousness level is Walker's wish for black woman, because under that specific social and historical background Celie lives, it is unrealistic to some extent. Psychological growth as a part of a person's growth is ahead of behavior. At the same time, the awakening of consciousness will urge people to take action from behavior. When someone's mentality is mature, his or her behavior will respond correspondingly. These behavioral growth characteristics based on psychological growth can be reflected in geographical space and social space.

3.2. Celie's Self-consciousness in Geographical Space

In the first half of the 20th century, we could still see the racial and gender discrimination and oppression suffered by women from geographical space. In America, black women experienced serious persecutions from racism and sexism. Black women in the South in that period especially had the words to say. In *The Color Purple*, sentences like "Have you ever seen a white person and a colored sitting side by side in a car, when one of 'em wasn't showing the other one

how to drive it or clean it?”[4] and “Men and women not suppose to wear the same thing, he said. Men suppose to wear the pants.”[4] show the fact that there is deep discrimination towards black women. Even in Africa at the same time, black women suffer oppressions from the white colonists and black men. For example, the white colonists destroy their home, and “The Olinka do not believe girls should be educated... A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something”[4], showing the profound thought of racism and sexism.

With the expansion of geographical space, people’s horizons will become wider. If a person is confined to a small area and has no knowledge or exposure to a larger area, his or her ideology and vision will be limited; if he or she sees a wider world than his or her hometown where he or she has lived for many years, his or her thinking and vision will be totally different and his or her horizon will be enlarged. Therefore expansion of geographical space could help people achieve self-consciousness to some extent. At first, Celie lives in the village of southern Georgia. During this period, her scope of main activities is the house and field. This kind of living method greatly limits the awakening of her consciousness. But along with her awakening in psychological space, her consciousness about the geography also awakens. In *The Color Purple*, Celie sees the world outside her hometown in two ways: one is through the description of Africa in her sister Nettie’s letters and other parts of America by Shug; the other is through the way out of her long-lived hometown. Both of these two ways expand Celie’s geographical space of her activities, whether in realistic world or conscious world. The knowledge of the space outside her hometown not only broadens her horizons but also stimulates her self-awareness as a woman. Firstly, through letters from Nettie, she learns about the unexpected African continent, the customs of Olinka, and the birthplace of her ancestors. For example, Nettie says in a letter to Celie, “It was the funniest thing to stop over in Monrovia after my first glimpse of Africa, which was Senegal. The capital of Senegal is Darkar and the people speak their own language, Senegalese I guess they would call it, and French”[4]. This kind of indirect method leads Celie to know that there is a place called Africa, beyond the United States. Secondly, accompanied by her husband’s lover Shug, she learns about places in America outside her hometown and experience these places first-hand. To Shug, “Memphis, Tennessee ain’t North, even I know that”[4]; but to Celie, it is a “new continent” for her to “reclaim and explore”. Lastly, after she leaves her husband for Memphis, her self-consciousness begins to truly awaken. “So what is it like in Memphis? Shug’s house is big and pink and look sort of like a barn.”[4] After the enlargement of geographic sphere, Celie develops her own consciousness and does what she likes and endures no oppression like before. In Memphis, under the help of Shug, she begins to make pants and develop it as a business, which lets her get economical independence. Besides this, after going to Memphis with Shug, Celie also knows about other places in America because Shug, as a singer, visits all over the United States, tells the places she goes and brings gifts for Celie. All of these provide Celie with a kind of overall consciousness of the world.

Whether it is the expansion of the real geographic scope or the expansion of the conscious scope in geography, both of them can increase people’s cognition of the external world, expand the field of activities, and benefit their own growth and development. Although Celie gets to know Africa through her sister Nettie’s letters and learns about places outside her hometown and Memphis through Shug’s words in the novel, these all broaden her horizons and lay a solid foundation for her to go out of the suppressed hometown, and achieve the awakening of self-consciousness. When Celie leaves her hometown and goes to Memphis, she realizes a real leap in real geographical space, which witnesses her self-growth. Besides this, Celie’s growth is also perfectly embodied in the social space.

3.3. Celie’s Formation of Independent Personality in Social Space

The formation of independent personality in the real world is a sign of a person’s maturity. The growth of mental consciousness and expansion of geographical vision are also parts of the

healthy personality and they can help the formation of independent personality. They also serve the proper manifestation of the personality in society. Black women lived under racial discrimination and gender suppression from whites and black men in society under the historical background of the novel. When the white ordered black men to do something, black men made black women do that, which led to their miserable fate. Black women followed black men's commands in every aspect. They just like mules, which is a frequent image for black women in African-American literature. For example, in *The Color Purple*, Celie just follows Mr.'s orders, as Harpo, Celie's son-in-law, says "When Pa tell you to do something, you do it, he say. When he say not to, you don't. You don't do what he say, he beat you"[4]. But under the help of other women, such as Sofia, Nettie and Shug, Celie experiences the baptism of psychological space and geographical space, and finally achieves the integrity of personality.

At any time, economic independence is the basis for the formation of independent personality in society. Only by achieving economic independence can we get rid of dependence on others and pursue our own life. When Celie marries Mr., she does the chores of the house and the field work. She does not have anything belonging to her, which means that she depends on her husband financially. However, with Shug's encouragement and support, Celie discovers the talent for making pants, opens a shop by herself and inherits a house from her real father, which makes her realize financial independence. Celie makes a living by making pants and "then orders start to come in from everywhere Shug sing"[4]. Therefore, Celie has the capital to resist the oppression from the outside world. Finally, she realizes the transformation from family space into social space. Moreover, she is not afraid of her husband anymore, forgives him, and finally becomes good friends with him. But this is just a beautiful vision of Alice Walker, which would not come true under the background of the novel black women lived.

In society, the ability of social communication is an important skill for people to live. Changes of Celie's relationship with black men and stepping into social space witness the maturity of her personality. Black women have been under the oppression of black men for a long time and are regarded as their accessories. In *The Color Purple*, black women are used as tools for black men to vent their physical needs and as servants to take care of the family, and they must absolutely obey the orders of black men. Harpo says, "When Pa tell you to do something, you do it, he say. When he say not to, you don't"[4]. All of these reflect the unequal relationship between black women and black men. Celie completely obeys her stepfather Alphonso's demands before marrying Mr. and continues to follow Mr.'s commands after marriage. She can not express herself to others, and even can not talk to others properly. But later under the influence of Sofia and Shug and with the growth in psychology, Celie begins to have a sense of resistance. She can bravely express her thoughts and talk with others. She even can refute her husband's unreasonable demands. When she knows truth that her husband hides her sister's letters, she doesn't stand him anymore and says "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"[4]. After achieving economic independence, she dares to resist the oppression of her husband in action. She even makes friends with her pant-workers. More importantly, she finally forgives Mr., calls his real name Albert, and becomes friends with him, which realizes a kind of an equal relationship between the sexes in a relative sense. But this kind of relationship is only the author's beautiful imagination for black women in the novel, and it is difficult to realize in the real world. However, it is undeniable that the changes in her relationship with her husband and other people witness her growth of personality.

In addition to being persecuted by black men, black women also endured oppression from white society under that background. So black women have to fight with both the white and black men. About sexism in black people, black women are always dominated and despised by black men. For example, "There is a way that the men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don't even look at women

when women are speaking” [4]. From this, we can see that black men only see black women as a tool to look after the family and do works for them. They take black women as their things and their property. When Mr. __ speaks, “What will people say, you running off to Memphis like you don’t have a house to look after?” [4] We can surely confirm what we say. As the true self awakens, Celie chooses to leave her husband and begins a new life. In fact, racial discrimination from the white has made the situation of black women more difficult. When black women get out of the house, they meet the prejudices from white people. “He snatch the cloth and thump down the bolt. He don’t measure. When he think he got five yard he tare it off.” [4] This scene is from the treatment of reverend’s wife, a black woman, buying cloth by a white assistant, which shows the racism. Moreover, Sophia is put into prison because she refuses the offer to be servant of white mayor’s wife and beats the mayor when he beats her first. In order to get out of prison, she becomes a servant for the mayor for years. In order to deal with racial issues, Celie takes some useful measures, which shows her growth in society. When Celie opened the pant-making shop, she “kept the white man Alphonso got to run it” [4], which not only alleviates the racial issue but also realizes the harmonious coexistence between white people and black people to some extent. All of these show the formation of whole personality and the self-growth of Celie in society.

In social space, Celie experiences great changes. From her changes, we can see that black women experienced many encounters in the first half of 20th century, even though the slavery was abolished. But Walker depicts an ideal living space for black women in this novel.

4. Conclusion

As a famous African American female writer, Alice Walker enjoys a high reputation in the world literary world. Her masterpiece, *The Color Purple*, won three great awards in American literary world for her and has attracted many scholars to study and analyze it. It mainly describes the growth of a black woman under pressures from both sexism and racism. Through the analysis from spatial dimension, we learn about Celie’s changes and growth in special historical background as a black women in psychological space, geographical space and social space respectively. More importantly, interpreting the novel from the spatial perspective not only allows us to witness heroine Celie’s growth process, but also maps the unfortunate fate of black women as a whole and their pursuit of black female identity, which is beneficial for us to know about the living conditions of African American women in specific historical environment.

References

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