

Study of Celie's Portrayal in "*The Color Purple*" Under the Theory of Androgyny

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Abstract. The classic novel *The Color Purple* by black American author Alice Walker outlines the journey of Celie, a black woman in the Southern part of America in the early 20th century, as she grows up under the triple oppression of race, gender and class. Celie is abused by her stepfather and then forced to marry Mr. _____, a widower who already has four children, and lives in daily slave-like worry. However, with the help of other women, Celie gradually awakens from her numb and closed state, thinks about her gender and identity, and finally grows up to be an independent woman with individuality, dignity, and self-confidence. Therefore, based on the theory of androgyny, this paper analyzes in depth the development process of Celie's gender consciousness, revealing that her gender consciousness goes from clear boundaries to blurring, and finally achieves integration through self-awakening. In the novel, Celie experiences the questioning and redefinition of her own gender awareness, from the initial limitation of social expectations to the gradual escape from the traditional gender boundaries, and finally realizes the comprehensive awareness of gender. Through an in-depth analysis of the image of Celie and the evolution of her gender cognition in *The Color Purple*, the author hopes to better help readers understand the plurality of individual gender cognition, and to provide useful literary references for the promotion of gender harmony.

Keywords: Alice Walker; *The Color Purple*; Androgynous Theory; Gender Studies.

1. Introduction

Alice Walker is a prominent American author, poet, and activist known for her portrayal of the black female experience and her exploration of social justice. Walker's works usually reflect her sensitivity to social issues such as race, gender, and class, as well as her deep reflections on human nature and human relationships. This characteristic is particularly evident in her novel *The Color Purple*.

Set in the American South at the beginning of the twentieth century, the novel tells the story of Celie, an African American woman who undergoes a profound personal transformation and self-discovery. At the beginning of the novel, Celie is abused by her stepfather and then forced to marry Mr. _____, a widower with four children, and lives a life of slavery and fear. However, with the help of other female characters, Celie gradually awakens from her numb and closed state, and eventually grows up to be a confident, dignified and independent woman with her own personality. Walker's writing is full of emotion and poetry, and she employs a unique language style that emphasizes a deep understanding of nature, spirituality, and humanity. In the book, she portrays many vivid characters including Celie through vivid descriptions and profound dialogues, enabling readers to deeply feel the inner world and emotional changes of each character.

At present, scholars at home and abroad have carried out multifaceted research on *The Color Purple*, mainly focusing on narrative form and technique, thematic research, image analysis research, community consciousness research, feminism and feminist research, psychoanalytic research, ecological theme research and interdisciplinary research. In terms of narrative form and technique, scholars have focused on the impact of the narrative form (e.g., epistolary) and narrative techniques (e.g., focalization and address) employed in the novel on the emotional effect of the story. The thematic research literature on the book centers on the themes of feminist ideology, racism, oppressive conflicts, and the self-establishing growth experiences of African American women. The image analysis research literature on this book pays particular attention to analyzing and exploring



images of femininity and black masculinity. The literature on the book's sense of community focuses on the sense of community demonstrated in the novel, including the importance of family and "sisterhood," as well as reflections on community building and human destiny. The feminism and feminist literature on this book explores the author's concern for women's rights and liberation as expressed through the novel. The psychoanalytic research literature on this book focuses on the trauma theory perspective, exploring the traumatic experiences of African American women and the reconstruction of their self-identity under the dual oppression of racism and sexism. The research literature on the book's ecological themes explores the ecological ideas embodied in the novel and the impact of the author's ecological ideas on the ecological construction of society. The interdisciplinary research literature about the book involves the fields of linguistics and medicine, exploring the connection and interaction between the novel and these disciplines. (Guo Juanjuan, 2015: 12-16) Although the existing studies are well established, most of them presuppose the gender of the protagonist, Celie, and regard it as a fixed and unchanging characteristic. However, in fact, episodes such as Celie's initial oppression and silent suffering, to running away from home and founding a pants company indicate that her gender consciousness is fluid and her femininity also conceals male characteristics. Therefore, it is necessary for this paper to analyze the fluid process of Celie's gender from the perspective of gender plurality with the help of androgynous theory.

The theory of "androgyny" was first introduced into literature by Coleridge, who advocated "androgynous" writing that embodies both male and female qualities. Woolf enriched the meaning of "androgyny" on this basis. Woolf's view of androgyny is essentially "against confrontation and for harmonious coexistence". She believes that "male and female are not unidirectional, static concepts, but will change fluidly with the times, economic and political environments, as well as with changes in the objects of interaction" (Wen Yuxin, 2020: 120). American scholar Judy Butler elaborates on the theory of "gender performance" in her book *Gender Trouble: An Alternative View of Gender Discourse*, which also argues that gender is not a fixed and unchanging characteristic, but rather "indeterminate and unstable, and that gender, and indeed all identities, are performative", emphasizing the fact that gender is not a fixed and unchanging characteristic, but rather "fluid and static" (Wen Yuxin, 2020: 120). "It emphasizes the fluidity and diversity of gender. (Yan Zesheng, 2004: 38-44.)

Celie's sense of gender is not static but fluid. As the plot develops and she interacts with others, she breaks free from the shackles of societal expectations, demonstrates her desire for power and self in her interactions with male characters, and gradually learns to support each other with other female characters. The purpose of this paper is to use androgynous theory to analyze the role of Celie, and to explore in depth the psychological changes experienced by Celie in the process of gender cognitive awakening and gender transformation. In the first stage, Celie is trapped in the clear boundaries of gender consciousness by the constraints of social expectations and traditional gender concepts. In the second stage, with the care and support of other female characters, Celie's understanding of gender roles begins to blur. She begins to reflect on and challenge societal expectations and develops a greater understanding and empathy for the other female characters. In the third stage, Celie runs away from home and starts her own business by founding a pants company. Celie discovers her independence and strength, breaking free from the constraints of traditional gender roles, realizing the integration of her own gender, and gaining a more comprehensive and free understanding of her own identity. In doing so, this paper will provide a unique perspective that will help readers explore how Celie transcends traditional gender roles and structures and how she navigates her own gender identity in a society with stereotypical gender expectations.

2. The Constraints of Social Expectations

In *The Color Purple*, Celie is initially bound by traditional societal attitudes, and she is confused about her identity and gender roles. Celie grew up in the American South in the early 20th century, and as a black woman, she was under the triple oppression of race, gender and class. According to Beauvoir, "The reference that defines and distinguishes woman is man, but the reference that defines

and distinguishes man is not woman. She is the subordinate, the inessential in opposition to the essential. He is the subject, the Absolute, and she is the Other." (Simon de Beauvoir, translated by Tao Tiezhu, 2004: Preface) The social structure of the United States has forced black women to be the "other" of the "other".

Celie experiences the abuse of her stepfather in her early years, and then she is forced to marry Mr. _____ and live a life full of fear and slavery. These experiences leave Celie with a lower status in society, lacking autonomy and not knowing "how to fight":

Don't let them run over you, Nettie say. You got to let them know who got the upper hand.

They got it, I say.

But she keep on. You got to fight. You got to fight.

But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive. (Alice Walker, translated by Tao Jie, 1998: 15)

This portrayal highlights Celie's inner struggle and confusion, showing the loss of her autonomy. Nettie's words embody a sense of liberation, encouraging Celie to realize her own value and power, and in this way to fight against the oppression and manipulation in society. However, Celie's response reveals her deep-seated helplessness and confusion about the struggle and fight for her rights. She has been in a state of passive acceptance of her fate for a long time, and is at a loss as to how to struggle and fight for her rights. This state of mind reflects her inner fear and despair, as well as her desire to change the status quo but lack of confidence and direction for practical action.

In the beginning of the novel, Celie shows identification with traditional gender roles. She accepts the expectations placed on her by society and believes that women should obey men and suffer in silence. For example, Mr. _____'s sister, Kate, tells Celie to "fight them herself," but Celie believes that she should "keep quiet" in order to live (19). When abused by Mr. _____'s son, Harpo, Celie imagines herself as a tree in order to suffer in silence. (20) These perceptions and experiences have taken a toll on her self-worth, and she sees men as the authority and dominator, and herself as the object to be dominated and controlled. The influence of such traditional gender concepts makes Celie's boundaries in her self-perception become clearer, and she is unable to escape from society's preconceived position of what is expected of her as a woman. After Sofia marries Harpo, Celie believes that she should "stay home and keep the children." (29)

At the same time, Celie does not possess a sense of female alliance and lacks awareness of the importance of women supporting and uniting with each other. When Harpo asks Celie how to get Sofia to obey him, Celie tells Harpo that he should beat Sofia:

I think bout this when Harpo ast me what he ought to do to her to make her mind. I don't mention how happy he is now. How three

years pass and he still whistle and sing. I think bout how every time I jump when Mr. _??? call me, she look surprise. And like

she pity me.

Beat her. I say.(30)

This depiction demonstrates Celie's perceptions of gender roles and power relationships early on, as well as the complex emotions within her. At Harpo's question of how to get Sofia to follow his command, Celie suggests beating Sofia. This comes from her own early abuse and misunderstanding of power. She feels a complex mixture of envy and jealousy as she compares her own experiences of abuse to the relaxed attitude Sophia displays in her marriage. Celie sees Sophia's treatment of her husband as a luxury, as she herself has never had this freedom to treat her husband.

Celie was not an isolated case in society at the time, as many women were bound by traditional notions of gender and lacked a true sense of themselves. Celie's experience represents the voice of

many women at the time, who found it difficult to find their independence and autonomy under the constraints of social structures and concepts. Mr. ____'s sister, Kate, believes that "when a woman gets married, she has to keep the house in order" and complains that Mr. ____'s ex-wife does not do housework. (17) This notion reflects the traditional expectations of women's roles in society at the time, namely that women should play a neat and orderly role in the home, echoing Celie's passive acceptance of her role in the family. Sophia asks Celie if she feels nothing at all about being abused by Mr. _____. Celie thinks but believes that it is tolerable because Mr. _____ is her husband, and according to her beliefs, not disobeying her husband is the only way to get to heaven:

What you do when you git mad? she ast.

I think. I can't even remember the last time I felt mad, I say. I used to git mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me.

Then I see how sick she is. Couldn't stay mad at her. Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. Then after while every tune I got mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick. Felt like throwing up. Terrible feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all.

Sofia frown. Nothing at all?

Well, sometime Mr. ??? git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon

be over, I say. Heaven last all ways(34)

This dialogue highlights the religious beliefs of the dominant society of the time as well as Celie's internalization of traditional values, as she links her worth and destiny to her husband's authority, demonstrating a deep identification with her role and societal expectations. God symbolizes religious beliefs and moral codes in the novel. Celie views her suffering and endurance as loyalty to God, which reflects her understanding of religious beliefs and her interpretation of her situation. Heaven symbolizes eternal happiness and liberation in the novel. For Celie, heaven represents her anticipation of the future and her hope of escaping suffering. Her belief that she can only attain eternal happiness after death reflects the contradiction between the reality of her life and her fantasies about the future. Fathers and husbands (males) symbolize family and social authority in the novel. For Celie, her father and husband represent her obedience and submission to her family and society. She views her resentment and anger toward her father and husband as undeserved, and even chooses to hold her tongue when confronted with her husband's abuse, which reflects her submissiveness and fear of family and social authority. Together, God, heaven, fathers and husbands (males) constitute the authority structure and moral norms in society and personal life.

At this stage, Celie is bound by traditional gender concepts and social authority and lacks self-awareness and autonomy. She experienced abuse and slavery, was in a state of passive acceptance of her fate for a long time, felt helpless and confused about how to struggle and fight for her rights, and regarded men as authorities and dominators. At the same time, her perception of traditional gender roles and power relations is also affected, and she lacks a sense of female alliance.

3. The Awakening of Gender Consciousness

As her interactions with the other female characters gradually deepen, Celie begins to think more deeply about her gender roles and begins to question the expectations that society has placed on her. She begins to realize that traditional gender roles define women's actions and thinking differently than her thinking and understanding of gender.

Celie begins to show her skepticism of traditional gender roles in her own behavior and choices. Instead of blindly following society's expectations as she had done in the past, she began to pursue her true inner feelings and needs. For example, despite the fact that society at the time defaulted to pants as men's clothing and that Mr. _____ would not allow his wife to wear pants, Celie violates the social expectations and the restrictions set by her husband, and begins to wear pants with Sag's

encouragement because they are more satisfying for her needs to work. (111) Celie begins to show more autonomy and independence and is no longer limited to the behaviors and roles expected of a traditional woman. Always contrary, she shows aggression unbecoming of traditional femininity and tries to kill her husband after discovering that Mr. _____ is hiding a letter from her sister Nettie:

Naw, I think I feel better if I kill him, I say. I feels sickish. Numb, now.(93)

In this passage, Celie's desire to kill represents her deep-seated anger and rebellion. She used to be passively at the mercy of fate and society, but after discovering Mr. _____'s betrayal, her anger and resentment reaches its limit. This anger is not only against Mr. _____'s personal betrayal, but also against the whole social system. By imagining the killing of Mr. _____, Celie tries to express her anger against bondage and oppression, showing her deep inner struggle and determination to be free.

Celie begins to help and understand the other female characters. She takes good care of Sag during her illness, shifts her attitude toward Sophia from hostility to friendliness, and begins to speak well of her in front of Harpo:

Some womens can't be beat, I say. Sofia one of them. Besides, Sofia love you. She probably be happy to do most of what you say

if you ast her right. She not mean, she not spiteful. She don't hold a grudge.

He sit there hanging his head, looking retard.

Harpo, I say, giving him a shake, Sofia love you. You love Sofia.(51)

In the previous section, Celie's attitude toward Sofia is hostile, and she even suggests that Harpo beat Sofia as a sign of authority. This shift reflects Celie's skepticism and reexamination of traditional gender roles. Instead of simply viewing Sofia as an enemy or rival, she begins to understand and support her from a female perspective. This also reflects Celie's own inner growth and liberation, as she comes to realize that women should support and understand each other, rather than compete with or exclude each other.

Not only that, Celie also helps Sofia sew a quilt (54) and cleans her wounds after she is imprisoned (70). When confronted with Harpo's lover, Squeaky, Celie encourages her to use her real name:

Make Harpo call you by your real name, I say. Then maybe he see you even when he trouble.(67)

Celie no longer just sees the surface of other women, but tries to understand their hearts and needs. She realizes that a name is not just a sign, but a symbol of an individual's identity and dignity. By encouraging Harpo's lovers to use their real names, Celie expresses her support and respect for women's self-identity, believing that women should be called by their real names rather than passively accepting other people's definitions and names.

These behaviors show that Celie begins to pay attention to other women's situations and helps them when she can, in contrast to the traditional gender roles in which women compete with each other for male attention.

Sag plays an important role in this transition. She helps Celie find a letter from her sister Nettie, cautioning Celie not to look for a God created by men in a church or in the Bible, but to find her own God in the harmony of nature:

Now that my eyes opening, I feels like a fool. Next to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr. ???'s evil sort of shrink. But not altogether. Still, it is like Shug say, You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall.

Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock.(151)

Sag's influence causes Celie to begin to reexamine her views on God and men. Sag cautions Celie not to look for the God created by men in church or in the Bible, but to look for her own God in nature. This shift in perception causes Celie to begin to question the influence of men on her and society's expectations of her. By recognizing the corrosive power of men in her life, Celie begins to realize that she needs to free herself from male definitions and influences and reclaim her identity and power. She begins to see that men are not omnipotent, but can be excluded, and this change in thinking allows her to pursue her true inner feelings and needs. This shift demonstrates Celie's skepticism of traditional gender roles and societal expectations, as well as her reconceptualization of her own identity and worth. By excluding men from her life and reexamining her place in nature, Celie begins to reclaim her power and autonomy.

Overall, Celie gradually shows her skepticism of traditional gender roles at this stage and begins to pursue her true inner feelings and needs. At the same time, her understanding and support of other female characters reflects her gradual realization of the importance of mutual support and understanding among women. By re-examining her views on God and men, Celie begins to get rid of the male influence on her and rediscover her own identity and strength.

4. Integration of Gender Awareness

Celie gradually discovers her independence and strength, free from the limitations imposed on traditional gender roles. She begins to realize that she should not let society's expectations limit her development. She gradually gains initiative in her relationships with male characters and changes her image of being subservient. She finally realizes the integration of gender consciousness and is no longer bound by traditional gender concepts, possessing her own independent and autonomous attitudes and values.

In terms of self-awareness, Celie becomes more autonomous. She becomes unconcerned about what others think and is full of concern when Darlene tries to change her way of speaking; she affirms her existence when the outside world denies her; at the same time, Celie becomes more optimistic about life, from wishing only that she would not die to being hopeful about life:

Phis, Darlene trying to teach me how to talk. She say us not so hot. A dead country give-away. You say us where most folks say we, she say, and peoples think you dumb.

Colored peoples think you a hick and white folks be amuse.

What I care? I ast. I'm happy.

.....

What I care bout dogs? I think.(167)

Celie shows an insistence on her unique personality and way of speaking, and no longer cares about what others think or say. She emphasizes her own attitude, believing that as long as she is happy, she can be happy and does not need to think too much about what others think. She begins to pay attention to her own inner feelings and needs, and is no longer forced to adapt to society's expectations of her, showing her independent thinking and individuality.

I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here.(160)

Celie expresses affirmation and acceptance of her existence. While recognizing her own inadequacies and difficulties, she still firmly believes that she has the right to exist in this world and expresses her cherishing of life and hope for the future. This shows Celie's gradual process of realizing her self-knowledge and self-affirmation, as she is no longer swayed by external evaluations and difficulties, but begins to truly accept and affirm her existence and value.

I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children.(166)

Celie mentioned that she has love, work, money, friends and time, all of which were lacking in her life before. By having material and spiritual support such as love, work and money, she has rediscovered the meaning and purpose of her life and thus has confidence and optimism for the future. Money and work represent women's economic independence and social status. This transformation shows the growth and self-perception that Celie has achieved after all the difficulties, and it also reflects the changes in her social role and identity.

In terms of her perception of gender relations, Celie is free from the limitations of traditional gender concepts. The power relationship between Celie and Mr. _____ changes subtly; she no longer tolerates Mr. _____'s abuse and even hopes that he will be afraid of her. After that, their relationship gradually improves and Celie even changes Mr. _____'s stereotypical thinking:

Mr. _____ ast me the other day what it is I love so much bout Shug. He say he love her style. He say to tell the truth, Shug act more manly than most men. I mean she upright, honest. Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost, he say. You know Shug will fight, he say. Just like Sofia. She bound to live her life and be herself no matter what.

Mr. _____ think all this is stuff men do. But Harpo not like this, I tell him. You not like this. What Shug got is womanly it seem like to me. Specially since she and Sofia the ones got it.(213)

Celie argues that such bluntness and honesty are not only masculine qualities, but can also be feminine, challenging the traditional notion of gender that sees certain qualities as male-specific. This dialogue demonstrates Celie's freedom from traditional gender constraints, her realization that women can also display "masculine" qualities, and her reinterpretation and understanding of gender temperament. This change of mindset demonstrates her maturity and openness to her own perception of gender and her pursuit of gender equality.

Whoever heard of such a thing, say Mr. _____. I probably didn't whup your ass enough.

Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say. Then I say, You better stop talking because all I'm telling you ain't coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words.

Shit, he say. I should have lock you up. Just let you out to work.

The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say.(160)

Celie expresses her protest and defiance against Mr. _____ in a strong tone. She shows her strong will and indomitable spirit by using sarcastic and provocative words against Mr. _____, stating that she will not give in even if she is imprisoned. This reveals Celie's deep-seated anger and resentment, as well as her strong will to face adversity bravely.

How you Celie, he say.

Fine, I say. I look in his eyes and I see he feeling scared of me. Well, good, I think. Let him feel what I felt.(173)

Celie gradually gains the initiative in her power relationship with Mr. _____ and no longer passively accepts the oppression and control of the other party. Her change in attitude also demonstrates a renewed sense of her own capabilities and values, which changes the power dynamic with Mr. _____.

I told him you say they both wear long robes, sort of like dresses. That was the day he come to visit me while I was sewing and ast me what was so special bout my pants.

Anybody can wear them, I said.

Men and women not suppose to wear the same thing, he said. Men spose to wear the pants.(215)

Celie offers a different view on Mr. _____'s notion that wearing pants should not just be a male preserve, but a choice for all. This reflects her pursuit of gender equality and freedom, and not

accepting the limitations of traditional gender roles. This reflects Celie's challenge and change to traditional gender concepts as a self-reliant woman.

In this part, Celie gradually gets rid of the constraints of social expectations and is no longer limited by traditional gender concepts, possessing her own unique and firm values. She doesn't care about external criticism and negativity, insists on affirming herself, and is full of hope for the future and life. She has a more mature understanding of gender and is no longer afraid of male roles, even changing the stereotypical ideas of male roles.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper uses androgynous theory to analyze the developmental trajectory of the protagonist of *The Color Purple*, Celie's gender perception, from clarity to ambiguity and then to integration. At first, Celie is bound by traditional gender concepts and social expectations and lacks autonomy and correct self-knowledge. In the face of male characters' abuse, she tolerates it; in the face of female characters' suffering, she turns a deaf ear to it. However, as Celie interacts with other female characters and awakens to herself, she gradually becomes skeptical of traditional social concepts and pays more attention to her own needs and experiences. Eventually, Celie breaks free from the traditional gender roles, gains the initiative in her relationship with male characters, and establishes mutually helpful alliances with other female characters. Celie's experience exemplifies that gender is not a fixed characteristic, but rather changes fluidly with individual experiences and social contexts.

This paper can provide a unique perspective on gender studies and help readers to re-examine the constraints and limitations imposed on individuals by traditional concepts of gender. Readers can better understand the status and role of women in society and promote the realization of gender equality and harmony.

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