

“THE WEIGHT OF UNSPOKEN WOUNDS: TRAUMA AND NARRATIVE FRAGMENTATION IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*”

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Abstract:

This article focusses on trauma representation in Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982). The novel's focus on female survivors, employing her unique narrative strategy, epistolary confession, provides insights into the unrepresentability of traumatic experiences. Applying the theories of Cathy Caruth (1996) and Bessel van der Kolk (2014), this article explains and investigates the psychological fragmentation of the protagonist. Caruth's model elucidates how Celie's fragmented letters embody belatedness while van der Kolk's framework informs the somatic symptoms. This dual theoretical approach bridges literary and clinical trauma studies, providing a comprehensive theoretical framework to analyse how the narrative of the main character is portrayed in the novel. The study finds that the use of language is inherently challenging, given the multiple layers of meaning-making. The results indicate that trauma disrupts the protagonist's mental processes, which further leads to delayed responses, fragmented memories, and long-term mental health consequences.

Introduction

Human history is inextricably linked to the pervasive impact of natural and man-made catastrophes. These sudden, destructive events leave indelible marks on the human psyche, as the long-term effects of trauma appear as enduring emotional and psychological scars. Essentially, any distressing experience becomes traumatic when it presents stressors beyond an individual's capacity to cope. Makwana (2019) elaborates that the destructive reach of these events extends far beyond physical damage, such as the loss of homes and property. They inflict deep psychological wounds on victims, often leading to chronic mental health challenges. Indeed, many survivors develop mental health abnormalities after experiencing such devastating incidents, emphasising their overwhelming psychological, not just physical, impact. Trauma, as Giller (1999) suggests, is a deeply personal event that overwhelms the ability of an individual to integrate emotional experiences. While scholarly consensus affirms the significant relationship between violent events and their psychological effects on individuals and communities, the precise severity of these impacts on human mental health continues to be a subject of scholarly discussion (Bolin, 1985).

The concept of trauma originates from the Greek word, which means “wound” or “injury”. Initially, it referred only to physical injuries. However, by the late 19th century, its meaning expanded to encompass psychological wounds, emotional and mental disturbances resulting from distressing experiences. The modern understanding of trauma emerged alongside developments in psychology, psychiatry, and literature, reflecting a growing recognition that catastrophic events could leave lasting scars on the mind as well as the body of the traumatised individual. The scientific study of psychological trauma gained prominence with the significant work of Jean-Martin Charcot and Pierre Janet in the late 1800s, who explored hysteria as a response to traumatic experiences. Sigmund Freud further developed these ideas, particularly in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), co-authored with Breuer, where he introduced the idea that suppressed memories of traumatic events might manifest as psychological indicators. Freud's

later work on war neuroses and childhood trauma laid the foundation for psychoanalytic approaches to trauma, emphasising its unconscious persistence (Goetz et al., 1995).

The two World Wars and the Vietnam War heightened awareness of trauma, especially through the diagnosis of “shell shock” during World War I and later through post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which was officially recognised in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)* in 1980. These developments emphasise trauma’s link to intense violence, loss, and helplessness, shaping modern clinical and literary discussions.

Initially emerging from the study of hysteria, a poorly understood psychological condition with erratic symptoms, trauma studies gained further traction after World War I, as the psychological scars on soldiers became undeniable. Terms like *shell shock* and *traumatic neurosis* entered public discourse, and war literature began exploring the deep psychological wounds left by combat. Freud himself revisited his earlier theories in response to these wartime traumas, refining his understanding of how catastrophic events disrupt the psyche (Herman, 1992). *Trauma* was originally part of medical discourse but has since become a crucial concept in the humanities. Building on Freud’s work, Cathy Caruth, a prominent figure in the Yale School of literary theory, established the foundations of contemporary trauma studies in the 1990s. Caruth’s influential works, “*Trauma: Explorations in Memory*” (1995) and “*Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*” (1996), played a pivotal role in shaping trauma criticism.

Trauma theory is inherently interdisciplinary, intersecting with psychology, sociology, history, politics, and literature. Caruth, following Freud’s legacy, shifted the focus from the traumatic event itself to its lingering psychological aftermath (Balaev, 2008). Caruth defines trauma as a mental *wound* caused by an overwhelming experience so devastating that the mind cannot fully process it. Because trauma resists complete assimilation, it remains inaccessible to ordinary recollection, manifesting instead through fragmented repetitions, nightmares, and involuntary flashbacks (Caruth, 1996).

Trauma has been a primary concern for both literary writers and theorists, both as a psychological and scholarly phenomenon. There has been an increase in the number of narratives in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that investigate the non-linear, fragmented, and unspeakable nature of trauma and its most extreme experiences. This research examines the various levels of traumatic experiences faced by the protagonist Celie in *The Color Purple*. Since Celie’s circumstances are different and so are her existential crises, this research argues that the literary portrayal of the character reflects societal problems and issues creatively.

Problem Statement

In the novel, *The Color Purple* Celie, the protagonist confronts several challenges heading to different stages of trauma. Though, she overcome her horrifying past and its memories, she does survives and adjusts to the new reality of her life. This research article explore the mechanisms of her survival, arguing that her journey reflects a complex process of healing following sustained psychological abuse

Literature Review

Chapagae (2025) examined the socio-cultural context of African American communities, focusing on gender inequality, discrimination, love, and sexuality as depicted in *The Color Purple*. The study centres on Shug Avery, exploring her life and worldview, which challenge the norms of African-American patriarchal society. Her rebellious attitude and her relationship with Celie reveal various aspects of her personality. The research highlights that her bond with Celie offers insight into the representation of women of colour. She positions herself as an empowered woman of colour, voicing her resistance to the patriarchal system through her actions.

Ahmed & Qasim (2025) explored the concept of Epidermalization of Inferiority in the novel, *The Color Purple* (1982). The theoretical framework for this investigation is based on Fanon's (1952), *Black Skin, White Masks*, while the work of Enberg, "The Epidermalization of Inferiority and the Lactification of Consciousness", provides the foundation for the theoretical framework. This research identifies the elements of chromatism, essentialism, and self-objectification in the novel, employing a qualitative research method and discourse analysis to examine the text. The findings reveal that the Epidermalization of Inferiority is a pervasive theme in the novel and that the experiences of the characters are shaped by it.

Aydin (2023) discusses Celie's transformative journey in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. The study states that Celie evolves from a passive to an active, assertive, and independent individual. It highlights how, as readers follow her story, they see her gradually developing her own identity. She shifts from being a victim to a victor, challenging the entrenched patriarchal norms. Her efforts to free herself, both psychologically and economically, as well as physically, are key to her liberation and growth from self-negation to self-assertion and self-actualisation.

Doll (2022) highlighted many similarities between Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in her study. She emphasises that both novels, set in the mid-20th century, focus on protagonists of the same race, gender, and social background. The most notable similarity is the shared sexual trauma faced by Pecola Breedlove and Celie. Both characters experience incestuous rape, which leads to pregnancy shortly after their first menstruation. The research notes that although they share many experiences and traits, the consequences of their trauma diverge significantly. By the end of *The Color Purple*, Celie's life is marked by love and fulfilment, whereas Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* ends up scavenging through trash, speaking to herself about her imagined blue eyes. Both Novels depict how these two individuals cope very differently with childhood sexual abuse resulting from incest. Together, Morrison's and Walker's works explore how contrasting socioeconomic backgrounds shape the characters' traumatic experiences and their coping mechanisms.

In their research, Noufel & Ikorichene (2016) highlighted the trauma of slavery and its legacies in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. This research emphasises that the writer has drawn upon Jeffrey C. Alexander's *Social Trauma Theory* to identify the traumas associated with slavery. They first examined slavery as a cultural trauma that threatens the collective identity of Afro-Americans, with the hypothesis that the recurrent motif of rape finds its explanation in this cultural trauma. Second, they analysed the healing process that Hurston, Morrison, and Walker engage in as carrier groups to heal Black society. Lastly, they contribute to the discussion through their novels by voicing the trauma of slavery and bringing it into the public sphere. After investigating the three selected novels in the light of Alexander's *Social Trauma Theory*, the researcher has concluded that these Afro-American writers see the prevalence of rape as a legacy of slavery.

Chukwuma (2024) analysed the marriage dynamics within African-American society. The researcher has focused on Zora Neale Hurston's and Alice Walker's novels, "*Their Eyes Were Watching God*" and "*The Color Purple*". The researcher claims that the primary focus of this study is to analyse both female protagonists, Janie Mae Crawford and Celie, and to consider how their marriages have shaped their growth as independent women within a patriarchal society that prioritises men. Similarly, the researcher argues that these women interact with both female and male characters. While women come together to support each other in their journey towards individuality, men rely on violence and oppression to exert power. Both novels portray the silencing of black women through several layers of oppression. Both emotionally and physically, they have endured violence and abuse while at the same time

they have been regarded as objects for men to harm. Throughout these novels, both protagonists have attained individuality with the help of sisterhood and resilience.

Wandi (2024) examined the effects of the patriarchal system on women in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The researcher states that the patriarchy is a social system that places men in authority. They analysed the forms and impacts of patriarchy within *the novel*. For this purpose, a descriptive qualitative approach was employed. The data used in this research were drawn from Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, published in 1982. Data were collected through a detailed reading of the novel. The researcher analysed the data using Silvia Walby's theory of patriarchy. The study's findings revealed six forms of patriarchy in *The Color Purple*: patriarchy in paid employment, the household, culture, sexuality, violence, and the state. Additionally, the researcher identified three effects of patriarchy: marginalisation, gender discrimination, and oppression.

Lamrabet (2024) explores Queer Hospitality and Resistance in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Walker's *The Color Purple*. The study suggests that hospitality is a social and ethical concept that significantly influences how queer desire is portrayed and negotiated in American literature. The researcher highlights that both novels feature queer female protagonists navigating the boundaries and opportunities of the hospitality industry. The differing eras of these works provide vital insights into how hospitality has shaped the queer experience over time and whether social, cultural, or political contexts have impacted the depiction of queer desire. Additionally, by comparing these texts, the researcher identifies recurring patterns in how queer individuals navigate challenges and opportunities related to hospitality across American history and literature. The thesis emphasises that hospitality in both works extends beyond mere welcome; it also involves challenging unjust power structures. This theme is evident in the struggles of the main female characters to find a balance between seeking accepting environments and facing societal pressures. Dasgupta (2022) analysed the novel written by Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, in light of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, examining Celie's transformation from the 'Other' in De Beauvoir's terms to 'Self' throughout the novel and her growth in speaking for herself, moving from silence under the oppression of her step-father and later her husband. The researcher further questions whether Celie's 'voicelessness' can be equated with silence, as she continually records her experiences and emotions in her diary, which also serves as a form of expression. Additionally, the researcher claims that this study compares and contrasts the characters of Celie, Shug, Sofia, and Nettie in light of *The Second Sex*, evaluating how Alice Walker portrays Celie's liberation from male domination through the lesbian relationship between Shug Avery and her brief observation of Walker's depiction of the 'Black Lesbian'. Simone de Beauvoir discusses how women have been regarded as inferior to men for centuries.

Mogea (2022) studied the novel "*The Color Purple*." The researcher states that this study aims to explore violence and its impact on the characters in the novel. The design employed for this study is a qualitative research method that presents data in the form of words, sentences, paragraphs, and quotations. The author gathers and selects data from the primary source, the novel itself, and secondary sources, including books on research, literature, and other relevant references supporting the analysis. In analysing the data, the author uses an objective and mimetic approach to examine the literary work as a reflection of human life. The results show that African American women, as depicted in Celie's experience, are poorly treated physically, sexually, and mentally by black men, introduced as her stepfather and her husband. These harmful treatments stem from an internal factor associated with Celie's straightforward character: a fear of confrontation. Additionally, external factors arising from the social conditions of that time influence men's perspectives on black women, who are

perceived as socially inferior, making them often the targets of cruel treatment by both white and black men.

Rorintulus et al. (2022) examined the deconstruction of patriarchal power over females, society, and education in the novels "*Bekisar Merah*" and "*The Color Purple*". This analysis is based on the survival of women who feel subjugated and are trying to fight for their rights. The analyst compares the same situation between the novels' main characters, which is explained using the qualitative research method. The data for this study were collected through a close reading process, where notes were taken and each sentence was coded. The researcher employed feminist intersectional theory to examine the oppression of female characters in the novels. The findings reveal that discrimination, marginalisation and dominance are being experienced by the main character due to society, family, race and gender. The subordination and violence experienced by the women in the novels are due to gender inequality.

Vypracovala (2022) analysed Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Sapphire's *Push*. This study aims to analyse sexual violence and child abuse that result in generating trauma. This research asserts that the protagonist of each novel is a victim of sexual abuse. This abuse plays a significant role in developing their psyches and their ability to return to live everyday lives. The researcher argues that a comparative study of the three novels reveals the protagonists' journeys and essential psychological developments. The researcher focused on the terms "happy ending," "realistic ending," and "tragic ending." The findings reveal that in the novel *The Color Purple*, Celie finds a happy ending, Pecola finds a tragic ending, and Precious finds a realistic ending.

Nurbayani (2021) explored the theme of violence and abuse in Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, drawing on the theories of Suffering by Azam Syukur, Structural Analysis by A. Teeuw, and the study of Literary Psychology. Celie lived a life full of abuse and violence, first at the hands of her stepfather and then her husband. The data is collected using the qualitative descriptive method. The researcher argues that the findings reveal that the character of Celie experiences different kinds of sufferings ranging from psychological, physical and even sexual.

Songire (2015) examined the novels *The Color Purple* and *Meridian* and found traces of exploitation, marginalisation and humiliation of blacks and, more particularly, black women. The main characters in the novel, along with the other women, suffer from domestic abuse and violence, revealing the old rules of racism, male dominance and patriarchy. These novels portray the suffering of black women and their ability to stand against the odds. These women found new ways to become more confident and independent.

Qing (2020) analysed *The Color Purple* and described it as a novel that represents the trauma experienced by African women. The study reveals the traumatic history of women suffering from domestic abuse. The main character, Celie, suffered from assault and abuse at a very young age from her stepfather. But this suffering does not end here; instead, it continues throughout her life until she stands up for herself and leaves her husband. This research points out that Celie suffered from different traumas, including Isolation trauma, Domestic Violence trauma, Gender trauma, etc. Using the trauma theories of Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth, the researcher unveils the traumas of Celie and her courage to walk out of her traumatic marriage with Mr ____.

Budi et al. (2017) examined Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* from the perspectives of inequality and oppression. He argued that the main character, Celie, faces domination and can resist through her self-determination. The researcher claimed that it is through Celie's self-determination that she can fight back and stand on her feet. Celie is an uneducated, unattractive, and repressed woman who is chained in the shackles of her marriage. She proves her sexual self-determination by having a lesbian relationship with Shug, and her

non-sexual self-determination by leaving her husband in Memphis and running her own business, which helps her to combat the oppression she experiences, allowing her to live her life free from oppression. She demonstrates that her discovery of both sexual and non-sexual self-determination enables her to respond to and fight the sexual and non-sexual oppressions she faces, and she can live her life without oppression.

Wani and Gupta (2019) investigated *The Color Purple* and found that the female characters in the novel are marginalised and oppressed. They suffer from sexual and racial issues. These women represent both repression and renewal for humankind and civilisation. American society is racist and sexist, where people become victims of gender, sex, and colour. This research asserts that the novel demonstrates strong elements of discrimination based on sex, race, and culture in South America, where African American women faced suffering in the United States. The central character evolves from a state of ignorance to one of enlightenment. The theme of emancipation heightens her desire and ambition to improve. People become victims of gender and sex with colour.

Padhi (2015) examined the novel *The Color Purple* and found the gradual evolution of a woman's growth from patriarchal oppression. Celie's character faces oppression and ignorance at the hands of men. She was abused physically and mentally by her stepfather and her husband. The novel depicts the slow formation of a new black woman. Celie advances from patriarchal dominance to realisation and freedom by developing good relationships with other women, namely Nettie, Sofia, and Shug Avery. Those women have reshaped Celie from a submissive woman usually oppressed by male characters, especially her father and her husband, into an independent woman who is no longer dependent on men.

Yamini (2020) analysed the novels *The Color Purple* and *The Bluest Eye* and found that the authors depicted many black women facing various forms of struggle. This research asserts that black people are not only harmed and abused by white individuals but also cause harm to each other. Celie, the protagonist in *The Color Purple*, endures domestic violence and abuse from her stepfather and husband. She is beaten by her husband to keep her silent and obedient. Additionally, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline experiences both physical and mental violence at the hands of her husband. The researcher argues that the cycle of oppression and dominance continues throughout their lives.

Gümüş & Yemez (2019) studied the novel *The Color Purple* and analysed traumatic issues like sexual abuse and child abuse. The novel's protagonist, Celie, is the victim of all the abuse. She deals with many traumatic situations throughout the novel, and her coping with the traumatic situations can be explained through Freud's defence mechanisms such as humour, altruism, projection, isolation and repression. The researcher argues that Celie begins her first letter to God and continues it until the end, identifying each traumatic event she has experienced. The letters portray her stressful incidents and also show what type of defence (immature, neurotic or psychotic) she adopted during that stressful situation. The researcher claims that her act of writing the letter can be considered as a "Schizoid Fantasy". She writes those letters to God not because it is a matter of fantasy; instead, she desires to resolve internal and external conflict through those letters. The letters written to God were left unanswered. Furthermore, the researcher claims no defence mechanism for Celie's character has been identified. What turns out to be more dominant in her dealing with the traumatic events in life are immature, neurotic and mature defence mechanisms.

Binakli & Misadi (2003) examined trauma and domestic violence in the novels *The Purple Hibiscus* and *The Color Purple*, written by Chimamanda Adichie and Alice Walker, respectively. Both novels depict the lives of black women in two different communities, one Nigerian and the other African American. The women in these novels suffer from physical and sexual abuse. The researcher argues that to identify the elements of violence and abuse present

in the novels, Robert Hampton's theory on domestic violence from the book "Violence in the African-American Community" and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory from "Trauma Exploration in Memory and Unclaimed Experience" were employed. The analysis reveals that black women are "doubly oppressed" and abused by the men within their communities. Additionally, these women are victims of their intimate partners. The causes of their violence and abuse are rooted in religious, social, and economic factors. The protagonists Kambili and Celie endure hardship at the hands of the men in their communities. After years of brutality and suffering, they finally find the courage to end this ongoing torment and begin living their own independent lives.

Tanritanir and Aydemir (2012) explored the theme of "the sufferings of black women" in Alice Walker's novels *The Color Purple* and *Meridian*, as well as Toni Morrison's works *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eyes*. They argue that, as women of colour, Walker and Morrison are uniquely positioned to portray what it means to be a woman of colour in society. In *The Color Purple*, Celie, the protagonist, is *powerless* to resist the cruelty inflicted by both black and white men. Similarly, *Meridian* tells the story of Meridian, a black woman facing hardship and suffering as she fights for "a reluctant world"- a society where blacks and whites enjoy equal rights.

Cheung (1988) analysed *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior* by unveiling the parallel narrative strategies. The black and Chinese American characters (main characters) work their way from complete speechlessness to expressiveness by breaking through the limitations of race, sex and language. The female main characters in the novel transform into masculine figures to serve as guidance for the female models, providing inspiration, and to incorporate native idioms for stylistic innovation. The researcher argues that initially, they were unable to speak, but now they have developed distinctive voices by expressing their unspoken pain and angst on paper in the form of writing. More importantly, it will record and follow the voices of females from their respective ethnic communities. The researcher further claims that, through their statements, written in a bicultural language, Alice Walker and Kingston show the problems and resources unusual to minority women. Destabilising the patriarchal traditions by retrieving a mother tongue with a rich oral tradition, the writers coordinate breaking the silence, female influence, and redefining.

Talif & Sedehi (2014) studied Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*. This research employs Kristeva's concept of subjectivity to examine the characters' perspectives on discrimination and how gender discrimination impacts their sense of self. The novel addresses issues of sexism, gender discrimination, racism, and their harmful psychological effects on women's minds. The researcher argues that the author criticises discrimination against women. The characters, especially female ones like "Celie, Shug Avery, Sofia, and Squeak", do not have fixed identities; their identities are fluid. They depend on their desires, language, and the speech and emotions of other characters. The researcher claims that the characters are influenced by their own thoughts and feelings.

Furthermore, the desires and speech of other characters also shape them. The researcher also notes that the novel's epistolary style facilitates the reader's understanding of the characters' fluid subjectivity. Therefore, when viewed from different perspectives, the characters, as Kristeva suggests, lack a solid and stable identity. From Julia Kristeva's perspective, the subject speaking, Celie, does not have a fixed identity; instead, she is in the process of becoming. Her identity is constructed through language and interaction with others.

Hsiao (2008) explored Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* to unfold the interplay of gender, language and power. Drawing upon the theories of language and gender, the researcher addresses the novel's three major topics: language, voice and gender. The conscious use of language in the novel employs narrative strategies, reveals the previously unheard stories

of women, and challenges traditional concepts of gender roles. This research argues that the influence of language empowers the speaker, whereas the failure to voice leads to silence and a lack of control. The epistolary style of novel makes the silenced women heard in a double-voiced narrative. Walker also expresses concern over the polarity between gender roles, an arbitrary division that results from language construction. The researcher further claims that their colour and skin tone further complicate her black characters and their hierarchical gender structure.

Talebian (2014) examined the novel *The Color Purple*. This research states that Julia Kristeva claims women have been deprived of their progress and linear improvement over time. They have been confined to circular time, a vicious cycle of repetition. The protagonist, Celie, defies the established gender roles. She joins other female characters to form a sisterhood. The researcher focuses on how the patriarchal system affects women, sisterhood, and its influence on women's individuality and social roles, using Julia Kristeva's concept of women's time. The researcher also emphasises how Celie plans to pursue her desires.

Abbandonato (1991) emphasised the influence of patriarchal society in the novel *The Color Purple*, which uses various methods to highlight patterns of domination and reinforce its control. This analysis suggests that a deconstructive approach to Celie's rape, along with the use of epistolary discourse and womanist connection, helps the protagonist find her autonomy and voice. One method of asserting dominance is through rape, serving as a tool to intimidate and subjugate women. The encounter between a male attacker and a female victim involves victimisation, followed by the loss of bodily integrity and agency. Feminist critic Carine M. Mardorossian challenges the typical view of women rape victims as passive, asserting that speaking out transforms victims into active agents who not only survive but also raise awareness and weaken socio-political power structures. The protagonist, who is repeatedly raped and silenced by her stepfather and later her husband, evolves from a submissive victim to an assertive individual after engaging in meaningful discourse with other women. Through epistolary and face-to-face womanist communication, she begins to shed the stigma of being a rape victim and eventually becomes a rescuer for other oppressed women.

Research Methodology

The research design employs detailed textual analysis and theoretical application to explore how narrative form, embodiment, and intersectional identity influence the portrayal and negotiation of trauma in the selected novel. The study is based on core theories by Cathy Caruth (1996) and Bessel van der Kolk (2014), which offer frameworks for understanding the linguistic, psychological, and somatic aspects of trauma. Through this methodological integration, the thesis aims to identify both common and differing strategies used by these texts in depicting traumatic experiences and healing.

Analysis and Discussion

The primary method of analysis is close reading, which involves a detailed examination of key passages in both novels to identify patterns of narrative fragmentation, linguistic disruption, and embodied trauma. The study represents how each text addresses themes of violation and memory. Women's physical and mental suffering stems not just from society but also from their own families. Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, traces a woman's journey from modesty to independence and strength. Central to the story is sexual trauma. The narrative, written in an epistolary style, follows Celie, a Black woman growing up in rural America during the early twentieth century. She starts by writing letters to God, then to her sister Nettie, as she faces abuse, oppression, and a path to self-discovery. As a girl, Celie is repeatedly raped by her stepfather Alphonso, who also takes away the children she has from this abuse. He then forces her into a marriage with a man called Mr ____ (Albert), who treats

her like a servant. Celie's sole comfort is her deep bond with her sister, Nettie. When Nettie runs away, Celie is left heartbroken and convinced she will never see her again.

Celie's life begins to shift when Shug Avery, a glamorous blues singer and Mr. ____'s ex-lover, moves in with them. Initially jealous, Celie and Shug develop a strong friendship that eventually turns into love. Shug helps Celie realise her self-worth and urges her to confront her husband's cruelty. Significantly, Shug finds a collection of letters that Nettie has been writing to Celie for years, which Mr. ____ had hidden. These letters reveal that Nettie has been living in Africa as a missionary, caring for Celie's children, Samuel and Corrine, who were lost. Through these letters, Celie uncovers family secrets, including the fact that Alphonso was not their biological father.

Walker's (1982) epistolary novel constructs trauma not as discrete events but as an interlocking system of violence. Celie's suffering exemplifies what Crenshaw (1991) would term "intersectional trauma", where racial, sexual, and economic oppressions compound psychological devastation. Her narrative demonstrates Herman's (1992) concept of complex PTSD through chronic, interpersonal violence that systematically dismantles selfhood (p. 119). Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) meticulously portrays acute trauma through a series of escalating violations. This cumulative abuse creates what Herman (1992) terms as "complex PTSD" (p. 119), a profound distortion of self-concept arising from repeated, interpersonal violence. Despite this overarching complex trauma, specific incidents within *The Color Purple* also vividly display acute trauma characteristics. For instance, Celie's rape by her stepfather, Alphonso, is an acutely terrifying event, highlighted by the chilling directness of "He start to choke me saying You better shut up" (p. 11). Her own home, a presumed sanctuary, became a site of terror and constant physical and psychological abuse. Overwhelmed by the inability to halt her suffering and psychological distress, Celie retreated into writing letters to God, a solitary outlet for her anguish. Terrified into silence by her stepfather, God became her sole confidant, her letters laying bare her helplessness, despair, and profound sense of ruination. Her journey was further compounded by an unexpected pregnancy and the absence of support from her ailing mother, who remained blinded by her husband's deceit.

Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, thus unfolds Celie's traumatic experiences through a harrowing yet ultimately redemptive narrative. From the opening command, "*You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy*" (p. 3), Celie's trauma manifests initially through silencing and dissociation, paving the way for her eventual reclamation of voice. Her traumatic reaction, particularly her inability to articulate the rape, exemplifies the "speech terror" often associated with acute trauma. This aligns directly with van der Kolk's (2014) finding that "trauma interferes with the proper processing of memory" at a linguistic level (p. 66).

At nearly fourteen, Celie endured rape by her stepfather in the very confines of her home. The immediate aftermath was marked by her utter inability to disclose the event. As Caruth (1996) points out, amnesia and the inability to speak about a traumatic event are hallmark qualities of trauma, positing that "survival itself can be a crisis" (p. 62). Traumatic experiences are often distorted in the victim's mind, making accurate interpretation and communication profoundly challenging. This distortion can hinder both the victim's ability to articulate what happened and others' capacity to grasp the full impact, thereby impeding the search for help or support (p. 4). Celie, suffering from multiple acute traumas, indeed experienced this amnesia and unspeakability. Her profound inability to tell anyone about her suffering persisted for years, until she finally poured her heart out to Shug Avery.

The traumatic memories are inherently disruptive, overwhelming the mind's natural defence mechanisms (Freud, 1920). Unlike ordinary memories, which integrate smoothly into conscious recollection, traumatic memories remain fragmented and unprocessed (van der Kolk

et al., 1997). As Dori Laub (1995) describes, they exist as distinct islands of developed thinking, detached from the normal process of memory formation. Because they are not fully assimilated, these memories resurface involuntarily through nightmares, flashbacks, or somatic reactions, entirely beyond the individual's control. This fractured recollection not only contributes to chronic conditions like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) but also significantly complicates survivors' ability to articulate their experiences, thereby raising profound questions about the reliability of traumatic testimony.

nobody ever come in there but Mama. But one time when mama not at home, he come. Told me he want me to trim his hair. He bring the scissors and comb and brush and a stool. While I trim his hair he look at me funny. He a little nervous too, but I don't know why, till he grab hold of me and cram me up tween his legs. It hurt me, you know, I say. I was just going on fourteen (p.102).

The traumatic event precedes and overwhelms Celie's ability to make sense of her experience of rape in real-time. The act of her stepfather grabbing and holding her is a sudden, violent intrusion that leaves no space for conscious processing or resistance. Caruth emphasises that trauma is a shock to the system, an event that is experienced profoundly even if it is not immediately comprehended or fully into a coherent narrative. Celie's age highlights her vulnerability and the developmental stage at which this experience occurs, further cementing its capacity to shatter her sense of self and safety without immediate intellectualization. The brevity and unambiguity of the description suggest the inherent difficulty in communicating the unspeakable. For Caruth (1996), the "unclaimed" aspect of trauma often means it resists easy verbalisation or integration into conventional narratives. This silence around the explicit details of the sexual assault, coupled with the focus on the physical pain, highlights how the event remains partially unassimilated in her conscious understanding, despite its devastating.

Van der Kolk (2014) emphasises that in traumatic situations, the body's survival mechanisms take over. While Celie does not describe fight, flight, or freeze overtly, the suddenness of the act would have triggered immediate physiological responses, a surge of adrenaline, a racing heart, muscle tension, and ultimately, pain. The "hurt" is not just emotional but a deep, physical violation that the body registers acutely. This profound breach of trust and safety is central to Van der Kolk's (2014) understanding of trauma's impact on an individual's sense of self and their ability to navigate the world. The domestic setting intensifies the betrayal, as the source of supposed protection becomes the source of terror. This shatters Celie's fundamental sense of security and autonomy at a critical developmental stage.

Celie remained silent throughout all those years. She was finally able to pour her heart out. For the first time, she described her abuse (rape) in detail to Shug. Previously, he warned her not to tell anyone, so she remained silent and suffered the rape and abuse. But after the arrival of Shug and their close friendship, Celie got the courage to tell everything about her past to Shug. Caruth's concept of trauma as an unassimilated event that returns belatedly is evident in Celie's sudden flood of memories while lying in Shug's arms, "Seem like it all came back to me" (Walker, 1982, p. 103) exemplifies trauma's "belated temporality", where the full impact of the event emerges only after a period of latency (Caruth, 1996, p. 17).

I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all came back to me, laying there in Shug arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise. How it stung while I finish trimming his hair. How the blood drip down my legs and mess up my stocking. Mama finally ast how come she find his hair in the girls room if he don't in there like he say. That when he told her I had a boyfriend. Some boy he say he seen sneaking out the back door. It the boy's hair, he say. You know how she love to cut anybody hair, he say. I did love to cut hair, I say to Shug, since I was a little bitty thing. I'd run go git the scissors if I saw hair coming and, I I'd cut and cut, long as I could. That how come I

was the one cut his hair. But always before I cut it on the front porch. It got to the place where every time I saw him coming with the scissors and the comb and the stool, I start to cry. Shug say, Wellsah, and I thought it was only whitefolks do freakish things like that (p. 103).

Caruth's concept of trauma's unrepresentability manifests in Celie's fragmented narration and abrupt shifts between the past and the present. The juxtaposition of the details about the scissors, comb, brush and stool with violent assault creates what Caruth calls the "enigmatic core" of traumatic memory (Caruth, 1996, p. 5). Celie's initial inability to articulate her experience and her later outpouring to Shug reflect Caruth's argument that trauma resists narrative coherence but demands witnessing (p. 11).

Furthermore, Van der Kolk's (2014) neurobiological perspective profoundly illuminates Celie's physical and emotional responses to trauma. Her intensely detailed sensory memories, such as about her rape strikingly reflect van der Kolk's observation that trauma is stored in the body as "implicit memory" that can be triggered years later (p. 66). Celie's dissociation during the assault and her subsequent conditioned response "every time I saw him coming, I start to cry" further aligns with van der Kolk's findings regarding how trauma creates automatic physiological reactions (p. 98).

This enduring impact highlights a peculiar trait of trauma - the inherent difficulty for a traumatized individual to move on from their past. Vander Kolk (2014) explains this neurobiologically, while humans naturally desire to leave painful experiences behind, the part of our brain dedicated to survival is not adept at denial. After a traumatic event concludes, it can be revived by the least hint of danger, activating disturbed brain circuits and leading to the secretion of immense amounts of stress hormones. This cascade leads to negative emotions, strong physical sensations, and sometimes violent behaviours. For Celie, her trauma was immediately provoked by seeing her stepfather with scissors. Although innocent, the scissors symbolised the violent act for her, making her emotional and reactive whenever she saw them with him. This showcases how her response is instinctive and deeply rooted.

When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me saying, you better shut up and git used to it. But I don't never git used to it and now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook. My mama fuss at me an look at me (p. 3).

As a child, Celie was profoundly unaware of her own burgeoning sexuality, making her even more vulnerable to the repeated rapes and physical violence that began in her childhood. Her stepfather forcibly impregnated her twice by the age of fourteen. She gave birth to a son and a daughter, but Alphonso cruelly took them away, leaving Celie to believe they were dead. This compounded her trauma, as he simultaneously condemned her, stating, "he acts like he can't stand me no more. Say am evil an always up to no good" (Walker, 1982, p. 4).

My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me. I'm big. I can't move fast enough. By the time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By the time I git the tray ready the food be cold. By the time I git the children be ready for school it be dinner time. He don't say nothing. He set there by the bed holding her hand an cryin, talking bout don't leave me, don't go (Walker, 1982, p. 4).

Fearing the loss of her mother, Celie made the agonizing choice to endure her suffering in silence, perpetually reliving her horrific experiences. Caruth (1996) defines trauma as an unassimilated event that returns invasively, frequently, and outside conscious control. Celie's poignant confession that she was unable to get used to the abuse of her stepfather powerfully encapsulates this definition, suggesting that her trauma remains unresolved, actively resisting amalgamation into normal memory. The initial violence of her stepfather choking her is not merely a past incident but a persistent presence that resurfaces through profound bodily and emotional reactions, as seen in her later statement, "now I feels sick every

time I be the one to cook” (p. 4). This aligns precisely with Caruth’s idea that trauma is not fully experienced at the time of the event but rather emerges belatedly, often through involuntary repetition. The seemingly innocuous act of cooking, now grimly associated with the original choking threat, becomes a potent trigger, compelling the traumatic moment to resurface.

Meanwhile, van der Kolk (2014) significantly emphasizes the somatic (bodily) dimension of trauma, asserting that traumatic memories are stored not solely as narratives but as visceral physical sensations and ingrained reflexes. Celie’s nausea while cooking serves as a prime illustration of how trauma lodges itself deep within the body. The original threat (choking) resurfaces as an instinctive, involuntary reaction (sickness) when confronted with a related situation, bypassing conscious thought. Van der Kolk (2014) further emphasises the vital role of social support after trauma, pointing out that lacking familiar faces, voices, physical contact, safety, and communication with loved ones can greatly worsen a survivor’s distress. In Celie’s devastating experience, her mother’s reaction intensified her trauma. This lack of maternal comfort, coupled with the profound shaming and blame for her pregnancy, deepened Celie’s wounds. Her mother, tragically, died while still screaming and cursing her, having never questioned Celie’s version of events but instead blaming her for being immodest. This ultimate betrayal by the very person who should have provided solace left an indelible negative mark on Celie’s developing personality. Her inability to get used to the assault and abuse reflects how trauma fundamentally rewires the nervous system, leaving the individual perpetually susceptible to hyperarousal or dread when reminded of the original event. It was this deep impact that prevented Celie from ever finding the courage to confide in anyone about her abuse, until she finally met Shug Avery.

During her second pregnancy, burdened by her physical state, Celie faced further interrogation from her mother regarding the paternity of her first child. Trapped between the fear of her stepfather’s violence against her mother and her inability to articulate the horrific truth, Celie evasively attributed the child to God. She desperately sought to conceal the reality, telling her mother, “I say God took it. He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods” (Walker, 1982, p. 4). This statement by Celie offers a deeply unsettling glimpse into her traumatic experiences. From Caruth’s (1996) perspective, trauma is fundamentally about something that occurs with such overwhelming force or in such a way that it cannot be fully registered or understood at the moment it happens. The insistent repetition of “He took it. He took it. He took it” in the Celie’s words is highly indicative of her deferred trauma. It is not a coherent narrative, but rather a compulsive, almost ritualistic, re-enactment of the core, unbearable fact of loss or violation. This repetition suggests that the event itself remains largely unassimilated; the speaker cannot fully articulate the what or how of the taking of her children, only the raw, undeniable fact of its occurrence. This signifies an experience too overwhelming to be processed coherently at the time, leaving a traumatic imprint that demands repetitive verbalisation even in the absence of a complete narrative understanding. The crucial detail of Celie sleeping while her children were taken away from her further reinforces Caruth’s concept of latency. Celie was unconscious, deprived of the ability to consciously witness, comprehend, or respond to the act as it unfolded. This aligns perfectly with Caruth’s notion of trauma as an event that is not known in the first instance. The lack of conscious awareness during the taking away of her kids means the event was never truly experienced in a way that could be integrated into a linear memory, contributing to the subsequent fragmented recall and a profound sense of helplessness. Furthermore, the attribution of the act to God can be seen as a powerful form of displacement. While seemingly a religious explanation, it can also be interpreted as a way of grappling with an utterly incomprehensible and perhaps human-perpetrated act. Naming a human perpetrator might be

too direct, too horrifying. By attributing it to an omnipotent, inscrutable force, Celie implicitly acknowledges the overwhelming nature of the event, placing it beyond human control or understanding. This also speaks to the difficulty of direct representation, a core tenet of Caruth's work on trauma narratives. The mention of "kilt it out there in the woods" further displaces the horror, situating it in a liminal, wild, and distant space, possibly reflecting the psychological distance the speaker maintains from the full implications of the event.

This profound inability to articulate her story aligns with van der Kolk's (2014) assertion that traumatised individuals experience overwhelming rage, terror, and helplessness, which renders communication impossible. Trauma inherently pushes us to the limits of understanding, separating us from language rooted in shared experience or a conceivable past. Celie, terrified and feeling that her stepfather had taken her child and killed him in the forest, was equally consumed by anxiety for her second child's fate. Her fears were tragically realised when Alphonso seized the second infant while she slept, later telling her he had killed him as well while he sold the child to missionaries.

Van der Kolk's work, which focuses on how trauma fundamentally alters the brain and body, provides further crucial insights. The persistent, almost visceral repetition of her children being taken away from her suggests that trauma is not merely a cognitive memory but an embodied one, aligning with his concept of "the body keeps the score". The act of killing them (whether referring to a child or something deeply cherished) would have been accompanied by immense terror, helplessness, and potentially physical sensations of pain or threat, even in sleep. These are stored as "implicit memories", sensory, emotional, and physiological fragments, rather than coherent, narrative memories. The very utterance is a re-activation of these deeply stored bodily states of distress. The act of her children being taken away while she was sleeping also points towards a form of dissociation, a common response to the overwhelming trauma. It means that the mind may have shut down or disengaged to protect itself from the unbearable reality of the event. This aligns with Van der Kolk's understanding of how traumatic memories are often fragmented and disorganized, stored in parts of the brain that bypass the narrative processing centres. Celie is unable to provide a clear, linear account because the experience itself was not processed linearly. The absolute nature of "God took it" and "Kilt it" also highlights a profound sense of powerlessness and a complete lack of agency, a common outcome of severe trauma where an individual's ability to exert control over their life and environment is severely compromised. The external attribution to God also serves to distance Celie from the unbearable reality, suggesting a shattered sense of self and an inability to integrate the horrifying event into their personal narrative of control or competence. Finally, the present tense "I say God took it" suggests that the event, despite its past occurrence, remains a live, ongoing reality for Celie. This is a sign of PTSD, where the past intrudes relentlessly into the present through intrusive thoughts, emotional flashbacks, and a pervasive sense of threat. The briefness and intensity of the statement reflect the persistent, intrusive nature of traumatic memory. It demonstrates how the overwhelming experiences bypass normal memory processing, leading to fragmented recollections, compulsive repetition, and a deep sense of helplessness. Celie is grappling not just with a past event, but with its ongoing, embodied, and unintegrated presence.

Conclusion

Celie's trauma's deceptive nature meant that even after many years, her past wounds remained unhealed. Her trauma manifested as disruptive memories, haunting her day and night, forcing her to relive her experiences through flashbacks perpetually. It was through these agonising flashbacks that she eventually confided in Shug Avery, revealing the deeply buried secrets of her horrifying past. This was a horrifying experience, kept deeply in her heart for

many years, the ill-fated experience of being repeatedly assaulted by her stepfather since childhood.

This study found that Celie's trauma, characterized by its deceptive and persistent nature, remained unhealed for many years. The analysis, guided by the theories of Caruth and van der Kolk, shows that her past was not simply a memory but a living wound that manifested in disruptive, involuntary flashbacks. These episodes, rather than being simple recollections, were somatic and psychological returns to the traumatic events.

It was during these moments of agonizing flashbacks, which forced her to relive her painful history with her stepfather, that Celie was finally able to confide in Shug Avery. This act of revelation represents a critical turning point. Through this analysis, we see that Shug's presence and acceptance provided the necessary safety for Celie to articulate her long-buried secrets, transitioning her experience from a purely internal, fragmented haunting into a shared narrative. This shift from an unspoken, embodied trauma to a verbalized, witnessed experience marks the beginning of her healing process.

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