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'A Standing Self against the World': Alice Walker's Feminist Agenda in *In Love and Trouble*

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Abstract

This paper is devoted to a quest for identity. It answers few relevant questions like What are the problems of African Women?, What are the aftereffects of being chained to traditional ways of African culture?, How vulnerability is affecting Black women psychology? and Will their sacrifices in relations makes them valuable in their society?, Through this paper I have probed deep into the increasing identity crisis in the post-modern Africa.

Keywords: *Black Women, Inter Racial Marriage, Susceptibility, Suspicion, Social Chains*

Introduction

Alice Walker, the strident black woman activist of our times, takes her voice from her forefathers who were plagued by the scars of slavery and untold oppression arising from being the 'other'. More importantly she takes her spirit from her foremothers and extends their conscious strife against being doubly oppressed – both by colour and gender. Combined with such a legacy, her writing is simultaneously rife with the uneasiness stirred by the questions raised about black culture and identity from the times of the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement. She is now a part of a generation who are spiritually emancipated and who strive for recognition and equality. Being intellectually dynamic and quite literally on the move, she is symbolic of an awakened racial pride. Although influenced by such writers as Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Claud Mckay and Nella Larson, Alice Walker mostly owes her allegiance to Zora Neale Hurston whose novel, *Their Eyes Were Searching God (1937)* was reclaimed in the 1970s as a seminal black feminist text. Of course, black autobiographers like Maya Angelou, Gloria Naylor, Richard Wright and James Baldwin had a say in her making as well.

Alice Walker's short stories always show a 'struggle for identity' of the 'twice colonized' – both by colour and gender. This Walker typifies in her first collection of short stories *In Love and Trouble*. In the thirteen stories of this anthology there are thirteen women, each mad, raging, loving, resentful, hateful, strong, ugly, weak, pitiful and magnificent. These women try to live with loyalty and devote their whole life and endeavour in trying to find that wholeness which will resurrect them to their desired goal. As Walker says in her poem "Anything":

I find my own
Small person
a standing self
against the world.

"Really, Doesn't Crime Pay" is a question mark on the piousness of marriage institution where Myrna is chained by marriage to a husband embarrassed by her aspirations to be a writer. He encourages her to take on more feminine pursuits, such as shopping or having babies. Enough of her own woman to take the pill religiously, Myrna is still vulnerable enough to fall for the first man who takes her writing seriously. Unfortunately, Mordecai Rich the other man takes it so seriously

that he steals her work, publishing one of her stories as his own.

The story takes place within the pages of Myrna's notebook. Her name is never used in the story; it appears in parenthesis only as an under title. On the surface, the notebook entries tell about Myrna's desire to be a writer and her dissatisfaction with her life as a housewife. Spending her days in idleness and useless dissipation - she does not have to work - she falls prey to a young Black charlatan or amateur writer, Mordecai Rich, who seduces and then abandons her, leading to an emotional breakdown. One day while sitting in the doctor's office, she discovers that he has published under his own name one of her stories that she had given him. Later that night while in bed, she attempts to murder her husband Ruel, who had ridiculed her desire to be a writer, insisting instead that she have a child and become a housewife. On a deeper level, the story is a tragedy about a young black woman who has talent but who lacks the understanding, courage and know-how to break the restrictions placed on her and to create the meaningful identity she craves and needs. Her insecurity about her talent and her own self-worth resulting in extreme self-hatred, leads to her victimization by Mordecai and to her attempted murder of her husband, whom she blames for her plight and to whom she transfers her frustration and hatred.

Myrna's entries in her notebook are significant in revealing her character and exposing the tragic nature of her situation. Walker skilfully establishes the interrelatedness of the literary elements of theme, character and plot. Allowing us to see inside Myrna's head and heart, we observe more than twenty years of rage and anger bottled up there, which is more than enough to drive anyone mad. Since the entries in her notebook are both the plot as well as samples of her writing, what they also allow us to see is not only the quality of her writing and the sensitivity and talent required to produce it, but also the tragic waste of them and her life due to her failure to act or to attempt to solve the dilemma she faced.

The house where she spends her days of idleness is like a prison to her. There she fritters away the hours with her jars and bottles of cosmetics, symbolizing her spiritual decay, indulging herself. Although she still writes, and has done so for some twenty years, her doubt about her talent and her unwilling acceptance of the role society has created for her are seen in her words 'I am not a serious writer'. Her feelings about herself begin to change after she meets Mordecai Rich, whose flattery helps banish her insecurity. What Walker shows us here is the self-doubt which causes Myrna to act contrary to her own moral instincts and which is the basis of her vulnerability for she understands quite clearly what and whom she is up against. It is this vulnerability, specifically, her need for praise and recognition, that cause her to succumb to him. After he reads a story of hers, this thought runs through her mind:

> If he says one good thing about what I've written, I promised myself, I will go to bed with him. (How else could I repay him? All I owned in any supply were my jars of cold cream! (Walker, 1984, p.17)

So devoid of self-esteem that she feels the jars of cold cream are all she possesses of value, since she cannot give them to him, she resorts to sex as an expression of her gratitude. For if all else fails, sex is always considered a valuable commodity. Myrna kept her word by giving herself to Mordecai, and the effect was immediate, albeit, regrettably, ephemeral:

> He took me in his arms, right there in the grape arbor..... After that, a miracle happened. Under Mordecai's fingers my body opened like a flower and carefully bloomed..... (Walker, 1984, p.17)

Walker never lets the reader forget that Myrna is conscious or fully aware of her act. In fact, it is this awareness on her part that makes her appear less sympathetic, and the man with whom she commits adultery less villainous, in the readers' eye. The above passage, for instance, concludes with Myrna's thought, 'And it was strange as well as wonderful. For I don't think love had anything to do with this at all' (Walker, 1984, p.17). What increases the antipathy towards her even more; however, is her use of her week-long sexual encounter with Mordecai, unknown to her husband, of course, as a way of striking back at him for his failure to recognize her need:

> I gloat over this knowledge. Now Ruel will find out that I am not a womb without a brain that can be bought with Japanese bathtubs and shopping sprees. (Walker, 1984, p.18)

Putting all her hope for a change in her life in Mordecai, she declares that the moment of her deliverance is at his hand. He abandons her, however, and soon thereafter she begins to reveal signs of an emotional breakdown. As her condition worsens, Ruel tells her that she acts as if her mind is asleep, to which she makes the mental note, 'Nothing will wake it but a letter from Mordecai telling me to pack my bags and fly to New York' (Walker, 1984, p.19). Clearly, this indicates the confusion in her mind about what change is needed to bring about the happiness she craves. This change is not an external one, although new scenes, sights and surroundings would no doubt help alleviate her mental depression. What she actually requires is a fundamental modification in the way she thinks about herself.

Thus, it is not Ruel alone who needs to know that she is not a womb without a mind but she too must realize that she has a capability of being both 'womb' and 'brain' - both a housewife and artist. In separating the two or failing to see the alternative available to her, she commits the same kind of error that Ruel makes. Complementing this confusion in her mind is another serious mistake on her part: her lack of self-involvement in changing her condition. And so she sits waiting for deliverance, expecting Mordecai to do for her what only she can do for herself. Although unsympathetic and chauvinistic attitude of the 'new husband of Roselily' and 'Ruel' are the main cause of vulnerability in the life of both the protagonists but even they themselves are responsible for their mental trauma. By portraying such characters, Walker wants to say that women are actually 'twice colonized' in Africa, sexually with the hands of White and psychologically by their own near and dear ones. Barbara Christian (1980) adds to this:

> As a craftsman, Walker sorts out the throwaways, the seemingly insignificant and hidden pieces of the lives of southerners, particularly black families and stitches them into a tapestry of society. Who is to blame for the waste in our lives, she asks? Ourselves? The society that seems at every turn opposed to blossoming? The wrath of God? The question of responsibility for personal action and societal change is one recurrent motif in the complex quilts that Walker makes out of thrifty sentences, knotted questions, tight metaphors, terse sections..... Walker's quilts reiterate the basic concept that 'the greatest value a person can attain is full humanity which is a state of oneness with all things', and that until this is possible for all living beings, those of us who seek wholeness must be willing to struggle towards that end. (Christian, 1984, p.460)

It can be seen that in Walker's stories most woman become homicidal or suicidal to avenge social snubs. It is not wholly because of the society's refusal to give them the required space or because they are mentally or emotionally deficient but because they are responding to the stress of situations not of their own making. It can be seen that marriage offers these women nothing and neither does religion. Yet the stories of Walker are not wholly pessimistic because Walker seems to assert that Nature grows and defends itself in its own way. Opposition is not necessarily insurmountable. The struggles and crisis in the lives of these women can lead to growth, if not in the present at least for the future. This is the case in the story "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff", a story written in the memory of Zora Neale Hurston who was an inspiring mentor for Walker. Hannah was the apprentice to Tante Rosie to whom she narrates how at twenty she had got married and had four small children. Those were the days of Depression and everybody was hard hit in the Cherokee County. It was the time when Carrie Mae who was working for some good white people in Chicago and was killed by a gangster. At that time Hannah's husband was also behaving a little weird, looking around at other women. Hannah was afraid that she was going to loose him. He made fun of her,

called her arrogant and proud and did not want to be at all like her. She was proud, indeed, and did not want to beg him for the upkeep of herself and her children. But one insult was the last straw and she could bare it no longer. He had been with another woman and gambled everything away and he left:

> My spirit never recovered from that insult, just like my heart never recovered from my husband's desertion, just like my body never recovered from being almost starved to death. I started to wither in that winter and each year found me more hacked and worn down than the year before. Somewhere along them years my pride just up and left altogether and I worked for a time in a whorehouse just to make some money, just like my husband's woman. (Walker, 1984, pp.66-67)

She took to drinking to forget what she was doing. Then she started going to church and was converted. Although her spirit mended but the shame could not be lifted. She felt that it would be easier to die if something could be done to avenge that bitterness of failure. Tante Rosie suggested seeking a curse:

> She told Mrs. Kemhuff that each morning and evening for nine days she was to light the candles, burn the powder, recite the curse - prayer from her knees and concentrate all her powers on getting her message through to Death and the Man-God. As far as the Supreme mother of us all was concerned, she could only be moved by the pleas of the Man-God. Tante Rosie herself would recite the curse-prayer at the same time that Mrs. Kemhuff did, and together she thought the two prayers, prayed with respect, could not help but move the Man-God, who, in turn, would unchain Death who would already be eager to come down..... (Walker, 1984, pp.69-70)

Mrs. Kemhuff prayed hard to the fathers and mothers from their farthest generation and asked them to intercede and save her. She prayed for starvation and thirst to those who had reduced her to this miserable state. She prayed 'that their house shall be unroofed and that the rain, the thunder and lightning shall find the innermost recess of their home and that the foundation shall crumble and the floods tear it asunder' (Walker, 1984, p.71). She prayed 'that the sun shall not shed its rays on them in benevolence, but instead it shall beat down on them and burn them and destroy them' (Walker, 1984, p.71) She also prayed that the moon shall not give them peace, but instead shall deride them and decry them and cause their minds to shrivel and that their friends shall betray them and cause them loss of power, of gold and of silver, and that their enemies shall smite them until they beg for mercy which shall not be given them and that their tongues shall forget how to speak in sweet words, and that it shall be paralyzed and that all about them will be desolation, pestilence and death:

> To the Man God: O Great one, I have been sorely tried by my enemies and have been blasphemed and lied against. My good thoughts and my honest actions have been turned to bad actions and dishonest ideas. My home has been disrespected, my children have been back bitten and their virtue questioned. O Man God, I beg that this that I ask for my enemies shall come to pass. (Walker, 1984, pp.70-71)

This prayer was straight from Zora Neale Hurston's book *Muels and Men* and was specifically directed for Sarah Marie Sadler who had weaned the husband away. Several months later it was in the papers that Sarah had passed away. The paper spoke briefly of her harsh and lengthy illness and we as a reader know where it came from. Such is the way of averaging spirits when other means for them are closed.

The same happens in "The Welcome Table". It is the story of yet another pained woman who sang in the church. One day she entered a white people's church and was made fun of. She was thrown out on the highway where she thought she was walking with Jesus himself:

> She would have known him, recognized him, anywhere. There was a sad but joyful look to his face, like a candle was glowing behind it, and he walked with

> sure even steps in her direction, as if he were walking on the sea. Except that he was not carrying in his arms a baby sheep, he looked exactly like the picture of him that she had hanging over her bed at home. She had taken it out of a white lady's Bible while she was working for her. She had looked at that picture for more years than she could remember, but never once had she really expected to see him. (Walker, 1984, p.85)

They walked along in deep silence for a long time. She told him how many years she had cooked for them, cleaned for them, and nursed them. She told him indignantly how they had grabbed her and tossed her out of the church. He looked at her kindly but in silence. She told him how glad she was that he had come and how she had often looked at his picture hanging on her wall but had never expected to see him in person:

> They walked on, looking straight over the tree tops into the sky, and the smiles that played over her dry wind-cracked face were like first clean ripples across a stagnant pond. On they walked without stopping. (Walker, 1984, p.86)

No one ever came to know what happened to the old woman, no one ever mentioned her either. It came to be believed that an old colored woman had walked herself to death. Many of the black families along the road said that they had seen her jabbering in a low insistent voice, sometimes singing, sometimes merely gesturing:

> Some of them wondered aloud where the old woman had been going so stoutly that it had worn her heart out. They guessed may be she had relative across the river, some miles away, but none of them really knew. (Walker, 1984, p.87)

The relation of course was no other than Jesus himself and as she had sung in a spiritual:

I 'm going to sit at the Welcome table
Shout my troubles over
Walk and talk with Jesus
Tell God how you treat me
One of these days! (Walker, 1984, p.81)

One key to understanding the disparate nature of black women's circumstances *In Love and Trouble* is in its epigraph. The first epigraph, a page-long extract from *The Concubine* by Elechi Amadi, depicts a girl, Ahurole, who is prone to fits of sobbing and alarmingly irrational fits of argument. From all that her parents easily guessed that she was being unduly influenced by *aguri*, her personal spirit. It is not until the end of the extract that Amadi mentions casually that Ahurole was engaged to Ekuriems when she was eight days old. In light of what follows in the collection, it is a most suitable epigraph. The women in this early volume truly are 'in Love and trouble' due in large measure to the roles, relationships and self images imposed upon them by a society which knows little and cares less about them as individuals. A marriage arranged in infancy perfectly embodies this situation and the shock engendered by Amadi's final sentence is only heightened as one reads *In Love and Trouble* and comes to realize that the concubine depicted in his novel, far from being a bizarre, pagan, foreign phenomenon is practiced in only slightly modified form in contemporary America.

In the opening story of *In Love and Trouble,* "Roselily", the overworked title character marries the unnamed Black Muslim from Chicago in part to give her three children a better chance in life, and in part to obtain for herself some measure of social and economic security. But it is not really a relationship she chooses to enter freely, as is conveyed by her barely listening to her wedding ceremony - a service which triggers images not of romance but of bondage. Even ten-year-old Myop, the sole character of the vignette "The Flowers" has her childhood – and, ultimately, her attitudes towards herself and her world are shattered by the blunt social reality of lynching. As much as she would love to spend her life all alone collecting flowers from the moment she accidentally gets her heel caught in the skull of a decapitated lynching victim it is clear that for their own survival black females like Myop must be part of a group that include males. Hence there are the plethoras of bad marriages in Walker's fiction. Hence also the mental anguish suffered,

by most of her women characters, who engage in such unlady like acts as attacking their husbands with chain saws ("Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?") or setting fire to themselves ("Her Sweet Jerome"). Must be that *pesku agwu* again - a diagnosis which is symptomatic of society's refusal to face the fact that women become suicidal or hire root worker to avenge social snubs ("The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff") or lock themselves up in convents ("The Diary of an African Nun") not because of Agwus or because they are mentally or emotionally deficient but because they are responding to the stress of situations not of their own making.

Certainly marriage offers these women nothing and neither does religion. That these traditional twin sources of comfort and stability causes nothing but 'trouble' for Walker's characters might lead one to expect a decidedly depressing volume of short stories. But in fact *In Love and Trouble* is very upbeat. Walker manages to counterbalance the oppressive subject matter of all these thirteen stories by managing the undercurrent of hope first introduced in the volume's second epigraph, a passage from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet: '*..... we must hold to what is difficult; everything in nature grows and defends itself in its own way and is characteristically and spontaneously itself, seeks at all costs to be so and against all opposition'. For Walker as for Rilke, opposition is not necessarily insurmountable. Struggles and crises can lead to growth, to the nurturing of the self. And indeed most of the women of *In Love and Trouble*, sensing this, do try desperately to face their situations and deal with them - even if to do so may make them seen insane, or ignorant, or anti-social.

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