

The Challenges of the Black Female Spirit in the Stories of Alice Walker

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on expressing basic peculiarities of black female spirit in the stories by Alice Walker. Basically, this paper gives more essential information about "In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women" by Alice Walker. For centuries, American patriarchal society has been detrimental to the spirits of Black women in a variety of ways. In our male-dominated world, women of all races and cultures are, to a large degree, discouraged from setting foot outside of their female-identified arenas. The fact that women remain subject to normative representations of Woman, the feminine, the biologically female - reminds us that such representations continue to exert a great deal of pressure on any attempt to represent women as the subjects of feminism, or indeed, as the subjects of any discourse or social practice.

An evaluation of the Black female spirit as present in Alice Walker's "In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women" (1973) must begin by exposing the adversities Black women have been forced to overcome in America; despite undying efforts to nourish their selfhood, they have battled a society that continuously uses race and gender as suppressers of their identity. Existing as a Black woman in the twentieth century involves dismantling the "double-negative stigma," a term used to describe the towering obstacles placed before the individual who is both Black and female. In addition, little nourishment has been given to those labeled powerless and unimportant, whereas our society has encouraged white males to embrace their race and gender as symbols of authority.

Unfortunately, their maleness has meant a history of oppression for minority men and women. I believe the internal spirits of Black women have been devalued, ignored, and in the most horrible situations, annihilated. The Black woman has had to conquer enormous odds in her attempt to sustain a sense of self, and this is evident in today's society and during slavery. On slave ships African women and men were considered inhuman and received inhumane treatment, which included rape, lashings, the eradication of dignity, the removal of any observable heritage, and daily terrorization. However, although the slave experience was horrific for both men and women, historians have given minimal recognition to the effect slavery had on the emotional health of Black females. In fact, enslaved women endured abuse equal to that of enslaved men and in *Ain't I A Woman?*, bell hooks asserts that the experiences of the Black female slave has been unfairly devalued: Scholars have been reluctant to discuss the oppression of black women during slavery because of an unwillingness to seriously examine the impact of sexist and racist oppression on their social status.

Unfortunately, this lack of interest and concern leads them to deliberately minimize the black female slave experience. For instance, although enslaved women were forced to assume a "masculine" role on the plantation field, enslaved men were rarely forced to perform labor as domestics in white households. My point is that women felt a sense of loss when unable to sustain their womanly essence.

However, the greatest negative impact on the Black woman's sense of self during slavery was her continued sexual exploitation. More specifically, the most profound violation of self was undoubtedly the frequent occurrence of rape and the violent removal of children from their mothers. To be black and female, slave or free, elicits feelings of pride in the ability to share one's sexuality at will and reproduce in the name of "family." These are physical abilities, but their true roots thrive in the soul within the female body. When white, lewd slave owners preyed on the vulnerability of Black women, they simultaneously etched out a great portion of the Black female spirit. Moreover, when they snatched babies from their mothers' breasts, they invaded yet another one of these same spirits.

On the issue of rape, Black activist Angela Davis adds that "the rape of black female slaves was not, as other scholars have suggested, a case of white men satisfying their sexual lust, but was in fact an institutionalized method of terrorism which had as its goal the demoralization and dehumanization of black women" (hooks 27). The connection is easy to ascertain: When a slave woman was demoralized and dehumanized, the effects were felt in her emotional, internal self.

Over hundreds of years, the Black female has made continuous attempts at freeing her troubled spirit, and in doing so she has battled with her longtime foes: racism and sexism. For example, even in the twentieth century, more than a century after slavery was abolished, Black women have fought various societal conventions that discourage them from being their spontaneous, unique, artistic selves. Evidence can be found in the media, where physical beauty is still dependent upon the existence of traits similar to those of the European woman.

In the 1960's, "Black is Beautiful" was an expression on the lips of almost every Black man and woman, and pride in the natural, physical beauty of the African

American was at its peak. However, it didn't obliterate for Blacks, especially women, the memory of being labeled "ugly" and "unattractive" because of dark skin and kinky hair. As the twenty-first century approaches, significant progress has been made in assuring the non-European female of her unique splendor, but a white, male-dominated society still promotes the white female counterpart as the ideal symbol of beauty.

As mentioned earlier, in the discussion of slavery, rape had a ruinous effect on the Black woman's emotional self, and its effects have manifested in nations around the world. Obviously, rape has a disastrous impact on any woman, and can happen to women of different ages, cultures, races and classes. Many women have said that although their physical selves may have been brutally beaten and abused, the pain of rape runs deep into their hearts and has a lasting effect on their psyches.

A historical background of the Black female spirit is necessary if one is *to* recognize the various ways Black women writers, both past and present, address this same spirit. With this in mind, I would like *to* focus on the contributions Black women have made *to* the short story genre; by revisiting their own experiences and those of their sisters, they have expressed the pain, frustration and joy felt by women from different backgrounds, age groups and regions. Once I have investigated this literary tradition, I will then explain how six stories in Alice Walker's *In Love and Trouble* expose women trying their absolute best to save their individual sense of self without further damaging their inner spirits. Many Black, female writers have addressed, at least indirectly, the repercussions of harboring an injured spirit. This is certainly the primary focus of Walker's collection of short stories which "probes the extent to which black women have the

freedom to pursue their selfhood within the confines of a sexist and racist society" (Christian, "Wayward" 92). Further, Walker writes within a tradition of Black women who feel an obligation to voice their anger and frustration at a society that turns a blind eye to psyches damaged by abusive relationships, racism, sexism, male-domination, and a myriad of other troubling issues.

Immediately, contemporary novelists like Toni Morrison and Terry McMillan are names, along with Alice Walker, that comes to most minds when asked to recall the identities of powerful African American women writers. Certainly they deserve this recognition, for in 1992 they each had a book on the best-seller list; Morrison's *Jazz*, McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, and Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* collectively sold millions of copies and impacted the lives of all women, especially African American women.

At the same time, as with Walker's collection of short stories, Black women writers have used this genre to address issues relevant to the Black woman. In the introduction to their anthology of short stories, *Centers of the Self*, Judith Hamer and Martin Hamer assert that the short story "more readily reflects the moods and attitudes of black people" because it is the form generally published by African American magazines and journals (5). Because the short story as a genre has existed for decades, the "moods and attitudes" alluded to above can be found in the early writings of historical authors like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

In fact, her short story "The Two Offers," often considered the first tale published by an African American, "raised questions that were probably central to the lives of many women" (Hamer and Hamer 8). The story questions whether the union with a man is a commitment more important than spinsterhood, and if a woman's place is only in the home. Harper's story is about choices a woman must make; in making life-altering decisions, a woman undoubtedly has to weigh the ratio of self-sacrifice to happiness. That is, how much of her own personal spirit is compromised when her purpose in life moves from the internal to the external? At the turn of the century, Black women writers became more visible, partly because of the emergence of two new magazines, *The Colored American Magazine* (1900) and *The Crisis* (1910). However, many of these writers, like many African Americans, still held to the notion that they could become complete citizens by embracing the values of middle-class White Americans.

In turn, domestic allegories emerged that "created an instructive but fictive world, where art did not imitate reality" (Hamer and Hamer 9). Fortunately, the attention to social realism was reborn in the literature of Black women and can be found to this day; many of their writings return to issues that have a direct impact on the individual woman.

Alice Walker herself is as complex as her characters; she wears many hats at the same time, such as Black, female, Southern, and feminist. Thus far in my discussion, I have explored her identity as an African American, Southern woman writer, but her position as a feminist deserves some attention. Although she is dedicated to the survival of women in general, Walker's primary concern is undoubtedly the Black woman. Because of this, she prefers the term "womanist" to "feminist," and as a preface to *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* Walker defines the characteristics of a "womanist":

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown-up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (xi-xii)

So, because Walker identifies herself as a "womanist" who appreciates the strength of Black women as well as their spiritual wholeness, it is natural that she would probe the extent to which that same strength - that sense of self- is tested under adverse conditions. Walker herself adds she is "preoccupied with the spiritual, the survival whole of my people. But, beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of Black women" (Christian, "Wayward" 82). In "A Womanist Response to the Afrocentric Idea," womanist preacher Larine L. Cummings discusses the relationship between Afrocentrism and womanism, and asserts that Afrocentrism, although beneficial in theory, fails to acknowledge the needs of the Black woman. To Cummings, Black women must depend on themselves for understanding and self-nourishment: No one can accurately reflect and/or speak about African American women better than ourselves. Others attempt to discuss their understanding of our experience, but they cannot tell the entire story ... Womanists are voicing concerns of African American women which are often very different from those articulated by their white female and African American male counterparts.

"In Love and Trouble"

I chose Alice Walker's *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973) for many reasons. First, I wanted to concentrate on the emotional well-being of the African American female in a male-dominated society. Second, I wanted to focus on this issue in the short story because although a great deal has been written on Walker's novels, little attention has been given to her contribution to this genre. And third, Walker's variety of settings and circumstances helped me arrive at the fact that women react to their troubled spirits differently, depending on a myriad of external factors.

For centuries the Black female spirit has been ignored, and although many will attest to her strength, she has still been seen as victimized by circumstances beyond her control. A true understanding of the spirit of the Black woman cannot occur until she is taken out of this victimized position. Further, before she is judged or condemned for her actions, a critical eye should be set upon the conventions she must battle. In doing this, it will become more evident that although she may appear to have been defeated, she has really triumphed in a manner that unleashes her own unique, individual self. I would like to address the Black woman's spiritual freedom by looking at three interrelated issues: the constraints of societal convention, the restriction of black femaleness within Southern tradition, and the ideology of revolution as an obstacle to an unsuppressed *agwu*.

To examine how the constraints of societal convention affect the Black female spirit, I also chose Walker's "Roselily" and "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" because the protagonists in these stories are clearly at odds with themselves in a racist, sexist society that limits their ability to reach happiness. As they exist in a world that functions for the benefit of white males, their

struggle to survive is that much more difficult. Societal conventions have restricted most people of color, but in America their effect on African Americans is clear. Not only has financial security been threatened, but so has the overall state of Black Americans' physical and mental health. Other stories in *In Love and Trouble* address this same issue; in fact, all of Walker's women battle the conventions of a racist, sexist, male-dominated society. However, "Roselily" and "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" are particularly interesting because of the unique perspective we have on the lives of these women.

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