

The Constraint of Black Femaleness in Alice Walker's *In Love And Trouble: Stories of Black Women*

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Abstract

*Alice Walker succinctly and elegantly describes the relationship between Black Women's freedom in society and the existence and survival of Black people. Because Her writing has tremendous potential to change the world and she is dedicated to her mission to discover the world. Alice Walker deals with the suffering of black women in various forms, especially racism and sexism. Her short stories are noted for their perceptive and attentive handling of African American Culture. In *Love And Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973) by Alice Walker is analysed for various reasons in this study. First and foremost, in a culture dominated by men, we must prioritize the emotional well-being of African American women. Because Walker's books have received much attention, it is important to concentrate on this topic in the short story, which has received little. Walker's use of a wide range of situations and circumstances was invaluable to know how women deal with their unsettled spirits. This study attempts to find out the trial of black women in search of self and identity, racism, sexism In *Love And Trouble: Stories of Black Women*.*

Keywords: feminism, gender, colour, identity

Even though many people can speak to the power of the Black female soul, she has been seen as a victim of circumstances beyond her control for decades. The genuine essence of the Black woman cannot be fully understood until she is freed from her subjugated position of oppression. In addition, before passing judgment on her behaviour, it would behoove us to examine the traditions she is up against. Thus, it will become clear that she may have seemed lost but has succeeded in a way that liberates her distinct, personal self. To examine the spiritual freedom of Black women, I focus on three linked issues: social convention, the limiting of black femaleness within Southern tradition, and the concept of revolution as a barrier to an unrestrained agwu.

Walker's book is an examination of how cultural norms affect the Black female soul. "*The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff*" and "*Roselily*" the protagonists are clearly at odds in a racist, sexist society that restricts their ability to achieve happiness." It is more difficult for them to survive because they live in a world whose white men dominate. In the United States, the impact of societal customs on African Americans is obvious. In addition to their financial well-being, Black Americans' physical and emotional health has been at risk. It's a problem brought up in other tales throughout *In Love and Trouble*; all of Walker's female characters go up against the stereotypes of an oppressively racist and sexist society every day. *Roselily*, on the other hand, and "*The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff*" provide a distinct viewpoint on the lives of the ladies featured in the film.

American patriarchal culture has harmed Black women's souls in many ways for generations. Most women of all races and cultures are discouraged from venturing outside the confines of their gender-identified roles. In her book *Engendering the Subject: Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, Sally Robinson argues that women who challenge social standards go through much hardship:

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. (8)

Central character of the stories, *Roselily* and *The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff* depict a Black woman who cannot fully express her artistic side since her primary focus is just surviving. It is impossible to discover *Roselily*'s skills since she has no means of expressing them; her energy is used to ensure her and her family's survival. In addition, it is difficult to see *Hannah Kemhuff* as a sexual creature since we only see the ragged, elderly lady behind layers of shawls when we meet her. On the other hand, Walker describes women whose spirits are bothered by more than the fight to get the needs of survival. The ladies, in this case, are not victims but survivors of agwus that have gone away.

Crime does pay in "Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?" Walker speaks to the minority woman who, like *Roselily*, can only express her emotions via daydreams and diary writing. Myrna, Ruel's wife and Mordecai's lover is fed up with Ruel's constant mockery of her

writing "gives the impression that having a kid and buying are the same thing. It is just something to fill the void ". She's "open, both physically and aesthetically," to Mordecai, an artist," since her spouse hates her writing (Christian, "Contrary" 37). Even though she is married to a man who believes she will be the ideal Southern belle, Mordecai is stealing the tales she shares with him and using them to further his agenda. Both Myrna's connection with these two men and the trauma she experiences, as a result, are harmful to her inner self.

In September of 1961, we first meet Myrna, who tells us about her life in a series of entries from her diary. As a result, she may document everything from her current situation to her plans for escaping from it without being executed until she's ready. It is clear from the first post that Myrna is enraged by the character she is playing; she sarcastically describes her "Helena Rubenstein hands" as "sweet-smelling, small, and soft ... ". One would question why Myrna is always whining. After all, unlike the calloused hands of Hannah Kemhuff, Myrna's can do nothing at all in the face of life's cruelties. Myrna's agwu, on the other hand, has a hard time dealing with the fact that it isn't like her flower-scented physical self.

"I have a surprise for you, Ruel said the first time he brought me here. And you know how sick he makes me now when he grins".(119) We discover that Myrna despises her husband, who demands she enjoys what he wants her to enjoy, such as a nice home with new furnishings, regular shopping excursions to the mall, and designer lotions and fragrances. This is an extract from the journal Myrna allows Mordecai to read. However, Ruel's unwillingness to accept Myrna's desire to express herself via writing is the most concerning: "No wife of mine is going to embarrass me with much foolish, vulgar stuff".

Men's unwillingness to understand women's work frustrates Alice Walker, who writes in *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult*:

It was painful to realize that many men rarely consider what women write or bother to listen to what women say about how we feel. How we perceive life. How we think things should be. That they cannot honour our struggles or our pain. That they see our stories as meaningless to them or assume they are absent from them or distorted. Or think they must own or control our expressions. And us. (*Trouble* 39)

Myrna's difficult anguish becomes clearer as it is made evident what Myrna's genuine passion in life is and her husband's attitude and response to it. In addition, she meets Mordecai due to both of the circumstances above. Because of Mordecai's encouragement of Myrna's writing and her desire to escape Ruel's expectations of her as his wife, she is eager to share her innovative thoughts with the world (an extension of herself). On the other hand, Myrna is not a naïve lady; she is aware of both her husband's and Mordecai's sincerity. She says the following about the latter:

I think Mordecai Rich has about as much heart as a dirt-eating toad. 'Even when he makes me laugh, I know that nobody ought to look at other people's confusion with that cold an eye. (*Trouble* 14)

It doesn't stop her from allowing him to read a character sketch of a woman who kills herself after being disabled and unable to sexually please her spouse since she thinks she has nothing to lose by sharing it with him. Myrna doesn't only write. She adds, "Under Mordecai's fingers, my body opened like a flower and carefully bloomed", and it's no wonder that he compares her to Walker's (and Myrna's) primary literary inspiration, Zora Neale Hurston.

When Myrna encounters Mordecai's end, she claims that she is "nearly strangled" by her terror when she discusses her narrative concept with her boyfriend. All of this, in combination with her terrible marriage, pushes Myrna close to the brink of craziness, but as she waits for answers at a reproductive clinic, she discovers a narrative in the diary that shatters any last hope she had of having a family. In her diary, she records the following:

Today at the doctor's office, the magazine I read fell open with a story about a one-legged woman. They had a picture of her ... not black and heavy like she was in the story I had in mind. But it is still my story, filled out and switched about. The author is said to be Mordecai Rich. (*Trouble 21*)

Myrna attempts to murder her husband by hacking his head off with a chain four days after cleaning "the prints of his (Ruel's) hands off (her) body," For Myrna, it's either a blessing or a curse, depending on your point of view: "Because of the noise, this did not work. Ruel's alarm went off just in time ". Myrna is sent to a mental hospital as a result of this. With her spouse and new clothing, Myrna is back at her house three years after she almost decapitated Ruel. Her meticulously manicured hands only write in her diary entries. Is there a way that Myrna's agwu has been freed? She looks to have made little progress in her novel since her writing has been taken, and Ruel is still kclosely checking. When it comes to Myrna, she is unable to express her identity as a Black woman and as a woman since she is not allowed to write about what she considers significant. The bad conduct of Ruel and Mordecai teaches Myrna two crucial lessons that enable viewers to remain positive about the story's end and Myrna's future. There are two reasons why Myrna is encouraged to continue writing, despite Mordecai profiting from the "story about a one-legged woman". For the first time, she is praised for more than just her looks:

Mordecai praised me for my intelligence, my sensitivity, the depth of the work he had seen - and naturally, I showed him everything I had ... Already, I see myself as he sees me. A famous author, miles from Ruel, miles away from anybody. I am dressed in dungarees, and my hands are a mess. I smell of sweat. I glow with happiness. (*Trouble 18*)

Even though Myrna's vision does not become a reality instantly, it manifests itself in the shape of an actual possibility. The absence of Mordecai would be felt, but Myrna's agitated soul may be soothed by the sweat of Helena Rubenstein's hands in place of his. As for the second reason, Myrna has gained an important life lesson that makes her a worthy winner at the end of the story: Because of her feminine stillness, she knows she can modify it.

Myrna discovers the one thing that transforms her from a victim to a survivor during her time in the mental institution. Even if her written words are discouraged whenever she returns to Ruel's house and has her hair and nails done, she learns how to control the spoken word. According to Christian: "Like countless Southern belles, she has found that directness based on self -autonomy is ineffectual and that successful strategies must be covert. Such strategies demand patience, self-abnegation, and falsehood ("Contrary"38)".

To escape her terrible predicament, to realize what she can't do (outwardly express her rage at Ruel), she sets herself in a strong position that will enable her to leave Ruel once he's "tired of the sweet, sweet smell". As a result of her capacity to manipulate words, she obtains power by making yes mean "no." Myrna chooses to be the wife Ruel desires on the surface, but this is just a part of her strategy to finally free herself from the constraints of her marriage: "I wait, beautiful and perfect in every limb, cooking supper as if my life depended on it. He was lying on his bed as a drowned body washed to shore. But he is not happy. He knows I intend to do nothing but say yes until he is completely exhausted" (*Trouble* 23).

While Myrna may appear to be unhappy due to social norms and expectations that suppress her femaleness (this, for her, is partially identified by her writing), in reality, she has taken control of the situation, and this makes her a patient and strong-willed woman, which pleases Myrna and is a result of her perseverance. Seldom throughout *In Love and Trouble*, according to Winchell, do we see Walker's heroines effectively rebuff preconceived, stifling, and constricting assumptions about women's duties. For the same reason that Roselily and Hannah had to discover their unique ways to communicate their wounded spirits, I believe that Myrna must do the same, which is why her unusual behaviours are warranted.

Looking at the geographical distinctions among the men in Myrna's life is the best way to demonstrate how important the South is to her as agwu. He disapproves of her writing and wants her to live like whites. She believes Southern belles like Ruel, a guy from the South who "had never left Hancock County, except once, when he is gallantly went off to war" (120). A man's desire to demonstrate his achievement in the peanut field and his marriage to such a lovely woman is an important part of his masculine identity. However, Walker decides to make Mordecai a Northern guy who "never saw a wooden house with a toilet in the yard", as well as a man who unreservedly embraces (and takes) her work.

Regarding Myrna's physical appearance, these guys are quite different. She says, "He [Ruel] married me because although my skin is brown, he thinks I look like a Frenchwoman. Sometimes he tells me I look Oriental: Korean or Japanese"(2) . Because Myrna is a Southern Black woman, Ruel can only accept Myrna's Blackness if she is physically distinct from other Southern Black women; her identification constraints Myrna's Black femaleness as a Southern, Black woman. For his part, Mordecai appreciates her "heavy, sexy hair" and sees her for the beautiful Black lady she is, regardless of her skin colour. Because she has come to terms with who she is and the power she has to choose her destiny, it doesn't matter whether either guy accepts her or not.

The protagonists' agwus have been annoyed by internal and external elements in every story, Because of their lack of self-confidence. Myrna, Roselily, and Hannah Kemhuff cannot turn within for the support but they lack from their spouses, social norms, and other external influences. We encounter a young women whose soul is attacked externally but who is otherwise at ease in the most challenging narrative in *In Love and Trouble*.

Like Myrna's femaleness, the heroine in "*The Child Who Favored Daughter*" is completely removed from her femaleness by her deranged, jealous father, allowing her to show her passion for the written word. It is only that she goes by the name "Child," and she only know her as the daughter of a guy who brutally kills three women, including his wife, who took her own life "while she was still young and strong enough to escape him," and a sister, who was discovered "impaled on one of the steel-spike fence posts near the house". When father first meet his Child, He know that she is at ease with her sexuality since she is in a prohibited romantic relationship with a Southern white guy. As she gets from her school bus to her front porch, the Child notices her father sitting "tensely in the chair", and he knows he has discovered the letter and she sent to the unknown white boyfriend. She is not hurried by her father's irritation or the heat of the day; instead, she enjoys the warmth of the sun and its beams as she sits there and admiring the warmth "Closely inspecting an area with a few scattered buttercups and black-eyed Susans she takes a few steps back as her fingertips caress the brittle petals, a momentarily lost in thought" Father's ideas are in contrast to his daughter's: they are filthy:She is near enough for him to see the casual slope of her arm that holds the schoolbooks against her hip. The long dark hair curls in bits about her ears and runs in corded plainness down her back. Soon he will be able to see her eyes, perfect black-eyed Susans. Flashing back fragmented bits of himself. Reflecting on his mind. (*Trouble* 38)

When he thinks of her, he is transported back to his childhood, when he had an older sister who was "tawny, wild, and sweet." He recalls their daughter's life and death, which were caused by the punishment she faced when her family found she had an affair with a white man, much like the incestuous feelings he has for his daughter. Affectionately caressing the face of their brother's brother, his sister had decided to fall in love with the exact guy in whose terrible, hot, and lonely fields her brother laboured . A lifetime of pain has "poisoned" Walker, who believes he has become blind to the beauty of love as well as "weary of living as though all the world were out to trick him," Walker adds . Many believe he committed the brutal deed out of "poison," along with his wrath and lunacy.

Her father's furious glare and shotgun can't disturb her peaceful spirit; instead, she "always back against the porch post, looking at him and from time to time looking over his head at the brilliant afternoon sky" and gazes up at him and sometimes at the brilliant afternoon sky. In the shed, where he beats her, he leaves her wet, bloodied, and alone. He takes her there.

The next morning, he comes to the shed and sees her "dark eyes -reflecting the sky hrough the open door" after browsing old pictures of his deceased sister, Daughter. He has discovered her white lover's letter and wants her to deny it and never meet him again, but she refuses to comply. In this location, I suppose, she is aware of his sexual impulses toward her;

she also says the only words she needs to say: "No ... Going". Yes, I agree with "His eyes fear her more than the gloom of the shed where she spent the night alone. His yearning for her is what she sees. "I would add that this same desire may completely disturb Child's otherwise serene agwu," writes Winchell in his essay (Winchell 37).

It is not the first time Alice Walker has written a narrative about an incestuous relationship, and "*The Child Who Favored Daughter*" is no exception. According to critics, "*The Color Purple*" (1982) "caused an emotional response from black communities as well as black academics" (Harris 903). Several others questioned how the Black community could rise when Walker and others highlighted the devastation inside the Black community. That is not the case for Walker, who believes quiet will only lead to more sorrow for African-Americans, particularly women. "I have been glad to see how the book opened up the issues of incest and domestic violence," says Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (River 41).

At any rate, when Child continues to maintain her position, her father restricts her femaleness most horrendously:

She gazes at him over her bruises, and he sees her blouse, wet and slippery from the rain, has slipped completely off her shoulders, and her high young breast is bare. He gathers their fullness in his fingers and begins a slow twisting. The barking of the dogs creates a frenzy in his ears, and he is suddenly burning with unnamable desire. In his agony, he draws the girl away from him as one pulls off his arm and, with quick slashes of his knife, leaves two bleeding craters the size of grapefruits on her bare bronze chest and flings what he finds in his hands to the yelping dogs. (*Trouble* 45)

Now that Child is dead and her burgeoning soul has been imprisoned forever in the wicked clutches of her father, the tale can go forward no farther. Hasn't it, or hasn't it?

The impact of incest on a Child is examined in "Tiptoeing through Taboo: Incest in *The Child Who Favored Daughter*" by Trudier Harris, where she offers some fascinating remarks regarding the Child's father and how his problems damage his daughter's life:

He tries to free himself from what he cannot name, what he cannot express, and once again destroys a woman in his life. The daughter, his wife, and his daughter are dead because he cannot face the image of the unbrotherly love he wanted to bestow upon his sister. (502)

Although that may be true, it is hard for me to feel sorry for the Child's father, as he still has his life (however short) to look forward to.

The picture of Daughter that haunts him, his incest, and the final woman who can haunt him have all been destroyed by his daughter's death" (Washington 94). At the end of the narrative, Walker indicates that even if he has released his troubled agwu, he has also come closer to the madness that lurks inside it, since "if he stirs he might take up the heavy empty shotgun and rock it back and forth on his knees, is like a baby". (*Trouble* 46)

For the second time, the study revisits Child's Agwu, and it uncovers an ironic twist in the narrative that proves my view that his soul, as impossible as it may appear, is liberated at the end of this tale. If Child's father moves even a little, critic Mary Helen Washington believes, the same pictures and recollections of the three women in his life may emerge as they have in the past. The insects and dust of the South threaten his survival. Even though she cannot appreciate the beauty of life, Child no longer has to utilize her inner self to fight against the wrongs of others, especially her father. Modern women, according to Parker-Smith, "modern women accept every challenge necessary to protect their mental and physical selves". (486) If this premise is correct, it may be claimed that a child's peace of mind cannot be achieved until she is removed from her environment. In other words, she can't liberate her agwu until she flees the negativity she's surrounded with, and death is the only way she can do so.

In *Love And Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, Alice Walker offers a platform to women who may otherwise go unheard and forgotten. This anthology of short tales is everything but relaxing to read. Readers cannot help but resent the racial, sexist attitudes they encounter in Walker's characters' stories. Our hearts go out to these ladies, and we wish we could do something to alleviate their pain. Our most painful experience is that we feel helpless in the face of these women's predicaments since we know we can neither assist them out nor pretend their situations are different or nonexistent.

Even though my connection to Walker's ladies is unnerving, being a Black woman gives me hope for their futures. Perhaps this stems from my own experiences, in which the outcomes of certain scenarios may have seemed awful to others but were the only way out for me to get through them. To put it another way, no one has a duty (or right) to judge the judgments we make in life based on our circumstances. People should avoid putting them in the same victimized roles that Black women have been fighting against for centuries because "the women in this volume truly are ' *In Love and Trouble* due in large measure to the roles, relationships, and self-images imposed upon them by a society which knows little and cares less about them as individuals" (13).

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