



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Crossing: A Journey Within and Beyond in Alice Walker's *By the Light of My Father's Smile*

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Abstract

This paper offers a detailed analysis of Alice Walker's *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. It delves into themes related to love, sexuality, trauma, forgiveness and acceptance on the one hand and on the other, analyses the oppression of women across cultures and the oppression of the indigenous people of Mexico by the White world. It delves into the worldview of the Mundo tribe that establishes connections between humans, nature and animals. In this worldview love and sexuality are celebrated as against the Christian worldview where they are repressed and curtailed. The paper analyses the manner in which the white men destroyed other cultures and yet the novel affirms the value of forgiveness and the need for the victims to emerge out of their victimhood and help their oppressors to cross over by forgiving them.

Keywords

Love; Forgiveness; Mundo worldview; White world; Oppression; and Patriarchy.

The reason people and angels hover around human sexuality is because it is a light source that has been kept in the dark. ¹

Alice Walker's *By the light of my Father's Smile*, is a story about multiple narratives, written from the point of view of multiple characters. The novel is a tale of oppression, marginalization, exploitation but most of all it is a tale of love, guilt, forgiveness, of transcending one's limitations and seeing the other as the other. Though the novel proceeds by recounting endless narratives yet what holds the novel together is a single event of violence, apparently physical violence but deep down it is a violation of Magdalena's sexuality by her father Robinson. This violation is not just of an individual's sexuality, though in this case it is related to Magdalena, who is also known as Mad Dog, Mac Doc, Maggie and June, but of the very ontology of sexuality. This event is repeated endlessly in the novel, each time from the point of view of a different character. The novel depicts how points of view vary and how different people react differently to the same event. Thus this one event becomes the nucleus of the text that besides delving inwardly into Robinson's personal journey, of coming to terms with his notion of sexuality, also looks at sexuality as governed and determined by Christianity. This idea of sexuality as governed by Christianity is set in contrast with the perspective of the Mundo tribe ² whose views regarding sexuality are far deeper, broader and respectful than those of the so called righteous Christians.

The novel recounts this event at the very outset, and then takes us deep into an ideological and a psychological journey wherein we are made to enter in and out of the minds of various characters. As the narrative positions continue

¹ This quotation occurs as an epigraph to the novel on the first page.

² The reference here is to the Mundo tribe, who as Walker explains within the text on page 15 ". . . were a tiny band of mixed-race Blacks and Indians who had fled across the border during the Civil War; that by now the people, like others of their mixture near Veracruz, Costa Chica, and elsewhere, thought of themselves not as Africans or as Indians, but as dark skinned Mexicans. Isolated, however, as they were, they were said to retain distinct tribal ways that they honored and had never repudiated."

to shift, we experience the emotions of the concerned characters, while we are also made to examine our own views regarding love and sexuality.

Langley, Robinson's wife is too distressed by her husband's act; she feels absolutely betrayed and refuses to live with such a man. For a month she refuses to relate with him but she is too deeply in love with him to reject him completely. Night after night Robinson seeks his wife's forgiveness, pleading and bending on his knees, he sits outside her closed door. It is only when she falls seriously sick, that he enters her room and loves her back to life and to his own self. Though Langley returns to him but she finds it hard to forgive him. Throughout her life Magdalena is annoyed with her mother because she had not walked out on the man who had so deeply and psychically wounded her.

Susannah, Magdalena's younger sister, almost becomes her alter ego. She internalizes her sister's pain, as she witnesses her compassionate, gentle father turn into a Godzilla lashing at her sister. She sees all this through her eyes glued to a key hole. She begins to hate her father, whom she actually adores. Her journey through the novel is to come to terms with her father and yet she feels torn between the love she feels for her sister on the one hand and her father on the other. The image of her father coming towards her, smiling, and holding out a handful of green apple jellybeans, and she rejecting him, constantly haunts her. Night after night, she dreams of her father visiting her. She begins to dress more and more in black, unconsciously submerging herself into her father's being. Her father used to dress in black when she was four. His church had sent him as a spiritual advisor to Mexico to work among the Mundo Indians. In actuality both her parents were anthropologists. But as no one was willing to fund them on any anthropological expedition so they threw themselves on the mercy of the church, manipulated the church and entered Mexico under the garb of Christian missionaries.

Once in Mexico, dressed in black, Robinson tried to preach Christianity, a religion for which he had no respect, until he was “sucked into the black cloth” (171), sucked to the extent that he acts absolutely contrary to his own innate nature, when he denies the right to be herself to Magdalena and in the process, he negates his own being. His entire life, and even his life after death is a journey to come to terms with his own darker, unacceptable self: That how could he, a believer of people’s culture, an ardent lover, who loved his wife immensely and respected the unknown forces of the universe, act in so contrary a manner. The novel almost seems to be haunted by Robinson’s presence and therefore offers us an insider’s view into his being. Moreover as Robinson is dead, he can move into the minds of all characters and reveal the inner workings of their being. In the process, we, the readers too, witness the emergence of being, the quest for ‘wholism’ of characters who otherwise belong to a world which constantly wants to fragment and disintegrate them. Though the larger forces of our universe, according to the novel are absolutely harmonized, it’s left for the humans, to see and become one with this unified light.

Robinson forever wants to rectify his deed just as Magdalena forever wants to undo his forgiveness by reminding him that deeds are irrevocable, that they mar one’s psyche, that they can demolish the most cherished expression of a person’s being. When Robinson had whipped Magdalena and physically scarred her body, the act of this physical violation was nothing as compared to her father’s inability to understand Manuelito’s love for her, a love which had marked her body in the deepest possible way. She had felt, as if her body and therefore her soul had been marked and chosen by love, whenever Manuelito loved her. She had felt worshipped and then this same body was whipped and violated to erase the memory of so much love. She could not understand that, how could her father be so violent towards her just when she had experienced so much of love and pleasure. If he truly loved her, as he

professed he did, then he should have been happy for her but instead he had beaten her with the same leather belt with silver discs that Manuelito himself had made with his own hands for her. In her perception, her father had attempted to impurify and destroys her memory of love. She can never forgive her father just as Robinson can never forgive himself. As the novel proceeds we feel more and more empathic towards Robinson who punishes himself in the severest possible way as he spends his life in interrogating his own existence and visiting his daughter both in body when he is alive and in soul when he is dead to seek forgiveness from her. Once when years pass and Magdalena meets a mutilated war torn Manuelito, it is Robinson who stands on guard outside Magdalena's door to assist her love making with Manuelito. Robinson becomes the angel of love. In the deepest recesses of his being he knows that he alone has to encounter his own truth.

It is only after Manuelito's death that Robinson meets Manuelito, the man he had rejected in the past but the man whom now he seeks for spiritual guidance. Manuelito becomes his guide. The locus of the action and space in the narrative shifts from earth to cosmos just as the relationship of the characters exists within life, within death and within life and death. It is now that the distinction between Christianity and the Mundo belief system becomes absolutely stark. The Mundo people, the text affirms, though they follow no organized monotheistic religion yet they are far more spiritual in their living and beliefs as they live their lives in complete harmony with nature and hence the universe. Manuelito explains to Robinson the meaning of love in their culture, where it is the parents who initiate their children into sexuality by kissing them on five parts of their body; ears, eyes, nose, mouth and the place where life begins. One is kissed on all five places that lets in the light, the light of life. The parents respect their children's search for true sexuality and send their children to find their way to love with songs and blessings:

When one prepares to make love for the first time

mother arrives singing, father is there
sweetgrass and feathers are brought, eggs are eaten
one is kissed in all five places
the sweet breasts are thanked
one is sent to the loved one blessed. (179)

The realization now dawns on Robinson that this boy with such deep understanding of life could have been his son-in-law had he not so brutally destroyed their relationship. As Manuelito explains to Robinson that the most important line in the Mundo initiation song is “by the Light of My Father’s Smile” (233), the recollection dawns on Robinson that Magdalena during those days when she was in love with Manuelito would constantly sing this line, perhaps she was seeking her father’s blessings, seeking his willful and joyous participation in her life and what did he do instead. Time passes, the text does not clarify how much but soon after Manuelito’s death, Magdalena too, a depressed person passes away. Robinson silently witnesses her death, while conversing with Manuelito, who gradually while initiating Robinson now after his death into his culture, takes him to Mexico, to the village to which he had originally belonged. It is here, that he further explains the role of moon in the lives of men and women. Manuelito tells him that in their culture before a girl is wedded, the young man first invites the young woman’s mother to visit the space that will be her daughter’s home. After that the father is asked to visit so that he can know the place where his daughter will grow into a growing spaciousness of heart and become one with life as she will find so much love. Robinson is deeply touched. While talking to Manuelito, in the distance he sees Magdalena approaching, riding a horse and looking incredibly beautiful, she is coming for her final reunion with Manuelito. Robinson is too anxious. He wanders whether Magdalena will come close to him and thus forgive him or she will remain distant. Manuelito informs him that she will only come close when Robinson is prepared to receive her. Finally Robinson understands what

precisely Manuelito means. Magdalena approaches Robinson. In this final moment of reconciliation, Robinson kisses the palms, the feet of his daughter, kissing her on all five parts and finally kisses her knees while he bows, thus symbolically seeking her forgiveness, he says, "...it is to our knees that we must sometimes be driven, before we can recognize, witness, or welcome our own light" (234). Robinson knows that 'light' will emanate only after he has sought his daughter's forgiveness and in this way rectify the wrong that he had done her. The 'light', he knows will emanate when she will finally forgive him.

Robinson's journey thus becomes complete for he finally accepts this relationship and Magdalena meets Manuelito through "the light of her father's smile", the smile becoming the "radiance of the half moon", thus man and moon both bless the lovers as they enter into the cycle of life and radiance. As Robinson's journey ends, so simultaneously Magdalena's too ends as she now with humility accepts her father as the irreversible damage of her life is finally undone.

Susannah alone is left to grapple with her emotions, loving and hating her father at the same time. It is Irene who becomes the catalyst and helps Susannah resolve and recognize her true feelings for her father and thus reduce her anguish through interpreting her life for her. As the novel ends Susannah too passes away, this time it is Magdalena who comes to receive her. The two sisters reconcile in death which in this case is life. Susannah finally understands her emotions for her father without any trace of hatred in her. She realizes that in hating her father she had betrayed her own love, among the Mundo, the greatest crime that one can commit against one self. The novel thus ends at a point when Robinson not only overcomes his guilt but his entire conception related to sexuality undergoes a transformation. He is finally able to undertake the real 'crossing' after he has understood and accepted the Mundo worldview and is able to shed his arrogance related to his understanding of life. As Susannah's body after her death is put to fire along with all her belongings,

Magdalena is reminded of a poem: "When life descends into the pit, I must become my own candle/ willingly burning myself to light up the darkness around me (241). The light finally is the light of forgiveness, for it is only "...in forgiving the trespass of others that the vado³ at last becomes home" (186). One is finally able to 'cross' the river to the other side of death and thus become "a very small part of love". The text transcends the Christian notion of forgiveness and encompasses the vision of the true 'crossing' that comes through complete forgiveness and with the transcendence of one's point of view, for it is only then that one overcomes one's limitations and accepts the other as the other.

This central event in the text besides polarizing view points and encompassing the vision also becomes functional in that it provides space for a lot of thematic, narrative and psychological content to surface. Further it is this event that helps the evolution of form in the novel to emerge; the time in the novel moves backward and forward, as past and present merge into each other. Nevertheless though there is this central event in the text yet there are a multiple threads of narratives operating simultaneously: Narratives concerning lives of women; their oppression, their subsequent surfacing and narratives that tend to redefine love and sexuality.

The novel tends to redefine love and sexuality. It demonstrates the co-existence of various modes of sexuality and brings to the surface the non-possessive relationships which can co-exist in a perfect state of soul connectedness. For according to Walker, when we truly love another person, we can neither possess the other person nor be the other person. Love rather helps us to arrive at our own selves, our own being; any real love completes itself and leads to a kind of an orgasmic freedom (168). The ideas around love that Walker expresses in the novel resonate deeply with what Martin Buber

³ Walker explains "Vado" on page 16 of the novel "as a word which means a shallow place in the river, where one might safely get across".

discusses in his book *I and Thou*. Buber while discussing the idea of love writes:

Love does not cling to the *I* in such a way as to have the *Thou* only for its “content”, its object; but love is *between I and Thou*. The man who does not know this, with his very being know this, does not know love even though he ascribes to it the feelings he lives through, experiences, enjoys and expresses. . . . Love is the responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou*. (Buber 24-25)

Given this perspective, making love becomes synonymous to creating and nurturing life. In the Mundo belief system, the idea of union is fertility which is not just related to creating children but is also related to creating ideas and love, a kind of a shared pregnancy. In this context the concerned lovers; whether a man and a woman, or a woman and a woman, together experience the pangs of creativity.

The novel thus is an intervention in the male hegemonic discourse of patriarchy that tends to define and curtail female sexuality, as within a patriarchal worldview, women are trained to never enjoy sexuality, to never experience themselves as sexual beings. Patriarchy in the novel is challenged from within the discourse of sexuality by depicting how in pre-Christian and many non-Christian societies, female sexuality is eulogized and respected. Anne Cameron’s *Daughters of Copper Woman* which is based on an origin myth from Vancouver not only celebrates the ability of women to procreate but is absolutely antithetical to the *Old Testament*. The *Old Testament*, through the origin myth of Adam and Eve informs us that Eve was made from the rib of Adam, the *Daughters of the Copper Woman*, elucidates that the first man was created from the mucus, tears and menstrual blood of the Copper Woman, the first woman to inhabit the world (Cameron 1981). Similarly, closer to the setting of the novel, several origin myths of the Native American people reiterate similar worldviews. The Iroquois origin myth of “The Woman Who Fell

from the Sky” exemplifies that as a consequence of the fall of a woman, earth was created, and all the beings - supernaturals, animals, humans everywhere came into being. The falling, fallen woman is a creative force, the myth informs us (Allen 1989). The novel questions the politics of sexuality and demystifies the social givens by bringing to the surface the Mundo mythology which has been repressed. This repressed mythology becomes the counter-hegemonic current that depicts the greatest ‘lie’ manufactured by the institution of Christianity; that Eve tempted Adam and was responsible for the ‘fall of man’. This myth about the ‘fall of man’ in Christianity is perpetuated so that women become their own repressors once they internalize a guilt psyche that their sexuality alone was responsible for the exclusion of mankind from the kingdom of God. Perhaps this is the one ‘lie’ that has unraveled the entire Christian world, the text affirms. According to the Christian worldview, any woman who is in contact with her sexuality is a dangerous woman, a threat to the society and so the society must repress her not only by using overt violence as it happens in the case of Magdalena or in the case of Irene’s mother, who is stoned to death by the tenets of religion but also through religious, social and moral hegemony.

The darkest side of patriarchy comes through Irene’s and Pauline’s narrative. Pauline’s mother bore children after children in a ‘black hole’. Little Pauline as a child had to nurse her younger brothers and sisters. Eventually, she is raped by Winston, her husband to be, with the consent of her parents who justified the rape under the pretext that Pauline did not show interest in Winston. They felt that the only option available for Pauline to live was to marry Winston. Pauline’s mother bore so many children, essentially because she was a Christian and Christianity does not permit a woman to have any control over her body as against the belief system of the Mundo tribe, where men never make their women pregnant unless both the man and the woman desire it, rather;

...pregnancy was considered thoroughly shared, so much so that during labor the father-to-be took to his bed with labor pains and all his buddies gathered around him to offer support. Sometimes the father's cries drowned out the mother's. (90)

Inferentially, Walker depicts that the life of the most ordinary woman, we see on the street is frightening. She questions: "How many lives does a poor woman have? How many lives does a Black woman have? At least three more" (119). For the one word for a woman's existence is hurt. It is a woman's life. The plight of women living under the dominion of patriarchy is pathetic. Whether it is the life of a woman in Greece, Africa or then even America, it's all the same across all cultures (though in the case of black and poor women, the oppression becomes multiplied). Their life is a history of being stoned to death, of body parts being mutilated, and of endless childbirths and servility. Irene and Susannah converse and inform each other, "...in some culture's they have written in their religious books the size and shape of the stones to be used. Some are of a special size and shape to break the woman's nose, others to crack her skull. There had been many recent stoning's in Saudi Arabia and Iran..." (62). Irene's mother's narrative is another such revelation. Her mother was beaten because she was raped. After enduring this trauma, her father and brothers refused to give her shelter. They declared her to be an evil woman, she was beaten and ostracized and when Irene was born, her mother died. Irene was made to pay for her mother's 'sins'. So at a very young age she was given away as a servant to the church. Here she was compelled to live in complete isolation. No one ever spoke to Irene and Irene never spoke. The myth went around that Irene was speechless. Irene's narrative is important, as it brings to surface, the manner in which men attribute speechlessness to women. In the process women actually become mute and begin to conceal their speech, for speech is power as it defines self-hood and by suppressing speech, men deny selfhood to women. It is later towards the end of the text that Irene re-buries

her mother and declares that her mother was not evil; thus rectifying and finally rejecting the false imposition of transgression, and of setting limitations.

The novel transcends the mystification around heterosexual love and enters the space of not just homo-sexual intensity but of homo-relational spaces where women stand for each other and understand and feel one with each other's pain and happiness. In this context, the narrative goes deep into Susannah and Pauline's passionate relationship and later into Susannah and Irene's bond that not only nurtures them but helps them to come to terms with the deepest issues of their lives and finally into Susannah and Magdalena's complex emotions for each other. The novel also delves deep into the mother-daughter relationship both in the context of Langley and her daughters and Irene and her mother, even though Irene's mother died soon after her birth. And yet the novel does not demean hetero-sexual relationships.

The deepest relationship in the text is between Manuelito and Magdalena: "As woman is the mother of the oldest man and man is the father of the oldest woman, man and woman are equal but differently beautiful" (178) the novel states. The most beautiful form of sexuality in the novel is demonstrated through the Mundo practice where men and women are in tune with the cycle of moon (232). Far from any cynicism regarding man-woman relationship, Walker affirms that: "There is a man inside a woman, your own inner man, so to speak and he is dedicated to helping you-because the best of men always love women" (205). Perhaps what Walker is suggesting is that the false ideas around eulogizing masculinity should give way to real 'maleness'. In fact the central vision of the text is carried forward through Manuelito.

One of the chapters in the novel is called "The Cathedral of the Future", wherein Manuelito states that the cathedral of the future will be nature, as: "In the end people will be driven back to trees, to streams, to rocks that do not have anything built on them" (213). The Mundo know this but beyond this, they do not know, that is why Manuelito tells us that

...instead of ideas they have stories, because ideas are made of blocks. They are rigid and hard whereas stories are made of gauze that is elastic, you can almost see through it, so what is beyond is tantalizing, you can't quite make it out; and because the imagination is always moving forward, you yourself are constantly stretching. Stories are the way spirit is exercised. (213-214)

The most powerful story of the Mundo is related to the notion of the mad dog. In the Mundo belief system, it is believed that Marijuana is the most scared plant because it is the plant that permits humans and trees to talk. It is the translator. The perfect *Ganja* is always grown by women. It is always grown with love. It is a plant that responds to feelings. Similarly in their culture, a mad dog is considered to be the wisest living creature and that is why the old women of the tribe had named, Magdalena, Mad Dog. A mad dog is considered wise because it has lost its mind which is one of the most difficult things in the world to do. The Mundo take special herbs once a year to lose their mind altogether and at once: "Instead of thoughts we have visions and that is how we guide ourselves against the Europeans who put too much emphasis on the mind that one could say that they have become mind only" (103). Manuelito further explains the reason behind their respect for a mad dog as; because of the losing of its mind, the mad dog becomes the symbol of a culture that says, that one must not live too much in one's head: "It is the way of reminding you to stay in your emotions, no matter how nutty they are, it is a way of saying also that craziness has value" (103).

The concept of 'Wholism' in the novel, comes across through concepts related to Mundo wisdom. In their worldview, the breeze, trees, birds, animals, men and women, all are a small part of love. Men and women know in their bodies that they are a small part of everything; even something as distant as the moon. The vision of the text, is presented through the chapter, "The Cathedral of the Future" which symbolizes a return to life with nature. The

chapter in its essence states that one will only be saved, when one will become aware of this essential oneness with nature and of the disjunction which has been caused by the White world.

The essence of the story lies in the fact that ironically while Robinson had forgotten what he had come to learn and understand from the Mundo people before he was “sucked into the black cloth”; Magdalena had understood and lived it. The story is not just about the oppression caused by the white men but about the Euro-American, monotheistic oppression of the pagan, pantheistic worldview, whether that of blacks, Indians or of so many other indigenous cultures.

The novel takes us into the recesses of the White world. The White world, as depicted in the novel, is metaphorically sucked into the “black cloth” and therefore they never thought of reflecting on themselves, rather the Whites always thought of studying people of other cultures and affirm how they did not measure up, how they were inferior. As Manuelito explains, the White world never thought of learning anything from them. They never even heard them, rather they only thought that the Mundo were an ‘uncivilised’ tribe and so their job was to teach, to ‘civilize’. Operating within this tradition of hypocrisy and domination, they raided their villages, hacked off their heads, and enslaved them to work. The Christian missionaries deplored everything belonging to the Mundo culture but the oppression of women. This they upheld under the pretext that this was culture and that the women themselves were enforcing it. Thus the Christian church became synonymous with patriarchy where the ‘fire of life’ was always missing. They called the Mundo uncivilized because they smoked Marijuana, the sacred plant, but they drugged the Blacks and the Chinese under their colonial policies. Though war, colonization and its subtle oppression are difficult to understand yet sooner or later the colonized can see through its devastating strategies. Whether it was the oppression of Gypsies, or Jews in the concentration camps in Germany, or the oppression of

Blacks in America or Africa, or the oppression of Indians by Britishers, or the oppression of Tibetans by the Chinese, or the experience of the American Civil war, the White world was always there reinforcing this oppression (153-156). The text further states that the Whites killed their own 'mother' and their best men in witch hunting.

The text demands a rectification of all that Christianity in its patronizing, condescending and exploitative strategies has done. The missionaries thought that the *Bible* had all the answers related to the lives of all the people belonging to different cultures in the world, when in actuality it had none. But this, they could not accept in their false pride, as an acceptance of this would entail an acceptance of their own retrogressive religion and worldview. While questioning the Christian missionaries, Manuelito says; "Did you really think we did not know we should love one another; that the person across from us is oneself? That stealing is bad? That wanting what other people have is hurtful to us? That we are a part of the Great Spirit and loved as such? What people do not know these things?" (164). Manuelito continues, the only thing that the Mundo can understand about Christ is that he had come back from the dead and had stayed to sort things out, to tell his people not to worry; to absolve them from blame. So though the missionaries had told millions of stories about Christianity to the Mundo, these stories left them untouched. They could not believe that God had given man dominion over nature and animals; they could not believe that God could create hierarchies between man and nature. They could not accept this as the word of God. Along with the 'lie' about Eve, they thought this is the other 'lie' that has unraveled the White world.

Despite everything, the one thing that the novel affirms: is that no matter how much the White world has repressed the other worlds, yet each victim, has to emerge from one's victimhood and take responsibility for everything one does; no matter how the chain of events began. Whether dead or alive we have to help in 'crossing' over, in forgiving, individuals and groups, colonizers and

oppressors. As Magdalena, the most oppressed amongst the oppressed writes in her last letter to her sister Susannah:

At the crossing it is the right way to release those who have taken comfort from our torment.

It is the right way to leave this place with a heart softer than a stone.

At the crossing it is the right way to forgive.

It is the right way to release all hostility towards those who wound us by their hapless presence alone.

It is in forgetting the trespass of others that the vado at last becomes home. (186-87)

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MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Vahali, Diamond Oberoi. "Crossing: A Journey Within and Beyond in Alice Walker's *By the Light of My Father's Smile*." *Literary Quest* 3.3 (November 2017): 1-16. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access - Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.