

## ALICE WALKER'S FEMALE CHARACTERS IN "THE CHILD WHO FAVORED DAUGHTER"

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"That my daughter should  
Fancy herself in love  
With *any* man!  
How can this be?"  
- Anonymous

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the female characters in Alice Walker's short story "The Child who Favored Daughter" from the collection *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973). At the time in which the story is set it is interesting to recall that the quality of black women's lives was affected by the interrelationship of race and gender and by the concept of the Afro-American context, linked to sexuality and domesticity. Therefore mothers, daughters, and sisters were expected to be the possessions of men, and were and sometimes still are subjected to the violent and incestuous whims of males. In such a social context, black women endure oppression and humiliation.

Walker paints a violent yet heart-rending picture full of lyricism of two women (Daughter and Child) who are sexually victimized by their own menfolks: brother/father. As a young boy, the male character fell in love with his own sister, nicknamed Daughter. By the time the action of the story begins, he has grown into a bitter, sullen male who reads the Bible, is full of turmoil over the wanton life of his sister and is guilt-ridden about her eventual suicide. His sense of authority and assurance permeates the tale.

Walker lures the reader into the shocking description of how the main male character and his father imprison and torture their sister/daughter:

Tied on the bed as she was she was at the mercy of everyone in the house. They threw her betrayal at her like sharp stones, until they satisfied themselves that she could no longer feel their ostracism or her own pain... they took to flinging her food to her as if she were an animal and at night when she howled at the shadows thrown over her bed by the moon his father rose up and lashed her into silence with his belt. (p. 39)

The reference to "*flinging her food to her as if she were an animal*" and "at night when *she howled* at the shadows thrown over her bed by the moon *his father rose up and*

*lashed her into silence with his belt*” and also “*They threw her betrayal at her like sharp stones, until they satisfied themselves that she could no longer feel their ostracism or her own pain...*” not only emphasizes the idea of Daughter treated as an animal but being physically maltreated with overtones of sexual abuse by both father and son. (emphasis mine).

Neal A. Lester suggests that this point is further stressed when “her father and brother choose not to ‘free’ Daughter from the bed for fear that if [t]he[y] set her free she would run away into the woods and never return”. And he adds: “While Walker presents these suffering women with compassion and power, “she reserves the image of monster, fiend, and brute images - consistently associated with the masters and overseers in Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs’s slave narratives – for the men who beat, mutilate, torture, threaten, and destroy.” (LESTER, p. 5)

After Daughter’s death, the male character’s daughter, (Child), already a young girl starts a love affair with a married white man. Her father strongly reacts to this relationship trying to forbid it but to no avail. Instead she defies him and sticks to her love affair.

It is pertinent to stress that it would be anachronistic to analyze the story from today’s assumptions. That is to say that nowadays young people expect to have the right to choose their partners, and in particular, the fact of Child’s lover being a white man today would be a matter that should be regarded as a matter of relative indifference to her father. The reader must remember that the story is set at a time of segregation in the Deep South of the USA, after slavery abolition. Even so any white man/black woman relationship was prohibited by state law and therefore doomed to be concealed. If discovered some kind of punishment was to be expected.

Almost as if watching a Greek or classical tragedy, the reader feels that despite Child’s defiant return, death awaits her at her father’s hands, and this foreboding grows the stronger as the reader slowly realizes that not only has she broken a taboo but that she has probably already suffered abuse from her father. Therefore while her return symbolizes that she has broken free from him spiritually, her father cannot let this take concrete form and by his own perverted psychology, dictated by the perverse male mores of his generation, his final sanction can only be that of killing or executing her.

It is only later that we learn of the main male character’s physical passion for his own daughter (Child). He cannot suppress his incestuous desire for her but this finds its expression not in rape itself but in his hacking off the most sacred part of a woman’s

femininity: her breasts. These she had apparently offered to her white lover in her letter to him. Thus rather than satisfying his incestuous lust by penetration, he denies himself carnal pleasure by excising her breasts.

The anonymous epigraph of the text is a good example to illustrate the selfishness and the theme of males' possessiveness: "That my daughter should/Fancy herself in love/With any man!/How can this be?"

In Barbara Christian's view, the short story "though encompassing the sexist results of racism goes beyond them for it is based on an apparently universal ambivalence men have toward the sexuality of their female kin, especially their daughters." (CHRISTIAN, 1985, p. 39). She includes all men irrespective of race, color, social condition.

Nevertheless we need to remember that sexual relationships between white and black were considered taboo and this is not only a socio-cultural-racial one but it is also a religious one. As no black woman could marry a white man, by definition any sexual relationship was adulterous and, however hypocritical this may be, a woman's adultery, as opposed to a man's, was simply not acceptable in a male-dominated, black, Christian society. The woman simply marked herself out as a harlot, and consequently had to be ostracized. There is no denying this is how society used to regard the woman. In fact, a "fallen woman" was defined not only as a harlot but also as an adulteress. And this idea remains so widespread and introjected into various cultures that it is difficult to deconstruct.

All the men in the story behave badly towards their womenfolk e.g. we learn of the father's early teenage attraction to his sister, Daughter. This is equivalent to black males reifying black females and therefore treating them as objects of sexual desire. This idea of women as reifications without an individual personal identity is further stressed by the women in the story not having personal names. Thus we are made to realize that they are regarded as a man's possessions, not human beings with inalienable personal rights:

His own wife, beaten into a cripple to prevent her from returning the imaginary overtures of the white landlord, killed herself while she was still young enough and strong enough to escape him. But she left a child, a girl, a daughter; a replica of Daughter, his dead sister. A replica in every way. (p. 40)

Although physically and emotionally tortured by the men, the women make choices that become affronts to men wishing to control them. In fact, the men seek to impose this illusory patriarchal order upon the women.

As to the black women in the story, Walker also shows them passing on an independent spirit that black male society fails to suppress. This is symbolized in Walker's comment that Child, the offspring of the male character and his wife, is "a replica of Daughter, his dead sister. A replica in every way." In other words, Walker is stressing not just physical appearance but mental attitude and socio-sexual behavior.

The narrator shows in retrospect that Daughter had an affair with a white plantation owner in order to assert her defiance of the men in her family and this case later on parallels Child's married white lover, therefore their relationships were both illegal under the law and adulterous in terms of the black community's moral code. (Another example of the idea that Child was "a replica" of her aunt.) That black men cannot overcome such prejudice is depicted as poignant because such an attitude is not and cannot be overcome from one generation to the next. It is as if, in Walker's view, black men are fated or perhaps even socially programmed to maltreat their womenfolks.

As Lester indicates "Men are thinkers, women are told what to think or expected not to think at all." That's why the daughter is expected to be a possession of the father with his socially granted authorial voice. But in Walker's story this daughter (Child) –as her mother and her aunt – disrupts the patriarchal stereotype for she can think and be emotionally independent, thus different from other women who are in conformity with the patriarchal order. And this is Walker's views on Afro-American society.

The opening of Part 2 is tense, dense, threatening and stresses the theme of sexuality: "He is sitting on the porch with his shotgun leaning against the banister within reach. If he cannot frighten her into chastity with his voice he will threaten her with the gun. He settles tensely in the chair and waits. (p. 37) (emphasis mine)

First of all, the father watches her from the time she steps from the yellow bus. (37) Then he carries a shotgun. According to Chekov if in a literary text there is an arm it means that before the story discloses this arm will explode. Chekov's principle was not really the fatality of the shooting but the aesthetic fact that any object present in a literary text has a meaning. (BRITO, 2006, p. 69) Later on, another weapon will be introduced, a pocket-knife.

And as the story unfolds both arms will perform a role. The reader must wait to see what will happen.

In Lester's opinion, Walker "blurs the lines between family relations in this story." This means that "the generic naming of family relations reiterates her position that the politics of power, even within families and among blood relations, is negotiated along gender lines." That is to say that "brother, lover, father, and husband fight to establish male authority over aunt, sister, lover, wife, and mother who all struggle for authority over themselves." (LESTER, 1995, p. 4)

Let us see as Walker describes the violent beating scene:

She leads the way to the shed behind the house. She is still holding her books loosely against her thigh and he makes his eyes hard as they cover the small light tracks made in the dust. The brown of her skin is full of copper tints and her arms are like long golden fruits that take in and throw back the hues of the sinking sun. Relentlessly he hurries her steps through the sagging door of boards, with hardness he shoves her down into the dirt. She is like a young willow without roots under his hands as she does not resist he beats her for a long time with a harness from the stable and where the buckles hit there is a welling of blood which comes to be level with the tawny skin then spills over and falls curling into the dust of the floor. (p. 41-42)

Lester states that erection imagery prevails in this passage, and the following scene describes the father as "stumbling weakly" (p. 7). It is as if he is limp after his act of violence partly brought on feelings of incestuous desire towards Child. The passage "picks up the gun that is getting wet and sits with it across his lap, rocking it back and forth on his knees like a baby" is a phallic metaphor. While there is no textual evidence that the father actually abuses Child sexually, Walker does make clear that the beating he has given her is psychologically motivated by his incestuous attraction to her, his jealous reaction to her lover and her breaking the parental taboo of her having entered into a sexual relationship with a married white man. Even the letter written by the daughter to her lover is described in phallic terms:

It is rainsoaked, but he can make out "I love you" written in a firm hand across the blue face of the letter. He hates the very paper of the letter and crumples it in his fist. A wet storm wind lifts it lightly and holds it balled up against the taut silver screen on the side of the porch. He is glad when the wind abandons it and leaves it sodden and limp against the slick wet boards under his feet. (p. 42)

This passage – a kind of free indirect account of the father’s thoughts – shows that the father remains sexually unfulfilled. If he has just or at some other time raped his daughter, he derives no gratification from it because she has been unfaithful to him in mind, spirit and body. Her written word to her lover replaces oral defiance of her father to his face.

When he returns to the shed the next morning to "cleanse" his world of wayward daughter, he is once again sexually aroused by her... “he rises from stiff-jointed sleep and wanders through the house.... At the back door he runs his fingers over the long blade of his pocketknife and puts it, with gentleness and resignation, into his pocket.” Again another weapon, a pocketknife. If we think of Chekov’s idea we can foresee that this phallic image – a pocketknife – will have a function in the text:

In the shed he finds her already awake and for a long time she lies as she was.... and except for the blood she is strong-looking and the damp black hair trailing loose along the dirt floor excites him and the terror she has felt in the night is nothing to what she reads now in his widestretched eyes. (p. 44.)

The father is unable to accept the power his daughter has over him. He thinks of her beauty and of her words to her white lover and it makes his body and mind respond uncontrollably. (LESTER, 1995, p.5). This impels him towards thoughts of killing her. His excision of her breasts whether or not this leads to her death, in the father’s mind means she will be sexually unavailable to him and other men. And therefore symbolizes her loss of the major physical feature that attracts men to women:

He can only strike her with his fist and send her sprawling once more into the dirt. She gazes up 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 breasts are 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. (p. 44-45)

Whether or not Walker intends the reader to understand that Child died of her wounds, what she stresses is that Child lives on in the father’s memory through the content of the letter. He will never be able to erase this from his mind and therefore her defiance of him

in her relationship with the white man and silently confronting him represents Child's triumph as did his sister's suicide and wife's death, their evasion of being controlled by him.

Walker writes what she sees in this society. She captures the reader's attention because she knows how to balance violence, emotion and literary technique with political concerns. In an interview to Claudia Tate, she reveals what writing means to her. Let's hear her voice:

Writing... is about living. It's about expanding myself as much as I can and seeing myself in as many roles and situations as possible... Writing permits me to be more than I am. Writing permits me to experience life as any number of strange creations. (TATE, 1985, p. 185)

In order to illustrate how her literary technique imbues and strengthens the story's theme, it is significant to say that, throughout this tale, Walker uses images of Nature that overwhelm the male character's senses. She introduces two sets of poetry in a relationship of tension between nature and time: "Lure of flower smells / The sun" (p.36). To Christian, this aspect "emphasizes the sensuality of nature and time while the second one, "Memories of Once / Like a mirror reflecting" (p. 40) transforms the temporal into an eternal moment, obliterating the possibility of redemption." (CHRISTIAN, 1985, p. 40).

Walker significantly invites the reader to connect the father seeing himself as the "giver of life' with his implied overtly sexual awareness that his daughter has a 'slight, roundly curved body' (p.40) and that his sister's was 'honey, tawny, wild and sweet' (Ibid) This latter description conveys the taste of sex and perhaps the cycle of love-making.

Another image of Nature that forebodes the father's killing of his daughter is connoted by the wasps' paper houses:

And busy wasps building onto their paper houses a dozen or more cells. Late in the summer, just as the babies are getting big enough to fly he will have to light paper torches and burn the paper houses down, singeing the wings of the young wasps before they get a chance to fly to sting him as he sits in the cool of the evening reading his Bible. (p. 37)

As he will burn the wasps' paper houses down, he must protect himself from "the agony of unnamable desire" here may be read as incest. And the expression "big enough to fly," which for black girls would mean to leave home before puberty, or at least on their becoming sexually active.

Almost at the end of the text Walker compares Daughter and Child to Black-eyed Susans: “and flowers pledge no allegiance to banners of any man.” (WALKER, p. 45). The mention of flowers like this (and previously –above– the wasps) seems to recall Shakespeare’s “Where the bee sucks, there suck I” (Ariel’s song from *The Tempest*) which might be interpreted in the same way, e.g. the flower/vagina is open to all bees/wasps/men.

The story ends with a poetic flourish. Walker’s use of the flower image applied to both women connotes Child being a replica of Daughter and yet another replication is the fact of their having similar socio-cultural behavior by their both having white-men married lovers.

Also there is a hiatus in time between the scene of the father excising his daughter’s breasts and “Today”, filled by the poetic lines “Memories of once / constant and silent / like a mirror / reflecting.”

In the final paragraph the expression “If he stirs” is repeated six times, which adds to the lyrical tone of the story. It is as if the writer summarizes the male character’s complicated inner feelings in relation to his loved ones, his dreams or nightmares, the wasps that sting, (a metaphor for Child) and last but not least, his shotgun, connected to the past, a symbol of his unconscious desire to rock his baby-daughter. Does this repetition mean that the male character will never wake up or if he does would he repeat the same actions again?

Walker is making a strong claim that literacy empowers women to overcome the subjugation imposed on them. It is not just the letter but the fact that Child has had an education and carries books home. In the time context of the story, a woman’s education represented the possibility of her breaking dependency on her father and other male members of the family. Black male society set out to be the sole fountain of knowledge and base for moral codes but education flouts this state of affairs. Women can become independent outside their family circle and learn to be their own *judges*, *givers of life* and *shapers* of their fate.

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