

An examination of the importance of community and language in female emancipation from social oppression, focusing on *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.

In *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, both writers examine the challenge of maintaining the self within cultures and histories that actively seek to negate them. Specifically, they examine the problems of asserting a black female identity – and ways in which Celie, the protagonist of Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sethe (and indeed, a myriad of other female characters) in *Beloved* establish independent identities.

In short, both novels articulate voices that are doubly marginalised, and the stories they are eventually able to tell. Celie's narrative is born from family abuse – she is down-trodden and negated by those who should protect her; it is through her friendship with singer, Shug Avery, and her letters to her sister, that Celie discovers her place in the world, and importantly, writes herself into existence. In *Beloved*, set immediately after the American Civil War, some 70 years before *The Color Purple*, Sethe is similarly oppressed – again by those who should nurture her but also by slavery.

Both protagonists occupy the most marginal of social positions which makes their eventual realisation of self all the more significant. As *The Color Purple* opens, Celie can't even sign her name to the letters which construct the novel as such an act is an assertion of identity. Only with the help of others, can these characters free themselves; be it by finding a place and people – realising their full potential with the assistance of companions or coming to understand that they can harness the power of language and communication towards self-realisation.

The importance of finding a place and people

Both Celie and Sethe find relief from the harsh realities of their worlds in the communities they find themselves in, and that they forge. Indeed, *Beloved* demonstrates the extent to which individuals need the support of their communities and strong relationships with others in order to survive and overcome oppression. Such a necessity is illuminated by the novel's central character, Sethe. She first develops her sense of self during her twenty-eight days of freedom from slavery in which she becomes part of the fledgling Cincinnati community, helping her escape the oppression of slavery which erases the identity of those it keeps down. Morrison clearly connects such an erosion of the self with an inability to find

peace; alienation, especially from the self, is intrinsically connected to volatility. Prior to this, Sethe does not have a healthy relationship with herself, and is highly critical of her own exterior and interior as a result of being constantly criticised by others. Paul D, when he “saw the float of her breasts ... disliked it, the spread-away, flat roundness of them that he could definitely live without”¹. She is also sensitive regarding the unsightly scarring on her back, which Paul D described as a “revolting clump of scars. Not a tree, as she said” (p15) and the reputation she built for herself by doing what she thought would save her children. But it is during these twenty-eight days, “Days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company” (p111), that she bonds with and learns from others (“knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better” p111), leading to her own awakening and therefore emphasising the importance of community.

By learning the stories of black women such as herself, the ways in which women like her assert their identities, and the ways in which they express their feelings, Sethe is able to establish her own identity and the way she thinks about life suddenly seems easier knowing that others feel as she does since, after all, many hands make light work. From this, Sethe’s mind is freed, allowing her to make steps towards also freeing her body. It is only after gaining such knowledge of those around her that, “Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, [Sethe] had claimed herself” (p111). However, Morrison is careful to point out that “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (p111-112). It is not enough simply to recognise one’s situation and erase the influence of other people in life, not to be controlled by others; one must take control of one’s own life and influence one’s own future. Similarly, the journey towards such a freeing of the self is almost always predicated on realising those things the self may wish to suppress forever; with oppression necessarily comes suppression, it seems. As well as the community Sethe discovers, she finds things about herself that are not as welcome. The narrator says that Sethe “knew that Paul D was adding something to her life – something she wanted to count on but was scared to” (p112). Simultaneously then, Paul D operates as both a “blessing” (p113) and “another kind of haunting” (p113).

¹ Morrison, T., 2005. *Beloved*. Vintage. P15

Sethe is not the only character in *Beloved* to experience such self-awakening through finding a place to belong, a people to know. Her own daughter, Denver, has a similar awakening, brought on by watching the deterioration of her mother, when she leaves 124 and becomes part of 'actual' society; she is only able to understand the importance of community when she is surrounded by new people after the solitude, spending her days working by herself and only ever seeing the inside of her own house and the same faces of her family within it, she has known for so long. And when Paul D finds himself in jail, he realises the importance of community when it becomes apparent that he can only escape such a dire situation with the help of his fellow men. Paul D and fellow prison inmates in Georgia prove able to escape only by working together as they are literally joined by a chain. Paul D says "For one lost, all lost. The chain that held then would save all or none." (p130) This scenario is an obvious metaphor for the oppression of slavery where the chain signifies how they are all joined by their shared struggle.

In *Beloved*, community has no gender; it takes the full strength of the collective to overcome the shackles of racial oppression. However, in *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker specifically portrays female friendships as the conduit for the telling of stories that resist oppression and dominance; only by forcefully talking back to the men who abuse, and articulating alternatives to abuse, do the women of the novel break the cycles of sexism and violence that confine them. Such abuse is exemplified in the way Mr. ___ speaks to Celie, consistently putting her down by saying things like "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all."²

Relationships among women form a refuge, providing reciprocal love in a world filled with male violence. This is apparent in most of the stories of the central female characters. Sofia's ability to fight, to stand up for herself and her rights, comes from her strong relationship with her sisters; Nettie's relationship with her sister Celie allows her to survive through her years of living in the unfamiliar culture of Africa; Samuel notes that the strong relationships of the Olinka women are the only thing that makes the polygamous lifestyle

² Walker, A., 2014. *The Color Purple*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. P187

they are forced into bearable (and, of course, these polygamous relationships mirror or map onto the trinity of Shug, Celie and Mr.____).

But the most important of these gynocentric relationships in the novel is between Celie and Shug Avery – and it is through this relationship that Celie finds redemption and, ultimately, herself. Christopher S. Lewis, in *Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker's "The Color Purple"*, addresses the nature of such a relationship and its significance. He explains to the reader that what he calls "black lesbian shamelessness"³, cultivated by black lesbian and lesbian-allied writers, is the idea that female relationships give black women a reason to live and live well, as well as the chance to recognise and welcome the fact that opening yourself up to another person and sharing a dependency with them is a key part of human relationships – therefore, black lesbian shamelessness helps women to overcome their oppression as they do not allow themselves to live miserably. This idea also directly links to Celie's relationship with Shug Avery and how it "sustains and nurtures" (p159) her life, aiding in her survival.

Power of language/communication

While community heals and relationships nurture, it is language that turns those who have always been defined into those who define, those who are passive into those who are active.

In *Beloved*, Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, escapes from her life as a slave and finds she "had nothing left to make a living with but her heart – which she put to work at once. Accepting no title of honour before her name" (p102). In this way, she frees herself from the shackles of definition, as she refuses to accept a title, a definition given to her by others. However, sometimes people need the help of the spoken word to free themselves. At her lowest ebb, mourning the loss of her husband Halle, Baby Suggs, of 124, and eventually also the reincarnation of her daughter, *Beloved*, Sethe survives thanks to the ideas

³ Lewis, C.S., 2012. *Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker's "The Color Purple"*. *Rocky Mountain Review*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Fall 2012), pp. 158-175.
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communicated to her by others. She laments to Paul D that Beloved “was [her] best thing” (p321), leading him to remind her that she is her own best thing (“You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” p322) and awakening her sense of self, allowing her to be active and to make her own definition (“Me? Me?”p322). Similarly, Sixo, a fellow slave, eventually resorts to abandoning English altogether to avoid being shackled by the language of his oppressor, and being whipped by Schoolteacher (a ‘definer’ in many senses: white, male, the holder of education, the classifier of knowledge). Sixo is whipped to demonstrate that “definitions belong to the definers – not the defined” (p225), not to him.

Other characters also manipulate language and transcend its limits; Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid, for example, rename themselves in an effort to redefine the world on their own terms. They abolish the definition by which others knew them and start fresh by making themselves known only to themselves.

Equally, the structure of the novel evades linear definition. The story is not told chronologically; it is composed of tales from both the present and the past. The flashbacks are always to a worse time in Sethe’s life, and so allow the reader to see how much her character has developed and how far she has come. As Sethe is the narrator – and as such the definer of her own story – it can be argued that she places the flashbacks in the novel deliberately, manipulating structure, in order to illustrate her own growth. But this structure also extends to illustrate growth of something bigger than Sethe. Linda Krumholz, in *The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s Beloved*, says that “Morrison constructs a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and a historical or national process.”⁴ She adds that Sethe describes this relationship within the novel herself:

If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays,
and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I

⁴ Krumholz, L., 1992. The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. *African American Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3, Fiction Issue (Autumn 1992), pp. 395-408.
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041912>
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remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (p43)

Krumholz explains that if Sethe's unique memories exist as pieces of a greater historical memory in the world, then each person's individual journey of recall or "rememory" can be replicated on a historical level. Her conclusion is that Sethe's healing process, accepting the details of her past, "is a model for readers who must confront Sethe's past as part of our own past, a collective past that lives right here where we live."⁵ Thus, Sethe's memories help not only her to come to terms with herself and survive oppression, but help the reader to come to terms with themselves and their past also. From all of this, it is clear that characters in *Beloved* take control of language so that they can escape the horrors of slavery and redefine themselves.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker emphasises throughout the novel that the ability to express one's thoughts and feelings is crucial to developing, or redefining, a sense of self. Celie begins the novel as essentially an object, an entirely passive party who has no power to assert herself through actions or words. Her only outlet is in her letters to God wherein she details her story (because she was warned by the man whom she believed to be her father, Alphonso, that she "better not never tell nobody but God" (p3) about his abuse of her). As a result, her narrative seems muddled – she is not used to expressing her own thoughts and feelings since people have spent so long telling her to keep quiet. But Celie finds her voice through important lessons taught to her by Shug Avery (emphasising again the importance of finding a place and people). Shug renames Celie a "virgin" (p74), symbolising a new beginning and showing her that through the power of words she can create her own narrative; a new interpretation of herself and her history that counters those forced upon her (indeed, become a definer rather than someone defined). Celie's own, full narrative comes when she discovers more about herself from the letters from her sister, Nettie. This

⁵ Krumholz, L., 1992. The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *African American Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3, Fiction Issue (Autumn 1992), pp. 395-408.
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discovery of her own story is what allows her to fully redevelop herself and survive the oppressive nature of her society, indeed what allows her to redefine herself.

The novel's climax comes when Celie finally curses out Mr. ____ for his years of abuse, but the erasure of his name is what is truly significant in the novel. By refusing to name him, Celie is denying him his identity, therefore erasing him and reducing him to nothing as the patriarchal society has reduced her to nothing for so long. Charles Heglar, in *Named and Nameless: Alice Walker's Pattern of Surnames in The Color Purple*, argues that Walker's erasure, or indeed contribution, of surnames to characters is done in an attempt to "develop an alternative perspective that challenges, overturns, and regenerates the patriarchal society of the novel"⁶. Therefore, Celie's denial of a man's identity, significantly a man who has abused her, is an act of survival as she rebels against the patriarchal order by diminishing Mr. ____ and building herself up in his place, putting herself above him – negatively redefining his name in order to positively redefine her own. This control of language, then, erasing names in order to erase power, exemplifies the influence of language and communication in Celie's survival.

As an epistolary novel, the development of Celie's character, the stages of her redefinition, can be seen in the content of her letters – specifically how she signs them and to whom she addresses them. For a large portion of the novel, she left her letters unsigned because she did not see herself as someone worthy of signing their name. Firm evidence of her growth comes later, however, when she signs her letter with not only her name but her own business and address:

"Your Sister, Celie
Folkspants, Unlimited.
Sugar Avery Drive
Memphis Tennessee" (p193)

⁶ Heglar, C. J., 2000. *Named and Nameless: Alice Walker's Pattern of Surnames in The Colour Purple*. *ANQ*, Vol. 13, No. 1, (Winter 2000), pp. 38-41.
Stable URL: <http://www.bookrags.com/criticism/the-color-purple-crit/12/#gsc.tab=0>
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This signifies that Celie has become a proud woman in her own right, one who makes her own money and has her own home. A far cry from the woman she was before. There is redefinition here not only of Celie, but of sewing as a profession, as Celie has overturned the idea that it is marginal and unimportant women's labour and turned it into a lucrative, empowering source of economic independence, which allows her to sign her letters with her name, her company and her own address. This connects to the idea presented in Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*, that a woman must have money and a room of her own to be successful, specifically in writing fiction. But Turgay Bayindir takes this idea one step further, and connects more closely to the character of Celie, in her essay *A House of Her Own: Alice Walker's Readjustment of Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own in The Color Purple*, when she explains that a room is not enough; for a black woman to truly free herself from patriarchy they need "a house of their own where they can live free from the confines of men regardless of whether that man is a father or a husband."⁷

The increasing sense of the letters becoming less muddled than they were initially illustrates the growing intelligence of Celie. The addressee of her letters also displays this to a degree, as her spiritual awakening is shown in the way she addresses one of her final letters:

"Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God." (p259)

This address stems directly from Shug's advisory tale of how she freed herself, wherein she tells Celie "My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people." (P176) Ultimately, then, Celie's survival of patriarchy and acceptance of the world is a direct result of stories that Shug shares with her. Therefore, survival in this novel comes from the sharing of stories and narratives which allow characters, like Celie, to learn more about both others and themselves – prospering in unfortunate circumstances on the basis

⁷ LaGrone, K., 2009. *Alice Walker's The Color Purple*. Rodopi B.V. P209-210
Stable URL: <http://static.schoolrack.com/files/232367/725950/the-colour-purple.pdf>
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that knowledge is power. As any knowledge comes from the sharing of stories, language and communication are therefore highlighted as greatly important.

Conclusion

In both novels, relationships and community help the protagonists to survive and overcome their issues on the basis of teaching and learning; in the company of others, the women learn things that they could not possibly learn on their own. Not all of this knowledge is positive, as they do indeed come to terms with negative and saddening facts, but it is all beneficial to them on the grounds that knowledge is power – the more they know, the more power they hold. Communication helps them in an almost identical way; by communicating with others they can absorb more information than they ever would alone and thus accumulate more power. Manipulation of language does not rely on other people; it is an independent act which allows the characters to help themselves, redefining themselves and others by supplying new and withdrawing existing names, and reordering structure in a non-chronological order to illustrate their own growth as motivation.

3,123 words

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