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PLIGHT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COMPLETE STORIES*

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ABSTRACT

African American women's position as a black and a woman adds to their double plight. The white Americans devised racism to maintain their autonomy, the same way men constructed sexism to dominate women. The sexist patriarchy has been conditioning women to the marginalized position. In her short stories, Walker criticizes African American men for imitating the patriarchal sexist culture that follows inequity in the gender relations and furthers women's subjugation. She regards marriage a patriarchal construct that restricts women's growth and relegates them to the lesser human beings. Women are regarded the objects of possession by men all over the world and African American women are not exception to that; their plight is worse than the white women in USA at the time recorded by Walker in her short stories. They are repressed in the racist and sexist patriarchy. Through patriarchy, women are restricted and confined to the traditional notions of womanhood to maintain male hegemony in all the spheres of lives. This research paper is an attempt to present how the racist and sexist men in Walker's short story collection entitled, *The Complete Stories* define women in the patriarchal concept of womanhood and confine their roles strictly within the imprisonment of the four walls to control women under the yoke of slavery imposed on them in the fascist patriarchy.

Keywords: victimization, womanhood, oppression, subjugation and feminist

The male dominated society best view women in the traditional roles of a wife, mother, daughter, sister and the most obedient servant to all. The women are autonomous beings. They are not bound to any confinements but the patriarchal sexist order that traps them in the traditional roles. In *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir rightly states, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" and it is a male dominated society that identifies them as women and regards them weak to men. (273) Walker's women are not only the victims of racial situations prevailing at the time but also the

gender based assumptions, she highlights in the short stories: "Roselily", "Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?", "Her Sweet Jerome", "The Child Who Favored Daughter", "The Diary of an African Nun", "The Abortion" and "Coming Apart" from the book, *The Complete Stories*.

The short story entitled, "Roselily" attacks the masculine agenda as it regards women the secondary beings and places them next to the men in hierarchy. The men enjoy supremacy and take relative freedom in their relationship with women, ignore and abandon them without any obligation to

their duties. The sexual behavior of men highly pressurizes Roselily under the burden of four children, each by different father and the fourth one taken away by the child's father. The men burden Roselily with motherhood and desert her. The reasons behind it might be the racial turmoil of the time but it breeds the irresponsible behavioral pattern in them and they simply drift apart. Roselily's new husband is a Black Muslim. He expects her to give him "Babies" in return of safety and security, he promises her. (Walker 10) Enamored by the Black Muslim Movement, he accepts Roselily in the role of a wife and a mother and strongly expects her to live in *Purdah* and remain a subservient wife. Mukul Sengupta rightly comments, "The man she now accepts in marriage is the symbol of patriarchal nationalism of the black Muslims. To this man, the building of a black nation, rejecting not only white racism, but also white Christianity and imprisoning black women within patriarchal marriage, only to give birth to children to people the nation is the new convention he attempts to establish." (184) It is right that the Muslim patriarchal sexism elevates women to the dignified status of a wife and a mother but it also entraps them in the veil and the traditional customs and restricts their freedom to regulate their sexuality. Mary Helen Washington states, "His religion requires a set of customs and beliefs that control women and subordinate them to men." (139) Roselily's new husband and his Muslim religion strictly fit her in the image of the Muslim womanhood.

In another short story entitled, "Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?", Myrna's husband Ruel, being a Christian does not aspire to impose pregnancies on her, one after the other as it happens in Muslim Religion, but he too expects her in the traditional role of a wife and a mother. Like Roselily's Muslim husband, he demands his wife stay home and look after the household duties. He aspires to elevate her in his image of southern womanhood to maintain the beauty of her skin that he loves. He forces her to go shopping frequently and buy "the bottles of perfume, the skin softeners, the pots of gloss and eye shadow". (Walker 24) In this way, he expects her to engage herself in the feminine activities to

remain light-colored, fair and beautiful. Like Roselily, "she is also trapped by her husband and society's view of woman, though her confinement is not within a black veil but in the decorative mythology of the southern lady," states Barbara Christian. (88) Like a traditional man, he scoffs her writings and condemns it. It plants the seeds of conflict between the two and disturbs their relationship. The other man Mordecai Rich who loved her before her marriage takes this opportunity to exploit her further. He regards her sexual being, a prize to look on and an outlet to gratify his sexual demands. He flatters and appreciates Myrna's creative impulse with the intention to consume her. He abuses her body, steals her stories and abandons her. He betrays her trust by publishing one of her stories under his name. Myrna's deception by the two men, one, her husband and the other, her lover causes her victimization and complete mental breakdown.

Walker exposes the gender politics in "Her Sweet Jerome." African American women are victimized in patriarchy. Mr. Jerome Franklin Washington represents black men. He is a school teacher and an activist in the civil rights movement. He does not treat his wife-Mrs. Jerome Franklin Washington equally and ostracizes her inhumanly. He takes freedom in "beating her black and blue" before and after the marriage. Though, he beats her and other women in community, he is called a "gentleman" in society. (Walker 27) He is privileged with his father-in-law's money that he receives through legacy. He does not share it with his wife and keeps her uninformed about its use. Like his father-in-law, he marginalizes her and does not identify her as autonomous being. He maintains the amicable relations with the other women in the civil rights movement but at the same time, he does not consider her worth to share the purpose of his involvement in the liberation movement and the significance of it in the lives of the African Americans. He encourages her search for the other woman by maintaining silence after he discovers that she suspects him for the extramarital affair. He takes sadistic pleasure and delight in reading the paperback editions on revolutions coldly heartedly, laughing and ridiculing his wife and further causing her mental breakdown and death. Mr. Jerome

Franklin Washington is the representative example of bourgeois revolutionaries who practice equity in the public sphere while maintain the upper hand on women and instill the discrimination between the sexes. Dolan Hubbard substantiates, "In the public sphere, the men preach the rhetoric of inclusion, while in the domestic sphere, they practice the rhetoric of exclusion, which translates into a phallic power that does not recognize women as equal." (220)

The short story entitled, "The Child Who Favored Daughter" deals with the issue of incest and women's repression. It is "a nightmarish account of a black man who represses his rage before white people and turns it on his women" in the family. (Mickelson 158) The unnamed father fiercely loves his sister, Daughter in his childhood and unwittingly contributes in her destruction. Daughter is a "sexually free woman in a sexually repressive time" and does give away her love to the white man who enslaves her brother in the land and treats him worse than a beast. (Gillespie 221) When the family members discover the reason of her illness, they tie her to the bed and treat her worse "as if she were an animal." (Walker 38) The family ostracizes Daughter for taking a white lover and punishes her severely. Would she have been a man, the family would not have treated her like a beast and driven her to death. Her father, the patriarch harshly beats her with his belt and does not let her set free. She knocks her brother down, the moment he sets her free and disappears in the night. She is found dead the next day on the fence post near the house. The father carries the brunt of his sister's death all his life and vows not to trust any woman in future. After marriage, he victimizes his wife and punishes her severely. He cripples her down so that she cannot return to the imaginary advances of the landlord; he thinks she is engaged in. It compels her to end her life. The brutal cycle of violence does not end here and the repressed feelings of incestuous love he had for Daughter surfaces again when his wife leaves him behind a daughter who grows young and looks like her aunt. As the patriarchal father, he is possessed with his daughter's chastity, he loses the control and burning with "unnamable desire" within, he inflicts violence on her sexuality and slashes her

breasts. (Walker 43) He punishes daughter for violating his power that he used to dominate other women in his family. The unnamed father in the story is every African American father. He believes in the sexist domination over his daughter and thus, shuns her growth completely. Mukul Sengupta rightly acknowledges, "One of the dark aspects of racism within black psychology is this internalization of white racist culture, manifested in the story in the form of blind sexist domination of the Father over Daughter. Like Roselily's and Myrna's husband, the Father also regards the women of his family as his precious possession." (188)

The traditional men in the short stories, "Roselily" and "Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?" offer women nothing but a set of patriarchal values and try to fit them in the roles of subservient wives. These men want women to fit in their concept of southern womanhood that restricts and binds women in the patriarchal notions of constrains and limitations. Walker's men are "weak" and "self-centered." They fail to develop the amicable relationships with women because of their "violent" temperament; they exhibit in their affiliation with women in "The Child Who Favored Daughter" and "Her Sweet Jerome." (Pratt 42) As human beings, they should trust women and love them but they believe in the sexist myth of domination over the women and ostracize them inhumanly.

In the next story entitled, "The Diary of an African Nun" the setting of the story is Africa and not America. It adds to plurality as the composite feature of Walker's writing. She presents women's oppression not only within the veil of marriage institution but also the confinements of the church. Written in a diary form, the first person narrative exposes the Christian missionaries. The white missionaries, without providing any orientation about the life of a nun and the responsibilities they hold, converted the African young girls to Christianity and offered them nun hood. The unnamed nun represents these young girls. She desires for a lover and wants to have the experience of being loved not by Jesus, "a failed lover" and a husband but by the earthly man, full of life and energy. (Beautell 81) The restrictions imposed on her as a nun deprives her, the right to love, marry

and have children. Her feelings and desires thus, remain suppressed. Eva Darias Beautell observes, “. . . the love relationship between her and Christ is naturally deprived of physicality; and sexual/emotional desire, which is explicitly present in her story, is suppressed.” (80-81)

The short story, “The Abortion” exposes Clarence’s insensitivity towards Imani, his wife. He represents African American educated men. As a lawyer, he remains engrossed in the world of Mayor’s politics and neglects her. He regards politics men’s realm and looks down women. He thinks that the women must take interest in household chores, look after the children and spend time in personal looks and appearances. He assumes that as a woman, his wife would have no interest in politics or even does not understand it. He underestimates Imani and ignores her completely. Although, he has a daughter, he imposes pregnancy on her. In his busy schedule of work, she reports him about the pregnancy but he fails to discuss the delicate subject matter with her, whether they would like to have the second child or not. Though, he later supports her decision to abort the child in New York, he neither goes with her nor takes care of her health. He takes mayor with him when he has to drop her at the airport and engages himself in conversation with him over the issues of “municipal funds, racist cops, and the facilities for teaching at the chaotic, newly integrated schools” as if those matters were of primary importance and not her health and the child, she wanted him to save. He offers her “briefest kiss and hug” at the airport ramp. (Walker 192) It shows his insensitivity towards his wife. Though, he does not beat her, he assaults her body through repeated pregnancies that results in her health issues that he does not consider seriously. He fails to act responsible towards her and remains insensitive. In a way, he acts vengeance on her body and victimizes her in marital relationship that she ends finally and liberates herself.

In “Coming Apart” Walker probes into the sexist male psyche that engenders pornographic violence and victimizes women. She realistically captures the sexual violence penetrating through pornography in racist and sexist society to highlight women’s oppression. The unnamed husband

represents every African American. He is possessed with pornography and cannot have complete gratification in sexual relationship without imagining the sexual fantasies fed to him by the male dominated porn industry. His obsession with the porn magazines: the *Jiveboy* and the *Jiver* disturbs his relationship with his wife. He does not consider the serious impact, the porn magazines would have on the emotional and intellectual health of his wife. He does not care to think why a black woman is presented as “human turd at the man’s feet” in the *Jiver*, the black magazine. (Walker 170) It disturbs the wife and she remains oppressed in the relationship. “Pornography is shown as part of phallogocentric order which annihilates the selfhood of women,” states Keith Byerman and this is true of the wife as she is hurt with the women’s images in the magazines, her husband consumes. (322) He resists his wife when she refuses to surrender to his sexual fantasies and denies imagining herself in the sex positions projected in the porn. Unaware of the reality of sexual violence propagated against women in the history of America, he holds the view that his wife is the only woman who minds the things presented in the magazines. It is only through his wife’s resistance and proper guidance to him through the essays of the three feminist writers, he realizes his mistake. He tries his best to get rid of the sexual fantasies fed to him by the porn industry for the reason; it advocates women’s oppression in society.

Walker’s traditional men who are “Pygmalion in reverse” believe in the subjugation of the women. (Dieke 6) Roselily’s unnamed Black Muslim husband in “Roselily”, Ruel and Mordecai in “Really, Doesn’t Crime Pay?”, Mr. Jerome Franklin Washington in “Her Sweet Jerome” and the unnamed cruel father in “The Child Who Favored Daughter” cause women’s subjugation and oppression. The unnamed male in “Coming Apart” is Walker’s modern, well educated man who is seen blindly driven by the sexual fantasies fed to him by the racist pornographic content which regard women, the primary outlets to gratify the male sexual fantasies. Clarence in “The Abortion” who is a lawyer too underestimates women and treats his

wife as object and imposes pregnancies on her one after the other and subjugates her.

In nutshell, the African American men regard women as possessions, property, assets and sexual objects to gratify the male lust and give birth to children. The conservative men blindly follow the sexist myths of the patriarchy and treat women worse. Walker's African American and white men who are educated and non-educated thus, follow the sexist notions of women's suppression and contribute substantially in their discrimination, subjugation, oppression and pathetic conditions to maintain the hierarchy in gender relations. Thus, Walker addresses women's issues seriously and invites the attention of the intellectuals, academicians, politicians and the readers to the problems of African American women with the intention to bring transformation in conservative society and implement the laws to safeguard women's fundamental human rights to impart justice and also to bring them in the mainstream of the society which is must for the betterment of entire human civilization.

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