

Subject Construction of the Protagonist in *The Color Purple* from the Perspective of Mirror Theory

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Abstract:

The Color Purple is one of the representative works by African-American writer Alice Walker. It recounts the growth journey of the protagonist Celie, who progresses from being oppressed to achieving identity recognition and subjectivity awakening. Domestic and foreign scholars have mainly researched this novel from aspects such as feminism, racial issues, religious beliefs, and narrative techniques, delving into themes like women's liberation, racial marginalization, and the narrative importance of the epistolary form. However, analyses from the perspective of Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory are still relatively rare. This paper holds that Celie's growth process in the novel highly conforms to the logic of Lacan's theory, and the epistolary narrative faithfully documents this changing process. Thus, this paper attempts to introduce Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory into the study of *The Color Purple*. By focusing on the protagonist Celie, it analyzes her construction process from being a chaotic subject in the Real, to an imagined subject in the Imaginary and finally to a symbolic subject in the Symbolic. The significance of this research lies in offering novel academic perspectives to enrich the studies of *The Color Purple*, thereby deepening the understanding of the protagonist's subject construction and providing fresh insights into the exploration of literary works through psychoanalytic theories.

Keywords:

The Color Purple, Alice Walker, Mirror Theory, Subjectivity

1. Introduction

The Color Purple (1982) is one of the representative works of Alice Walker (1944-), a prominent African-American modernist writer. The novel, written in an innovative epistolary form and employing the unique linguistic style of Black culture, tells the story of Celie's spiritual liberation and identity transformation. At the beginning of the novel, Celie is portrayed as a victim of oppression. In her youth, she is raped by her stepfather and gives birth to two children. Later, she is forced to marry the abusive Mr-. During this time, Celie loses contact with her only sister, Nettie, and seeks "relief" through faith in God. Her life takes a turn when she meets the singer Shug

Avery, who guides and helps her gradually become independent. Eventually, Celie frees herself from Mr., reunites with Nettie and her long-lost children, and finds happiness.

Scholars both in China and abroad have primarily focused their research on *The Color Purple* in areas such as feminism, racial issues, religious faith, identity, and narrative techniques. From a feminist perspective, researchers argue that the novel highlights women's resistance and awakening in a patriarchal society. For example, Hazel Carby pointed out in her work that *The Color Purple* demonstrates the path to women's liberation through bonds between women [1]. Similarly, Chinese scholar Li Jieping, from the perspective of Walker's concept of "Womanism", explored how *The Color Purple* constructs and conveys Womanist themes [2]. Regarding racial issues, Bell Hooks noted that Walker exposes the multiple marginalizations Black women experience, including the dual oppression of gender and race [3]. Li Yiqi analyzed the threefold oppression faced by Black women in *The Color Purple* during a specific historical period: racial persecution by white, male oppression influenced by racism, and mutual persecution among Black women internalizing patriarchal ideologies [4]. In terms of religious faith, scholars like Barbara Christian argued that Celie's journey from traditional religious belief to personalized spiritual exploration signifies her awakening of subjectivity [5]. Furthermore, on the topic of narrative techniques, Epstein studied the innovative use of the epistolary form, asserting that it amplifies the expression of women's voices [6]. Chinese scholars such as Du Yeyan and Zhou Xina have also analyzed narrative strategies, including the novel's narrative voice and epistolary format, to reveal its profound themes [7,8].

This paper argues that while existing studies have addressed Celie's personal growth, identity, and construction of subjectivity, analyses from the perspective of Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory remain insufficient. Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory offers a unique lens by focusing on how individuals form self-awareness and subjectivity through the reflection of the Other and the introduction of language. This theory is particularly applicable to exploring the psychological journey from repressed "otherness" to the awakening of subjectivity. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's process of constructing her self-image aligns closely with Lacan's three orders of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The epistolary narrative faithfully documents the dynamic changes in her construction of subjectivity. Therefore, this paper adopts Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory as its research framework, aiming to analyze the internal psychological motivations and external manifestations of Celie's growth. This approach not only provides theoretical support for understanding her transformation but also enriches theoretical discussions on female subjectivity and its awakening.

2. Theoretical Framework

Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory is a fundamental component of his early thought, offering a comprehensive and profound analysis of the formation of individual self-awareness. According to Lacan's theory, an individual's self-recognition must go through three main stages: the pre-mirror stage, the mirror stage, and the post-mirror stage [9].

In the pre-mirror stage, which spans the first six months after birth, the infant's consciousness remains unintegrated, experiencing only fragmented bodily sensations and partial illusions. During this time, the infant's perceptual abilities are in a chaotic

state, unable to establish clear relationships with the external world. All experiences are vague and lack symbolic meaning.

When the infant enters the mirror stage (6 to 18 months), they can recognize their complete image in a mirror. This recognition marks the first step in establishing a relationship with the external world and signifies an initial self-identification. However, the mirror image is fundamentally an Other, and this identification is illusory. The mirror image persists throughout a person's life; in other words, even after the infant matures beyond the mirror stage, those fragmented experiences do not vanish with the formation of a unified sense of self. According to Lacan, the so-called unified self does not exist; the formation of the subject occurs through continuous interaction and identification with the Other [10]. Every individual in society seeks validation of their self. The self reflected in the mirror is unreal—it is an Other. Throughout a person's growth, the subject continuously identifies with the Other. Human self-awareness is inseparable from the presence of the Other, as it is through the gaze of the Other that the self is confirmed, placing the subject in a perpetual state of illusory self-construction.

After the mirror stage, the individual gradually matures and begins to develop a more complex sense of unified selfhood within the frameworks of language and social norms. Lacan posits that this stage does not signify a substantive completion of self-unification but rather the establishment of long-term relationships with the external world through the symbolic order of language and social structures [9]. In this process, the subject relies on the recognition of the Other and the social symbolic system to affirm their selfhood.

3. Construction of Celie's Subjectivity

In *The Color Purple*, Celie's self-construction aligns with Lacan's three stages of the mirror theory: the pre-mirror stage, the mirror stage, and the post-mirror stage. Through a close reading of the text, it becomes evident that Celie's self-image evolves from an unconscious, chaotic subject to a fragmented and illusory subject, eventually transforming into a symbolic subject through the intersection of language and social norms.

3.1. The Pre-Mirror Stage: The Chaotic Subject

In the pre-mirror stage, the subject lacks a clear sense of self-consciousness, existing in a chaotic state in which the individual passively accepts the influences of the environment and others. In the original chaos, the infant is physically separated from the mother and the world, creating a biological need that leads to anxiety, a sense of loss, and lack, forming the basis of the mirror stage [11]. Lacan notes that to please the mother, the infant tries to become the mother's phallus, meaning that the child's desire is a desire for the Other's desire [9]. The first 'mirror' encountered in life is the mother, and recognition from the mother has a profoundly positive impact on self-image [12].

However, Celie's mother, long afflicted by illness, fails to provide emotional support for Celie, instead projecting her anger and suffering onto her. This humiliating treatment "She scream at me. She cuss at me." [13] strips Celie of her position within her mother's desire, plunging her self-perception into chaos. The mother's death exacerbates this crisis, pushing Celie from rejection into obliteration, leaving her with no opportunity to affirm her existence through her mother's desire.

This absence of the maternal figure deprives Celie of a critical Other in her psychological development.

In the absence of her mother, Celie grows up entirely dependent on external power structures imposed by others. Her stepfather not only objectifies her as the target of sexual violence but also suppresses her subjectivity through language. His threats “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” [13] force Celie into silence, stripping her of the right to express herself and excluding her from the symbolic order, preventing her from confirming her existence through language.

Later, Celie is married off to Mr- who neither likes her nor hesitates to abuse her physically. “She’s ugly ... But she ain’t no stranger to hard work.” [13] These words, used by her father to “sell” Celie to Mr- reflect his denigration of Celie’s appearance and objectification of her body. Not only is she reduced to a submissive commodity passed between her father and husband, but she also internalizes these labels, further deepening the confusion in her self-perception.

In Celie’s early life, her mother, father, and husband fail to provide her with a “mirror” to help her understand herself. This absence causes her growth to stagnate in what Lacan terms the chaotic state of the Real Order.

3.2. The Mirror Stage: The Imaginary Subject

In Lacan’s mirror theory, the mirror stage is a critical moment in the formation of subjectivity, as it facilitates the birth of the self and establishes a relationship between the subject and the external world [14]. This relationship is characterized by an imaginary connection between the self and others, founded on narcissistic mirror identification. When an infant first sees their reflection in a mirror, they equate this image with themselves, establishing a fictional, imaginary self. The self identifies not only with its reflection but also with the Other in the mirror, which Lacan terms “secondary identification” [9]. The self exists only in the eyes of the Other; without the Other, the self cannot exist [15]. This signifies that the subject begins to recognize their existence through the Other or external mirrors, developing a sense of self-identity. However, this identification involves both the illusion of wholeness and alienation due to dependence on the Other.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie’s growth reflects this turning point, with Shug Avery acting as the key Other and serving as Celie’s mirror. The mirror stage, metaphorically represented in Lacan’s theory, is literally enacted between Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple*.

Celie first faces and appreciates her body in front of a mirror, much like an infant in Lacan’s mirror stage who becomes aware of their independence and wholeness, thus transforming from the object of desire to the subject of desire, gaining self-respect and power to resist patriarchal oppression [16]. As Daniel Ross notes, this transformation mirrors Lacan’s mirror stage theory [17].

Celie has no desire to understand her body until the arrival of her husband’s lover, Shug Avery. Seeing Shug’s naked body for the first time reshapes her perception of the beauty of the female body. Shug, who exudes charm, confidence, and a willingness to express her desires, provides Celie with an ideal mirror image. Lacan posits that the mirror image is both the ideal self of the subject’s imagination and the object of identification. For Celie, Shug is not only an external Other but also a projection of her ideal self. Shug’s affirmation of Celie’s body helps Celie gradually

break away from the labels imposed by patriarchal discourse. When Shug encourages her to look at herself, Celie reacts like a child afraid of being caught by a parent: she giggles and feels as though she has “been doing something wrong” [13]. Shug reassures her: “You look so cute” [13] and praises her body: “It a lot prettier than you thought, ain’t it?” [13]. From internalizing labels such as “ugly” and “not smart” to discovering and appreciating her body and value, this journey symbolizes Celie’s transformation from a passive object of desire to an active subject of desire.

However, this mirror identification carries the alienating traits described by Lacan. Psychoanalysis suggests that identification is both alienation and self-love, as the self invests more libido in itself than in the object of the Other, immersing itself in unrealistic fantasies and forming a narcissistic view of the subject [11]. Celie’s self-recognition heavily relies on Shug’s external support. She views Shug as the center of her world and repeatedly expresses possessive desires for her. For instance, when Shug finds a new lover, Celie writes, “My heart broke. Shug love somebody else” [13]. These elements demonstrate that while Celie’s mirror stage facilitates her initial self-awareness, her identification remains unstable and dependent on the Other. However, Shug’s role extends beyond providing Celie with identification during the mirror stage; she also offers the possibility for Celie to transition from identification to self-subjectivity. Celie begins to rebuild her sense of self-worth through tailoring and other endeavors.

3.3. The Post-Mirror Stage: The Symbolic Subject

In individual development, the subject (or infant) quickly realizes that at a certain age, if they do not use language to express their “demande”, the parents will no longer respond as they did before, and their “besoin” will not be met [14]. Only when the subject escapes narcissistic imaginary identification can the intervention of the symbolic order or language become possible. Once the subject disengages from the fascination of the mirror, they turn toward controlling tools and interacting with others through actions.

As Celie gradually detaches herself from mirror identification with Shug, she enters the Symbolic Order described by Lacan. The Symbolic Order is the domain in which the subject establishes their position through language and social norms, marking Celie’s transition from dependent, narcissistic identification to self-subjectivity.

Writing letters is a key means for Celie to rebuild her relationship with the external world. Initially, having lost contact with her sister and receiving no help in the real world, Celie turns to spiritual solace. With no other options, she entrusts her fate to God, writing letters to Him to express her pain and seek guidance from this imaginary Other. For over a decade, Celie wrote letters to God without signing her name [18]. This unconscious denial of her identity gradually transforms as Celie grows. She begins to question God’s race and gender authority, transitioning from passive submission to active questioning. This marks Celie’s breakthrough from an oppressive symbolic order and her reconstruction of her relationship with the external world through language.

Celie’s growth is also reflected in her ability to establish equal interactions with others in reality. For example, when she tells Squeak, or Mary Agnes, “Make Harpo call you by your real name, I say. Then maybe he see you even when he trouble” [13], Celie not only guides others in maintaining their dignity but also demonstrates her mastery of language and the symbolic order. By empowering others through language,

Celie showcases the awakening and consolidation of her subjectivity. Squeak's experiences reflect similar emotional oppression and identity loss to Celie's early life. When Celie, in a mentor-like role, tells her this, it signifies her transformation from an oppressed individual to a guide helping others recognize their self-worth and rebuild their self-esteem. Later in the story, when Harpo says, "I love you, Squeak" [13] and kneels to profess his love to Mary Agnes, and Mary Agnes responds by standing up and declaring, "My name is Mary Agnes" [13], this moment highlights not only Mary Agnes's empowerment but also Celie's expanded subjectivity. Early in her life, Celie's voice was silenced, and she could only write letters to God to express her suffering. However, when she influences Mary Agnes through language and helps shape another's subjectivity, Celie transitions from a passive participant in the Symbolic Order to an active one. She has become an independent and empowered self.

Later, when Celie prepares to leave Mr- and move to Memphis with Shug, Mr- ridicules and humiliates her, claiming she is incapable of leaving him and surviving on her own: "But what you got? You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open you mouth to people ... You not that good a cook either ... And nobody crazy or backward enough to want to marry you, neither" [13]. In response, Celie asserts her freedom and proclaims her right to exist: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly, and can't cook ... But I'm here" [13]. This turning point signifies Celie's complete transformation into an independent subject. By asserting her existence, she is no longer an oppressed, exploited, and abused object but a subject of language, capable of boldly speaking her mind [18]. By the end of the story, Celie establishes an equal relationship with Mr-, referring to him by his name, Albert, for the first time. This shift in address reflects Celie's growing sense of equality, marking her transition from a passive recipient of violence and oppression to an independent voice capable of asserting herself and living her own life. With her newfound identity, Celie breaks free from the masculine prohibition against speech and to join a community of women, thus freeing herself from dependence on and subjection to male brutality.

As mentioned earlier, the Symbolic Order is the realm in which the individual establishes their position through language and social norms. Thus, Celie's growth is not only evident in her linguistic practice but also in her creative labor. Embroidery, as a tangible form of expression, provides Celie with a means to engage with the Symbolic Order, enabling her to establish her social role and subjectivity through labor. Initially, embroidery serves as Celie's way of escaping oppression and seeking self-worth [19]. Through designing clothes for Shug and sewing stars on her daughter's diapers, Celie expresses her emotional connections and creativity. As her skills develop, Celie establishes her own sewing brand "Folkspants". This brand symbolizes not only her economic independence but also her societal recognition and subjectivity. By engaging in sewing, Celie transcends the constraints of domestic violence and patriarchal oppression, redefining her relationship with the external world and solidifying her reconstructed subjectivity.

Celie's construction of subjectivity progresses from the chaos of the Real Order, through the identification with the Other in the Mirror Stage, to the self-reconstruction in the Symbolic Order. This process demonstrates Lacan's Mirror Stage theory's profound relevance in *The Color Purple*, while also highlighting Celie's transformation from a victim to an independent subject.

4. Conclusions

Celie's journey in *The Color Purple* is a process of subject construction, moving from oppression and loss to awakening and rebirth. Through an analysis of Lacan's three stages of the Mirror Theory, it becomes clear how Celie transitions from the chaotic Real Order to self-awareness in the Mirror Stage and ultimately reconstructs her subjectivity through language and labor in the Symbolic Order. This process not only illustrates Celie's self-image development but also reveals the possibility of achieving subjectivity through language, relationships, and labor in a patriarchal society. Celie's growth is both a history of her struggle against humiliation and objectification and a spiritual journey of restoring dignity and attaining freedom. Through this transformation, Celie moves from being a "silent existence" to a "powerful voice", becoming the author of her destiny and offering readers profound insights into the awakening of female subjectivity.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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