

Struggle and Reconciliation: Alice Walker's Trauma Narrative in The Temple of My Familiar

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Abstract. Alice Walker, a renowned African American female writer, has long focused on the living conditions and subject construction of Black women, and in her works, she presents the psychological trauma suffered by women, a vulnerable group, under the dual oppression of race and gender from the perspectives of multiple characters. Her novel *The Temple of My Familiar* portrays major characters such as Lissie, Hal, Fanny, Suwelo, Carlotta, Arveyda and Zedé through fragmented forms including dialogues, diaries, oral narratives, letters and monologues, telling the stories of trauma and healing experienced by female characters through interwoven narrative threads. For instance, by interpreting the diaries and oral history left by her ancestors, Fanny reveals the struggles and pains of several generations of women in her family under sexual violence, racial discrimination and cultural rupture. Meanwhile, through the transmission of past-life memories, the female characters in the novel gradually establish a unique dialogical relationship with others, achieve healing after trauma and the mending of wounds, and ultimately transform the dilapidated "temple" into a spiritual community "homeland" that integrates Black culture, female spirituality and a harmonious ecology. Therefore, based on Judith Herman's trauma theory, this paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the forms of individual and collective trauma in the novel, and explores how memory and dialogue serve as the source of healing to provide spiritual comfort and strength for women. In addition, the author hopes to enrich the current academic research on trauma literature and provide valuable theoretical references for it by analyzing the multiple relationships among trauma, memory inheritance and dialogical healing.

Keywords: Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*, Trauma Theory, Dialogue

1. Introduction

As a sequel to *The Color Purple*, the representative work of African American female writer Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar* reveals how trauma is transmitted intergenerationally through time and the human body by virtue of its unique space-time structure and multiple narrative perspectives. Breaking the limitations of linear history, the novel traces back 500,000 years of human history and demonstrates the accumulation and influence of gender oppression, racial discrimination, colonial violence and other injustices in history. In the novel, Lissie and Hal are a model couple who treat each other as equals and with mutual respect; Fanny breaks free from the

sexual objectification by her husband Suwelo and establishes a relationship of free love with the musician Arveyda; Carlotta, Suwelo's lover, gradually shakes off objectification and achieves awakening... In the end, all the characters obtain salvation in the "spiritual community" of Black women through memory inheritance and narrative sharing.

At present, domestic research on *The Temple of My Familiar* is relatively scarce, mostly revolving around the following key words: ecofeminism, nature, Black Feminism, harmonious writing, ecological aesthetics and dehumanization. From the perspective of ecofeminism, Lu Meng argues that Walker transcends womanist theory through triple criticism [1]; Zhang Qianqian proposes that the associated oppression of women and nature should be deconstructed to construct multiple harmonies [2]; Xu Yingjing emphasizes the urgent significance of Walker's ecological thoughts for contemporary crises [3]; Wei Haijing focuses on the dual predicament of women and people of color under the hierarchy [4]; Zhao Songzhi interprets the ecological outlook of the text from four dimensions: ecology, morality, aesthetics and practicality [5]. In addition, Guo Xiaoqing reveals through the Lucifer Effect that systematic, situational and objectifying oppression inflicts physical and mental damage on people of color [6]; Zhao Songzhi explores the new relationship between humans and animals from the perspective of animal criticism [7]; Du Yeyan reflects on the commonality of human spiritual values in the field of ecological aesthetics [8]; Chen Yong points out that Black feminist thought contains three meanings: group cohesion, planetary harmony and the pursuit of self [9].

Foreign research, on the other hand, mainly centers on core issues such as womanism, intertextuality and cultural identity. Scholars generally interpret the work from the perspective of womanist ethics, emphasizing its in-depth attention to the collective experience, spiritual dimension and community consciousness of Black women. The academic interpretation of *The Temple of My Familiar* presents a distinctly diverse character. Foreign researchers have conducted an in-depth analysis of the presentation of themes such as race, gender and cultural identity in the text through womanist criticism, cultural semiotics and interdisciplinary research approaches, and at the same time, examined the symbolic meaning of the "temple" in a broader comparative cultural perspective.

Although scholars at home and abroad have conducted in-depth interpretations of *The Temple of My Familiar* from various perspectives, the psychological trauma suffered by the characters in the novel and its healing have not been analyzed yet. In fact, the physical and mental trauma endured by Fanny and the female members of her family, as well as the process of their healing through exploring history, inheriting memory and communicating through dialogue, constitute the core driving force and emotional core of the novel. Therefore, this paper will conduct an in-depth analysis of the trauma narrative in *The Temple of My Familiar* based on Judith Herman's trauma theory.

Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* reconstructs the theory of psychological trauma from a sociocultural perspective, proposing that trauma stems from the helplessness of individuals under overwhelming force, leading to a sustained experience of fear, loss of control and the threat of destruction. She also emphasizes the duality of trauma: on the one hand, there is a desire to deny the existence of horrific atrocities, and on the other hand, a hope to make them known to the world. This contradiction is the main opposing conflict of psychological trauma, and also reveals that trauma is not only a physical and mental scar of the individual, but also often a product of the silence of collective history [10]. Based on Herman's theory, this paper will analyze the individual physical trauma and spiritual shadows rooted in racial and gender violence experienced by women such as Lissie, Fanny and Carlotta, and focus on exploring how they seek and ultimately achieve subjective

recovery by establishing a profound dialogical relationship with others and historical memory, revealing the healing power of trauma contained therein.

2. Interweaving narratives: individual memory and collective trauma

Psychological trauma exerts a contradictory dual influence on memory: on the one hand, it manifests as the repression or active forgetting of memory; on the other hand, it presents as the stubborn enhancement of memory, which repeatedly emerges in the form of intrusive flashbacks and is beyond one's voluntary control. "Traumatized individuals may develop traumatic disorders such as 'hyperarousal', 'intrusion' and 'constriction'" [10]. People with traumatic experiences remain vigilant at all times and often feel anxious and uneasy due to minor stimuli. Even when the danger is long gone, traumatized individuals continue to relive the traumatic events in their minds [10]. Because the trauma repeatedly invades the minds of the victims, their lives can hardly develop normally. Finally, when traumatized individuals feel powerless, they may experience a state of surrender, eventually giving up the struggle and entering a "dissociative state" characterized by a split sense of identity, loss of reality, emotional detachment and memory interruption.

The contradiction of traumatic memory described by Herman is profoundly presented in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Fanny's process of interpreting her ancestors' diaries and oral history is both an inevitable way to expose trauma and a source of new pain. When she uncovers the truth of sexual violence suffered by Black women and the identity fragmentation of mixed-race children during the slavery period, these memories not only solidify the collective pain of the women in her family, but also force her into an ethical dilemma: her great-grandmother was forced to alienate herself from her mixed-race daughter to protect her from the harm of slave owners. Although this "separation out of love" intended to end the cycle of trauma, it led to deeper identity confusion for future generations.

Black women were subjected to inhumane treatment and suffered psychological trauma in the context of slavery and colonialism, remaining in a state of "hyperarousal" at all times and being extremely sensitive to any potential danger signals in the environment. In the novel, Carlotta remains vigilant at all times when selling handcrafts. "Her eyes were worried and watchful—she might still have been tensely afloat in the vanilla-bean-pod boat—her face drawn, her mouth hard to imagine in a smile [11]." Through depicting Carlotta's body language, Walker profoundly presents the persistent post-traumatic stress disorder left by colonial trauma. The superimposed state of "worry" and "vigilance" is a pathological alertness caused by long-term violent coercion. The stiff facial nerves are a symptom of traumatic emotional numbness. Carlotta's mouth, which can hardly form a smile, directly points to the strangulation of human instincts by trauma.

At the end of the 1880s, although the racial segregation system in the United States had been abolished, the discrimination against Black women by white people still persisted. Through the novel, Walker exposes the "intergenerational trauma" inflicted on Black women by slavery and colonialism, a phenomenon in which psychological trauma is transmitted from one generation to the next within a family. Lissie mentions her traumatic experience when talking with Suwelo:

But anyway, it was my uncle who sold me. It was the uncle who sold a lot of women and their children. My mother was just begging and pleading and calling for mercy, because she knew about slavers, but these brutes had no ears [11].

Walker intensifies the invisible power of trauma through the calm narrative tone of a child. This scene nakedly presents the core contradiction of intergenerational trauma: kinship is both a carrier of trauma and a tool of perpetration. When the narrator's uncle sells his niece and other Black women and children into slavery, the blood bond subverts family ethics, forcing the victims' bodies to be commodified and their spirits to be persecuted by their close relatives, thus leading to the

disintegration of self-identity. The mother's hysterical begging is essentially a "futile resistance" in traumatic stress: she is fully aware of the brutality of slave traders, yet still makes a final struggle with emotional appeals. The child's "calmness" is actually a dissociative state, and the detail of the mother's begging being "suddenly remembered" by the narrator many years later precisely reflects the fragmentation and intrusiveness of traumatic memory, confirming Herman's view of "memory intrusion".

In the long run, some traumatized individuals may fall into a state of "constriction", their perceptual abilities becoming numb and distorted. The change in perception combines a sense of apathy, emotional alienation, complete passivity and non-resistance, that is, abandoning all autonomous and struggling behaviors [10]. In the novel, Lissie's initial evaluation of her mother is "extremely self-respecting". "There never was a more fastidious or modest woman than my mother. She could not accept so much filth on and about her person [11]." But in the end, Lissie's mother gives up the struggle under the torment of abuse and illness, determined to die. "She willed herself to die [11]." At first, Lissie's mother maintained her dignity with an almost paranoid pursuit of cleanliness, resisting the trampling of her personality by keeping her body clean. However, as violence continued to erode, "filth" had transcended physical dirt to become a metaphor for spiritual contamination. In the end, she gave up the struggle completely, because the demise of the physical body was the only autonomy she could control.

Through the narrative of individual trauma symptoms, Walker reveals the collective trauma suffered by Black women. Carlotta's "hyperarousal" when selling goods on the street is actually a survival defense mechanism left by colonial violence; when Lissie tells the history of her uncle selling family members many years later, the violent scenes of slavery flash back repeatedly, forcing her to endure the pain of "memory intrusion"; and the transformation of Lissie's mother from extreme self-respect to actively seeking death is the ultimate embodiment of "constriction". These seemingly personal trauma responses permeate the entire community and future generations of the family through oral history, family memory and daily behaviors. In fact, the so-called "forgetting" caused by trauma is only pretended forgetting; it will be transmitted horizontally to other relatives and related families and vertically to future generations in the form of intergenerational transmission within families and society [10].

3. Physical and mental rifts: bodily trauma and spiritual shadows

Bodily trauma and spiritual shadows reinforce and exacerbate each other. As the most direct site where violence is inflicted, the body endures visible physical damage and invisible somatic memory, and these traumas are transformed into intrusive memories at the spiritual level through sensory channels. Traumatic events undermine the victim's basic belief in environmental safety, positive self-worth and the rational order of all things in the world [10]. Traumatized individuals suffer immensely because the basic structure of their sense of self is damaged [10].

In *The Temple of My Familiar*, the bodies of enslaved people who were sold suffered severe injuries, and Lissie mentions the inhumane treatment of Black people by slave owners many times. "They made us hop up and down to test the strength in our legs. Our feet were bleeding [11]." Zedé describes the tragic experience of her partner, who died in agony and was even dismembered after death. "Jesús' throat had been cut. They had also removed his genitals. He had been violated in every conceivable way [11]." The destruction of the throat, as a channel of language, symbolizes the deprivation of Black people's right to speak; the removal of the genitals goes beyond killing itself, as the perpetrators suppress the continuation of Black bloodlines by destroying reproductive organs. Since Jesús' mutilated body could not be buried as a complete human form, his body was forever

deprived of the right to be mourned. These physical and mental scars seep into the memory of future generations through Zedé's calm narration many years later. It can be seen that the most vicious aspect of racial violence is that it can transform physical harm into humiliating memories transmitted intergenerationally.

Violence inflicted on the body breeds fear in the mind; suffering endured in the spirit gives rise to self-hatred. Herman points out that the symptoms of hyperarousal and memory intrusion in chronic post-traumatic stress disorder will merge into the static symptoms of depression, resulting in what Lifton calls the "survivor triad": insomnia, nightmares and psychosomatic symptoms [10]. Lissie mentions the spiritual shadow left by her trauma when talking with Suwelo, which repeatedly appears in her dreams in a fragmented form. "In the dream memory there are suddenly days and nights of terror...To our horror, they took our cousins' skins and sometimes cooked and ate our cousins' bodies [11]." The horrific days and nights that suddenly flash in Lissie's dreams and the appalling images of her relatives being skinned and cooked reflect the intrusive nature of traumatic memory. Violent scenes repeatedly invade consciousness in an uncontrolled, fragmented form, confirming the "nightmare" symptom in the "survivor triad".

These psychological traumas are not only confined to the traumatized individuals themselves, but also transmitted to future generations. Arveyda tells Carlotta that the children of Black women who have suffered sexual violence, although unable to understand the root cause of the hatred between their parents when they are young, have their earliest memories in life deeply imprinted with the sensory marks of their mothers' suffering. "The earliest memories of these offspring were of the muffled screams of their mothers, and the scraping of what they thought must be their mothers' backbones against the floor [11]." These memories from hearing and imagination are not the children's rational cognition of the events, but the most primitive and disturbing sensory fragments of the violent scenes. Transcending the scope of language and understanding, they linger in the children's ignorant consciousness and become an inescapable psychological trauma in their spiritual world. The extreme violence experienced by mothers directly permeates the earliest and deepest memories of the next generation in a non-verbal, non-narrative form, planting seeds of fear and pain in the children's hearts, even if they know nothing about the cause and background of the violence.

In the process of being oppressed, women continue to awaken their consciousness and struggle to resist, but with little effect. In the novel, Fanny and her sister Nzingha agree that women are subjected to "systematic" oppression. Nzingha believes that both men and women are suppressed by the system. "Men are mangled by the system, as we are [11]." Fanny agrees and points out that women's oppression is created by men. "The difference is that they help create it. At least the part of it that oppresses women [11]." When oppression becomes unbearable, women begin to join organizations to resist. Nzingha's mother ran away from home and joined an underground organization called "the Mbeles". At the same time, at the political level, women are also constantly engaged in ideological struggle. Fanny no longer believes in the existing government, regarding it as being completely controlled by men. "They are all, as far as I'm concerned, unnatural bodies, male-supremacist private clubs [11]." Even though they clearly recognize the systematic nature of oppression and take action, these struggles are often difficult to shake the huge oppressive structure. The obstruction or failure of their actions not only fails to bring relief, but also makes them more acutely aware of the difficulty and powerlessness of change. This persistent frustration under clear cognition itself becomes a new mental burden, exacerbating the original trauma and despair.

Trauma inflicted on the body is not only physical pain, but also the starting point of the collapse of the spiritual world. Whether it is Lissie's bleeding feet, Jesús' mutilated body, or the images of her relatives being devoured in her dreams, these direct physical violence leave a lasting fear and self-

hatred in the victims' hearts. More distressing is that these scars are not limited to individuals. A mother's screams become her child's earliest memory, and past events recounted calmly become a burden for future generations, so trauma is quietly transmitted intergenerationally. Even when women rise up to resist, the realistic resistance often frustrates their efforts. This conscious powerlessness not only fails to mend the scars, but also adds new despair to the old pain, making the physical and mental rifts deeper and more severe.

4. Subjective recovery: memory inheritance and dialogical healing

The core experience of psychological trauma is disempowerment and disconnection from emotional bonds with others. Therefore, the foundation of healing trauma lies in rebuilding the autonomy of trauma survivors and forging new bonds [10]. The recovery process can be divided into three stages: the first stage is the establishment of safety, the second is recollection and mourning, and the third is the reestablishment of a sense of connection with normal life [10].

The core of recovery lies in rebuilding the individual's autonomy and emotional bonds, and memory inheritance and dialogical healing are the key to achieving this goal. Memory inheritance endows Black women with narrative sovereignty; through forms such as oral narration and diaries, Fanny and other characters transform fragmented traumatic memories into logically coherent narratives. Dialogical healing creates a safe space for emotional bonds; the narration of trauma under the witness of listeners can not only break the state of isolation, but also make mourning bear a collective weight, turning the pain of Black women into a bond connecting the Black community. Working together, the two enable Black women to transform from prisoners of trauma into narrators of history, and gradually repair the damaged relationship between the self and the world in the process of reconstructing the meaning of life. The process from trauma to recovery is the process of becoming an "ordinary person".

In the initial stage of trauma recovery, the establishment of a sense of safety is crucial. Through depicting the plot of Fanny sorting out the diaries of her ancestors about their experiences of slavery, Walker vividly shows how memory inheritance serves as the cornerstone for constructing a sense of safety. The ancestors' diaries, as fragmented evidence recording family trauma, are in themselves chaotic and disturbing, and Fanny, as a descendant, systematically classifies and annotates them. This process endows Fanny with a sense of control over traumatic memory. By transforming scattered and uncontrollable oral narratives into ordered, tangible textual objects that can be read or closed at any time, Fanny draws a narrative boundary for that heavy past. This active control over the presentation of memory effectively buffers the disorderly invasion of traumatic memory, creating a relatively safe buffer zone for Fanny's inner world. In addition, this sorting behavior itself is a kind of intergenerational memory inheritance. Under extreme oppression, the ancestors may have recorded their pain with ciphers or metaphors. Deciphering, understanding and inheriting these words by later generations is not only receiving the trauma information of the ancestors, but also inheriting the fortitude of narrating suffering. This cross-temporal memory inheritance makes Fanny feel that she is no longer a descendant bearing the family trauma alone, but is integrated into a larger life context that, though scarred, is still narrating and resisting. This sense of support from the collective memory of intergenerational connection further consolidates her current psychological security.

In the second stage of "recollection and mourning", dialogical healing plays a core role. By creating a safe space for emotional witness, it enables individuals to face traumatic memory directly and complete the mourning process. In the novel, Lissie confides to Suwelo the trauma of her relatives being abused and killed in her reincarnation dreams, and her fragmented monologue is

essentially the transformation of repressed sensory memory into a narrative that can be borne by language. The repeated use of the phrase "our cousins" elevates personal pain into an empathic bond for collective historical trauma, making individual mourning resonate with the family. This confirms the essence that "mourning requires the participation of witnesses", that is, the listening and response of others can dispel the sense of isolation of traumatized individuals, turning pain from personal pressure into a shared emotional experience.

In the final stage of trauma recovery, it is necessary to reestablish a sense of connection with normal life, that is, individuals can re-trust others and integrate into society. Walker effectively realizes the final leap of the recovery stage through "memory inheritance" and "dialogical healing". By systematically reading the records of family trauma, Fanny transforms the private pain of Black women into evidence of resisting racial oppression. The interpretation and reconstruction of traumatic texts can endow victims with historical subjectivity, and make the individual suffering concealed by mainstream narrative recognized by the ethnic group, thus becoming the foundation for future generations to understand their own blood and identity. This sense of self and belonging brought by memory inheritance is the cornerstone for rebuilding the individual's inner integrity and connection with the outside world. At the same time, the core role of dialogical healing is to accelerate the establishment of a sense of connection. Suwelo abandons the single authoritative mode of historical writing and instead faithfully records the oral history of different characters such as Hal and Lissie, a practice that directly serves the core goal of the third stage of recovery. The creation of such "dialogical historical texts" is essentially to break the monopoly of mainstream discourse on the right to interpret history through the integration of voices from different groups, making the traumatic experiences of marginalized groups such as Black women seen and recognized in the public sphere. Individuals are no longer isolated from the group due to trauma, but are integrated into the construction of collective memory by telling their own experiences, regaining a sense of belonging to the community. Individuals are no longer isolated victims, but active members who participate in forging new bonds and building a more inclusive community.

In the three-stage process of trauma recovery, memory inheritance and dialogical healing work in synergy to gradually drive individuals from the establishment of safety to social connection. The establishment of a sense of safety in the first stage relies on the systematic integration of fragmented trauma by memory inheritance, and a safe zone against the invasion of trauma is established for individuals by drawing boundaries for narratives. Recollection and mourning in the second stage take dialogical healing as the core mechanism, transforming sensory memory into linguistic narrative with the help of listening and witness, and elevating private mourning into a bond for collective connection. In the final stage of reestablishing a sense of connection, the two jointly accelerate the recovery process: memory inheritance establishes the subjectivity and self-identity of traumatized individuals by reconstructing traumatic texts; dialogical healing breaks the monopoly of discourse through the integration of diverse narratives, enabling traumatized individuals to transform from "the object being spoken of" into historical subjects and rebuild their social trust and sense of belonging. At this point, individuals complete the recovery process from being traumatized victims to narrators of history, and then to co-builders of the community.

5. Conclusion

Based on Herman's trauma theory, this paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the psychological trauma suffered by several generations of Black women under the oppression of race, gender and other injustices in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Through characters such as Fanny interpreting the diaries and oral stories left by their ancestors, the paper reveals the pain hidden in individuals and

the entire family. The characters in the book support each other and gradually heal their wounds by inheriting past-life memories and confiding in each other. They transform the dilapidated "temple" into a warm spiritual homeland that integrates Black culture, female wisdom and a harmonious ecology. This paper conducts a step-by-step in-depth analysis of the traumatic experiences of Black women and how they achieve spiritual healing and psychological recovery. First of all, trauma is not an isolated event; its symptoms will permeate from individual women to the entire community and future generations, and solidify into the collective scar of Black people in the process of intergenerational transmission. Secondly, trauma has the mutually exacerbating nature of physical and mental harm. Physical violence directly gives rise to spiritual shadows, and the frustration of women's resistance adds new despair, making the physical and mental rifts continue to deepen. Finally, the core of recovery lies in rebuilding subjectivity and emotional bonds. Through memory inheritance and dialogical healing, Black women gradually regain the right to interpret traumatic stories, repair the broken inner integrity and external connections, thus reconstructing the meaning and belonging of life on the basis of fragmentation. By interpreting and analyzing the trauma narrative and healing mechanism in *The Temple of My Familiar*, this study reveals how Walker uses strategies such as memory inheritance and dialogical relationships to realize the trauma transformation of Black women, enriching the academic understanding of trauma writing in literary works. At the same time, this paper responds to the current social attention to historical trauma and intergenerational repair, promotes the understanding of the living predicament of marginalized groups through literary interpretation, and provides a reference for exploring the interaction between literary narrative and psychological healing.

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