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FEMALE SEXUALITY IN WOMANIST MAPPING: A READING OF ALICE WALKER'S
BY THE LIGHT OF MY FATHER'S SMILE

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ABSTRACT

Alice Walker's penultimate novel *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998) is about celebration of the Eros and the importance of sexuality in human life. It talks about the importance of sexuality, in the making of whole women. Through the novel, Walker sponsors the view that the sexuality of a girl child needs to be blessed and guided, for her luxuriant growth as an individual. The novel recommends commemoration of female sexuality on par with male sexuality, blessed by parents. Walker through the novel has put forth the view that expecting sexuality to be uniform and heteronormative, tosses human thinking into the pitfall of fallacy. She vouches that patriarchal gender norms would shroud the interests and wellbeing of the marginalized, human population, and further invigorate insecurities in society rather than conferring stability. This paper discusses how the sexuality of black and coloured women is conformed and castigated in the name of gender, sex, race, class and religion through the aforementioned women characters in the novel. Walker through the novel has focussed on the importance of female sexuality, in the making of stronger African American women. She has made a tabooed subject like women's sexuality, a perfect topic for debate and discussion. Above all, Walker through the novel asks women to usher in Eros into their lives, as it is a source of happiness and wholeness in life.

Key Words: Eros, female sexuality, marginalized, debate, discussion, happiness, wholeness

Alice Walker's penultimate novel *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998) is about the celebration of Eros and the importance of sexuality in human life. It talks about the importance of a free female sexuality, in the making of better, stronger, women. Through the novel, Walker advocates that the sexuality of a girl child needs to be blessed and guided, for her luxuriant growth as an individual. Walker in an interview with Evelyn C White has said "Women must write more truthfully about the profound mystery of sex. . . . It is almost impossible not to learn something about yourself in the sexual act. So it is important for women to be alert to the spiritual growth and self-discovery they can attain by paying close attention to their sexuality" (Walker "On Finding" 196). By writing the novel Walker has stood by what she said, and has vouched for the afore stated viewpoint. She has showcased the importance of female sexuality and the need

for women to discover it. The novel recommends commemoration of female sexuality on par with male sexuality, blessed by parents.

"Sexuality most certainly plays a considerable role in human life; it can be said to pervade life throughout" (Beauvoir 71). Human sexuality from times immemorial is varied, indefinite and changing. It is a **"form of oppression" (Collins XI)** as well as gentle expression of an individual's psyche. It becomes a form of oppression when conformed, hindered, and subjected to stress and strain from its natural expression. Such oppression can lead to trauma, and derailment of the psyche altogether. Sexuality is a gentle, subtle expression of one's psyche, when nurtured properly and let to flourish according to individual will without degrading encumbrances. As hunger, sleep, and all sorts of emotional and physical expressions are same for any man and woman with a bit of difference, so is sexual expression, but this truth is suppressed by patriarchy to preserve the needs of men and their hierarchy. As stated by Freud **"Woman's sexuality is evolved as fully as man's" (quoted in Beauvoir 66).** At the same time, it has to be noted that, sexual expression is not just a physical need, but is even an emotional necessity strengthening the psyche of many women. At the same time, it has to be observed that sexuality and sexual needs of women are not homogenous. Walker through the novel has put forth the view that expecting sexuality to be uniform and heteronormative, throws human thinking into the pitfall of fallacy. She vouches that such norms would shroud the interests and wellbeing of the marginalized human population, and further invigorate insecurities in society, instead of conferring stability.

"Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity among others constitute major forms of oppression in the United States" (Collins 4). Black women face more discrimination in the United States as controlling images of black women are in vogue even in the twenty first century. Black women are stronger and wiser, than they are portrayed in popular culture. Despite this, conning their natural lives and showing them as castigated beings is very common. Further different images of black women have been used to subjugate black women and their sexuality. **As put forth by Collins: "Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S Black women's oppression. . . . A final controlling image-- the jezebel, whore or "hoochie"-- is central in this nexus of controlling images of Black womanhood. (81).** In fact, controlling a woman's sexuality is a way of subjugating women and asserting the power of patriarchy and his masculinity is a tool used by many a man. Controlled by two fold patriarchies, one white and one black, black women and their sexual selves are controlled on many planes and hierarchies.

A man is given more space and freedom to express and do what he wants to do; but women are expected to act and behave in a certain way, as per gender norms prevalent in that society. Masculinity is shown as an invulnerable thing, while femininity is shown as a vulnerable thing. Walker has talked about the aforesaid difference in her seminal work *In Search of her Mothers' Gardens (1983)*. **Walker has said that through her writings she wants to: "to explore the relationship between men and women, and why women are always condemned for doing what men do, as an expression of their masculinity. Why are women so easily "tramps" and "traitors" when men are heroes for engaging in the same activity" (256).** Walker argues how a man who is sexually expressive is praised as a stud, while a woman who expresses her sexuality even in the righteous mode is termed as a whore. Walker has clearly explored this idea in her novel, through the four main women characters in the novel Magdalena, Susannah, Pauline and Irene. This paper discusses how the sexuality of black and coloured women is conformed and castigated in the name of gender, sex, race, class and religion through the aforementioned women characters in the novel. Magdalena, Susannah, Pauline and Irene face the limiting forces of racism, sexism and classism in life and repressive gender norms, yet try to make the most of it. Walker shows how discovery of their sexuality helps them realize their strength to combat oppression.

Biblical projection of innate inferiority of women by birth and the projection of women as the descendants of the frail temptress Eve, and women's acceptance of such dictum under patriarchal pressure have subsumed their identity not only on the religious front, but even on the personal front. The projection of sex as a cardinal sin and its depiction only as a tool to procreate, make the subject for women a taboo to discuss or negotiate. Religion further influences gender norms and activities of a society. Development of sexuality and its reception are in turn influenced by religious beliefs and sexual politics, developed and

disseminated by patriarchy. Walker has talked about this aspect of religion controlling female sexuality, has said: **"I think of sexuality as something like the spirit has been colonized. It's the bible again that the book has done so much damage to women's self-image and the notion of what they are about"** (*The Richness* 130). At the same time, Walker does not advocate unsafe sexuality. She argues that women need to be given their due right. She opines that **"It is almost impossible not to learn something about yourself in the sexual act. So it's important for women to be alert to the spiritual growth and self-discovery they can attain by paying close attention to their sexuality"** (Walker *"On Finding Your Bliss"* (130).

A young woman wants to be free of patriarchal conformity, and at the same time longs, not to be a victim of patriarchal anger and disdain as the basic family structure is made and ruled by men. This authority vested in men to preserve the interests of men bestows unnecessary rigidity on the sexuality of women and their sexual choices. Moreover, women as such are relegated to reproductive and sexual functions leaving aside their intelligence, intellectual ability and emotional stability to safeguard patriarchal interests. On the other hand, men are appreciated for being virile and sexually active, and it is seen as a sign of manliness and masculinity. Walker in *In Search of her Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*(1983) has said that she **" wanted to explore the relationship between men and women, and why women are always condemned for doing what men do as an expression of their masculinity (44)**. Even though men and women are the same, women are condemned for being who they want to be. Morality and social propriety are only thrust on women, with men being spared from them. Despite this, men tend to sexually objectify women. Walker through the novel has tried to put forth the idea that when human existence itself is equal, how men and women can be unequal. She has said: **"We must begin to develop the consciousness that everything has equal rights because existence itself is equal"** (Walker *In Search* 116).

Magdalena and Susannah come from an elite background, yet face sexism and misogyny within their family. Despite racism, they emerge as successful women on the professional front. Magdalena turns out to be a successful professor in a university of repute, while Susannah is a successful, popular writer. Though they are successful on the professional front, their personal space is invaded by patriarchal disdain much after the demise of their father. Mr Robinson when alive has been a patriarchal monarch who has had terribly influenced, rather has upset the lives of his daughters. Both the girls experience the tyrannical side of their patriarchal father during their sojourn at Sierra De Madre and much later, even in their middle and old age. Senor Robinson and his wife Langley Robinson fake as priests though they are anthropologists and go to Sierra to study the Mundo. Being agnostic, it becomes very difficult for them to do so, but it turns out to be a faked truth later on. Senor Robinson faking as a priest becomes an imposter, and forcibly levies patriarchal gender norms onto his daughters. He wickedly beats his elder daughter Magdalena to the point of bleeding, hitting her black and blue. The physical abuse not only scars and wounds her body, but dents her mind forever. She becomes morose and silent from the enchanting, active person she has been. Years of patriarchal repression turn out to be outright hatred and vehemence later on. She hates the hawking and spying spirit of her father and cries about it, throughout her life. Senor Robinson as a dead angel with a motto to redress the relationship follows the lives of his daughters. He feels guilty for having slain the life of his daughter, but can do nothing about what has happened. He wails: " I did not understand her spirit. I yearned for guidance. It seemed to be necessary to tame her, though no one among the Indians or in my family showed any signs of thinking so" (**Walker By The 19**). Moreover, Magdalena becomes a binge eater who becomes, morbidly obese for life. She crucifies her sexuality forever, so that she never discovers herself in her totality. She closets her sexuality for ever. She fails to establish good personal relationships with her parents and sister Susannah. Toni Morrison has succinctly stated that **"the loneliest woman in the world is a woman without a woman friend"** (qtd. in **Wade-Gayles, 111**) and Magdalena unwittingly becomes one. Unlike Susannah, Magdalena feels very lonely as she fails to furnish important female friendships in life that can enhance her personality and perspective towards her life. She stays away from intimate relationships forever in life. She is bereft of wholeness throughout her life, constantly craving for it.

Walker through the character of Magdalena has shown how the deft in experiencing one's sexuality can lead to a deft in the personality of a person forever. Magdalena closets her sexuality forever, as she is terribly beaten by her father, till her body bleeds from bruises, for having precociously discovered her sexuality

with her boyfriend Manuelito. She suffers from bouts of depression and leads a lonely, morose life, feeling the deft and pinch of irresponsible parents. Magdalena whines throughout life about her father's carelessness, lack of trust and belligerence. She becomes sadomasochistic doing more harm to herself. A chance get together with Manuelito too fails to open her sexual self. She realizes that "Manuelito and I were the same people, but our bodies seemed to be those of two other people, . . . But mostly we prayed that our stranger's bodies would come to their senses and find each other again" (Walker *By the* 96). Unable to feel, re-discover herself sexually and otherwise, she leads the life of a sullen, obese recluse, and dies without wholeness. Robinson as a dead angel watches over his daughter Magdalena, dying breathless as "she sprawled mountainous and grotesque" with "a hunk of chocolate in one hand, and a can of beer in the other" (Walker *By The* 171). Magdalena's unwhole life showcased in the novel is a testimony to the ill-effects of severed sexuality.

Susannah sister to Magdalena and the second daughter of Senor Robinson and Langley Robinson overcomes patriarchal repression with strength, will power, wit and intelligence. Susannah is in fact liked by her father, for being feminine and as she sticks to female gender norms without question, and with liking. The disruption in the relationship between Susannah and Magdalena influences and deteriorates the relationship between Susannah and Senor Robinson for a certain period of time. Despite the deterioration, the relationship realigns itself. As a dead angel watching over her, Robinson is aghast on knowing that his daughter has turned into a bisexual, he never, ever thought, she would become. Susannah believes in herself, her decisions and tries to make the best out of everything and every relationship. Be it the relationship, with her Greek husband Petros when they were together, or her relationship with Pauline her lesbian partner, she puts forth her best. She holds no remorse or hatred towards any one and only concentrates on making things better, in all spheres of life. She has had her share of failures and successes that make her a strong person. Her childhood is spent under a patriarchal father who shows no great interest in the making of her personality. As a child, she is made to follow gender norms reserved for girls and women. She initially follows them to please her father and later on follows them as painting and pottery give an outlet for her creativity. The restricted childhood does not let her discover her complete personality. The belligerent relationship between Magdalena and her father turns the atmosphere at home into an unpalatable one altogether. Susannah though fragile like a flower, constantly evolves into a better being and overcomes the lacunae of her life. Failed relationships or failures never deter her from achieving what she wants, as she has womanist awareness that leads her forward in her life. Magdalena on the contrary, never completely develops womanist awareness that would bale her out of her problems. Magdalena feels happy that Susannah is estranged from her father. She avows: "With time I understood how severely the twig was bent in that moment of her horror and disbelief, my revenge against my father, a revenge so subtle Susannah would not realize its damage to her for another thirty years, was born" (Walker *By The* 29-30). Walker by contrasting and comparing Magdalena and Susannah showcases that women's needs and thinking are not monolithic. She harps on the need to develop womanist awareness.

Susannah loves the company of women than men and she rarely listens to them but follows her heart. "Susannah was glad that, on principle, she rarely listened to men. Rarely believed, really, a word they said. No matter how much she might love them" (Walker *By The* 61). Susannah is self-reliant on all planes and this gives her the autonomy, she has aspired for, as a child. She has the grit and determination to be what she wants to be, and do what she wants to do. Susannah as a young woman has realized that love for others starts with self-love. Walker too has vouched for self-love and its importance in the life of a woman by stating that **"Self-love is the first and hardest to stick by. Women need not abandon themselves in their quest for bliss and love. You can love yourself spiritually, physically—in almost any way that anyone else can. I think that anatomically thus is the reason we are constructed the way we are"** (Walker *"On Finding"* 196). Susannah is both, loving and forgiving and this helps her sort out things in life. Walker through the novel argues that womanist awareness alone leads to development of autonomy on all planes, that leads to true emancipation.

Walker though the novel reiterates the importance of female bonding as an antidote to male harassment and patriarchal gaze. Susannah's marriage with Petros fails, due to irreconcilable differences between the two. Susannah makes valuable female friendships in life, that help her overcome personal strife and discover her personality completely. Susannah's friendship with Irene in Greece helps her discover herself.

She comes to know about her strengths and the need to be strong throughout life after having met Irene. Irene and Susannah realize that Female bonding enhances **“one’s capacity for compassion, generosity, humour and wonder”**(Elizabeth Schultz 69). Their friendship turns out to be mutually enhancing one, that does wonders to their lives leading to empowerment and emancipation. She is unashamed about her sexuality and her lesbian relationship with Pauline. It helps her discover herself completely.

Walker through the character of Pauline has shown how women are forced to face sexual abuse in the name of love by parents and life partners too. Pauline grows up in a household of ten children, being the eldest of the brood. Babysitting for her young brothers and sisters, she leads the life of a recluse at home unwanted and unappreciated. Her education and well-being suffer altogether. The worst breach of trust happens when she is hooked with a near good for nothing suitor called Winston by her parents, when she is passed out. They do it to lessen their burden and keep her as a baby sitter at home. Pauline wails that, what happened to her is worse “than what happened to Persephone or Psyche”(Walker By the 184). The worst feeling that hurts her is the fact that she has been betrayed by her very own parents. Walker through the novel argues that women need trust and faith, rather than breach of trust to evolve as complete human beings. The character of Pauline in the novel serves as an example of a womanist who is self-made, and self-reliant. She unabashedly experiences life to the fullest on all planes and seeks wholeness. After begetting a son via sexual exploitation while being passed out, Pauline dares to take responsibility for her own life. Walker through the novel argues that self-reliance is the key to complete and successful womanhood.

Womanism as a theory advocates celebration of women’s sexuality. The first definition says that a womanist is **“A black feminist or feminist of color.”** (Walker, 1984: xi-xii). The second definition states that a womanist is also **“A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually”** (Walker In Search xi-xii). The afore-said definitions hint at the importance of women’s sexuality in the domain of womanism as a theory. The above lines even hint at making space for variant sexualities. The novel *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* (1998) vouches for the aforesaid perspectives regarding human sexuality. The sexualities of Susannah and Magdalena vouch for the aforesaid standpoint of Womanism proposed by Walker. It recommends space and place and empathy for alternative sexualities, and brings them out of the tabooed zone by normalizing them.

Walker by showcasing the lesbian relationship between Pauline and Susannah as the one between Shug and Celie in *The Color Purple* (1982) does not advocate lesbian relationships as an antidote to patriarchal restrictions but argues that it too is a way of life for some women as it has led or leads to self-discovery. Pauline thinks about her life with a new perspective after she meets her special friend Gena, who helps her discover her personality and sexuality. By showcasing the nurturing, same sexual relationship between Gena and Pauline, initiated by Gena a white woman, Walker challenges the popular belief that **“Normal female heterosexuality is expressed via the cult of true White womanhood, whereas deviant female heterosexuality is typified by . . . black womanhood”** (Collins 83). She argues that homosexuality or heterosexuality are not attributive features of any race but pervade the whole human race. Pauline later on completes her education, joins the navy, travels, does all that she wants to, and later on turns out to be an entrepreneur owning a restaurant where she meets Susannah for the first time. Through the friendship between Susannah and Pauline is homo-erotic, they learn a lot from each other. Walker through the novel *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* (1998) as in *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1992), and *Now Is the Time to Open your Heart* (2004) has normalized homo-erotic relationships on par with heterosexual relationships. She has shown that love, jealousy, passion, and possession are the same in hetero or homosexual relationships. The novel does not only focus on the erotic relationship between Susannah and Pauline, but highlights the succour women can offer each other, despite many odds and upheavals. Susannah learns how to be a go getter from Pauline, while Pauline acquires stability from the relationship. Both acquire professional and emotional stability through each other. This paper does not argue on behalf of homosexuality and lesbianism but shows different sorts of sexualities do exist amongst all races. It argues that sexuality and sexual orientation of different sorts prevail amongst all human populations. Walker through the novel

presents her view point that sexuality abnormal or unacceptable is not a race issue and that blacks needn't be marginalized on account of their diverse sexuality, as it is present amongst all races be it black white or coloured.

Irene the dwarf woman in the novel from Greece is another instance of a womanist who leads life to the fullest, despite having faced decades of oppression. Walker through the novel talks about the physical entrapment and psychological manipulation reserved for women in the name of religious and cultural norms. The plight of Irene is unimaginable to anyone outside Greece. Right after her birth, she is given away in service to the church to atone for the sins of her mother, suspected of adultery. On the contrary Irene as a young woman wants to experience life to the fullest, which she is denied. Irene becomes a friend of Susannah, while Susannah tours Greece with her ex-husband Petros. In the patriarchal society of Greece stoning women is a very common punishment awarded for women like Irene's mother suspected of adultery. Many women are stoned to death in Greece, when they don't subordinate themselves to patriarchal diktats. Irene leads the life of a recluse throughout her life, with no contact with anyone as per the punishment conferred on her, by her father, brothers and the patriarchal society of Skidiza. Marriage and family are made distant dreams to her. Yet, she does not lose her spirit. As a tarot card reader she stays in contact with tourists who visit Skidiza, though human company is forbidden to her. She stays abreast of things around the world through the internet and learns new things. The alienation and discrimination thrust on her have no negative effect on her. The pain and strife undergone by her help her become a stronger human being. Despite limitations, she invigorates her life and that of others. She helps Susannah overcome the pain in her personal relationships. Her wisdom can be inferred from the ultimate advice she gives Susannah. She tells her: "Let nothing stand between you and the dance of life" (Walker *By the* 158). Irene's advice inspires Susannah to lead life to the fullest. Susannah and Irene realize that Female bonding enhances **"one's capacity for compassion, generosity, humour and wonder"** (Elizabeth Schultz 69). Their friendship turns out to be mutually enhancing one, which does wonders to their lives, leading to empowerment and emancipation. Irene is an instance of a womanist who lives life to the fullest, and helps fellow women discover their best, despite limitations of the worst sort. Irene inherits all the wealth of her stinking rich father in ripe old age, after his death and that of her brothers. Though old, she travels around the world and discovers all that has been forbidden to her by patriarchy. Patriarchy does not allow her discover her sexuality and this leaves a debt in her personality forever that she forgets the need to discover it. Though she does not discover her sexuality, the way she strengthens Susannah and Magdalena through her wisdom and intelligence brings about a major change in their lives. Through her androgynous bent of mind Irene shuns gender boundaries and makes other women realize that one should oppose **"stereotypical definitions of 'masculine' and 'feminine'" and "Women must assume responsibility for strengthening their self-esteem by learning to love and appreciate themselves."** (Claudia Tate 1983). Walker through the novel urges women to develop an androgynous bent of mind, as this alone would help women achieve egalitarianism on par with men. Walker through the novel argues that women need to fetch sexual egalitarianism on their own.

Walker through the novel has put forth the pagan belief that sexuality is a route to spirituality. The Mundo culture showcased in the novel reiterates Walker's thoughts on sexuality and spirituality. According to the Mundo the pagan race showcased by Walker in the novel: "It is understood that spirituality resides in the groin, in the sexual organs. Not in the mind, and not in the heart. It is while fucking that you normally feel closer to God. The other time you feel close to the creator, of course, is when you create something." (Walker *By the* 158). The aforesaid lines from the text are blasphemous to any Christian, yet are replete with meaning. Walker through the afore-quoted lines in the novel, talks about the importance of human sexuality in conferring wholeness and creating life. By putting forth, the aforesaid statement in the novel, Walker has argued that sexuality is a way to discover human strength that bestows wholeness. The act of sex is not only for procreation and propagation of the human race, but is a route to satiety, completeness and spiritual enrichment. Walker through the novel argues that sexuality has been kept in the dark from women, as it is a key to owing internal power. She has showcased that patriarchy has since ages hidden the positive aspects of discovering one's sexuality to preserve the interests of men, weaken women, and make them thorough

dependents. She asks women to make their own sexual choices that are nurturing and invigorating, rather than conforming and taxing.

Walker through the novel puts forth the view that life is not about sex alone, but sexuality is an important aspect of human evolution and progress. Walker through the novel has showcased how: **"Heterosexuality is juxtaposed to homosexuality as its oppositional, different and inferior "other" (Collins83).** Though she has depicted homosexual relationships on par with heterosexual relationships in the novel, she has also shown their shortcomings. Walker argues that one needn't shy away from defining oneself and discovering one's own sexuality thoroughly. Yet it has to be understood that all don't discover their sexuality the same way as some have sweet initiations while others have bitter ones. This paper supports the viewpoint that one should discover one's own sexuality the way it is not cumbersome or doesn't lead to unbearable baggage, as sexuality when exploited by others or when discovered in a bitter way leads to emotional and psychological damage that cannot be easily redressed. Walker through the novel presents Lorde's view point that **"It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others-- for their use and our detriment"(45).** Walker asks women to define themselves, rather than being defined by others. By showing successful bisexuals in the novel Walker does not enforce lesbianism, or bisexuality, but rather normalizes them, on par with heterosexual relationships. Walker through the novel has focussed on the importance of female sexuality in the making of stronger African American women. She has made a tabooed subject like women's sexuality, a perfect topic for debate and discussion. The novel reiterates the fact that sexuality is a matter of individuation that leads to wholeness and gives holistic view of life, rather than complacency. Walker through the novel argues that sexuality is a facet of human existence that enlightens and invigorates life. She argues that sexuality should be a matter of personal taste and choice, rather than something coerced by force or exploitation. She reiterates the need to give space for all sorts of relationships. Above all, Walker through the novel asks women to usher in Eros into their lives, as it a key to happiness and wholeness in life.

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