Cultural and Arts Studies, 2026, Volume 2, Issue 3
https://www.bbwpublisher.com/journal/CAS
Online ISSN: 3083-3949
Print ISSN: 3083-3957

The Reconstruction of Body Space and the Emergence of Female Subjectivity in The Color Purple

Xin Zhao*

School of English, Xian International Studies University, Xian 710100, Shaanxi Province, China

***Corresponding author*:** Xin Zhao, 1289921613@qq.com

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Published in 1982, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is widely regarded as a landmark work in black feminist literature. This novel explores the struggle of Black women under the triple oppression of race, gender and class. Through vivid character images and highly infectious narratives, Walker showcases their efforts to survive, resist oppression and regain their self-identity. This article employs spatial theory to examine the process of Black women from the violated private space to the subjective space of self-reconstruction. The research focus lies in the awakening, liberation and reconstruction of the body space. Celie's early life reflected the spatial oppression faced by Black women. Her physical autonomy and emotional well-being have been repeatedly violated, plunging her into silence and self-denial. However, Walker does not simply portray women as victims of oppression. Instead, she demonstrates how they gradually gain control over their lives and rebuild their inner worlds again. It is Celie's transformation that also highlights the connection between personal growth and social independence. As she develops her sense of self, she begins to challenge the restrictions that are imposed on her. Walker further emphasizes the importance of economic independence and professional development in women's pursuit of autonomy. Through her work and financial self-sufficiency, Celie gains magnified control over her life. She also rebuilds her relationships with people around her and develops a stronger sense of belonging within her community. All these changes explain one thing: Celie's body space has been reshaped. Those resonant characters, unique narrative forms, and a powerful feminist perspective make Walker's exploration of women's resistance in body politics and the process of self-reconstruction in body space more vivid. *The Color Purple* showcases the process from collapse to reconstruction of black women in the dimension of body space, and it has thus become a classic.

Keywords: *The Color Purple*; Spatial theory; Feminism; Body as space

Online publication: June 30, 2026

1. Introduction

The Color Purple is one of the most significant works by African American author Alice Walker. The

novel follows a Black girl named Celie, suffering physical and psychological abuse from her father during childhood. These experiences shape her into a submissive and passive woman. However, her life begins to change when her relationships with other women change, including Shug, Sophia, and her sister Nettie. Their support helps Celie challenge patriarchal authority and overcome years of oppression. Through this process, she gradually gains control over her body and spirit again and begins to reconstruct her body space. Current scholarly research on *The Color Purple* primarily emphasizes feminism, trauma studies, coming-of-age narratives, narratology, and postcolonialism [1]. However, the application of spatial criticism theory to this novel remains underdeveloped.

2. Body as an important space

"Spatial criticism", which is a term that emerged from the "spatial turn" in 20th-century humanities and social sciences, emphasizes the special concept that space is not a neutral vessel in nature but a structure continuously shaped and encoded by power relations. In the development of spatial criticism, Henry Lefebvre is undoubtedly the most significant person and his "body as space" became a key concept. He argued that "each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space [2]."

With this theoretical frame, the body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it [3]. As Henri Lefebvre argues, the body is simultaneously subjected to social discipline and capable of producing space, functioning as a creative source through which space is appropriated, lived, and transformed [2]. There is no doubt that Foucault's discussion of "disciplining the body" in Discipline and Punish further reveals the close connection between the body and political structures. "Women are defined as objects, as mere bodies, and… regarded as such by others, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention… the objectifying regard… can account for the spatial modality [4]." Feminist spatial theory further stresses that, for women, the body is not just a biological entity, but a "possessed space" continually defined by multiple essences, including violence, gender norms, domestic institutions, and the social gaze. For Black women, the body is not only disciplined by patriarchy but shaped by racism into a "possessed space." Within this theoretical framework, through Celie's process of losing, gaining, and reconstructing control over her body space, Alice Walker illustrates the dual oppression Black women endure from both gender and racial discrimination, while simultaneously constructing an idealized path of self-rescue for Celie as a representative figure of oppressed Black women. Celie's body space thus becomes the intersection of multiple forms of oppression; examining her subjectivity through this lens is not only methodologically feasible but also allows a deeper articulation of the novel's internal logic and political significance.

3. Disempowerment of body space

Celie's loss of control over her body space is first and most acutely manifested in her loss of sexual autonomy. At the age of fourteen, she repeatedly suffers abuse at the hands of her stepfather, "then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He started to choke me, saying You better shut up and get used to it." "I'm big. I can't move fast enough[5]." Even her own visual agency is controlled by others, "He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got somethin in my eye, but I didn't wink.[5]" This situation persists until Celie turns twenty, when, under her father's arrangement, she marries Mr. ___. Even after marriage, Celie still lacks the right to decide whether to engage in sexual activity, and she

merely endures it submissively, “I lay there thinking about Nettie while he on top of me, wonder if she safe. [5] ” Celie’s prolonged loss of sexual autonomy --- her inability to refuse her stepfather’s violent intrusions and her lack of agency over Mr. ___’s possession of her body -- represents a fundamental collapse of the boundaries of her body space, as sexual consent is a crucial component of bodily sovereignty.

As Judith Butler observes [6], violent discipline shapes women’s bodies into compliant and governable forms; in Celie’s case, this discipline reaches an extreme through coercive possession, leading her to internalize the view of her body as an extension of another’s property. The body serves as a surface upon which culture and power inscribe their meanings [7]. The body is not only inscribed, marked, engraved by social pressures external to it but is the product, the direct effect, of the very social constitution of nature itself. Sexual violence is the most destructive mode of inscription, marking Celie’s body with shame, silence, and lack of sovereignty, rendering her unable to perceive herself as a subject. As Althusser notes, “the soul can only think insofar as it is affected by the movements and impressions of the body; the soul not only accompanies the body, it resides within it, and the integration of soul and body precedes any distinction [8].” Consequently, Celie’s soul was subjugated by her stepfather; she succumbed to patriarchal authority and was even stripped of the ability to resist. Thus, in the first half of the novel, the loss of sexual autonomy is not only the most striking manifestation of Celie’s loss of control over her own bodily space, but also the fundamental reason for her inability to assert her own agency.

Celie’s loss of bodily autonomy is also reflected in the fact that the labor she performs within a space controlled by patriarchy does not belong to her. Marxist feminism argues that when a person is deprived of the right to enjoy the fruits of her own labor, this effectively means that her bodily space does not belong to her. Their bodies have become places of dispossession, dedicated to domestic labor. Celie shoulders every aspect of maintaining the household--cooking, cleaning, caring for the children, and upholding her husband’s social image. Yet this labor neither constitutes her sense of identity nor brings her any tangible rewards. As Silvia Federici observes, “The unpaid labor of women has been the pillar of capitalist accumulation. [9]” Women’s bodies undertake the labor necessary for social reproduction, but such labor has long been uncompensated and appropriated by patriarchal structures. In Celie’s case, this dynamic is particularly pronounced: her work is regarded merely as a natural extension of male life order, constructing her body as a “serving body” rather than as an autonomous producer. Simone de Beauvoir’s notion of women being fashioned as “the Other of the Other” [10] is likewise confirmed in Celie -- her existence is defined by service to others, with both body and labor divorced from subjectivity. The expropriation of labor thus constitutes another crucial dimension of Celie’s loss of control over body space: she cannot decide who may touch her body, nor can she determine the ownership of her bodily labor’s products.

With both sexual and labor rights over her body space expropriated, Celie’s linguistic space is also erased. Her only outlet for expression is the letters she writes to God. From her conversations with Shug, it is evident that, at the time of her loss of bodily autonomy, Celie’s image of God is that of a distant, indifferent white male. He “doesn’t seem to listen to your prayers,” “just sit up there glorying in being deaf.” This imagined figure reveals the double exclusion embedded in the discursive structure of Black women: as a Black person, she is unheard by white culture; as a woman, she is unheard by patriarchy. Her voice is denied, and silence is consequently constructed as a necessary mode of survival for Black women. As Spivak notes, “subaltern cannot speak [11]”; Celie’s letters become a monologue that can only be received in silence, rather than a voice that enters the public discourse. Writing to “God” thus manifests a forcibly internalized

discursive space: she can only address an authority that does not respond, which most clearly illustrates how the expropriation of her body space compresses her linguistic space.

4. The awakening and reconstruction of body space and subjectivity

Celie's body space begins to undergo transformation, primarily due to the emergence of Shug Avery. Even before Shug physically appears before her, she exists as a symbol of awakening within Celie's consciousness. It is precisely the presence of this nascent consciousness that makes subsequent awakening possible. When Celie first hears the name Shug Avery from Mr. ___ and sees her photograph, she believes Shug is "the most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail." During sexual encounters with Mr. ___, although Celie does not desire such acts, she refrains from resistance because she thinks that "I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it" Celie "put my arm around him." Celie's curiosity about Shug stems from her admiration for Shug's rebellious nature. In this sense, Shug appeared as a symbol even before she physically entered the story, representing a form of female existence that transcends patriarchal norms. When this projection came to fruition as she finally entered Celie's life, Celie begins to reclaim control over her body, her desires, and her voice through real-life interactions, thereby achieving her latent awakening.

The awakening of Celie's body space was not something deeply hidden in her heart and innate, but was catalyzed by others. In the novel, the three female characters around Celie build an "awakening matrix" for her, making her awakening possible. First up is Shug. Shug is both a lover and a mentor, guiding her from the silence of her body to self-awareness of it. Celie's sister, Nettie, conveys information about the outside world to Celie through letters. This information made Celie realize for the first time that there were other physical worlds beyond the patriarchal space and that there were other possibilities in life. The confrontation between Sofia and her husband Harpo provides a practical model for Celie's physical resistance. The words, deeds and experiences of the three of them constantly reminded Celie, "You must fight them." Celie thus realized that female obedience is not a predestined fate, and physical obedience is not a matter of course. Celie's experience coincides with that of feminist spatial theory, that is, the liberation of the body is often achieved through "the subject model borrowed from others", and in this process, the mutual gazing, imitation and dependence among women are the key mechanisms for the generation of subjectivity. It is precisely these factors that have provided Celie's physical awakening with emotional support, behavioral motivation, and practical examples. The interwoven influences of Shug, Sofia, and Nettie have truly affected this compliant black woman. All these factors made it possible for her to imagine and try another way of physical existence in such a repressive situation.

Apart from the most crucial factor of friendship among women, there are also some other objects that constantly inspire Celie's awareness of her own body space. Among all the objects, the razor is the most important and shows the most obvious change. The razor represents Celie's own interest - cutting others' hair -- and also marks her personal space. In the image of the razor, she confirmed her own value and was able to establish an equal and fulfilling connection with others. However, one day her stepfather brutally invaded her territory under the pretext of "asking Celie to cut his hair for him". After that, the razor was entangled with "sexual violence" for her and became a devastating memory. This experience also symbolizes

the deprivation of her bodily autonomy. The razor began to become a symbol of fear and a tangible symbol of patriarchal violence and male control. But this fear wasn't always lurking in Celie's heart. When she discovered that her husband had been hiding letters sent by Nettie, for the sake of family bonds, the image of the razor transformed for the second time. At this point, the razor was no longer a symbol of fear and patriarchal violence, but became a tool for defending family connections, reclaiming the right to know, and taking control instead of being at others' mercy. This flip marked a turning point in her awakening to bodily autonomy: the razor went from being "something used to control her" to "a power she commanded." In other words, the razor wasn't just a tool for revenge--it became a symbolic milestone in reclaiming her body space. This demonstrates that Celie acknowledged her right to resist, and that her body was no longer just a site for enduring violence but a being with agency.

Celie's subjective initiative after awakening was the decisive factor that enabled her to reconstruct her body space, and the most obvious manifestation of this initiative was the emergence of her interest in sewing. After leaving Mr.___, Celie moved into Shug's home. Here she fell in love with making trousers. The work she does is not only cutting but also designing. Pants were originally supposed to be a symbol of male culture, but Walker let Celie take control of them. To some extent, this indicates Walker's transcendence and redefinition of the patriarchal space. Celie picked up a pair of scissors that resembled a razor and created her own work of art, achieving both material and spiritual success. This behavior indicates that her body no longer submits to others but has become a subject capable of creating meaning and economic value. She escaped from the patriarchal space and from then on no longer worked passively but actively created. In this kind of production, she established her own subjectivity, gained social recognition and economic autonomy. As Grosz argues, the body is a cultural surface that can be inscribed and reinscribed [7]; Celie's process of designing and making trousers demonstrates her subjective initiative in writing about her body space. This process not only shaped the meaning of her body but also projected her physical space onto the external social domain, thus enabling her to complete the transformation from inner awakening to external practice. In this sense, sewing not only means making a living, but also means that Celie has gained physical value, identity and spatial sovereignty. Therefore, Celie's mastery of the skill of sewing is a sign of the successful reconstruction of her body space.

5. Conclusion

Through the portrayal of Celie's arduous process from losing her body space to reshaping her own subjectivity, Walker profoundly reveals in *The Color Purple* the process by which women's body space exerts power as patriarchy and the efforts and significance of women regaining their own subjectivity. At the beginning of the text, Celie's body became an "occupied space" under the dual pressure of patriarchy and race. She was not only deprived of her verbal power and economic power, but most importantly, the inherent autonomy of her body was also taken away. All of these constitute a cruel reality, that is, the loss of her own subjectivity. Yet, supported by a female community including Shug, Sofia, and Nettie, Celie gradually breaks her silence and, through acts such as resistance with the razor, creative labor in sewing, and the awakening of desire, achieves a fundamental transformation of body space from "other-possessed" to "self-governed." This process of reconstruction is not only a form of personal liberation but also reflects a pathway for Black women to generate subjectivity amid structural oppression. Through the metaphor of body space, the novel concretizes the intertwined oppressions of gender, race, and class, while the reshaping of the body resonates

with the core concerns of feminist spatial theory: space is not a static container but a dynamic field that can be recoded through resistance, creation, and relationality. Through sewing, Celie was able to achieve financial independence and also find emotional connections in love and mutual support. Her body thus transformed from a disciplined subject into a creative subject space with subjective initiative.

Therefore, *The Color Purple* tells not only a story about the growth and resistance of individuals, but also deeply reveals the intrinsic connection between body politics and spatial autonomy. Walker wants to tell all black women through *The Color Purple* that the awakening of subjective consciousness begins with the re-mastery of the right to control the body and is further consolidated through the emotional connection and practical actions among women. Although Celie's story has passed for decades, when placed in contemporary society, her experience still holds significant implications. She reminds every girl who is oppressed and finds it hard to express her own voice that only by breaking free from the constraints of the existing spatial order and re-establishing her understanding and control over her own body can she gradually achieve true freedom and self-completeness.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

[1] Jiang H, 2014, An Interpretation of Purple under the Theory of Binary Opposition. Language Construction, 08: 25–26.

[2] Lefebvre H, 1991, The Production of Space. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Blackwell.

[3] Foucault M, 1977, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Pantheon Books.

[4] Young IM, 1980, Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality. Human Studies, 3: 137–156.

[5] Walker A, 2018, The Color Purple. Ed. Rachel Lister. Oxford UP.

[6] Butler J, 1990, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Routledge.

[7] Grosz E, 1994, Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism. Routledge.

[8] Althusser L, 1993, L'Unique Tradition Matérialiste. Lignes, 08: 96.

[9] Federici S, 2004, Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation. Autonomedia.

[10] Beauvoir S de, 2011, The Second Sex. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Vintage Books.

[11] Spivak GC, 1988, Can the Subaltern Speak? In: Nelson C, Grossberg L (eds.), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture. University of Illinois Press: 271–313.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.