

Critical Appreciation of *The Color Purple* in Relation to *Beloved*

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Abstract

Oppression, sexual abuse, exploitation, regardless of someone known or otherwise are phenomena that transcends the across time periods. Sethe, in Beloved was exploited by the whites and on the other hand Celie in The Color Purple was abused by her "supposed" family. This paper delves into the critical appreciation of Alice Walker's The Color Purple and Toni Morrison's Beloved, two seminal works of African-American literature. Both novels delve into the intricate layers of African American experiences, exploring themes of oppression, resilience, and the quest for identity. Both characters, Celie and Sethe grapple with the trauma of sexual exploitation and abuse, yet their responses and eventual liberation unfold in distinct ways. Through a critical analysis, this study elucidates how both novels employ various literary techniques to depict the enduring legacies of slavery and oppression on African American communities, particularly through the experiences of their female protagonists. Central to this analysis is the exploration of the protagonists' journeys toward self-discovery, empowerment, and healing amidst the pervasive trauma inflicted by systemic racism and patriarchal oppression. This paper will attempt to examine how Walker and Morrison employ language, symbolism, and narrative innovation, emphasizing the transformative power of literature in confronting collective trauma and fostering empathy and understanding across generations. This paper further aims to deepen our understanding of the complexities of the African-American experiences as represented in literature, through a close analysis of the themes, characters, and narrative strategies.

Keywords: *slavery, exploitation, abuse, sexual abuse, racism, oppression, gender roles, self-identity and self-worth.*

Introduction

The Color Purple (1982) by Alice Walker and *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison are significant works that shed light on African-American events during that specific period, particularly for women, in the post-slavery, pre-Civil Rights era. Both novels explore the themes of slavery, racism, gender roles, and the struggle for self-identity and self-worth.

Alice Walker played an active role in the American Civil Rights Movement, a significant endeavor that commenced around 1960, aiming to transform the dynamics of interaction between Black and White individuals in the United States, particularly in the Southern region. Despite the Civil War having ended nearly a century earlier, numerous African Americans faced demeaning and oppressive laws, known as Jim Crow laws, which segregated facilities such as water fountains, lunch

counters, and bathrooms, preventing black people from accessing the same amenities as white individuals. Additionally, these laws hindered African Americans from attending predominantly white state universities and exercising their right to vote and hold elected positions.

Beloved is connected to the Civil War era, particularly the Fugitive Slave Act, which permitted southern slaveholders to pursue and retrieve escaped slaves in the northern states. The novel draws inspiration from the real-life account of Margaret Garner, a slave who fled with her family across the Ohio River in 1856. After being apprehended by slave catchers, Garner tragically chose to take the life of her two-year-old daughter rather than subject her to slavery again. Consequently, Garner was returned to enslavement.

Materials and Methods

This paper attempts to highlight various themes of both novels along with the critical appreciation of the themes.

Slavery

The theme of slavery in *The Color Purple* is indirectly shown as violence and suffering of natives. Violence and suffering in the novel are portrayed as part of a pervasive cycle of tragedy occurring both within families and across broader societal contexts. Celie endures sexual abuse from her stepfather and physical abuse from her husband until Shug Avery intervenes. Sofia faces near-lethal violence from white police officers and imprisonment. Nettie narrowly escapes sexual assault and must flee for safety. Harpo attempts to exert control over Sofia and mistreats Squeak. The threat of violence looms over black communities, as seen in the lynching of Celie's relatives and the oppression by white authorities.

In Africa, similar violence occurs within the Olinka village, where men exert absolute control over women and harmful rituals are enforced. The arrival of white British rubber dealers leads to further violence and disregard for the indigenous culture. Despite these hardships, there is a thread of hope in the novel, particularly in the possibility of Celie and Nettie reuniting. This hope catalyzes breaking the cycle of violence within Celie's family and facilitating the reunion of several family members in Georgia by the novel's conclusion.

"Nobody ever love me. I'm so happy, I don't even mind I'm hurt. A little." - Sofia

Sofia's defiant declaration after being brutally beaten by white police officers captures the resilience and defiance of African American women in the face of systemic oppression, reminiscent of the strength and resilience of enslaved individuals who endured unimaginable suffering yet retained their humanity and dignity.

In *Beloved*, the novel unflinchingly depicts the brutality of slavery through the memories and experiences of its characters. It explores how slavery strips slaves of their humanity, treating them as mere property or animals. Slave owners like Schoolteacher view African-American slaves solely in terms of their monetary value and subject them to degrading treatment, such as using iron bits as

restraints. Even seemingly kind slave owners like Mr. and Mrs. Garner perpetuate abuse and maintain a dehumanizing environment. Slavery also fractures families, as children are often sold away from their parents. The effects of slavery persist even after individuals attain freedom, as seen in the haunting memories, physical scars, and the persistent threat of former owners. The novel demonstrates the enduring consequences of slavery through the haunting presence of *Beloved* and the characters' struggles to escape its shadow.

"They sang of bosses and masters and misses; of mules and dogs and the shamelessness of life."

Morrison captures the dehumanizing language and imagery of slavery, illustrating the pervasive impact of systemic oppression on the psyche and culture of enslaved individuals.

Racism

The novel, *The Color Purple* unfolds in two distinct locales: rural Georgia and a remote African village, each plagued by issues of race and racism. Celie's perception of her appearance is tainted by societal standards that equate dark skin with ugliness. Sofia, despite standing up against racism, finds herself serving the very family she challenged, while also fulfilling maternal duties for Eleanor, who fails to recognize Sofia's sacrifices. Career opportunities for African Americans are limited, with farming being a primary occupation for men, while women are often relegated to motherhood or performance roles.

In Africa, Nettie, Samuel, and their companions encounter parallels to the racial struggles faced in Georgia. Nettie discovers the unsettling history of African ancestors selling others into slavery, while the Olinka people display indifference toward African Americans. The English rubber workers further exacerbated the displacement of the Olinka, disregarding their historical ties to the land in the pursuit of development. Only upon the family's return to Georgia do they find a sense of unity and normalcy, highlighting the ongoing impact of slavery and poverty on their lives, in contrast to the unaffected lives of white families of the era.

"You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman."

- Harpo

Harpo's internalized racism and misogyny are evident in his derogatory remarks toward Sofia. This quote underscores the intersectionality of oppression faced by Black women, who are marginalized and devalued based on their race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

In *Beloved*, racism is intricately intertwined throughout the narrative, serving as a profound lens through which Morrison scrutinizes the lasting effects of slavery on African American individuals. The novel deeply explores the psychological, emotional, and cultural consequences of racism, shedding light on the complexities of identity, memory, and power within American society.

A pivotal aspect of the theme of racism in *Beloved* is Morrison's examination of the dehumanizing impact of slavery and its aftermath. Through the character of Sethe, who has escaped enslavement but is haunted by past traumas, Morrison vividly depicts the psychological wounds inflicted by racism and oppression. Sethe's memories of violence, separation, and loss serve as a stark reminder of the cruelty of slavery and the enduring impact of racism on individual lives.

Additionally, *Beloved* delves into the transmission of trauma across generations and the enduring influence of racism on subsequent familial and community dynamics. The character of Beloved, embodying Sethe's unresolved pain, symbolizes the persistent presence of history and the lasting effects of systemic injustice on African American families and communities. Morrison's exploration of memory underscores the ongoing struggle to confront and come to terms with the painful realities of the past.

Beloved challenges dominant narratives by centering the voices and experiences of African Americans. By foregrounding the perspectives of marginalized individuals, Morrison offers a counterpoint to historical narratives that have marginalized Black voices, celebrating their resilience and strength in the face of adversity. Through her characters' stories, Morrison illuminates the complexities of race, identity, and power in America, urging readers to confront the painful legacies of racism and envision a more just and equitable future.

"Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another. - Paul D

This quote reflects the struggle of African Americans to assert their humanity and agency in a society that seeks to deny them their rights and dignity.

Gender Roles

The novel, *The Color Purple* also reflects on the traditional gender roles assigned to men and women. Initially, Celie is expected to serve her abusive father and later her husband, Mr. _____. In contrast, Nettie rejects these roles and pursues education and missionary work in Africa. Celie, on the other hand, becomes a mother but leaves the upbringing of her children to Nettie. It's only when Celie is influenced by Shug, who teaches her about self-empowerment, that she begins to challenge the control of men in her life and finds independence. Celie, Squeak, and Harpo's second wife ends up living with Shug in Memphis, where Celie starts her own business.

The male characters experience a shift in expectations as well. Mr. _____, especially after Celie and Shug leave him, realizes his reliance on the labor of women and acknowledges his past mistakes. Similarly, in Africa, Nettie balances traditional gender roles by marrying Samuel while continuing her missionary work. The novel concludes by celebrating both the continuity of family, with strong female characters and repentant male ones, and the fluidity and evolution of family dynamics towards greater equality and understanding, despite the challenges of abuse and neglect along the way.

"Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, and holla just wanting to be loved." - Shug Avery

Shug's assertion of the universal desire for love and acceptance challenges traditional gender roles and emphasizes the importance of emotional expression and connection in human relationships.

In *Beloved*, the theme of gender roles is intricately woven into the narrative, exploring the complexities of power, identity, and agency within the context of African American women's experiences in the aftermath of slavery. Through the characters of Sethe, Beloved, Denver, and others, Morrison examines how societal expectations and patriarchal norms shape and constrain individuals' lives, as well as the transformative potential of challenging and redefining gendered constraints.

At its essence, *Beloved* delves into the profound bond between a mother and her children, particularly focusing on Sethe and her unnamed daughter whom she tragically kills, as well as the eerie resurrection of that daughter in the form of Beloved. Sethe's determination to escape Sweet Home is fueled by her longing to reunite with her children and ensure their safety, paralleled by Halle's efforts to purchase his mother Baby Suggs' freedom before seeking his own. The narrative highlights the strength of maternal love through Sethe's close relationship with Denver, which is disrupted by the arrival of Paul D.

However, the novel also exposes how the horrors of slavery challenge and undermine the power of motherhood. Slavery systematically separates mothers from their children, preventing them from forming strong emotional bonds. Paul D notes the danger of loving one's children deeply in such circumstances. Sethe's traumatic experience of being robbed of her breast milk underscores the physical and emotional deprivation inflicted by slavery. The central act of Sethe killing her daughter can be interpreted as both an act of desperate maternal love to spare her children from slavery's brutality and a rejection of motherhood under such oppressive conditions. Sethe's action reflects the impossibility of being a true mother within the constraints of slavery.

"My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember." - Sethe

Sethe's reflection on her mothering experiences underscores how societal expectations of motherhood can overshadow individual identities and experiences.

Self-Identity and Self-Worth

The novel, *The Color Purple* is primarily about Celie's journey of self-discovery, which also involves the transformation of other characters. Initially, Celie is passive and confused, having endured abuse and mistreatment. However, she gradually learns practical skills, gains independence, and discovers her capacity for love and sexuality through her relationship with Shug. Learning of her sister Nettie's letters, with Shug's support, empowers Celie to confront her past and pursue her happiness. Eventually, she becomes financially independent, repairs

her relationships, and creates a loving family with those around her.

Nettie's journey mirrors Celie's, albeit with different experiences. Despite receiving more education and traveling extensively, Nettie learns to balance her independence with a fulfilling married life. Her arrival with her family at Celie's home signifies the culmination of their respective journeys, as they both find themselves and each other.

"I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." - Shug Avery

Shug's reflection on the significance of the color purple symbolizes the importance of finding beauty and meaning in life's simple pleasures, a revelation that contributes to Celie's journey of self-discovery.

In *Beloved*, the theme of self-worth is intricately woven into the narrative, exploring the profound impact of trauma, oppression, and identity on individuals' sense of value and dignity. Set against the backdrop of slavery's enduring legacy, the characters grapple with the haunting memories of their past and the dehumanizing effects of bondage.

Sethe, the central character, struggles with feelings of guilt and unworthiness stemming from the traumatic events of her past, particularly the murder of her child. Her sense of self-worth is deeply intertwined with her experiences as a slave, as she grapples with the conflicting emotions of love, responsibility, and despair. Sethe's journey towards self-acceptance and redemption is a central focus of the novel, as she confronts the ghosts of her past and seeks to reconcile her actions with her sense of identity.

Similarly, other characters in the novel, such as Denver and Paul D, also wrestle with feelings of inadequacy and shame resulting from their experiences of slavery and oppression. Denver, raised in the shadow of her mother's trauma, struggles to find her sense of worth and belonging in a world defined by violence and suffering. Paul D, haunted by his past and the horrors of slavery, grapples with feelings of worthlessness and displacement as he searches for meaning and connection in his life.

Findings and Results

Throughout the novel, Toni Morrison explores the complex interplay between self-worth, memory, and identity,

highlighting how individuals navigate the legacy of slavery and seek to reclaim their dignity and humanity. Ultimately, *Beloved* serves as a poignant exploration of the enduring impact of trauma and oppression on individuals' sense of self-worth and the transformative power of love, forgiveness, and resilience in reclaiming one's dignity and humanity.

"Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined."

- Beloved

Beloved's profound statement challenges the societal constructs and labels imposed on individuals, asserting the right to define oneself on one's terms. This quote speaks to the theme of self-worth by highlighting the importance of autonomy and self-assertion in shaping one's identity. Beloved's words serve as a powerful reminder of the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, regardless of external judgments or expectations.

In the novel, *The Color Purple*, instead of black oppression by white people, there is black oppression by black people. Walker's major interest is whether or how change can occur in the lives of her black characters. At the beginning of the novel, alienation and separation are evident in all of those relationships, however, through the realization of the novel, an integration exists amongst all factors of life. The novel is a critique of the patriarchal and racist society that has oppressed black women.

Conclusion

This paper reflects on how both the novels can be read together as they are of the same time period and also deal with the same themes such as slavery, racism, gender roles, self-identity, and self-worth. Both novels are written from the feminist point of view which reflects how African American women suffered in the patriarchal and racist society. *Beloved* questions the conventional notion of religion, family, and love and offers alternative visions of spirituality, community, and freedom. *The Color Purple* celebrates the beauty, sexuality, and spirituality of black women, who reclaim their bodies, minds, and souls from the forces that have tried to control them.

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