

THE WOUND IN THE EYE: A SEXIST ANALYSIS OF ALICE WALKER'S WORKS

Abstract

Alice Walker suffered an injury in childhood. She was playing outdoors with her brothers when the boys used the guns they received for Christmas and shot, at her right eye. As she develops artistically, Walker associates her childhood injury more directly with violence against females in general and against poor, black, rural women and children in particular. The paper suggests that the wounded eye signifies the violent acts directed not only against her but all abused women she represents. My major concern here is to portray how women exemplified by Alice Walker, are at the receiving end of subjugation, suppression and violence. The theoretical framework of this paper is based on Marxist literary theory.

Introduction

“So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them. (Genesis 1:27)

Ward Jouve insists that the King James's translation of the Bible spells early and symptomatic trouble for women. On the one hand Genesis says “them”. They, male and female, are equally included in the blessing, the bid to be fruitful, the dominion over every living thing. On the other, the translation says he for God. ‘He’ created ‘man’, ‘him’, ‘in his own image.’ The masculine gender is associated with the creator, and the main name of the created human, Adam.

The Adam of chapter 2, the first human being, the one who is formed from the dust of the ground and breathed life into is firmly male. Eve is created second, shaped from a rib from Adam's side, as a companion for Adam: for it is not good that man be alone. We all know the sequel: how Eve, not Adam, is seduced by the serpent.

Ward Jouve still lashes out that there has been countless mythic stories that follow the biblical story. There is the medieval *Roman de Renart* of Eve stealing the rod that God gave Adam to lash the sea to bring out of it all kinds of goodly animals. Adam has worked in the daytime while Eve creeps in at night when Adam is asleep. She lashes the sea in her turn and out of it come all the evil beasts: lion, tiger, wolf and finally fox (Female Genesis, 2).

Since the first chapter of Genesis, “they” have not been equal sharers in the blessing of creation, in dominion over all things. Full identity as a human being, in the act of knowing and in the creative act, have been firmly aligned with the male of the species, at least within the classical Greek and the Judeo-Christian civilizations and their European offspring. Only when “alone of all her sex” as Marina Warner has stressed, she is both virgin and mother can she have power. The power of absolute humility. God's servant, God's mother: procreator, not creator.

Alice Walker suffered an injury in childhood. She was playing outdoors with her brothers. The boys had received guns for Christmas, the type that shoot copper pellets. The moment is described in enduring present tense, as if still occurring in her vivid memory. She was standing on top of a make-shift garage, with her brothers on the ground below- and she intimates:

I feel an incredible blow in my right eye. I look down just in time to see my brother lower his gun... tree growing from the underneath the porch that climbs past the railing to the roof... it is the last thing my right eye sees. I watch as its trunk, its braches, and then its leaves are blotted out by the rising blood (Walker, 364).

From that day, she begins to see life differently. Walker suffers the loss of her right eye. The incident dents her: the wounded eye becomes cloudy, blank, and as far as she is concerned, grotesque. Though partial, walker's blinding shatters her spirit, fragments her world, and delineates the beginning of her literature. Years later, Walker explained that, because she was a girl, her parents had not given her a gun. This was her first true encounter with violent manifestations of sexism – what she would later call a patriarchal wound.

The wounded eye and, by extension, the wounded "I", becomes walker's thematic unifier. Walker associates her eye with the center of her physical, social, and sexual self. She has been incestuously raped by her brother, his gun and copper pellets metaphorically penetrating and despoiling her physical sense of completeness, as well as her soul's ability to visualize its wholeness. Writing about walker's women, Bettye Parker Smith observes that she "transposes her 'self' into her writing" to gather "up the historical and psychological threads of her own life" (Walker and Parmar, 44). As she develops artistically, Alice Walker associates her childhood injury more directly with violence against females in general as well as poor, rural women and children in particular. The wounded eye signifies the violent acts directed not only against her but all abused women. As her career proceeds, Walker complicates and deepens her representations of this theme, which remains predominant in all her works.

Thematic Blindness

Thematic blindness develops over time. From her early poetry to her most contemporary novels, which include *Warrior marks*, *Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*. Walker's partial blindness becomes the source of her militant feminism and activism for human rights, from which issue the central concerns of her writing.

Walker does not accept what happened to her as merely accidental. She views this incident as the distillation of all her moments, asserting that:

although he was only ten, I had seen my brother lowering his gun after shooting me, and knew the injury had been intentional, perhaps he had not planned to shoot me in the eye, but that he was aiming at me was unmistakable.

For her, the conflict took form and grew, in part because no one would accept accountability: her father died without ever talking to her about what had happened. Walker claims, he completely withdrew. His own mother had been shot to death when he was eleven, by a man who claimed to love her; maybe the sight of my injury pained him, as it struck that old bruise of loss and fear (Walker and Parmar, 16).

After many years of pain and confusion, Walker began to delineate in her writing the cultural intersections of sexism, racism, and violence. In her later career, she asserts these connections with more and more devastating clarity. The recurrent symbol is her own blind eye, and her excruciating interpretation of the event: the blinding was not an accident; her brother intentionally aimed at her; and she felt outrage at her own family's disregard of the incident. To worsen the enormity of the injury, she simultaneously became aware of her father's retreat from his responsibility, her mother's subservience to him and to the culture around her generally. Also, she became aware of the incomprehensible absolving of the brother's responsibility in her blindness and their parents' joint role in making their daughter feel responsible for her own injury. Although she does not exonerate her parents, she is eventually able to understand their behaviour only as a consequence of racism, thus, "growing up in the fifties in the segregated south". Walker remembers how hard, black people worked and how little white employers paid them. Their only entertainment at the end of an exhausting six-day week was the "picture show". There, they consumed racist and sexist propaganda via the "shoot-em-ups"...which taught them to despise Indians and Africans as a matter of course, and to distrust Asians. Then, to protect and respect only white women; to admire and fear only white men; and to become unable to actually see themselves – for the duration of the film, at least – at all (Walker and Parmer, 17). Theirs was in fact, a psychic mutilation. The mutilation of the body and psyche became Walker's primary theme.

Analysis of Texts

Walker's first collection of poetry links the injured eye to the wounded self: she paints a disturbing portrait of a good looking man in the **Karamojongs** whose "eyes/are running/sores". From a distance, he is tall and handsome, but up close, his disfigurement is apparent. In another poem, **South, the Name of Home**, Walker prays for eyes to see again and asks God to "give us trees to plant/and hands and eyes to/love them. The reference to 'trees' and 'eyes to love them' must be presumed self-referential because a tree was the last image Walker saw with her right eye. The reminders of her injury also occur in her second collection of poetry, **Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful**. In the poem, **Remember?** she laments, "I am the dark/rotten-toothed girl/with the wounded eye" but concludes more optimistically, "I am the woman/with the healing eye". The poem **Listen one, pull one**, again she alludes to her eye injury and the rising blood as it filled her eye; asserting that violence and death will "fill our eyes/with the mud of oblivion" (50). Overt references to blindness are prominent in **Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems**. In the poem **Nothing is Right**, Walker wonders "what was it that kept/the eyes alive/Declined to out mode/the hug?" (36). The burning bright eyes in her poem **Black Mail** surely resemble William Blake's **The Tyger**; "Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright/in the forest of the night,/what immortal hand or eye/could frame thy fearful symmetry?/Burnt the fire of thine eyes? On what wings dare he aspire?/what the hand dare seize the fire?". However, Walker's poem twists violently and distinctly away from Blake's query about the presence and design of divinity. Her poem clearly refers to an attack – a "crucifixion" – staved off only by a suit of armor with the eyes as the only openings vulnerable to attack. The poet's eyes are "Burning

sharp,/Burning bright:/Burning righteous/But burning blind". The eye is pierced with a dagger of "narrow truth". In a poem from "African Images", Walker refers to the first sign of glaucoma as "bright" eyes. This differentiation between eyes that are bright and those that have dimmed presages Walker's later elaboration of these distinctions. The loss of sight often coincides ironically in her work with the deepening perceptive powers of inner vision.

In Walker's short stories, blindness acquires a more complex metaphorical quality, suggesting the inability to perceive the truth or to see clearly the consequences of one's actions. In "You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down," in the story, "Nineteen Fifty-five", Traynor's symbolic blindness is manifest in his inability to understand the blues songs that he sings. The girl in "How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It was Easy", gets away with murder because racism and bigotry prevent the adults from seeing the true killer. One of the most poignant images of eyes comes from the short story, "The Child who Favored Daughter" in *In Love and Trouble*. In this story, a father is literally blinded by his disregard and incestuous lust for his daughter. Walker concludes the story by declaring, "if he stirs he might wipe the dust from the dirt daubers out of his jellied eyes" (46). The reference draws on king Lear – Shakespeare's immortal tragedy about a father who similarly misunderstands his daughter. The specific reference to "jellied eyes" alludes to the scene of Gloucester's blinding, in which Cornwall cries "out, vile jelly!" In Walker's southern, rural version, the father's inability to comprehend takes on the grotesque images of jellied eyes caked with dirt dauber's dust.

Walker addresses the issue of sexual blindness in the sense of an inability to experience pleasure in "The Diary of an African Nun" from *In love and Trouble*. She imbues the term "sexual blindness" with more specific meaning, symptoms, and effects: by turns the expression denotes an inability to see the consequences of sex; the repression of female sexuality through both psychic and physical mutilation. The symptoms include emotional and psychological disturbances. The effects are profound: women suffer pain, endure or succumb to life-threatening situations, experience horrific labour and childbirth, preventing them from achieving wholeness of body and mind. In "The Diary of an African Nun," the "speculative crystal eyes of bright historical blue" (113) allude to the European colonialists who wonder about the identity of the nun. These on lookers see a nun who represents, for them, an idea opposing womanhood.

Walker continues to amplify the concept of sexual blindness through the depiction of even more ruthless and violent treatment of women in her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* where Brownfield has "heavy eyes unnaturally bright" (8). Again, the brightness of the eyes warns of veiled sight. Brownfield, a victim of lovelessness, is metaphorically blind because he is unable to love. Grange's coldness toward Brownfield, his only son, sets in motion a ruthless violence. Brownfield's father "never looked at him". Consequently, Brownfield never developed a sense of self worth. In the presence of white people, Grange's figurative blindness intensifies.

The gun as a masculine weapon of choice – a weapon that wounded Walker appears early in the novel. Most certainly, violence, will then dominate the characters' lives and they forfeit their vision. Grange sits on the porch, "cradling something in his arms; it was long and dark, like a steel rod, and glinted in the light" (27). A gun appears again later in the novel

when Grange has a final chance to rectify some of his past mistakes. This he did by loving his grand daughter Ruth and protecting her from danger and harm targeted by her father, Brownfield. "Brownfield lunched out onto the porch waving his shotgun". Mem, his wife, "walked blindly toward the gun and Brownfield shot her face off" (172). Her child asks piteously, 'she sleeping ...ain't she?', trying to see closed eyes where there were none at all". Mem's blindness, which manifests itself in her refusal to see Brownfield for the fiend he has become, or to see herself as a whole person who deserves a normal life is evident in the questions posed by her children: why had she walked toward him after she saw the gun? Was she blind?

In Walker's second novel, *Meridian*, the central character, Meridian, suffers both a sexual and a physical blindness. She suffers a sexual blindness made manifest by a complete ignorance of her body and the nature of sexual relations between women and men. Her discovery that she is pregnant shocks her. "She realized that her mother, father, aunts, friends, passers – by, not to mention her laughing sisters, had told her nothing about what to expect from men, from sex" (80). She falls prey to promiscuity and unwanted pregnancy. Unable to accept her role as a mother, Meridian gives her child away and incurs a debilitating guilt and depression. Her sanity destabilizes; she loses her hair and experiences a temporary literal blindness. Thus, one day the blue became black and she temporarily for two days lost her sight (19). A further invocation of blindness emerges at the novel's conclusion, when Truman begins a journey of transformation from fragmentation to wholeness, a process already undergone by Meridian. "Truman turned, tears burning his face, and began, almost blindly, to read the poems she had left on the walls" (220). Forgiveness, the poem states, is the key to wholeness. Forgiveness of self and others is a principle that Walker may have adopted as a way of reconciling her "accident".

Sexual innocence and literal blindness coincide in *The Color Purple*. Celie's rape, at the age of fourteen, deadens her libido. Celie will long remain unaware of the physical pleasure of sexual intercourse. When asked how she feels about sex, Celie tells Avery: "He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (68). Shug eventually shows Celie how to take control of her own sexuality and give pleasure to herself. Shug describes the "little button" as integral to female sexual pleasure: it becomes "hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part"(69). As early as *The Color Purple*, Walker openly discusses female sexual pleasure and the description of those who would deny it. In her later works, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Warrior Marks*, she focuses again upon the clitoris and sexual violence, but now she attacks the ritual of genital mutilation, an act that represents violence toward women in general. Another character in this novel, Sophia who suffers loss of sight in one eye carries forward Walker's autobiographical reference and solders together her themes of violence, racism, sexism and blindness. Sophia is a self-assured, fully sexual woman who is completely in control of herself. She defends herself, but at a high cost. Walker's depiction is a reminder that self defense by a black woman who lives in a racist, patriarchal society is rarely permitted. When the Mayor slaps her for "sassing" his wife, Sophia retaliates with her fists and knocks the Mayor down. The townsmen then attack her: "They crack her skull, they

crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye" (77). Although the cracks in her skull and her bones heal, Sophia remains blind in one eye, a constant reminder that in her world she was too proud and too free.

Walker's description of her own wounded eye is reminiscent of Sophia's, whose blind "eye wanders around the room" (78). Walker worries that the grotesqueness of her injured eye will alienate her daughter. She says: "since her birth, I have worried about her discovery that her mother's eyes are different from other people's. Will she be embarrassed? What will she say?" (369). Walker's child did not perceive a strange mother, however; instead she saw in her mother's blind eye, a world. The daughter's positive acceptance enabled Walker to accept herself. "There was a world in my eye and I saw that it was possible to love it: for all it had taught me of shame and anger and inner vision, I did love it and even to see it drifting out of orbit in boredom, or rolling up out of fatigue" (370).

In her later works, such as *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down: Stories*, *The Temple of My Familiar*, and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker magnifies the significance of the eye image by injecting into her metaphor of sight and damage, the psychological and sexual blinding of women and girls in Africa and throughout the world. She avows that her own "visual mutilation" led her to write about these horrific forms of physical and sexual abuse. She was stunned by the "callous way that little girls are taken to be mutilated and she likened it to her family's treatment of her as a child, especially in their sending her away from her immediate family to live with her grandparents when she failed to adjust to her injury.

Walker notes that even in American culture, women strive to be "very thin, very white, very blond, with very big breasts" (276). An image of beauty that encourages many women and girls to starve themselves, have breast implants and liposuction, and bleach their skin and hair. While some of these activities may not necessarily be related to violence, per se, others are clearly life-threatening – (eating disorders can lead to death, and women have died from liposuction), and they are indeed related to sexism. Walker convincingly argues that clitorrectomy, silicon breast implants and the like are all "really about shaping a woman in the image that men think they want", and every country in the world is busily doing that.

Walker writes about the rape of her great-great grandmother, who was eleven years old and a slave, by a white man, her owner, in a poem, "The Thing Itself". A poem first published in *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*. The poem is about the feigned rape of a black woman, the speaker of the poem, by a white man, to whom the poem is addressed. The white man imagines the black woman will enjoy the feigned rape. Instead, Walker imagines she sees her "great-great-grandmother's small hands/encircle/your pale neck." Her thoughts are murderous, for she cannot enjoy her great – great grandmother's "pain". The point here is that the historic relationship of black women to white men, the burden of the past, was very real to Walker.

In *Warrior Marks*, Alice Walker wrote that while on the set of the film *The Color Purple*, she was handed a copy of Joy Adamson's *The People of Kenya*. She opened the book to a passage depicting a twelve year old girl held down by a group of women during the performance of a clitorrectomy (Walker, 160). Imagining the ordeal of a child betrayed by adults who "forget pain" as Walker phrased it, was later employed in a scene in her novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. This powerful image of women who act in complicity with the

status quo to institutionalize sexual oppression serves as a metaphor for the text's political message, that women must unlearn sexism before they can truly liberate themselves.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker first questions the value and legitimacy of a sisterhood based on shared victimization, when a physically and psychologically battered Celie counsels her stepson, to beat his assertive and self-assured wife into submission. That advice alienates the two women and helps to destroy a marriage that could have been based on mutual respect and sharing. Celie later trades the learned lessons of sexual oppression, blinding and exploitation for a belief in her ability to exercise control over her own life; creating the possibility for solidarity based on women's shared strength. This is what the feminist theorist, Bell Hooks, calls a "woman bonding". Foregrounding that message in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker not only condemns those traditional practices that inflict pain on women but indicts women themselves for being accomplices in the perpetuation of women's collective suffering. The protagonist in the novel is a middle-aged African woman, burdened by repressed memories of her sister's death following a ritual circumcision and by the debilitating effects of her own voluntary circumcision years later. Tashi awaits execution following the murder of the Olinka Tsunga who performed the ritual procedures on both sisters. In the struggle to understand and contextualize their victimization, Tashi journeys across frightening dreamscapes, through the psychic territory of painful memories and finally to her Olinka homeland. Guided by Tashi, the reader navigates the nightmare world of Tashi's adult life after her circumcision: suicide attempts, self-mutilation, acts of violence, bouts of depression, nervous breakdown and psychosis. From the depths of madness, emotional torment and spiritual death, Tashi emerges at the end of the novel, a strong resolute woman with new lessons about women's solidarity and liberation. Rather than stereotyping the consequences of Tashi's circumcision as the fate of all circumcised women, Walker offers the heroine's madness as a means to facilitate both the character's therapeutic journey toward self-knowledge and her developing radical political consciousness. In the novel, madness functions, as Lillian Feder suggests in *Madness in Literature*, as a "vehicle of self-revelation" (xi), that transports pieces of Tashi's fragmented self beyond the confines of imprisoning towers and harmful traditions.

CONCLUSION

Certainly, by exposing the violent, cultural rituals of clitorrectomy and infibulations in Africa, Walker continues to voice her activism against violence toward women in general. While writing *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Warrior Marks*, Walker faced a dilemma, that Westerners might see "genital mutilation as a way of describing Africa as being backward, savage, and barbaric, and feeding into all those sorts of racist perceptions of Africa" (275). Her solution to this difficulty is to illustrate forcefully that while we may view traditions in the Middle-East, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Africa as isolated assaults on women, in fact "the assault on women is worldwide... (varying) only by degree" (276). Pratibha Parmer concurs the plurality of feminism thus: violence generalizes across cultures: "It seems there is a continuum of violence against women that takes specific forms in different cultures" (275).

By resisting the violent, blood-filled darkness, brought on by her childhood incident and drawing the conclusion that it was no casual accident, but rather, a part of culturally

reinforced patterns of behaviour, Alice Walker finds the strength to address shocking, taboo subjects that others might shun. Her own inner pain has fortified her to illumine these dark corners of human activity and positively to express the wholeness of selfhood, the power of inner vision- whole sight, and the ultimate secret of joy.

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