

## Names and Naming in Alice Walker's

### *The Color Purple*

by  
Barbara Olive

At the physical center of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is the story of Mary Agnus, who very quickly, over several chapters, moves through the stages that parallel those that the central character, Celie, moves through in more depth of detail, from the beginning to the end of the novel. Mary Agnus, or "Squeak," as she is first called by others, is just that: she is what others call her. Celie describes Mary Agnus as Harpo's "little yellowish girlfriend," admitting that Mary Agnus is "like me," that "she do anything Harpo say" (83). Harpo has also named Mary Agnus by giving her the "little nickname" of Squeak, a naming that inscribes Mary Agnus' mouse-like status and personhood.

Mary Agnus' sudden transformation occurs after going on a mission to free Sophia from jail, a mission she is chosen for by coincidence of her being related to the warden. Mary Agnus returns from her mission having been victimized, like Celie; the warden, her uncle, rapes her. But she returns to tell her own story. "Shut up, Harpo," Squeak says, when he tries to tell her story for her, "I'm telling it." "And she do," Celie reports (94). In the same scene, Mary Agnus names herself by standing up and declaring, "My name is Mary Agnus." Despite, and even through her victimization, Mary Agnus has claimed her own power and identity.

Following upon this claiming of her own power, Mary Agnus begins to sing, first Shug's songs and then those she makes up "her own self" (96). Like any change in power structure, hearing Mary Agnus' voice, the outward sign of her self-naming, takes getting used to by the whole community, and Harpo "don't know what to make of it." But, Celie reports, "then we like it a whole lot," and Harpo comes to see Mary Agnus as having been like an unused gramophone sitting in a corner "as silent as the grave" that has now "come to life" (96).

Mary Agnus' story illustrates the form of the whole novel, Celie's narrative of gaining back power taken from her by her victimization, a story of all victimization and oppression. Walker, through her penetrating and rigorous depiction of the social order, is naming oppression, revealing its character and its effects on those oppressed. It is no accident that the novel begins with the naming of incest, an ultimate form of victimization, for in depicting Celie's life, Walker captures a picture of the effects of oppression, whatever form it takes, on its victims: victimization isolates and separates, both physically and emotionally (Celie is emotionally isolated—and later physically separated—from her mother, her siblings, even from herself); the victim often takes on the guilt of the victimizer; the victimizing is passed from one oppressor to the next (in

Celie's case, as for many incest victims, from the original perpetrator to spouses or lovers and even children); the victim develops an extraordinary low self image, an image exacerbated by the oppressors, who cultivate the low self esteem in order to maintain their control; victims learn to numb themselves through chemicals or emotional means (Celie makes herself tree-like in order to survive Pa's and Mr.\_\_\_\_\_'s sexual abuse); their creative potential is cut off (Celie even shuts off her physical regenerative processes), as is their relation to the creation (Celie has never noticed a flower or anything beautiful); they spend their energy attending to others' needs, often not even being aware of their own; and, until they reach a stage of liberation, they are often not even consciously aware of their condition, or of their anger.

Mary Angus' story also points to the importance of names in the novel, names that help capture the nature of the oppression and that also imply the means of liberation from the oppression. Mary Agnus herself bears a name that points to the need for this liberation: Agnus, or lamb, suggests Mary Agnus' role as sacrificial figure (she is chosen as the one to go to free Sophia from jail), while Mary implies her role in redemption. She redeems Sophia, becoming, through her sacrifice, a vehicle of grace for the community of people to which she belongs. Through declaring her own name, she is helping the community declare its own name, and identity, as well:

They calls me yellow  
like yellow be my name  
they calls me yellow  
like yellow be my name  
But if yellow is a name  
Why ain't black the same  
Well, if I say Hey black girl  
Lord, she try to ruin my game (97).

The naming of oppression in the novel occurs primarily through the name, "Pa." Not given an individual name until near the end of the novel, Celie's "Pa" represents oppression in the form of a generalized notion of patriarchy, a system seen not as benevolent but as serving its selfish needs through exploiting others. Pa's real name, Alphonso, supports this vision of a self-serving system, through its root meanings, "adal," signifying nobility, or one who has power through recognition, and "funs," meaning ready. Pa is clearly an opportunist, "ready" to marry a half-crazed widow for her property, victimizing her daughters sexually for his own gratification, and using his knowledge of white ways to exploit his own people in order to increase his wealth.

Pa's actions in building his private empire parallel the exploitation going on internationally, as the Olinkas fall victim to the self-seeking of the larger patriarchally driven white society. Just as Pa overlooks the effects of his victimizing, the developers of the Olinka land look through the Olinka people as if they are not visible. Both are agents of division: Pa divides the family, the developers of the Olinka community, the latter symbolized by the road that guts the village. In both instances the division ultimately separates people from the earth (the Olinka women sing love songs of farewell to the

earth and sky), and from themselves (Celie is separated from her creativity, from her love of herself, from her joy).

Ironically, in the estimation of their societies, both Pa and the developers of the Olinka land are deemed successful. Pa's tombstone, looking to Celie like a "short skyscraper," bears the praises of the social order that victimizes and separates: "Member of this and that. Leading businessman and farmer. Upright husband and father. Kind to the poor and helpless." The oppressors, who falsely claim their position of power (Celie discovers that "Pa not Pa"; the developers' rights to the Olinka land are suspect), also falsely claim their deeds to be good, perpetrating their oppressive reign.

If Pa represents the oppressive system, Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, who carries two names and two natures, suggests the possibility of change. As Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, the only name Celie knows her husband by until Shug reveals Mr.\_\_\_\_\_'s second self, he, like Pa, objectifies and uses people. Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ bargains for Celie as he would for an animal (he gets a cow thrown in on the bargain), "looking her up and down," asking her to turn around, all the while maintaining his position above her on his horse. After they are married, he exploits and victimizes Celie, as he did his first wife, beating her, without passion, because that "all women good for." He keeps himself aloof from Celie and his children, hiding from them behind the cloud of smoke that protects—though weakly—his position of power. Most significantly, Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ is the force that continues to separate Nettie from Celie, making Celie's life one without connection or love.

At the same time that Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ is another Pa, however (Mr.\_\_\_\_\_'s real name, Albert, is derived from the same root, "adal," as Pa's name, Alphonso), he also possesses a second nature, one that Shug is able to make manifest. Mr.\_\_\_\_\_'s transformation through Shug's physical love early in the novel prepares for his later more radical and permanent transformation of character. An unbelievable change by most standards for fiction, Mr.\_\_\_\_\_'s potential for transformation is suggested in his name, for "Albert," the name Celie discovers he bears when Shug reappears in his life, unlike Pa's real name, has the close feminine variants, "Alberta" and "Albertine(a)." Thus the thoughtful Albert at the end of the novel who collects sea shells and loses himself in sewing is that part of Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ that had hidden itself behind a mask of sullenness from those who laughed at his "Alberta" side when as a child he tried to sew along with his mother. He is the Albert betrayed by Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ when he did not marry Shug, heeding instead the false voice of society sounded through his father. Only when the voice of the oppressor is stilled within Albert is he able to "live on Earth as a natural man" (230).

The initially muddled Harpo represents a transition stage on the way to a new social order, as he tries to play a role he does not believe in. Because he is not able to take on the dominant oppressor role naturally, he tries to play the role in its outward form by increasing his physical size. Harpo's name suggests that in this state of social transition, Harpo can either support the change by being an instrument of music (music and song in the novel are primary images of the new social order), or attempt to stand in its way, as did the Harpies of Greek mythology, who greedily ravaged their victims.

Just as Walker uses the names of her characters to name oppression, so she uses names to speak of the possibilities of social renewal. Celie is the most obvious victim in the novel. She has learned to survive by complete self-negation, as she offers herself up,

mechanically, to others' demands. She is depicted initially as possessing no worth in her own or society's eyes: "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, [Mr.\_\_\_\_\_] say, you nothing at all" (187). Celie's name, however, a variation of Celestine, or "heavenly," speaks literally to Celie's heavenly worth. At first a seeming mockery of the Virgin Mary (when Celie's mother asks whose child she bore, Celie responds, "God's"), Celie becomes the primary redemptive figure in the novel: she is both the redeemed and the catalyst for redemption. In her role as the ultimately oppressed and victimized person, she represents the need for personal and social redemption. However, Celie also nurtures the novel's redemptive force, Shug, both literally by eating in front of Shug in order to wet Shug's appetite, and metaphorically as implied through the proper name for Celie, Cecilia. As Cecilia, a patron saint of music, Celie frees Shug's music, allowing Shug to sing the songs of redemption and love.

While Celie's initial response in the novel represents one extreme response to oppression—passivity and self-negation—Sophia represents the opposite extreme, characterized by aggression and violence, as she attempts to overthrow the oppressive social structures with force. However, even with her physical ability and mental acuity, the latter suggested by the traditional association of wisdom with the name Sophia, Sophia possesses insufficient strength to counter the social forces, represented by the mayor and his wife, that reduce Sophia to a state similar to Celie's. The capable and bright Sophia finds herself nearly destroyed by the social structures she has attempted to fight single-handedly (Celie says after Sophia's beating, "when I see Sophia I don't know why she still alive" [187]), suggesting the need for a larger power, a healing force to attend to the deep flaws in the social structure.

That force comes in the person of Shug Avery, the novel's redemptive figure who possesses a "sweetness" that draws people, from their old lives without sweetness and flowers, to love her. From the heralds, in the form of advertisements, that precede Shug's visit and her arrival in the modest home of Celie and Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ because no one else will receive her, to her practice of healing and love, and her departure and final return to the community of love she founded, Shug's movements in the novel parallel the redemptive life of Jesus.

Shug's names—she is given more names than any other character in the novel—underscore her role as redeemer. "Shug" suggests the sweetness of Jesus, and "Avery," Shug's surname, her role both as incarnate god ("Avatar," a word closely resembling Avery, denotes a god coming to earth in bodily form) and spirit (the root of Avery is "aves" or birds). Another word bearing close resemblance to Shug's surname, "avens," is a rose with white, yellow, red and purple flowers, those colors associated with Shug in the novel and that imply her mission: to purify life (white, yellow), to bring joy out of suffering (red, purple). Walker underscores these rich associations with Shug's surname by keeping her origin a mystery: "Nobody even sure exactly who her daddy is" (59).

"Lilly," Shug's real name, contains the images both of bold shapes in multicolors and of flawless white, suggesting the bold redemption that Shug brings. The name points both back to our sources (Lilith, Adam's first wife, existed before Eve), and ahead to

new life, in its associations with spring, redemption and rebirth. Finally, "Queen Honeybee," Shug's commercial name, refers to the one who gives birth to and sustains community, Shug's most obvious redemptive role in the novel, as she counters the separation that has been brought about by an oppressive patriarchal rule.

One sign of redemption that Shug brings is the characters' new relation to the creation through their connection with their own creative processes, a connection that Shug models. Shug is both a creator and connector of people to their own creativity, as obvious in her effect on Celie. Her first step is to model the process to Celie when she composes a song and names it after Celie: "First time somebody made something and name it after me" (75). Then she takes Celie physically out of her oppression so she can enter the creation ("it's time to leave ye [Mr.\_\_\_\_\_] and enter into the Creation" (181)) and discover her own creative abilities.

Another sign of personal and social redemption that Shug brings is the connection the characters experience, first to themselves, then to one another, and finally to the whole world. Unlike Celie or Albert, who are initially imprisoned in their gender roles, Shug is both female and male. Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ says that Shug "act more manly than most men," and Harpo notes that both Sophia and Shug are "not like men, but they not like women either" (236). With love literally at the center of her existence, Shug is Eros, the source and catalyst of love for others and thus the force that preserves life. And like Eros, Shug, in her broad sexuality, is both male and female, thus containing the elements necessary for self-love, the basis of love for others and thus for the social order she founds.

The form and ongoing source of strength for the new community that Shug's presence originates is suggested in Olivia's name, a character who enters the final scene quietly, but who, together with her brother Adam, represents the new generation to carry on the community Shug has established. The literal associations with Olivia's name imply the feminist shape of society—the olive tree's yellow flowers bear female-shaped fruit—and also the internal source of its sustaining power: the olivary is part of the medulla oblonga, the system that controls the functions essential to the life of the body.

Literally raised outside the oppressive society, Olivia brings to the community a new consciousness, unshaped and thus unhampered by a society that systematically victimizes the powerless. While Shug can only dream of living in a round house, Olivia has grown up in round houses and finds square houses "very strange." Olivia has bridged gender roles, having attended without self-consciousness a school for males, and national and ethnic boundaries, as is evident in her faithful friendship with Tashi. She brings a new way, one no longer under the domination of a patriarchal image of God as a God of punishment, for the olive branch signifies the post-flood promise. Rather, brought in the mouth of a dove (both Celie and Shug are associated with birds in the novel), Olivia represents the peace and deliverance from oppression of the new social order.

Adam, like Olivia, represents a qualitative change in the social order from the pre-Shug social conditions of the novel's characters. Only after Celie and Albert are transformed by Shug's love does Adam, a new consciousness, enter their community.

Adam is the first person born into the new community, the first person to know himself, as his Olinka name, "Omatangu," denotes: "It mean a un-naked man somewhere near the first one God made that knowed what he was" (241). Unlike the first Adam, the new Adam resists falling into the sins of anger and blame, of claiming dominance and superiority over Tashi when she marks herself according to the way of her society. Rather, Adam marks himself as Tashi is marked in order to walk with her as an equal. The offspring of patriarchy, Adam bears none of its shape or sin. He is both a new Adam and the original Adam whom Joseph Campbell describes as existing in androgynous form before the fall from perfection. He has not been divided from himself and from God by moving outside what Campbell refers to as "the wall of Paradise, constituted of the 'coincidence of opposites,' by which Man (now man and woman) is cut off from not only the vision but even the recollection of the image of God" (153).

In the final scene the novel's significant characters are gathered into a new kind of community. Celie and Shug, Sophia and Mary Agnus, Albert and Harpo are all clothed now in the clothing Celie, inspired by Shug, has created. In this new clothing, people minister to one another without claims of superiority—Eleanor Jane to Sophia as Sophia to Eleanor Jane. Completing this scene and community is the arrival of Adam and Olivia, brought by Nettie, whose life and name imply that of many women ("Nettie" is the nickname for a number of women's names), and Samuel, whose name, derived from "shemuel," is the literal name of God. With their arrival, broken structures are mended: male and female, East and West, God and Creation become one. Implying the dignity of this community is the name of the last character mentioned in the final scene, Odessa, a feminine ("essa") song of praise and honor to celebrate the new community.

This new community occurs not in a faraway utopian land but in the very house of oppression that had been taken from its rightful owners. Celie's real lineage had been obscured by Pa, the representative of the oppressive social order, now dead and no longer referred to as Pa in the final chapters, but as Alphonso, his actual name. His house was actually theirs, an inheritance from their mother, as was "his" business. Not everything from the former way is discarded—Celie has kept on the white man Alphonso employed—but rightful ownership has replaced oppression.

Although the source of the shift in the novel to a new social order is sketched in only its broad outlines, the sketch offers, nevertheless, a compelling vision of a reconstructed society. And, taken together, Walker uses the names of her characters in the novel to begin to describe this new social order: of the self and community becoming, of the sources of their becoming in love, and of the possibilities of this new order existing, reconstructed, atop the old. The final scene of Walker's novel, as well as the novel as a whole has been criticized for its improbable nature. As the imagery in the characters' names suggests, however, the novel possesses a deliberate quality of generalization. Moreover, Walker's vision of reconstruction, however incomplete, goes beyond that which her predecessors have been able to offer, whether one looks at endings such as those in *Jane Eyre* or *The Awakening* where the resolution demands an escape altogether from society, or at that in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* where the

positive social order is confined to a private relationship, or in *Sula*, where the communal effort, though succeeding spiritually, is physically destroyed. As in her predecessors' fiction, Walker has named oppression, a necessary first step to liberation from oppression. In *The Color Purple*, however, as the names of the majority of her characters imply, Walker has also made significant movement towards naming and celebrating a social order that offers both personal and social liberation from that oppression.

## Works Cited

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