

A Study on Symbolic Connotations and Metaphorical Implications in *The Color Purple*

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Abstract

The Color Purple written by Alice Walker is a powerful cultural touchstone of modern American literature to indicate a large number of symbolic images with profound meanings. The paper analyzes the rich meanings contained in the symbolic images and metaphors, and strives to comprehensively interpret and deeply understand the themes and ideological connotations of the novel. An interpretation of the symbolic images indicates that: 1) The symbolic images embodied in the novel reflect Alice Walker's "overall survival" of her womanism, through which Walker points out the way for black women to realize "overall survival", through black women's search for independence in family and society; 2) Alice Walker entitled the novel *The Color Purple*, which reflects her desire to build a harmonious world. The color pink stands for females while blue stands for males; the color purple, a mixture of pink and blue, symbolizes the unity of black men and women to denote that the harmonious coexistence is expected to be the only way for the black to resist racism and obtain happiness in a multi-cultural society.

Keywords

The Color Purple, Symbolic Images, Independence, Wholeness

1. Introduction

Alice Walker is one of the most remarkable and influential Afro-American writers in contemporary American literary world. Her epistolary novel *The Color Purple* written in 1982, a powerful cultural touchstone in modern American literature, is the pinnacle of her achievements which won her three awards: the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Association Award. The Chinese version of *The Color Purple* was published in 1986 in China. Since then, the novel has drawn increasing attentions in domestic acade-

mia. The researchers analyzed and interpreted it from the aspects of theme, main characters, language art, symbolic meanings, and metaphoric techniques.

In terms of research content, the thematic studies and character portray are mainly involved. Zhou Shiyi explored the three themes contained in the travel image in Alice Walker's works which shows that travel is to seek a better way of survival and the first step to change the material and spiritual life, and travel is a process of black women's self-awareness, which could be achieved through understanding life and understanding the world (Zhou, 2012). Zeng Ling analyzed the theme of the initiation story of the novel and discussed the process of Celie's gradual maturity and ultimate independence through struggle with the help of Shug and others (Zeng, 2010). Yan Zhengkun and Chen Kuiyang discussed the inheritance and transcendence of epistolary form of the novel to the classical literary paradigm of initiation novels (Yan & Chen, 2014).

In terms of the research perspective, most researches were conducted mainly from the perspective of literature, and some studies were conducted from the perspective of culture, translation and religion, for example, Wu Di pointed out that the heroine Celie's life is inseparable from the spiritual pillar of religion, and analyzed Celie's understanding of God (Wu, 2003). Xu Taimei analyzed Celie's growth through transformation of her religious belief and pointed out the story of Celie's transformation of religious belief is both enlightening and educational for the majority of women in the contemporary society (Xu, 2013). The literary perspective is the main perspective for the study of the novel. Researchers mainly interpreted Walker's view of women and its new concept of womanism from different angles and levels. Feng Jinke explored the way out for black women to build their own identity and realize free release. He pointed out that "Celie, the protagonist of the novel, experienced two major changes in the process of looking for her own identity: from female conquest to female freedom; from spiritual loneliness to mental integrity (Feng, 2007). Chen Jing and Song Baomei, starting from the theme of love depicted in the novel, interpreted Walker's eco-feminist consciousness, and analyzed Walker's common concern for oppressed black women and nature (Chen & Song, 2013). Hou Xiaohua interpreted Walker's new concept of womanism from different angles and levels. Hou Xiaohua conducted a study on Alice Walker's womanism both from the perspective of black men's transformation (Hou, 2018a) and from the perspective of black women's rebellion (Hou, 2018b). Xu Taimei further pointed out that womanism was not out of date in contemporary times, which still had important guidance and reference significance for contemporary women to struggle for their own freedom and rights (Xu, 2021).

Writing technique is also an important literary perspective for the study of the novel. Some researchers explored the novel from the aspects of epistolary genre, language art, symbolic meanings and metaphorical techniques. Liang Honglan discussed and analyzed the epistolary narrative technique and style of *The Color Purple* from the perspectives of multiple person narration and double narration

(Liang, 2016). Wang Chengyu's research mainly focused on the language art of the novel. Through the comparison between the black dialect English and Nadi standard English in the rural South of the United States, it was pointed out that the comparison of languages reflected Alice Walker's view that blacks and whites were basically the same (Wang, 2002). Wang Chengyu made a further study on the blank language art and vocabulary spelling variation of the novel (Wang, 2003).

As a representative of African American female writers, Alice Walker has unique life experience that inspired her unique psychological perception. In her creation, she prominently uses the symbolic metaphor commonly used in black literature. At present, there are relatively few studies on the artistic characteristics and expression techniques of the novel from the aspects of symbolic meaning and metaphorical implication in domestic academe, which merely focus on the symbolic meanings of the color image in the novel. For example, Yu Qiulan analyzed the collocation and application of three groups of color words in the novel: purple and red, black and red and black and white to excavate the character and situation of the characters in the novel, and clarified the deployment and application of color which enhanced the expression of the theme of the novel (Yu, 2014). Zhang Hua analyzed and revealed the multiple connotations of the main color images such as purple, red, blue and black in the novel (Zhang, 2018). In addition to using rich colors to symbolize the protagonist's mood, environment and different stages of growth, there are also some other metaphorical images with deep symbolic meanings, the ingenious use of which makes the novel have unique artistic charm and become a classic of African American women's literature. However, these metaphorical images are rarely systematically studied in domestic academia. This paper analyzes the artistic techniques of color image and other symbolic metaphors in the English version of the novel, discusses the rich meaning contained in the symbolic image, and strives to comprehensively interpret and deeply understand the theme and ideological connotation of the novel, with a view to helping readers understand deeply the whole work, feel more strongly the unique charm of the novel and Walker's unique artistic thought.

2. Novel Introduction

Taking place mostly in rural Georgia, the story focuses on the life of women of color in the southern United States in the 1930s. The novel opens with a demand for silence that leaves a fourteen-year-old girl named Celie with no way to express her pain and confusion except in the letters she writes to God. From the first letter Celie writes to God, we know what is happening to the little girl, Celie. Her mother, giving birth to so many children, is falling her health and cannot satisfy her husband's sexual appetite. When her mother is away, her stepfather rapes her and warns her not to tell "nobody but God". Celie keeps silent, but this doesn't stop bad things happening on her. Her mother dies. Her two children

are taken away, leaving her alone wondering whether they have been sold or even killed by his stepfather. She is also worrying about her sister Nettie: "I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I'll take care of you. With God help." (CP, P.5) Celie is victimized physically and sexually by her stepfather. Utterly alone and out of desperation, Celie has no choice but to choose to write to God to express her confusion, shame and suffering.

Then a few years later, she is forced into a loveless marriage. When the widower Albert comes to propose marriage with Nettie, Celie's father refused: "I can't let you have Nettie. She too young...But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway" (CP, P.9) "Fact is, he say, I got to rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. And she a bad influence on my other girls." (CP, P.10). Celie then is passed like a piece of property from one cruel black male into the hands of another. In fact, the life with Albert is the continuous of her nightmare. In the wedding day, Harpo, the oldest son of Albert welcomes Celie with a rock laying her head open and blood runs all down between her breasts. His daddy, Albert tells him not to do that. But that's all. He rapes Celie with her head bleeding. Actually, Albert marries Celie not out of love; his true lover is Shug, with whom he has had three children. He can't marry Shug because his father forbids him to do that. He is not able to marry Nettie, because Celie's father doesn't approve. He finally marries Celie in desperation. He is in need of a servant to cook and clean for him and to take care of his three children just as he says: "Well, you know, my poor little ones sure could use a mother." (CP, P.9). Despite the fact that Celie is an ideal housekeeper, cook, labor, good stepmother and wife, she still wins no care and love from Mr.- and his children. Celie is continually physically and sexily abused by Albert.

"Staying alive" seems the best thing that Celie can hope for. Then Sofia, Harpo's wife comes. She is a woman utterly different from Celie who is very submissive and stoical because she puts up with Mr.- and doesn't say anything back, whereas Sofia has a voice and uses it because she wants to be in a fair relationship with Harpo and feels reluctant to be dominated. When Celie is in the most miserable and desperate life, Sofia shows Celie a new life attitude that Celie never touches and has great effect on Celie, whose untiring rebellion, causes Celie to reflect on the relationship between husband and wife. Shug is another important black woman who carries Celie on a spirit-affirming journey towards transformation, redemption, and love. More than anyone, Shug's influential presence and acceptance give Celie the strength she needs to redefine herself, take charge of her life, and leave Albert. Nettie escapes his sexual advances by moving in with Celie and her husband, Mr. Albert. This arrangement is no better than the previous one and Nettie is again forced to leave. She ultimately ends up in Africa where she writes to Celie of her experiences. Shug and Celie move to Memphis where Celie begins a career designing and selling pants. After her stepfather's death, she returns to her family home. Nettie also returns with Celie's two children from Africa to America. The novel ends with a reconciliation of Celie and

Albert's friendship.

3. Symbolic Images with Profound Meanings

A large number of symbolic images with profound meaning and great feminine literary color are used in the novel, which makes the whole novel full of wonderful color and thought-provoking philosophy. By analyzing the rich meanings contained in the symbolic images in the novel, this study has a comprehensive interpretation and deep understanding of the ideological connotations and its unique artistic thought of the novel.

In an interview, Alice Walker mentions that: "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women." (O'Brien, 1973). Walker clearly pointed out the path for black women to achieve "survival whole" which is realized through black women's exploration for independence in family and society. The following symbolic images reflect Walker's "survival whole" of womanism and illuminate the specific path she pointed out for black women to obtain family and social independence.

3.1. Black Women's Search for Independence in Family

Black women's pursuit of independence in family implies actualization of recognition, understanding and respect gained from the family, namely, freeing themselves from the subordinate status and obtaining the equal rights of equality between the sexes.

3.1.1. "Fighting" and "Speaking"

Living under terrible physical and mental oppression, "staying alive" seems the best thing that Celie can hope for. As Mr.- beats her, she keeps silent, like a tree, and "that how come I know trees fear man." At this time, for Celie, death is the only way out of present miserable life. Then Sofia, Harpo's wife elucidates the significance of fighting for Celie in both words and action: "I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo... God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me." (CP, P.38) Sofia never submits to her husband, Harpo, though she deeply loves him. She fiercely beats him when he tries to follow his father's example to be a familial patriarch. By fighting, Sofia gains her dignity as a black woman. Sofia's untiring rebellion causes Celie to reflect on the relationship between husband and wife in the black family. Moreover, Nettie advises Celie to fight: "You got to fight. You got to fight." (CP, P 17) Mr.-'s sisters also admonish that "You got to fight them... You got to fight them for yourself." (CP, P.21)

Celie gets to realize that it is effective to fight for familial independence as she writes it in her letters, which reveals her consideration in exploring for familial independence. When she discovers that her husband has suppressed Nettie's let-

ters, Celie speaks out. The power of speech immediately ends her state of silence and moves her toward a more autonomous sense of self. Celie begins to assert herself, airing her covert thoughts and resisting her position as slave to her husband. Celie shouts her curse at the family tyrant. "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need." (CP, P.84) and with black woman's dignity, she declares to the world, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here." (CP, P.84) It is the powerful voice of an irate black woman, which helps to actualize her exploration for familial independence. The image of "fighting" and "speaking" presents more of the black women's search for independence in family.

3.1.2. "Leaving Home"

Shug and Celie move to Memphis where Celie begins a career designing and selling pants. After leaving the old family, Celie gains complete freedom and independence in her new world. Moreover, her leaving home leads to the transformation of her husband. Mr.- eventually realizes that Celie is an independent and respectable black woman with equal rights as him. He sends Celie a little purple frog carved by him, symbolizing his recognition of her feminine dignity, and equal rights. "Leaving home" liberates Celie from the familial bondage, and turns over a new leaf for her as well. "Leaving home" symbolizes the black woman's casting off the old self and exploring for a new independent one.

3.1.3. "Coming Back Home"

"Coming back home" is another artistic symbol for black women to obtain familial independence. In the end of the story, Celie comes back home, which is not the "old" one where she has spent her terrible childhood but a "new" one that really belongs to her. Celie's "coming back home" indicates both her getting rid of the old self and becoming a new independent one. Moreover, Celie comes back to a pleasant and peaceful home, where she can not only enjoy happiness and freedom, but also gain respect from Mr.-. She begins to love her "new family. She even intimately calls Mr.- "Albert". She says, "Mr.- seem to be the only one understand my feeling... he begin to be somebody I can talk to... two old fools left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars." (CP, P. 84) Mr.- also tells her passionately, "Took me long enough to notice you such good company." (CP, P 84) He even asks her to marry him again. Although Celie turns it down, they can get along well with each other in an atmosphere of equality and amicability, which indicates that Celie has gained recognition, love, and esteem in a black family.

In these images, Walker clearly points out the steps for black women to achieve family independence. First of all, only when black women form an alliance based on economic strength, urge black men to reflect and change themselves, and correctly understand and treat black women, can the problem of gender discrimination among blacks be eradicated. Then, taking this as a new

foothold, black men and women unite to fight against racial discrimination and oppression. Walker has also realized that black women's struggle for social equality must be repositioned in political, economic, cultural and ideological aspects. Black women's exploration for independence in society in a broader sense of economic, political and spiritual independence is vividly embodied in the following images.

3.2. Black Women's Exploration for Independence in Society

For black women's exploration for independence in society, Alice Walker as a womanist seeks for self-realization by exploiting black women's potential from black feminine household activities, that is making full use of black women's limitless potential as a black woman in her daily work-the wisdom and artistic creativity, by which black women gain self-confidence, self-esteem and self-support, and thus actualizes their independence in the society.

3.2.1. "Making Pants"

"Making pants" presents an artistic symbol for black women to explore economic independence by themselves. Originally only men have rights to wear pants. Celie now is making different sorts of pants for both males and females, which shows her brave challenge to male economic dominance by her feminine artistic creativity. At the end of the novel, Celie achieves great economic success for she sets up her own company to make all kinds of pants designed by her. By making pants, Celie creates a new way to make her living and completely frees herself from subordinate status in economy and realizes her self-independence both in the family and in the society.

3.2.2. "Quilting"

"Quilting" symbolizes the womanist's self-realization of political independence from her own feminine activity. In the novel, Celie patches the torn curtains and old dress into a new quilt and designs a beautiful pattern called "Sister's Choice", which fully reveals her imagination and creativity. And just in the creative activity, Celie comes to value herself and lays her eyes open to the world. She writes in her letter, "What the world got to do with anything, I think. Then I see myself sitting there quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr- for the first time in my life, I feel just right." (CP, P 84) In her mind, quilting has become a bridge between her and the world, by which she taps her potential capability in the feminine work, and realizes her value and importance as a black woman in the world. Quilting prefigures her exploration for self-independence in the society."

3.2.3. "Wearing Pants"

"Wearing pants" also signifies black women's exploration for political independence. In the novel, Celie wears pants that originally only men can wear, which suggests her victory over the male in the struggle of equal rights and her defiance to the severe sexual discrimination in the society. When she goes to visit her stepfather, Celie wears pants that she elaborately designs and makes, which re-

veals her open challenge to the male oppressor and her maturity as a new black woman. By wearing pants, Celie presents her dignity as a black woman and her exploration for political independence in the society.

3.2.4. A Room of One's Own

Having a room of their own means that black women have the economic foundation and material guarantee to settle down, which is the key to black women's liberation. Owing a room of their own, black women have a sky to show themselves, express their thoughts, and develop their talents, without being bound by the outside world. In the novel, Celie, Nettie and Shug have their own thatched house after their own efforts. Shug decorated her big house in pink and Celie dressed up her room as she liked, with everything purple and red, and only the floor painted bright yellow. The different decoration and arrangement of their own rooms symbolize their own colorful inner world and their different pursuit goals. The image of "a room of one's own" symbolizes not only a free living space for black women, but also a free spiritual space for them.

4. The Title of the Novel

Alice Walker entitled the novel in *The Color Purple*, the color purple being a mixture of pink and blue is a cultural characteristic of purple. In Western culture, the color pink stands for females, while blue stands for males. Then the color purple symbolizes the unity of them. It means that the alliance of black men and women is expected to be the only way for the black to resist racism and obtain happiness, which is a wonderful metaphor for womanism in which a relationship of equality and harmonious coexistence between men and women is to be established. The realization of this harmonious relationship depends not only on the awakening and struggle of black women, but also on the self-reflection and change of black men.

In the last letter Celie wrote to God, Celie is so happy because she has got love, work, money, friends and time, which all indicate her final success in exploring self-independence in the black family as well as in the society. In addition, her sister Nettie takes her two children home; they are leading a happy life now. Alice Walker's ideal, through Celie, is shown to us, that is, black women can have a bright future.

5. Conclusion

The Color Purple is full of profound symbolic images. Through the interpretation of these symbolic images, it can be found that each symbolic image embodies the connotation of a womanist advocated by Alice Walker, who advocates equality between men and women and realizes the perfect survival of women. Interpretation of these symbolic images full of womanist philosophy is expected to help readers more comprehensively and deeply understand the theme of the novel and the ideological connotations of Alice Walker.

In her prose collection *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*,

Walker defines a womanist as “a feminist color or a black feminist”, who seeks not only liberation from male dominance but also the collective cultural recovery of their ethnic identities. Alice Walker explains that a womanist appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility, and women’s strength. A womanist is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female (Walker, 1983).

Walker identifies herself a womanist rather than a feminist. In her eyes, feminism aims to break the traditional archetypal shackles of women, demand the same rights as men, and pursue a new pure female paradise, which inadvertently divides women and men into two opposing forces, which is not conducive to the long-term development of mankind. In contrast, Walker’s womanist is a universalist not a separatist. The self-realization of black women’s value not only needs the strength of women’s individual and collective, but also needs men’s understanding and participation. The realization of women’s liberation also means the emancipation of men’s minds. The goal of “Survival Whole” should be accomplished by men and women. The far-reaching womanism presented to the world by Alice Walker and her novel *The Color Purple* not only illuminates the road of black women’s liberation, but also has important practical significance and guiding role for people of different colors and races who pursue equality and love freedom to achieve harmonious development all over the world.

The happy ending of the novel reflects Alice Walker’ desire to establish a harmonious and beautiful world in which men and women coexist equally. Walker believes that black men and women must eliminate barriers, unite and jointly resist racial discrimination, so that the black nation can stand in the forest of nations in the world with equal identity. In Walker’ works, the ending is always the harmonious coexistence of black men and women. Her tolerant humanistic spirit and fraternal womanist spirit provide a new perspective for solving the problems of domestic violence, women’s liberation and gender harmonious development in today’s society.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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