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Exploring the Power of Erotic in Alice Walker's *By the Light of My Father's Smile*

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Abstract: Alice Walker's sixth novel *By the Light of my Father's Smile* is an emotionally dark narrative that explores much neglected subject of female sexuality. In this novel Walker continues the subject she began in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. She does not see female sexuality as abnormality that deprives women of self-esteem and self-worth but treats the subject as a physiological celebration of pleasure and expectation. Walker begins her novel with the line "A Story of Requited Love, Crossing Over, and the Sexual Healing of the Soul." The narrative unfolds an exciting story line where Walker pays a poetic tribute to instructors, awareness and kinship. The novel centers on the acquisition of knowledge and development of a circle of friends who become extended family. The novel centers around love avenged, disembodied humans, sexual intimacy, hypocrisy, masquerade, and deception. Senor Robinson is an overbearing and controlling father, the epitome of patriarchy. He and his wife are often at odds over the upbringing of the girls, he is the stern disciplinarian and she leans more towards providing the girls opportunities to explore the world. The single motif that propels the action into play is the beating of Magdalena by her father, with a silver-studded belt. This one act impacts the lives of all the major characters causing a domino effect among other family members and the boyfriend Manuelito. Walker also talks about the predominant idea that African American men are capable of attaining an angelic state of grace.

Keywords: Father, daughter, erotic, belt, beating, spirituality.

Historical Perspective

The Robinsons, an anthropological African American couple, relocate to the remote area of Mexico in the 1940's to study a cultural group called Mundo. The tribe is ancestrally mixed-race of escaped African slaves and Native Americans. The Robinsons have two daughters who eventually amalgamate with the Mundos. Thematically the novel is concerned with the concepts of morality, ethics, spirituality and afterlife. In the novel Alice Walker introduces readers to the presence of Africans in Mesoamerica. She creates a group of people called the Mundo, a cultural group that is a fusion of Africa and Amerindian blood lines in Mexico. Within the mainstream scholarly community, African presence in the Americas is a subject that is either rejected outright or treated as controversial. However, African American scholar Ivan van Sertima asserts in his publication *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* (1976) that historical evidence documents the participation of Africans in Mexico in the pre-Columbian period. It is believed that Africans accompanied Spanish conquistadors to Mexico in the sixteenth century. This introduction of Africans into Mexico began the process of miscegenation (mixing of African and Amerindian blood press) that would fuel an Afro-Mexican population. By the seventeenth century enslaved and free Afro-Mexicans outnumbered the whites who had settled in the region. The enslaved Africans kept pouring in, as European diseases decimated the Amerindian population. Limitations on the importation of

slaves brought about a decline in the Afro-Mexican population in the eighteenth century. They also fell ill due to diseases like tuberculosis and were often worked to death. Another contributor to the declining numbers of Afro-Mexicans was the Spanish distaste for dark skin. Afro-Mexicans were encouraged to mate with lighter-skinned partners to improve their positions in the Mexican caste system. Individuals with dark skin endured harsh treatment and marginalization from officials of the Spanish government and from the clergy of the Catholic Church. Miscegenation continued into the twentieth century, and the reduction in the numbers of Afro-Mexicans was precipitated by marriage for the purpose of skin lightening, making Afro-Mexican heritage undetectable. Dominant Afro-Mexican settlements are found in Costa Chica, Vera Cruz, Coahuila, Zocatecas, Sinaola, Yucatan, and Quintana Roo, among others.

Government leaders of Mexico take pride in the nation's mixture of diverse peoples, identifying it as a nation of mestizos (indigenous and European ancestry). Mexican officials now recognize its third ancestral root, the Afro-Mexicans. Interest in Afro-Mexicans by anthropologists inside and outside the country has prompted officials in the government to amend their attitudes and acknowledge the population that they ignored and marginalized. Also during the decade Afro-Mexicans from 30 Afro-Mexican settlements convened the Encounter de Pueblos Negros (Gathering of Black Towns) to discuss their history, improve their communities, and organize against alienation and marginalization. Walker portrays the African American middle class. Access to quality education is one criterion for admittance into the professionally and financially successful world of the African American cultural sight. Its members are associated with artistic, business, educational, legal medical and political endeavors. Members of the African American middle class affirm each other. Employment status and the inheritance of wealth and property are less significant than decorum, refinement, reputation, respectability and morals. Even within class structure there are gradations of identification. There are gender issues and some biases centered on skin hue, a carryover from antebellum society, but these do not detract from their middle-class ideals. While they are not monolithic, they are connected by a common thread and a common call. They have a commitment to the African American church, the hub of religious life, organizing and politicizing. They retain the spirit of resistance to oppression and injustice that was embedded in their ancestors and they work hard to advance the cause of marginalized and disenfranchised people. Vigilant in their duty to those whose lives are weighed down by societal pressures, they are instrumental in bringing about change where it is needed. The Robinsons in Alice Walker's novel are members of the African American middle class, their contribution is an anthropological study of people that the world doesn't see. Their primary research and documentation of the existence of Mundo is a lasting evidence of their dedication to African causes.

Discussion

Senor Robinson and Langley Robinson, a married couple, practitioners of agnosticism are anthropologists posing as Christian missionaries in the remote sierras of Mexico. The Robinsons are in conflict with each other, although they eventually overcome the strained moments of their relationship. Senor Robinson is often overbearing and controlling, the epitome of patriarchy. He and his wife are often at odds over the upbringing of the two daughters. He is the stern disciplinarian and she leans more toward providing the girls opportunities to cover the world. The single motif that propels the action into play is the beating of Magdalena by her father, who uses a silver-studded belt. This one act impacts the lives of all the major characters causing a domino effect among all family members and the boyfriend Manuelito. Robinson is a worried father even when Magdalena nicknamed Maggie was only six:

Maggie was six, Not a six, however, of innocent cheerfulness. Not a six of languid indolence. Not a six driven merely by the dictates of playful curiosity. No, she was a six that already stared boldly at anything that interested her. And what interested her, it seemed to me, even at that early age, was men, and what was concealed by their trouser..... Maggie embarrassed us by her boldness. Her staring and her sidling up to boys three times her age. She is curious, my sweet daughter, said my wife. She laughed. And the young men here are magnetic (Walker, *By The Light* 15).

Mr. Robinson never really understood her. He ruminates and contemplates on how to hold her back and mould her into more womanly disposition:

I did not understand her spirit. I yearned for guidance. It seemed to be necessary to tame her, though no one among the Indians or in my own family showed any signs of thinking so. The Indians I think admired her. By the age of ten she was like, and even resembled, one of their sons. Their own daughters however, were like Susannah, demure, interested in woman's things. There was not one as wild as Mac Doc, as Maggie by now was called. She had wanted to be known as Mad Dog, but I drew a line there (Walker, By The Light 18).

Magdalena/June, lovingly nicknamed "Mad Dog" by the Mundo because of her fearlessness and free spirit, embraces the Mundo culture and rides a black stallion named Vado with the love of her life, Manuelito, by her side. She becomes a tragic character when her father represses her sexual awakenings putting her in direct conflict with him and with everyone she loves. As a defiant 15 year old she becomes sexually intimate with her boyfriend and as she emerges from the secret cave, their hideout, she is discovered by her father. Senor Robinson becomes so enraged that he administers the memorable whipping with a belt that Manuelito has given her as a present. When Senor Robinson insists on being uncompromising, Langley Robinson, his wife retreats into a safe zone, her bedroom, to regroup in her commitment to her marriage and rethink the situation. She then denies him the right of entry to the bedroom, listening to his pleas and finally acquiescing and allowing him to return. Their love is secure and their bond is strong. However, Senor Robinson is in conflict with his daughter Magdalena, a tempestuous, strong-willed child. He lacks the parenting skills to reach her at the base level because both of them are headstrong and desire to rule. Their confrontations lead to irreparable damages in their relationship.

It is a punishment from which she never recovers. In past Mr. Robinson and Langley had decided they would never administer physical abuse on their children.

We had agreed, even before we were married, that we would never lay a hand on our child. We believed in correction which we thought could be accomplished by reason and consistency: We did not believe in corporal punishment. This had been of such importance to us that we discussed it thoroughly, over years, until Langley felt it was safe for her to bear a child. By beating her oldest daughter to the point of actually drawing blood, caused by the disks on the accursed belt I used, I had betrayed her completely. We were beaten in slavery; She screamed, weeping as if her heart would break (Walker, By The Light 31).

Maggie and her father become estranged and Magdalena lives the remainder of her life in the shadows. Though Mr. Robinson realizes the blunder he has done and asks for forgiveness Magdalena never resumes any relation with him. Filial love has vanished from their relationship. Magdalena completely ignores her father. She becomes an obese academic, masking her pain with food. Her reunification with Manuelito provides the impetus for her to tackle her weight issue, but he dies before she takes the first step. Thoroughly brokenhearted, she dies, holding chocolate cake in one hand and beer in the other.

Susannah, Senor Robinson's second daughter, and daddy's joy to behold, wants to remain the apple of her father's eye, but Magdalena refuses to allow Susannah to forget the memory of the whipping she witnesses. Thus whenever Susannah finds herself melting under her father's overpowering charm, Magdalena sends a signal (clearing her throat) that conjures up the memory all over again. Senor Robinson goes through life without place and acceptance from his family and without love and affection from his daughters. Susannah is a Renaissance woman who when first introduced appears to be introverted and vulnerable but emerges a survivor. As a child she allows her sister Magdalena to stifle the love she has for her father, prohibiting her from outward expressions of affection. The result of this prohibition is alienation from her sister, which she vows to amend. The single childhood act of the whipping mars their adult life. Susannah internalizes her feelings and manifests her distress by wearing dark clothes. As she comes out of her shell her attire becomes more colorful. Susannah reconciles with Magdalena before she dies of a broken heart and with her father in the spiritual realm after her death from old age. Even his wife is never able to reconcile with him:

On my knees,outside the locked door,I pleaded.....She had seen me turn into a monster;how could I ever expect her to forget?I fell asleep there,growing cramped and chilled as the night wore on.In the morning,Her face wrinkled as a crone's and tear stained she opened the door,sniffed at me as if I were disagreeable garbage, and stepped gingerly around my cold ,ashen and yellowing feet (Walker,By The Light 32).

Senor Robinson goes through life without peace and acceptance from his family and without love and affection from his daughters.He has to learn life's lessons in death as a Mundo.As Manuelito tells him according to Mundo cosmology,“The dead are required to finish two tasks before all is over with them:one is to guide back to the path someone you left behind who is past, because of your folly; the other is to host a ceremony so that you and others you have heart may face eternity reconciled and complete”(Walker 150).When he embraces Mundo cosmology, he is able to make reconciliation with the ones he has injured, causing them mental anguish and emotional distress, and face eternity a harmonious soul. Gerri bates observes:

Walker provides the opportunity for Senor Robinson to correct past wrongs in the after life. It is as a soul, a spirit, that he has the willingness and desire to learn how to be a father to his daughters.The afterlife makes the vision clear and the knowledge accessible.As a ghostly voyeur he is undisturbed by his daughter's love making, however, in life he refuses to advise them in matters of sexuality.He reserves sexual privileges only for himself with his wife Langley. He ignores the fact that his daughters are maturing and need his mentorship.He approaches Magdalena's sexual curiosity as a taboo, setting her up for life to have dysfunctional relationships or no relationships.However,in the afterlife he embraces Mundo cosmology and accepts the guidance of Magdalena's banned lover to guide him to spiritual awareness (142).

The main issues that Walker brings up in the novel are father-daughter relationship, love, reconciliation, sexuality and spirituality.She focuses on father-daughter relationships to emphasize the importance of fathers in the life's of their daughters. Fathers are instrumental in socializing their daughters in the proper lifestyles and values.Fathers are support system not just emotionally, but also sexually.The father-daughter relationship in this novel is first strained and nonexistent.Walker illustrates through the character of Magdalena the vulnerability of young girls whose fathers do not provide them with a sense of compassion and belonging.Walker implies that fathers are essential in the development of daughters who are not conflict-ridden and can enter womanhood empowered and positive in the development of adult relationships.Gerri Bates notes:

The novel is an open and positive exploration of women's sexuality and Walker's use of language, specifically chosen to defy patriarchal descriptions of sex, is super. She states 'Its time for fathers to deal with the hypocrisy of their own sexual behavior and to extend themselves to their daughters in a positive way. The worst fear many of these men have regarding their daughter's sexuality is that the young women are having a great time'. And I'm here to tell you that many of them are , so get over it, and be there for them (141).

Walker maintains,“The book examines the way imposed religion almost always acts to inhibit and harden the heart of those who would intuitively love”(O'Brien 185).She

refers to the rigid dogma of institutional religion and its condemnation of the pursuit of sexual pleasure.Sexuality as a theme in the novel is a celebration of Eros. Susannah's attitude about sex affects the way she feels and responds sexually, that is, she is free and not confined.Her attitude about sex is healthier than Magdalena's. Furthermore, Susannah believes sex to be a source of pleasure, but Magdalena's sex life is practically non existent until she reunites with Manuelito. Both women identify themselves sexually as females, their biological inheritance. Susannah, however, is not locked into a traditional sex role and does not abide by dominant and submissive and independent and dependent characteristics.Instead, her behavior is androgynous. At the novel's beginning she is heterosexually married, but when the relationship fizzles, she enters a same sex relationship, indicating her flexibility in

sexual matters.

The purpose of Walker's depictions of female erotic intensity is to redeem African American female sexuality. Her selection of the subject has fetched her harsh criticism. But it has also been hailed as a subject that needs to be explored. As mentioned in the Denver post:

With explicit flair and fluid, descriptive prose, Walker explores the function and dysfunction of sexuality, as it relates to the growth of the human spirit. She glides unabashedly into her storytelling and her personal purpose without hesitation or a moment's regret. Her descriptive prowess and fast paced plotting make each chapter a joy to read. Her unyielding passion and purpose make this a hard book to put down (2003 100).

Walker celebrates Eros (Cupid) the Greek God of erotic love, presenting the impulse for gratification as a basic need for the preservation of life. Philadelphia Inquirer reviews it as, "A novel of the late 20th century, a tale of healing and forgiveness, a contemplation and meditation on the meaning of death, and a celebration of the spiritual nature of sex" (A Celebration). Within the text, the pursuit of erotic pleasure then brings about harmonious feelings in mind, body, and spirit. Walker's novel resonates with what Andre Lorde's essay, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, that thoroughly studies female power and why it is so often limited, constrained, labeled, put in a box, left to gather dust. Lorde sees women as having an erotic resource that operates in the realm of female spirituality. She defines the erotic as potential creative energy that women use to enhance their lives spiritually and politically. Lorde sees a need for women to tap into the potentiality of the erotic. The energy of the erotic through sharing and feeling stirs itself internally within the female but manifests itself externally. Gerri Bates succinctly observes Lorde offers three specific functions of the erotic:

Providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person.....the open and fearless underlining of the capacity for joy.....and to share the power of each other's feeling. Only women who are women-centered, according to Lorde, actually develop the courage and determination to tap into the power of the erotic and use it to effect change in themselves and the world (142-143).

Walker's depiction of female erotic intensity is basically aimed at reclaiming African American female sexuality. While the graphic nature of the erotic scenes might be one giant leap for womankind, Walker meets Lorde's requirements for the functions of the erotic. First, Pauline and Susannah not only share a long-term relationship but also share the pursuit of economic independence and financial success. Their unity as couple as aspiration and reality is strong, each flaming from it human emotional needs that are both foundations and systems of support. Gratified in this sense, they then are liberated to pursue the power of the erotic without hindrance. Next, neither Pauline nor Susannah is timid in the area of the pursuit of joy, although Pauline has some insecurity issues. Both are gratified in their professional careers and, of course gratified sexually. Pauline realizes her liberation through orgasm, knowing for sure that she is free in that area. Susannah takes steps toward her liberation as she sheds layers upon layer of stylish but dark attire. Once she completes the process, her liberation manifests itself in full color. Complete liberation, then, opens another door to experience the erotic. Last, Pauline and Susannah create the appropriate emotional state in which to share their feelings. Their consciousness, sensitivity, and awareness are intuitive reactions that permit them to make contact through open to the erotic. They attach importance to the shared elements of their relationship, which frees them to experience the depth of the erotic.

Conclusion: The erotic expose in the novel is Walker's manifesto that women are naturally strong erotic beings. They need not hide behind a veil or cut themselves off from the world. Neither are they threats to make accomplishments, spirituality, or sexuality. Recognizing the potential for the erotic is a basic trait for the development of the whole self. Walker's novel indicates that women need to claim their freedom, and the experience of the erotic is the underlying principle of the road to freedom. All the characters exhibit full sexual awareness. The text is also about crossing over, entrance into the afterlife. In order for death to take place the body must wind down, similar to the first law of thermodynamics, which hypothesizes that

the earth is winding down, coming closer to death of the planet. If the character's bodies are in constant decline or linear descending order, all the characters are then moving from life to afterlife. This pleasure on the earth is the pursuit of eroticism through sexuality. Thus, when life ends so does sexuality, therefore, the movement is from sexuality to spirituality-the subject of the text.

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