

**THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN AND RESISTANCE TO
DOMINATION AND REPRESSION: A STUDY OF ALICE WALKER'S
CONTRIBUTION TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE AND
THOUGHT**

By

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Abstract

This paper looks at Alice Walker's contribution to Black American writing. Her contribution is unique in the sense that she strives to highlight the condition of the African-American woman in America – she departs from mainstream African-American writing which focuses on the Negro's experiences in general. The paper argues that Walker presents Negro women being dominated and exploited as Negro women and not necessarily as African-Americans, and that men in general use Negro women as the arena in their power struggles. The paper acknowledges the limitations of Walker's artist vision and shows these limitations.

*“I believe that the truth about any subject comes when all the sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writers' story.” (Alice Walker – *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* – p. 49).*

In an essay entitled “Saving the Life that is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life,” Alice Walker writes that “... I write all the things that I should have been able to read.”¹ The question that arises here is: what are these things that Walker should have been able to read? The answer to this question is: these things are the struggles of women, especially the American Negro women, against all forms of domination and oppression. They are the experiences of the American Negro woman in struggle. These experiences are the missing parts to the other writers' story which Alice Walker wants to tell.

By telling the story of these women, Walker inevitably tells the story of the relationships of these women with their men. And even more important, it is an inevitable waving goodbye to Negro American writing in which we see “... white people as primary antagonists.”² Walker argues that this kind of African-American writing tells us “... a lot about isolated (often improbable) or limited encounters with a non-specific white world.”³ She further contends that a book which deals with personal relations is as good as one which deals with Negro relations with the white world. The unique nature of Walker's contribution to African-American literature lies in this departure from dealing with essential Negro/white relations to dealing with personal relations.

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This departure should not be interpreted as Walker's failure to perceive the wider forces at play in the African-American's experiences. This is simply to say the struggles of Negro women in America against all forms of oppression have not been adequately told in these experiences, and hence Walker feels the need to assert the vital importance of these struggles.

This brings us to the main thrust of this essay, which is to discuss Alice Walker's portrayal of gender relations in her writings in the context of skewed economic and racial relations in America. The essay will attempt to trace gender relations through an analysis of sexual relations (rape), marriage, education (school) and the parasitic nature of men. The essay will then attempt to explain Walker's solutions to the problems she raises and discusses. In conclusion, the essay will take a look at some of the criticism leveled against Walker's artistic vision.

Essentially, the male/female relations in the arena of sexual intercourse, as portrayed in Walker's fiction, is characterized by the callous rape of women. Meridian is victim to Dexter (p. 59), Eddie (p.53) and Truman (p.111). She is also Professor Raymond's target for sexual gratification (pp. 107 – 108). Dexter's assistant pounces on the baby sitter (pp. 60-61). Tommy Odds takes it out on Lynne (pp. 159-160) and The Wild Child is pregnant by an unknown man (p. 24). The relations in the Grange/Margaret and Brownfield/Mem paradigms have the dubious distinction of systematic sexual battery. Fat Josie has also been systematically raped (pp. 39 – 40); Margaret has fallen prey to Shipley (p. 178) in the same way as Squeak has been preyed upon by Hodges, the Chief Prison Warden (p. 184). Celie's brutal and beastly victimization by Mr. — cannot be overemphasized.

What emerges in all the sexual relations outlined above is a situation in which sex has become an exercise where the express gratification of the men is not the only ultimate goal, but more significantly, a way of dominating the woman. This attitude is an undesirable residue from the days of slavery in which, as Angela Davies correctly argues, the slave master used violent sexual assaults to remind the slave woman of her essential and unalterable femaleness and male supremacy: "Rape was a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men."⁴ The idea of attempting to dominate the Negro man through raping Negro women as from the days of slavery is exemplified by Shipley, who reasons that since he "owns" Grange through sharecropping he can have Margaret as well. Tommy Olds, Brownfield and Mr. — attempt to dominate Lynne, Mem and Celie respectively by some savage and primitive apemanship of Shipley. Rape has become a process of asserting dominance by the white man as well as the black man. For women it has become a constant threat to their well being and the threat transcends race and time.

The contention that the exploited and brutalized tend to perpetrate the same kind of treatment to those weaker than him/her has been eloquently articulated before. This is the phenomenon of the oppressed enjoying his own oppressed. In the context of the African-American situation the argument is that Negro men take it out on their Negro women because they have had it from the white master. Brownfield is articulating this kind of logic as he tries to justify his abuse of

Mem: “Lawd, Mem, you knows how hard I try to do the right thing. I don’t make much money, you knows that. What can a man *do*?”⁵ Several other male characters: Mr. ———, Grange and Truman all attempt to blame the whites in their own different ways for the abuse of women. Walker invalidates this argument through Tommy Odds who foolishly continues to declare to Lynne that “We fucked” (p. 163) after she had put it to him that rape was a spurious way to assert power and control. This is a presentation of rape as the dastardly, barbaric and abominable act it is without regard as to the colour of skin or the reasons for the act.

The institution of marriage provides Walker with further ground to explore the male/female relations in the American experience. The essence of the argument is that marriage is some nefarious trickery meant to keep the woman in “her place.” In the marriage between Eddie and Meridian the quarrel between the two about starching and ironing Eddie’s pants and shirts, reflects the way Negro men want to use tradition to maintain a position of dominance and oppression of the woman. The answer to Meridian’s question as to why she has to do the ironing and starching is: “Things have always been done that way.” Tradition thus becomes a weapon of oppression and injustice for the women through the institution of marriage. This idea is born out of the patriarchal nature of the American society.

While Eddie attempts to use tradition to dominate Meridian within marriage, Brownfield and Mr... use violence. Mem is constantly being battered by Brownfield (p. 77 – 78), and is finally shot dead (p. 122). The conjugal union between Sofia and Harpo is a series of fights between the two (p. 36). All this indicates that violence is a special ingredient of African-American marriage, and the major reason for this is the men’s desire to exert control and dominate their women.

The violence can be traced back to the slave plantation where the whip was used liberally on the Negro; he/she was mutilated casually and the crackers had great fun taking pot shots at Negroes. Later in the American experience this kind of violence manifested itself through the Ku Klux Klan lynchings, police brutality and castration. American historical experience is thus a catalogue of various forms of violence whose specific aim is to enhance domination and oppression of one sort or the other. This is the psyche that informs the importing of violence into the institution of African-American marriage.

The image of marriage that we see in “Roselily” is that it is prison. This enhances the view that marriage is a tool of domination and oppression of the woman by the man. Through the motif of chains and shackles in the story, Walker presents the dungeon like nature of marriage. The gaoler emerges as the husband whose “... hand is like the iron clasp of an iron gate”⁶ and the prisoner the wife: “She thinks of the ropes, chains, handcuffs, his religion. His place of worship. Where she will be required to sit apart with covered head.”⁷ Marriage, therefore, does not guarantee freedom and Roselily’s uncertainty is further proof. Mrs. Jerome⁸ and Meridian’s mother⁹ also reflect how debilitating marriage can be. Thus male/female relations in marriage are essentially jailer/prisoner relations, and the victim is the woman.

The school and education appear as other forms which promote warped gender relations in America, particularly for the African-American woman. Meridian rejects Saxon College

because it was meant to turn the girls who attended it into ladies, which meant inculcating values that perpetuated the status of women as second class to that of men. Anne-Marion and Meridian's rebellious attitudes (p. 28) equate to the resistance against institutionalized oppression of women. The issue of turning the girls into ladies parallels the idea of transforming an individual into a slave – it is an assault on the individual's psyche. One can only be a slave if he/she believes he/she is a slave, and as Frederick Douglass asserts, you can be a slave in form and not in fact. This translates into the logic that a woman who accepts ladyhood accepts the male dominance that comes with the deal.

The limited and oppressive nature of Negro education returns at Ruth's nameless three-roomed school in Baker County. The idea of the Negro being at the foot of "The Tree of the Family of Man" (pp. 185 – 186) reinforces the false notion of the Negro being inferior to other human races. If the Negro man is at the bottom of the tree, then the Negro woman is surely nothing if she is supposed to be below the Negro man. This also means that she has to serve the whole world, as she is the servant to the world. Zola Neale Hurston articulates this argument through Jamie's grandmother: "De Nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as ah can see." (p. 29) Mr. ——'s insults aimed at Celie express the same philosophy of her being the ultimate inferior by virtue of her being a black woman: "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all."¹⁰ And Brownfield also attempts the justification of his violence against Mem through the same logic: "A woman as black and as ugly as you ought to call a man Mister."¹¹ This kind of view of the woman as being inferior to the man is the view of women which Baker County School attempts to inculcate in the minds of its pupils. Ruth's outburst against Mr. Grayson parallels Meridian and Anne-Marion's resistance to being turned into ladies at Saxon College. The school and education are thus presented as being anti-woman and her emancipation.

The question of religion has always intrigued Alice Walker. In an essay entitled "From an Interview" she argues that God does not go beyond nature – a thesis she attempts to explain in *The Color Purple*. To her "... the world is God. Man is God. So is a leaf or a snake."¹² This issue of God, religion and Christianity finds its way into Walker's fiction.

Christianity, in Walker's presentation, plays an ambivalent role in women's lives. On the one hand it can be oppressive, and on the other hand it can be liberating. It becomes an oppressive tool due to the white patriarchal view of God as a white male as Celie writes to Nettie: "... this same old white man is the same God she used to see when she prayed."¹³ "Man" and "whiteness" are powerful symbols of oppression in a Negro woman's life. By associating God and these symbols Walker is underscoring Christianity as an oppressive institution to the Negro woman. Walker, however, challenges the linking of God to white maleness by arguing that God is African, is within the individual and is essentially everything (*The Color Purple* – pp. 166 – 167). This philosophy is critical to women because "... not being tied to what God looks like, frees us"¹⁴ as Nettie says. Walker thus redefines the concept of God and attacks the masculine conception because it is oppressive to women.

Meridian also rejects the oppressive presentation of Christianity when she refuses to accept God as a master (p. 16). The idea of master calls to mind the idea of slavery, and conjures up negative experiences of that dark era in Negro history. Accepting the kind of Christianity in which God is master is like embracing submissiveness and by extension oppression. This kind of Christianity is presented as incomprehensible to Meridian's mother (p. 71) because it is alien to her due to its oppressive qualities.

The kind of Christianity which Meridian eventually embraces is the one which, like Nettie's conception of God, offers and fosters the spirit of resistance to oppressive tendencies, and allows for freedom (pp. 199-200). The preacher who imitates Martin Luther King is Meridian's catalyst towards the realization that Christianity is as much a weapon of gender oppression as it is a tool of gender liberation: "He told the young women to stop looking for husbands and try to get something useful in their heads."¹⁵

The general picture of the nature of maleness which Walker presents in her fiction is a sharp accusation of men as diabolic and parasitic in nature in their relations with women. The male characters feed, vulture style, on the achievements of female characters. Grange is the "classic" symbol here. His journey to the North in search of the American dream turns out to be a nightmare as the North offers slavery in a different guise: "He had found that wherever he went whites were in control; they ruled New York as they did Georgia; Harlem as they did Poontung Street"¹⁶ On his return to the South, Grange cheats Josie out of her livelihood (the Dew Drop Inn - p. 156), and then discards her. He channels his loot towards Ruth, but this is not for her sake only, but his as well. She provides him with the opportunity to do what he failed to do for his family and himself: "And the Lord or something dropped you in my lap. A voice said to me, you stop that cuttin' up, Nig, here's a reason to get yourself together and hold on."¹⁷ Grange sees Brownfield as his failed second life and Ruth as his third that should not fail, hence his desire to do the best he can. Grange had cheated Margaret (running away from home and leaving her at the mercy of Shipley), and his taking away of Josie's Inn is another form of cheating a woman out of the fruits of her labour. He is thus making a hollow attempt to exorcise himself through Ruth. His life is a satanic opera at the expense of the women in his life. Grange's drama is acted out by a host of other male characters in Walker's fiction: Pa steals Celie's fortune, Mordecai steals Raul's wife's short stories, Trynor's fame is based on songs written by Grace Mae Still, Harpo's club thrives because of Shug's singing and so on. The thesis here is that men are callously parasitic in their interactions with women.

Having painted such a horrific picture of gender relations in America one wonders whether the situation can be saved. Alice Walker certainly believes the situation is not beyond saving.

First, Walker argues that if violence can be used by men to oppress and dominate women, then it is also a good enough weapon to use for women to liberate themselves. On this score she agrees with Malcolm X who advocates violence to counter violence: "I'm non-violent as long as somebody is non-violent – as soon as they get violent they nullify my non-violence."¹⁸ Violence is the knockout punch that Sofia (p.36) and Mem (pp. 92 –97) use to exorcise the

demons afflicting the men in their homes. Even Celie learns the power of violence as illustrated by her threat to attack Mr. — with razors.

One should also note that by hitting back through physical violence the women are essentially breaking the tradition of submissiveness. This violent resistance to unpalatable oppression has positive results as reflected by the sense of community and harmony we see at the close of *The Color Purple*. Even Mem is able to enjoy some peace after she wallops Brownfield.

Secondly, the woman's liberation and freedom can be achieved if the women first realize and then control their sexuality. Celie is an important symbol in this regard. Through Shug Avery, Celie is able to gain awareness on the beauty of sex and takes hold of her destiny. Squeak, by some twist of rape, also liberates herself, and tells Harpo that her name is Mary Agnes (p. 84). After this her career as a musician also takes a positive turn.

Talk of sexual relations between individuals brings us to the lesbian dimension in Walker's fiction. Lesbianism is presented in a very positive light. She argues that it is not only fulfilling, but also liberating to the woman. The lesbian encounter between Shug Avery and Celie leaves the latter in bliss: "It feel like heaven is what it feel like, not like sleeping with Mr. — at all."¹⁹ Here Walker puts a lesbian encounter on the same level with heterosexual encounter as she also does with the encounter between Fanny and Arveyda (p. 396). The sexual encounter is as satisfying to Fanny as it is to Celie, and even more important Fanny discovers her spirit — a long life ambition.

What may be frightening to most men is the apparent inference that the man is not necessary for the woman's sexual satisfaction. Walker does nothing to allay this fear: she actually intensifies the fear through the anecdote of the man who catches his wife in the arms of another woman, and his world disintegrates as he turns to drink after the woman simply chuckled and then left him.²⁰ In "Porn" the husband who desperately attempts to sexually satisfy his wife and fails, feels totally rejected: "He feels himself sliding down the wall that is her body, and expelled from her."²¹ The expulsion is a statement to the effect that the man is not necessary to the woman's sexual gratification. This is an enormously frightening realization to the man who believes that the penis is the ultimate weapon of dominating the woman.

Third, the woman needs a material base if she is to avoid male domination. Celie, through the making of pants, gains the power to talk back to Mr. — and be proud of womanhood: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook ... But I'm here."²² Fanny ultimately controls the men around her through her massage parlour. The harmony that we see at the close of *The Color Purple* has in a way been created by the women's self-sufficiency at the level of the material.

Finally, Alice Walker seems to argue that there is no need to accept the white oppressor's view of the Negro. The advice is revealed by Mem who tells Brownfield that his problem is that he accepts the sorry state which the white oppressor has driven him into: "The thing I done notice about you a long time ago is that you acts like you is right where you belong. *All* the time."²³ What Mem is urging is for Brownfield to abandon his obsession with self-

destruction and stand up against the culture of being abused by the white man. This idea is also articulated by Grange on his return to Baker County. On his return, Grange displays a certain degree of militancy and is ready to fight for what belongs to him: “The fence we put up around it will enclose freedom you can be sure of, long as you ain’t scared of holding the gun. The gun is important. For I don’t know that love works for everybody. A little love, a little buckshot....”²⁴ What we see here is a man who will use any means necessary to protect his property and his freedom – he will stand up for his humanity.

This is how Alice Walker presents gender relations in her fiction. This presentation, however, has not failed to attract criticism. We will take a look at the points on which Walker’s artistic vision has been challenged.

The Color Purple has been criticised as playing into the myth of black people, especially the black male, as brutal and violent beasts. The attacks on Celie by Pa and Mr. — do depict the violence in the Negro family, a situation which makes the family not an institution that protects and nourishes, but one which destroys humanity. Here we can draw parallels with Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*. Richard is constantly abused by members of his family.

The important thing to note about *The Color Purple*, however, is that the brutalisation of Celie will confirm to the white capitalists the false notion of the Negro man as *inherently* a violent beast with no brains. The danger of confirming these false notions is that there is a tendency of the confirmation taking attention away from the real issues which result in this kind of behaviour. These issues are the material relations which were created by capitalism as argued out by C. L.R. James and Eric Williams. The polemics of these two thinkers are that the Negroes were the fundamental prop of capitalism through the labour they provided in the slave plantations,²⁵ and that the safety of the whites depends on treating the Negroes as senseless beasts. For the white capitalists *The Color Purple* is important in the sense that this is an apparent admission by the Negro that he is the senseless brute the white capitalist has always been saying he is over the centuries.

Another form of criticism leveled at Alice Walker is that she does not go far enough in her analysis of gender relations. She does not go beyond the gender relations to perceive the material relations on which these gender relations are predicated. Celie is presented as victim of a patriarchal society which is completely oppressive to the woman. Celie’s rape is presented in a manner that presents manhood per se as the problem – the man aims to make the woman the object of his desires; she is an object to soothe his painful loins. Celie’s forced marriage to Mr. — and Grange’s attempts to sell Margaret apparently puts the Negro man on the same oppressive wavelength with the white enslaver. The man has become the new slave driver, with the attendant evils of that position – whipping, rape, mutilation, murder and so on. Thus patriarchy, which is universalized by the Olinka connection, becomes **THE** problem, and not the essential material conditions fostered by global capital. This drives Walker into, through Shug Avery, proffering the notion that women can live without men and are free to enjoy lesbian encounters as well as heterosexual relations with any man they feel like, a

notion which borders on anarchy. The thesis here is that no man is able to understand the delicate problems of the woman. The philosophy tends to ignore Angela Davies's position that during slavery, men and women were exploited and abused as a class and not men as men and women as women: "Black women were equal to their men in the oppression they suffered; they were men's social equals within the slave community; and they resisted slavery with a passion equal to their men."²⁷ In this context Walker's exploration of the African-American woman's experience can be said to be limited in that it does not take full account of the wider context of capitalist exploitation.

To bring this essay to a conclusion, it can be stated that Alice Walker attempts to give prominence to the experiences of African-American women through her fiction. In her account she makes an analysis of gender relations which are skewed in favour of men. She, however, fails to go beyond the gender issue and take a look at the role of global material relations that inform these gender relations.

End notes

¹ Walker, A. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, London, The Women's Press, 1995, p. 13.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 261 – 262.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 261 – 262.

⁴ Davis, A. *Women, Race and Class*, London, The Women's Press Ltd., 1988, p. 23

⁵ Walker, A. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, London, The Women's Press Ltd., 1985, p. 25.

⁶ Walker, A. *In Love and Trouble*, London, The Women's Press Ltd., 1990, p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31, "As steadily as she careened downhill, Jerome advanced in the opposite direction."

⁹ Walker, A. *Meridian*, London, The Women's Press Ltd., 1991, p. 39, pp. 40 – 41.

¹⁰ Walker, A. *The Color Purple*, London, The Women's Press Ltd., 1993, p. 76.

¹¹ *op. cit.* p. 77.

¹² *op. cit.* p. 265.

¹³ *op. cit.* p. 166.

¹⁴ *op. cit.* p. 118.

¹⁵ *op. cit.* p. 199.

¹⁶ *op. cit.* p. 140.

¹⁷ *op. cit.* p. 195.

¹⁸ Breitmann, G. (Ed.) *By Any Means Necessary : Speeches, Interviews, and a Letter by Malcolm X*, New York, 1989, p. 10.

¹⁹ *op. cit.* p. 98.

²⁰ *op. cit.* p. 13.

²¹ Walker, A. *You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down*, London, The Women's Press Ltd., 1991, p. 84.

²² *op. cit.* p. 176.

²³ *op. cit.* p. 95.

²⁴ op. cit. pp. 195 – 196.

²⁵ Williams, E. *Capitalism and Slavery*, London, Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1993, pp. 3 – 29.

²⁶ James, C. L. R. *The Black Jacobins : Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, New York, Vintage Books, 1963, pp. 3 – 26.

²⁷ op. cit. p. 23.

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