

SEXUALITY IN BY THE LIGHT OF MY FATHER'S SMILE

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ABSTRACT

The research paper intends to focus on the topic of sexuality in the novel of Alice Walker *By the Light of my Father's Smile*. It is an undeniable fact that black slavery in America gave path to several issues and vices like racism, sexism, sexuality, classism and other social evils. Alice Walker presents all the evils in her fiction but every novel is given a core theme highlighted by other drawbacks and weaknesses prevalent both in American and Afro-American societies.

KEY WORDS

Sexuality, Spirituality, Slavery, Black People

INTRODUCTION

Walker's novel entitled *By the Light of my Father's Smile* which appeared in 1998. It deals with sexuality, sexual gratification, dejection, oppression of the black people in America, repression, emancipation need of love and empathy towards the subalterns. Walker's fiction presents her strong desire and expectation of the welfare of her community in the context of American society. The transformation of slavery into freedom and victory of their incessant efforts and struggle have resulted in striking a constructive chord of better human relations eradicating the vicious acts and deeds that mar the quality of black life.

Christian throws light on the attributive aspect of Walker's fiction as follows:

“It focuses on the struggle of Black people, especially Black women, to claim their own lives, and the contention that this struggle emanates from

a deepening of self-knowledge and love are characteristics of Walker's work.”

Through her fiction, Walker attempts to rectify and better the life of the African-Americans. She aims at bringing a positive transformation in their lives by going along with the moral and ethical aspects that harmonize the discords and chaos from among the social communities which live in the same society. Her strife has been to expose the problems of the Afro-Americans on the attempt to rendering justice to her racially oppressed people.

By the Light of my Father's Smile is a strong polemic against the evils of patriarchal system. The historical period that it refers to is the decade of 1940s. It is the story of a family which shifted its residence from the United States of America to a remote place called Sierras in Mexico. The Robinson's family consists of four members: Susanna, Magdalena, the younger sister and their parents, Mr. Robinson and Langley who were zealous and amateur anthropologists. Magdalena had a couple of nicknames too like Mad Dog and June. The nomenclature of 'Mad Dog' embodied her rebellious nature.

The family of Robinson spent their time among the Mundo tribe in the Sierra Madres. Both Robinson and Langley wanted to study the life, lifestyle and ideology of the tribe mentioned above. It was almost at the margin of extinction. It was due to the lack of research grants, the Robinsons reach the Mundo tribe with the pretext that they were Christian missionaries who wished that they should try religious conversion as far as Christianity was concerned.

They had given a word to the church that they would try to concert them to Christianity. The responsibility of funding was on the shoulder of the church. The Mundo tribe had descended from the Mexican Indians. They had escaped the torture and trials of slavery. They were escaped slaves. The Mundo tribe referred to by Alice Walker was half black and half Indian who had rescued themselves from North American bondage, long ago.

Mr. Robinson and Langley came here with Susannah and her sister Magdalena. Both the parents were interested in studying the doomed life of the people of the Mundo tribe. Robinson taught and preached Christian fables and tales to the tribal people; during nights, he used to defrock with the will to gratify his lust and libido

with his life partner. He tried very hard to comprehend the traditional and religious secrets of the tribe. He made efforts to win their confidence so that he could gather information on their spirituality and other personal secrets of the tribe.

The girlhood of the two children was spent surrounded by the people who belonged to the tribe called Mundo. The specific and special attribute of this tribe was spirituality. Their intention was to avert the violence, exploitation and injustice towards the black community in America. Susannah had welcomed the impact of spirituality from the Mundo people owing to spending most of the time among them. However, Magdalena received unwelcoming influence from the local people.

There are two narrators of the story—one is Robinson and the other is Manuelito, a boy of the Mundo tribe who had a love affair with fourteen-year old June/Magdalena. The first undesirable deed in the adolescent life of Magdalena was that she had fallen in love with a boy who belonged to the Mundo tribe. The seductive activities of the Mundo tribe and the people around her, made her fall prey to sexuality. It so happened one day that Robinson sees his daughter, Magdalena having sex with Manuelito. She returns home, beaming with bright face for having the love for the first time. Her father makes the glittering face fade out by giving her corporal punishment. She was severely beaten by her father for this act of hers. The impact of this misdeed and punishment was observed in Susanna who was all eyes during the severe sentence. The traditional principles and customs changed the lives of the two sisters. They were victimized by the custom of sexuality in the tribal community.

After a long time, Magdalena happens to come across Manuelito, her lover and again they are lost in the world of their love and lust. Alice Walker is a great literary artist in giving abrupt twists and turns to her story. Manuelito meets with an accident and is dead. Walker gives a spiritual touch to the novel. First time in the novel of Alice Walker readers come across beliefs and cultural tradition which showed the definite and strong bond between their mundane and spiritual world. Walker focuses on the matchless elements of the Mundo culture like the unbreakable connection between sexuality and spirituality.

Sexuality

For the sake of this chapter it is essential to know the difference between sexism and sexuality. However, the researcher has already illustrated the distinction between them. But now, types of sexuality can be studied analytically with the view to criticize the story of the novel *By the Light of my Father's Smile*. By now, it is obvious that sexuality is a natural act and activity. But when it comes to the topic of gender, sexuality and its types are different. A sexual act is natural between a male and a female being, may it be animal or man. Here, we are concerned about man's sexual feelings. The following kinds can be conveniently categorized:

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual/Gay/Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Androgynous
- Asexual

Heterosexual

Natural attraction and romance between persons of the two opposite gender or sex is termed as heterosexual. Sexual orientation gives the sense of sexual identity, whether you are male or female. 'Straight' is the term in the American Jargon which refers to the naturally attracted person.

Homosexual/Gay/Lesbian

When a person feels attracted to the same sex/gender, he/she is a Gay or Lesbian. Alice Walker has used lesbian relationship in *By the Light of my Father's Smile*. If two male persons or two female persons are sexually attracted, they are lesbians.

Bisexual

While someone is sexually drawn to both the sexes/genders, he/she is bisexual.

Androgynous

They are partly female and partly male in their appearance. Their sex/gender is indeterminate. They are otherwise called 'Eunuch' or 'Hermaphrodite'.

Asexual

There are people in the world who do not feel erotic; they have no sense of sexual identity, either physical or psychological. Alice Walker makes her readers understand that the optimistic side and the symbolic effect of sexuality and evinces the need of new experiences in spirituality. Susannah's decision towards being sexual is that of a lesbian. Her father's inhuman behavior with his two daughters has led her towards homosexuality which is harmless and comfortable. Susannah's homosexual partner is Pauline. She tells her about the enlightening state of mind of their sexual act. Susannah feels and expresses that without the idiosyncratic relationship, their life would not have been complete.

Alice Walker's readers of *By the Light of my Father's Smile* instigate the feeling of believing that in her opinion, any kind of sexual act is the same, may it be heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual. It depends on the person who obtains gratification. The novel in question has been dotted with myriad of sexual scenes and references. It is a smorgasbord of sexual acts and love scenes. One feels that God has doled out sexuality to human beings through which they attain spiritual enlightenment.

She reveals the fact that women were being exploited by the white people by enslaving them. She explains to Susannah and Pauline the horrible and unbearable history of black slavery. Alice Walker has given a good example of Irene referring to her mother's life and the daughter's victimization. As observed by Akrudi in *Discourse of Womanism in the Novels of Alice Walker*:

“She was a scapegoat of sexism. She puts her feelings before Susannah. She says that her mother was accused of whatever happened in her life. She was held responsible for the consequences.”

All the members of her family and community too cut interacting with her. She has earmarked her life for the service of Christianity through the church. Even the visitors of the church did not wish to talk to her. Alice Walker's remarkable example for sexism is that of Irene and her role in the novel.

Coming back to the storyline, now, Magdalena is not well. She has been admitted to a hospital. Robinson and Manuelito go to the hospital to watch her serious

condition. She is on her death bed and as a dutiful and responsible father, he blesses his dying daughter. She is also near joining the metaphysical world of her father and her former lover. Here, Alice Walker has shown that the Mundo tribal faith in the connection between the living the dead and also in the bound duty of the departed to keep in touch with the people who have survived them.

Irrational treatment, behavior and attitude of Robinson towards his daughter have made them repay in the same coin. 'Tit for tat' is the weapons they take in their hands and take vow not to show even an iota of affection or concern towards their father who lacks even common sense. They feel that he has been rude with them; instead of advising and counseling them, he behaves in a beastly way. His patriarchal authority distorted the peace in the family. His wife is also not in good books with him only because of his hypocrisy. Magdalena is unable to understand the reason of punishing her. She becomes a revengeful daughter who loses all her filial attachment and affection towards her father. Hatred and disgust are the only sentiments his daughters have for him.

Walker's unique subject of sexuality proves that her novel is a paean that talks less of the foreplay but of the sexual activities that celebrate the connection between the living and the departed. Susannah becomes a sexy Afro-American author who is a victim of lesbianism. A notable faith of the Mundo community is that the departed souls can guide those who have survived and narrate the events, incidents and instances of the happenings in the mundane world. In the Mundo tribe, sexuality is not a bane; it is a boon from God for the enlightenment of the self. A better example is that of the angel of Robinson who depicts the lesbian acts and activities between his daughter, Susannah and her sexual partner, Pauline.

Conclusion

Afro-American men and women pass through multifarious harsh realities of life in which they confront various kinds of issues and problems. All these problems evolved owing to racial segregation and exploitation.

Alice Walker's novels do not hesitate to focus on the traditional customs like genital circumcision and sexuality in both black men and women. In *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, Walker's main motif is sexuality, womanism and patriarchal

hegemony. Walker's particular theme through which she deals with other motifs is a father's duty and responsibility and women's sexual aspect of life.

By the Light of My Father's Smile, she stresses the issues of sexism and universal sexuality with reference to the black women. A special presentation of Walker in the novel concerned is women's sexuality versus spirituality which is a vehicle for one's redemption and salvation. According to the Mundo tradition, sexuality is able to uplift human beings to the spiritual world.

In the same way Mundo people consider love an inseparable aspect of their life. They consider love as an announcement of the lifestyles pressure of girls, of their creative strength and knowledge. These cultural aspects are not understood by Mr. Robinson in his lifetime, therefore the family is distracted. He does not take her daughters love in a humanist way. Therefore, Magdalena, his elder daughter takes this humiliation seriously and behaves in a self-distractive way to meet her doom. His younger daughter, Susannah also hates her father but can do nothing in her lifetime. After her father's death she gets engaged in sexual relations with various people.

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