Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.ND28222

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

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Abstract. Alice Walker, the renowned African American female writer, has long focused on the survival conditions and self-construction of black women. Through the use of multi-perspective narratives in her works, she vividly portrays the psychological traumas endured by this vulnerable group under dual oppression from race and gender. Her novel The Temple of My Familiar employs fragmented forms such as dialogues, diaries, oral histories, letters, and monologues to depict key characters like Lissie, Hal, Fanny, Suwelo, Carlotta, Arveyda and Zedé. Through interwoven narrative threads, it tells stories of the trauma and recovery experienced by these female protagonists. For instance, Fanny deciphers ancestral diaries and oral histories, revealing the struggles and pain endured by generations of women within her family under sexual violence, racial discrimination, and cultural fragmentation. Meanwhile, through the transmission of past-life memories, female characters in the novel gradually establish unique dialogic relationships with others, achieving post-traumatic healing and the mending of emotional wounds. Ultimately, they transform the dilapidated "temple" into a spiritual community that integrates black culture, feminine spirituality, and harmonious ecology. Therefore, this paper employs Judith Herman's trauma theory to deeply analyze individual and collective trauma manifestations in the novel, exploring how memory and dialogue serve as therapeutic sources providing spiritual comfort and strength for women. In addition, the author hopes to enrich the current academic research on trauma literature by analyzing the multiple relationships between trauma, memory transmission and dialogue healing, and to provide valuable theoretical reference for the field.

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

1. Introduction

As a sequel to Walker's masterpiece The Color Purple, The Temple of My Familiar employs a unique spatiotemporal structure and multiple narrative perspectives to reveal how trauma is transmitted across generations through time and physicality. Free from linear historical constraints, the novel traces five hundred thousand years of human history, exposing the accumulated impacts of gender oppression, racial discrimination, and colonial violence. The protagonists Lissie and Hal form an egalitarian model of mutual respect in marriage; Fanny escapes from her husband Suwelo's sexual objectification and establishes a free romantic relationship with musician Arveyda; Carlotta, Suwelo's lover, gradually breaks free from objectification and awakens continuously...Ultimately,

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.ND28222

the characters attain redemption through memory transmission and shared narratives within the "spiritual sisterhood" of black women.

Currently, domestic research on The Temple of My Familiar remains relatively limited, with most studies focusing on the following keywords: ecofeminism, nature, black feminism, harmonious writing, ecological aesthetics, and dehumanization. From the perspective of ecofeminism, Lu Meng argues that Walker transcends feminist theory through triple critique [1]; Zhang Qianqian proposes that it is necessary to deconstruct the oppressive connection between women and nature in order to build multiple harmony [2]; Xu Yingjing emphasizes the urgent relevance of Walker's ecological ideas to contemporary crises [3]; Wei Haijing focuses on the dual dilemmas faced by women and people of color under hierarchies [4]; Zhao Songzhi analyzes the text's ecological perspective from four dimensions: ecology, morality, aesthetics, and practicality [5]. Additionally, Guo Xiaoqing reveals how systemic, situational, and objectified oppression causes physical and mental trauma to people of color through the Lucifer Effect [6]; Zhao Songzhi explores new human-animal relationships from an animal criticism perspective [7]; Du Yeyan reflects on universal human values in ecological aesthetics [8]; Chen Yong points out that black feminist thought carries threefold significance: group cohesion, planetary harmony, and self-pursuit [9].

International research primarily focuses on core themes including feminism, intertextuality, and cultural identity. Scholars predominantly analyze the work through feminist ethical perspectives, emphasizing its profound exploration of black women's collective experience, spiritual dimensions and communal consciousness. Academic interpretations of The Temple of My Familiar demonstrate remarkable diversity. Foreign researchers employ feminist criticism, cultural semiotics, and interdisciplinary approaches to thoroughly examine how race, gender, and cultural identity are manifested in the text, while situating the symbolic significance of the "temple" within broader comparative cultural frameworks.

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 and their recovery process have not yet been fully analyzed. In fact, the physical and mental traumas endured by Fanny and other female members of her family, as well as their process of recovery through exploring history, passing on memories and communicating, constitute the core driving force and emotional centre of the novel. Therefore, this paper will draw on Judith Herman's trauma theory to conduct an in-depth analysis of the trauma narrative in The Temple of My Familiar.

Herman's Trauma and Recovery reconstructs psychological trauma theory from a socio-cultural perspective, proposing that trauma originates from individuals' sense of helplessness under overwhelming forces, which leads to persistent experiences of fear, loss of control, and threats of destruction. It also emphasizes the duality of trauma: on the one hand, there is a desire to deny the existence of terrifying atrocities, while on the other hand, there is a hope to make them public. This contradiction constitutes the primary conflict in psychological trauma, revealing that trauma is not only physical and mental scars but also a product of collective historical silence [10]. Based on Herman's theory, this paper will analyze the individual physical trauma and mental shadows experienced by women such as Lissie, Fanny and Carlotta, which are rooted in racial and gender-based violence. It focuses on how they establish profound dialogues with others and historical memories to seek and ultimately achieve subjective healing, revealing the inherent power of trauma recovery.

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2. Interwoven narratives: personal memory and collective trauma

Psychological trauma exerts a paradoxically dual impact on memory: while suppressing or actively erasing memories, it simultaneously intensifies their persistence through intrusive flashbacks that become inescapable. Victims may develop post-traumatic disorders, such as “hyperarousal”, “intrusion” and “constriction” [10]. People with traumatic experiences tend to remain vigilant all the time and often become anxious over minor stimuli. Even when the danger has long passed, the victims continue to relive the traumatic events in their minds [10]. As recurring trauma assaults the mind, normal life development becomes difficult. Ultimately, when feeling powerless, individuals may succumb to resignation, abandoning resistance and entering a state of “dissociation” characterized by fragmented identity, lost reality, self-detachment and memory gaps.

The contradictory nature of traumatic memory described by Herman is profoundly illustrated in The Temple of My Familiar. When Fanny deciphers her ancestors’ diaries and oral histories, this process not only becomes an inevitable path to uncover trauma but also gives rise to new sources of suffering. When she discovers the truth that black women suffered sexual violence and the identity crisis of mixed-race children during the slavery period, these memories not only solidify the collective pain of the family’s women but also force her into an ethical dilemma: The great-grandmother was forced to distance her mixed-race daughter from her identity in order to protect her from the slave owner’s abuse. This “love-induced severance”, although it intends to end the cycle of trauma, leads the descendants into a deeper identity crisis.

Black women endure inhumane treatment under slavery and colonialism, developing psychological trauma that keeps them perpetually in a state of “hyperarousal”, hypersensitive to any potentially dangerous environmental cues. In the novel, Carlotta remains constantly alert while selling handicrafts. “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 reveals the persistent stress disorder left by colonial trauma. The superimposed state of “worry” and “watchfulness” represents a pathological vigilance caused by prolonged violent coercion. Facial nerve rigidity manifests as symptoms of traumatic emotional paralysis. Carlotta’s inability to smile vividly exposes how trauma strangles human instincts.

In the late 1980s, although racial segregation had been abolished in the United States, discrimination against black women still persisted among white communities. Through her novel, Walker exposes the “intergenerational trauma” inflicted on black women by slavery and colonialism—a phenomenon where psychological wounds are passed down from one generation to the next within families. When communicating with Suwelo, Lissie recounts her traumatic experiences:

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 employs children’s placid narrative voice to amplify trauma’s invisible potency. This scene starkly exposes the core paradox of intergenerational trauma: Kinship is both a carrier of trauma and a tool of harm. When the narrator’s uncle sells his niece and the black women and children into slavery, the blood ties subverts the family ethics, forcing the victims’ bodies to be commodified and their spirits to be persecuted by their closest relatives, thus leading to the disintegration of their self-identity. The mother’s hysterical pleas constitute “ineffective resistance” in trauma response: she clings to emotional appeals as her last desperate struggle despite knowing the slave trader’s brutality. The child’s apparent “calmness” masks dissociative states, while the

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narrator's sudden recollection of the mother's pleading years later exemplifies the fragmented and invasive nature of traumatic memory, validating Herman's theory of "intrusion".

Over time, some victims develop a state of "constriction", with their sensory perception becoming numb and distorted. This altered perception combines apathy, emotional detachment, complete passivity, and loss of resistance—essentially abandoning all autonomous and struggling behaviors [10]. In the novel, Lissie initially describes her mother as "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]." Yet ultimately, Lissie's mother, tormented by abuse and illness, abandons resistance and resolves to die. "She willed herself to die [11]." Lissie's mother initially maintains dignity through obsessive cleanliness, resisting personality destruction by preserving bodily purity. However, as violence continues to erode her, "filth" transcends physical contamination to become a metaphor for spiritual corruption. Ultimately, she completely gives up resistance, since physical demise becomes her only controllable autonomy.

Walker reveals the collective trauma endured by black women through narratives of individual traumatic symptoms. Carlotta's "hyperarousal" when selling on the street is actually a survival defense mechanism left over from colonial violence. When Lissie recounts the history of her uncle selling family members many years later, violent scenes of slavery keeps flashing back, forcing her to endure the pain of "intrusion". While the transformation of Lissie's mother from extreme self-respect to active suicide is the ultimate manifestation of "constriction". These seemingly personal traumatic responses permeate entire communities and generations through oral histories, family memories, and daily behaviors. In fact, the so-called "forgetting" caused by trauma is merely a pretense of forgetting. It is passed on laterally to other relatives within the family and in society, and vertically to the subsequent generations [10].

3. Psychosomatic ruptures: bodily trauma and psychological shadows

Physical trauma and mental shadows deepen and exacerbate each other. The body, as the most direct site of violence, endures visible physical damage and carries invisible physiological memories. These traumas are transformed into intrusive memories on the mental level through sensory channels. Traumatic events undermine the victim's fundamental belief in environmental safety, positive self-worth and the reasonable order of the universe [10]. The victims are in great pain because the basic framework of their sense of self has been damaged [10].

In The Temple of My Familiar, the bodies of the sold slaves are severely injured. Lissie repeatedly mentions the inhumane treatment of black people by slave owners. "They made us hop up and down to test the strength in our legs. Our feet were bleeding [11]." Zedé describes her partner's tragic fate: he dies in agony and is later dismembered. "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, the channel of language, symbolizes the deprivation of black people's right to speak. The removal of the genitals goes beyond the act of killing itself, as the perpetrator aims to suppress the continuation of the black race by destroying the reproductive organ. Since Jesús' mutilated body cannot be buried as a complete human, his body is forever deprived of the dignity of mourning. These physical and mental scars seep into the memory of future generations through Zedé's calm narration many years later. Thus, the most vicious aspect of racial violence lies in its ability to transform physical harm into a humiliating memory passed down through generations.

Physical violence breeds fear in the mind. Mental suffering gives rise to self-loathing. Herman points out that the symptoms of "hyperarousal" and "intrusion" in long-term post-traumatic stress disorder can blend into the static symptoms of depression, generating what Reedland calls the

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.ND28222

"survivor triad": insomnia, nightmares and psychosomatic symptoms [10]. Lissie tells Suwelo that the mental trauma she experiences continues to surface in fragmented form in her nightmares. "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 terrifying scenes of day and night that suddenly flash in Lissie's dreams and the horrifying images of her people being skinned and cooked, reflect the intrusive nature of traumatic memories. The violent scenes repeatedly invade consciousness in an uncontrolled fragmented form, confirming the "nightmare" symptom in the "survivor triad".

These psychological traumas not only remain with the victims themselves but are also passed on to their descendants. Arveyda tells Carlotta that the children of black women who have suffered sexual violence, although unable to understand the root of the hatred between their parents when they are young, have their earliest memories deeply imprinted with the sensory marks of their mother's 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 children's rational understanding of events, but the most primitive and disturbing sensory fragments of violent scenes. They transcend the realm of language and comprehension, lingering in children's innocent consciousness and becoming an inescapable psychological trauma in their spiritual world. The extreme violence experienced by the mother directly permeates the earliest and deepest memories of the next generation in a non-verbal and non-narrative form, sowing seeds of fear and pain in children's hearts, even if they have no knowledge of the causes and background of the violence.

During their oppression, women continually gain awareness, struggle and rebel, but to little avail. In the novel, Fanny and her sister Nzingha both believe that women are being "systematically" oppressed. 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 the oppression of women is created by men. "The difference is that they help create it. At least the part of it that oppresses women [11]." When the oppression becomes unbearable, women begin to join organizations to resist. Nzingha's mother runs away from home and joins an underground organization called "the Mbeles". At the same time, on the political level, women also constantly engage in ideological resistance. Fanny no longer believes in the existing government, considering it to be completely controlled by men. "They are all, as far as I'm concerned, unnatural bodies, male-supremacist private clubs [11]." Even if they are acutely aware of the systemic nature of oppression and take action, these struggles often fail to shake the vast oppressive structure. The obstruction or failure of their actions not only fails to bring relief but also deepens their feeling of the difficulty and powerlessness of change. This continuous frustration under the clear awareness itself becomes a new mental burden, intensifying the original trauma and sense of despair.

The physical trauma is not only the pain of flesh and blood, but also the starting point of the collapse of the spiritual world. Whether it is Lissie's bleeding feet, Jesús' damaged body, or the scene of the tribe members being devoured in the dream, these instances of direct physical violence have engraved lasting fear and self-hatred in the hearts of the victims. What is even more heartrending is that these scars do not stop at the individual. The mother's screams become the earliest memory of the child, and the calm narration of the past becomes the burden of the descendants. Thus, trauma is silently passed down from generation to generation. Even when women rise up to resist, the resistance of reality often frustrates their efforts. This clear sense of powerlessness not only fails to heal the wounds, but also adds new despair on top of the old pain, making the rifts in the body and mind even deeper.

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4. Subjective recovery: memory transmission and dialogue healing

The core experience of psychological trauma is the loss of autonomy (disempowerment) and the disruption of emotional connections with others (disconnection). Therefore, the foundation of recovery lies in restoring the autonomy of trauma patients and creating new connections [10]. The recovery process can be divided into three stages: The first stage is the establishment of safety. The second stage is review and mourning. The third stage is the re-establishment of a sense of connection with normal life [10].

The core of recovery lies in rebuilding an individual's autonomy and emotional connections, while memory transmission and dialogue healing are the keys to achieving this goal. Memory transmission grants black women narrative sovereignty. Fanny and others transform fragmented traumatic memories into coherent narratives through oral accounts, diaries, and other forms. Dialogue healing creates a safe space for emotional connections. Traumatic narratives witnessed by listeners can not only break the state of isolation but also enable mourning to be collectively carried, transforming the pain of black women into a bond of connection within the black community. Together, these two processes enable black women to transform from prisoners of trauma to narrators of history, gradually restoring their damaged relationship with self and the world in the process of reconstructing the meaning of life. The process from trauma to recovery is the process of reintegrating into ordinary life.

In the early stage of trauma recovery, establishing a sense of security is crucial. Walker vividly demonstrates how memory transmission serves as the cornerstone for building a sense of security through the depiction of Fanny's systematic organization and annotation of her ancestors' diaries about their experiences under slavery. These diaries, as fragmented and disturbing evidence of the family's trauma, are chaotic and unsettling. By systematically categorizing and labeling them, Fanny gains a sense of control over the traumatic memories. Transforming the scattered and uncontrollable oral accounts into orderly, tangible, and accessible textual objects allows Fanny to define the narrative boundaries of the heavy past. This active control over the presentation of memories effectively buffers the disordered erosion of traumatic memories, creating a relatively safe buffer zone for her inner self. Moreover, this act of organization itself is a form of intergenerational memory transmission. Under extreme oppression, the ancestors might have recorded their pain in code or metaphor. The descendants' deciphering, understanding, and passing on of these texts is not only about receiving the traumatic experiences of their ancestors but also inheriting the resilient spirit of narrating suffering. This intergenerational memory transmission across time and space makes Fanny feel that she is no longer a descendant bearing the family's trauma in isolation but is integrated into a larger, though scarred, life continuum that continues to narrate and resist. This sense of support from the collective memory of intergenerational connection further solidifies her current psychological security.

In the second stage "review and mourning", dialogue healing plays a core role. It creates a safe emotional witnessing space, allowing individuals to confront traumatic memories and complete the mourning process. In the novel, Lissie confides to Suwelo about the trauma of her tribe being massacred in her recurring dreams. Her fragmented monologue essentially transforms repressed sensory memories into narratives that can be carried by language. The recurring phrase "our cousins" elevates personal pain into an empathetic bond with the collective historical trauma, enabling individual mourning to resonate within the family. This confirms the principle that "mourning requires the participation of witnesses", that is, the listening and response of others can dissolve the isolation of the traumatized individual, transforming personal suffering into a shared emotional experience.

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In the final stage of trauma recovery, it is necessary to re-establish a sense of connection with normal life, that is, for individuals to be able to trust others again and integrate into society. Walker effectively achieves the final step of the recovery stage through "memory transmission" and "dialogue healing". Fanny, by systematically reading the family trauma records, transforms the private pain of black women into evidence against racial oppression. The interpretation and reconstruction of trauma texts can endow victims with historical subjectivity and make the individual suffering that has been concealed by mainstream narratives gain recognition from the group, thus becoming the foundation for future generations to understand their own bloodline and identity. This sense of self and belonging brought about by memory transmission is the cornerstone for rebuilding the individual's internal integrity and connection with the outside world. At the same time, the core role of dialogue healing lies in accelerating the establishment of a sense of connection. Suwelo abandons the single-authoritative historical writing model and instead faithfully records the oral histories of different characters such as Hal and Lissie. This practice directly serves the core goal of the third stage of recovery. The creation of this "dialogic historical text" essentially breaks the monopoly of mainstream discourse on the interpretation of history by integrating the voices of different groups, allowing the trauma experiences of marginalized groups such as black women to be seen and recognized in the public domain. Individuals are no longer isolated from the group due to trauma but are included in the construction of collective memory through sharing their own experiences, thus regaining a sense of belonging to the community. Individuals are no longer isolated victims but become active members participating in new connections and building a more inclusive community.

In the three-stage process of trauma recovery, memory transmission and dialogue healing work in synergy to gradually guide individuals from the reconstruction of safety to social connection. In the first stage of establishing a sense of security, memory transmission plays a crucial role in systematically integrating fragmented traumas. By giving narratives boundaries, it creates a safe zone for individuals to defend against the erosion of trauma. In the second stage of review and mourning, dialogue healing serves as the core mechanism. Through listening and witnessing, sensory memories are transformed into linguistic narratives, elevating private mourning into a collective bond. In the final stage of rebuilding a sense of connection, both memory transmission and dialogue healing accelerate the recovery process: memory transmission reconstructs the trauma narrative to establish the subjectivity and self-identity of the traumatized individual; dialogue healing, through the integration of diverse narratives, breaks the monopoly of discourse, enabling the traumatized person to evolve from a "spoken-for object" to a historical subject, and to rebuild their social trust and sense of belonging. Thus, the individual completes the recovery journey from a victim to a historical narrator and then to a co-builder of the community.

5. Conclusion

This article employs Herman's trauma theory to deeply analyze the psychological trauma endured by several generations of black women in The Temple of My Familiar under race and gender oppression. Through the characters like Fanny, it interprets the diaries and oral stories left by their ancestors, revealing the hidden pain within individuals and the entire family. The characters in the book rely on the transmission of past lives' memories, confide in each other, and eventually support one another to gradually heal their wounds. They transform the dilapidated "temple" into a warm spiritual home that integrates black culture, female wisdom, and a harmonious ecology. This article is structured layer by layer, deeply dissecting the trauma experiences of black women and how they achieve spiritual healing and psychological recovery. First, trauma is not an isolated event. Its

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symptoms can spread from individual women to the entire community and future generations, solidifying into collective scars of the black community through intergenerational transmission. Second, trauma has the characteristic of mutual harm to both body and mind. Physical violence directly gives rise to mental shadows, while the frustration of female resistance adds new despair, continuously deepening the rifts in both body and mind. Ultimately, the core of recovery lies in rebuilding subjectivity and emotional connections. Through memory transmission and dialogue healing, black women gradually regain the right to interpret their trauma stories, repair the fragmented inner integrity and external connections, and reconstruct the meaning and belonging of life from the fragments. This study, by interpreting and analyzing the trauma narrative and healing mechanisms in The Temple of My Familiar, reveals how Walker uses strategies such as memory transmission and dialogue relationships to achieve the transformation of black women's trauma, enriching the academic understanding of trauma writing in literary works. At the same time, this article also responds to the current social concern for historical trauma and intergenerational repair, promoting understanding of the survival predicament of marginalized groups through literary interpretation, and providing a reference for exploring the interaction between literary narrative and psychological healing.

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