

**The impact of organized religion
on the social status of women in Alice Walker's
*By the Light of My Father's Smile***

JADWIGA GRUNWALD

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Abstract

Alice Walker's novel *By the Light of my Father's Smile* (1998), as her prose in general, addresses issues of religious, ecology, feminism and sexuality. The article discusses the novel's depiction of the impact of organized religion on the social status of women with reference to both the novel's cultural settings and Alice Walker's personal experience. By deliberately breaking taboos about speaking openly of the sexual experience of women of color, the author intends to make her readers aware of the harm organized religion often causes to women all over the world. In her opinion, patriarchy unethically uses gender norms, as a way to benefit men over women. Walker thus commits herself to encouraging men who have been misguided by patriarchy to change their behaviour and righting their wrongs. She also strives to give oppressed women more confidence and courage to defend their freedom and independence.

Keywords

Black Feminism, United States, Christianity, patriarchy, sexuality

Wpływ zorganizowanej religii na status społeczny kobiet w powieści Alice Walker *W świetle uśmiechu mojego ojca*

Abstrakt

Powieść amerykańskiej autorki Alice Walker *By the Light of my Father's Smile* (W świetle uśmiechu mojego ojca), podobnie jak inne jej dzieła, porusza kwestie religii, ekologii, feminizmu i seksualności. W artykule omawiam sposób przedstawienia w powieści wpływu zorganizowanej religii na status społeczny kobiet, zarówno w odniesieniu do kontekstu kulturowego świata przedstawionego, jak i osobistych doświadczeń Alice Walker. Autorka, celowo łamiąc tabu otwartego mówienia o doświadczeniach seksualnych kobiet innej rasy niż biała, zamierza uświadomić czytelnikom, jak wielkie szkody kobietom na całym świecie wyrządzają instytucje religijne. Jej zdaniem patriarchat w nietetyczny sposób wykorzystuje kategorie płci w celu dominacji mężczyzn nad kobietami. Celem autorki jest zachęcenie czerpiących korzyści z patriarchatu mężczyzn do zmiany swojego zachowania i do naprawienia błędów. Walker stara się także dodać otuchy i odwagi do walki o wolność i niezależność uciskanym kobietom.

Słowa kluczowe

czarny feminizm, Stany Zjednoczone, chrześcijaństwo, patriarchat, seksualność

1. Introduction

Alice Walker became internationally known in the 1980s with the publication of *The Color Purple* and its subsequent film release. From the 1960s, she has been active in environmental, feminist and animal rights causes. Her fiction often confronts such issues as *racism, sexism and neocolonialism*. Being both Black and a woman, she is conscious of her position in the American artistic environment. In the preface to her book *The Same River Twice* (1996) she confesses: "I belong to a people so wounded by betrayal, so hurt by misplacing their trust, that to

offer us a gift of love is often to risk one's life, certainly one's name and reputation". Although she has attained fame and recognition in many countries, she still identifies with "her people", by which expression she does not mean only African Americans and Africans, but all suffering and humiliated people. Although Walker often risks her reputation, she keeps pronouncing on inconvenient and politically incorrect themes and keeps struggling for the improvement of these people's conditions. She has also campaigned against female genital mutilation. However, her political activity is only one method of her fighting against violence, racism and sexism. By elaborating on very controversial themes and breaking taboos in her writings, she greatly contributes to spreading the knowledge of human suffering, and finding ways of improvement.

By the Light of My Father's Smile,¹ published in 1998, like Walker's previous works again touches upon a number of serious issues. Through uniting such themes as spirituality and sex, religion and bodily experiences, the author often provides controversial, even provocative, scenes and images. The novel focuses on two African American women, Susannah and her sister, Magdalena, whose lives remain highly influenced and constrained by patriarchy. After the death of their father, they go on a trip to visit the last known location of Mundo – a tribe that lives in the Sierras of Mexico.

Since religion has always been one of Walker's main concerns, it is useful to briefly mention some of her previous statements before analyzing the novel. In April of 1995 she gave a lecture at Auburn Theological Seminary, presenting exploration of her own spiritual quest.² Walker claims that people are naturally good and do not need to practice any religion to be

¹ Henceforth in the references the title will be abbreviated to *BTL*. All references are to: Alice Walker, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1999.

² The text of the lecture was published under the title "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind" in Walker's (1997: 1-27) collection of essays *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*.

‘saved’. With all respect to God, Love and teachings of Jesus, she is at the same time strongly disappointed by organized religions, their ideologies and practices. She is aware of the fact that “[i]n fact, millions of people were broken, physically and spiritually, literally destroyed, for nearly two millennia, as the orthodox Christian Church «saved» them from their tradition worship of the Great Mystery they perceived in Nature” (Walker 1997: 17). Analyzing her memories of religious practices in her family and community, Walker also provides a detailed critique of Christian doctrines, and opposes them to her notion of paganism. According to Walker (1997: 17), “«Pagan» means «of the land, country dweller, peasant», all of which my family was. It also means a person whose primary spiritual relationship is with Nature and the Earth”. We find an embodiment of this notion of paganism in the image of Walker’s fictitious Mundo tribe, her own invention of an idyllic community living in harmony with Nature. However, the Mundo also performs another function: it serves as a contrast to the ‘civilized’ world, dominated by men and religion, and makes the flaws of the Western world more visible.

This article deals with the novel’s portrayal of the means by which organized religion and established institutions within society influence the way of treating women. I will start my analysis by outlining the depiction of Christianity. In the second part, I will turn my attention to specific cases, which make clear the influence of religion on the treatment of women. I will also outline Walker’s attempts of encouraging her audience to question the system of patriarchy and to find possible ways of living in harmony with Nature.

2. The depiction of Western spirituality

The representation of the Western culture in *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* is most easy to grasp through comparing it to its critique. In Walker’s novel all presented aspects of the fictitious Mundo tribe constitute a complete antithesis to the Western

world. It must be mentioned, however, that in describing the Mundo, the author focuses only on their teachings and theoretical aspects of their culture, whereas in the case of Western culture the reader learns a lot about people, their behavior and the way of functioning of the sociological institutions, without becoming acquainted with their cultural heritage. Thus, these two matters can hardly be related to each other and every comparison is condemned to be inaccurate and only partly true.

To start with, Walker gives a detailed analysis of the customs and traditions of the Mundo and explains their values and oral traditions. She shows that the tribe has its own prayers, songs and stories, which illustrate a reverence towards Mother Earth, humanity, and all living creatures. There is a Mundo prayer “Mama help us to help you”, which is a part of the Mundo initiation song. It serves as an introduction to the book, and runs as follows:

Anyone can see that woman is the mother
of the oldest man on earth
is it not then a prayer
to bow before her?

Anyone can see that man is the father
of the oldest woman on earth
is it not then a prayer
to bow before him? (*BTL* 161)

Yet, Walker’s narrative technique is criticized by Maria Lauret, because “in this novel, ideas often have to stand in for narrative development; they are talked through by the characters” and conveyed “by telling, rather than showing” (Lauret 2000: 208). This approach is also visible in Walker’s construction of Mundo beliefs and practices. There are no descriptions of people’s behavior that would help the reader to create an image of the tribe; the Mundo traditions and spirituality are made visible almost merely through the testimonies of a local boy, Manuelito. Through his narration, the reader has the impression

of an idyllic community, possessing great wisdom and noble morality. For instance, Manuelito informs Susannah's and Magdalena's father, Mr. Robinson (or rather his ghost who, from his spiritual perch, watches upon the lives of his daughters) that "[a]mong the Mundo is the teaching of nonpossession of others. [...] There is one other soul in each of our lifetimes to which we are primarily drawn. It is a body and a soul attraction" (*BTL* 96) or "We know woman and man as equals. Differently beautiful, as the elders would say" (*BTL* 162). Apart from Manuelito's testimonies, the impressions of the Robinsons are occasionally announced; for example, Susannah sees the Mundo as kind-hearted, naive people who cannot believe in the terrible things Christians try to make them believe in:

I thought about the Mundo, whom I had not really thought about in years. They had never understood how woman could be considered evil, either, since they considered her the mother of corn. When hearing of her original sin of eating the forbidden fruit, they scratched their chins again and said, even more gravely, Perhaps this is the one biggest lie that has unraveled your world (*BTL* 81).

Dhavaleswarapu (2018: 231f.) describes how the relation between religion and sex is being misused by Christian tradition and patriarchy:

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.

Thus, whereas the Mundo tribe is Walker's own invention of a utopian world, inhabited by peaceful, modest and virtuous people, the 'outside' world is the exact opposite to it in every respect: real life is shown with all its cruelty and injustice, as ruled by greed and bad men, who find pleasure in oppressing women.

In the depiction of the Western world, often "Walker [...] lets her character speak for herself", as Lauret (2000: 212) observes in the scene where Susannah talks about burning her books. Indeed, there are numerous situations in the novel where the characters formulate opinions already expressed by Walker in her previous books. In consequence, the whole novel is a very clear manifestation of the author's attitude toward Western culture and, in particular, its Christian ideals. In *By the Light of My Father's Smile* the reader does not witness any expressions of Christian spirituality or virtues. Nearly everything that is showed or told about Western culture demonstrates people's greed and selfishness. The institutions which are supposed to care for people and their well-being deteriorate the already existing problems: as Susanna's friend, Irene, tries to comprehend why "CIA helped to drug people in America", she reaches the conclusion that "your [American] government floods your communities with drugs, horrible ones [...] and then it comes in and arrests the young men for having them" (BTW 174).

Christianity is superficial, full of violence, hypocrisy and full of unjust accusations towards women. The religion fails to give meaning to people's life; Magdalena, lying in the hospital, reflects about the world of her students: "a world that was steadily turning to shit. Had always been shit. Money was the god of the culture into which they were born, and would live to hustle and die" (BTL 120).

The greatest paradox of the novel is that Mr. Robinson, who is an agnostic, masquerades as a minister. Being an anthropologist, he does so in order to receive funds for a project to study a tribe called the Mundo, of mixed African and Mexican descent. However, for Walker such a situation obviously is not very

surprising, since such – and also much worse – things happened so often in the history of Christianity. Among other things, this hypocrisy spoils Walker's approach toward Christianity and her image of the Christian God. In the essay called "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind" she reveals her strongest arguments against Christianity:

I try to imagine my mother and other women calling on God as they gave birth, and I shudder at the image of Him they must have conjured... That some people enslaved and abused others was taken for granted by Him. He ordered the killing of women and children, by the hundreds of thousands, if they were not of his chosen tribe. [...] Christianity, we were informed, had fought long and hard to deliver us from *that* ["heathenism"]. In fact, millions of people were broken, physically and spiritually, literally destroyed, for nearly two millennia, as the orthodox Christian Church "saved" them from their tradition worship of the Great Mystery they perceived in Nature (Walker 1997: 13-17).

As Dhavaleswarapu (2016: 46-48) points out, when patriarchy collaborates with any religion that privileges men over women, the patriarch of the family becomes more of a dictator than a loving, doting father. In the process of preaching Christianity, Mr. Robinson thrusts Christian ideals not only on the Mundo, but even on his family. He does not take all that is holy and wholesome in it, but rather gets inspired by the dictum of gender disparity and woman's subordination to man. He starts thrusting gender norms of performativity onto his daughters, who are not eager to accept them. As a result, his daughter Magdalena feels that he "wrecked her life", she begins to despise her father and is not capable of forgiving him. Walker through the novel argues that in a patriarchal world that is unkind to the sexuality of young women and girls, sexual status alone is used as a standard to measure their worthiness.

While in the book's reality Western culture, with its love to money, is dominating the whole world, it is Mundo spirituality,

which proves to be the only thing that survives after everything else becomes meaningless. The fact that Mr. Robinson, a sham Christian missionary, does not go after his death to the Christian heaven or purgatory, but rather finds his way to the Mundo after-life, is a clear sign of the rightness of Mundo beliefs. He then finally realizes his mistake of patriarchal arrogance, and tries to reconcile with his daughter in the afterlife. The minister meets his former disciple, Manuelito, who was and still is Magdalena's lover. Manuelito instructs Senor Robinson about Mundo beliefs and customs Robinson had failed to investigate; the boy helps him to fulfill two tasks one is supposed to do after their death and he teaches Mr. Robinson the Mundo initiation song in order to prepare the latter for the reconciliation with Magdalena. Manuelito even revises the Christian teachings he had heard from Mr. Robinson:

Did you really think we did not know we should love one another; that the person across from us is ourself? 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 does not know these things? (*BTL* 148).

We understood maybe only one thing about your Jesus Christ: that he was what you call a ghost. That he came back to spy on the confusion he had left. That he stayed only long enough to sort things out. To tell his people not to worry; to absolve them from blame. We were glad to hear he had returned from the dead; this made perfect sense to us. And also we liked him. He resembled a Mundo! Though we never believed he had a physical body that could actually be seen (*BTL* 150).

3. The position of woman in Western culture

3.1. Differences between men and women

Another issue that makes the influence of the culture on people's life well visible is how it treats women. The difference in

approaches toward men and women are deeply rooted in each society, and there are barely any civilizations in the world that treat these two sexes wholly equally.

Walker does not mention much about the Mundo treatment of women. We do not know, how Mundo society was structured and what their role models looked like. However, there are some elements that can make the reader assume that there were particular tasks for women and men; there is a description of women pottering, which indicates that there were separate domains, or in the already quoted scene when the Mundo people hear about the original sin it is mentioned that men heard it and women were informed by the men – which indicates that only men were going to church and hearing Robinson's sermons. The preacher recalls the behavior of Mundo girls: "Their own daughters [...] were [...] demure, interested in women's things" (*BTL* 18). Thus, Mundo women seem to feel free and happy and this is the most important thing; no matter how they reach this goal. We do not know, however, what their organization of childcare looks like and how far the responsibilities of their mothers reach. Although Walker does not explicitly tell anything about the role of women in her fictional tribe, through the narrative it becomes clear that the way the Mundo treat women is far more advantageous than it is in the case of Western cultures.

But then again, Walker's novel provides a wide range of situations from Western culture in which different approaches toward men and women become apparent, and, through the way of presenting certain characters and events, she also gives some explanations of the existing state-of-affairs.

The main female characters are presented as curious, spontaneous persons. They yearn for a personal freedom and an unimpeded expression of their own nature. The most striking example of such joyous person is Magdalena, "Magdalena the self-possessed, both willful and serene" (*BTL* 207), whose spontaneity is turned by her father into a tragedy for her and her family. In her childhood, her greatest passion is to spend time with

Mundo boys who “[teach] her [...] how to leap from one formidable boulder to another without breaking the leg [and] to run like the wind” (*BTL* 18). However, she is always tamed by her father who neither tolerates her love for playing with boys, nor does he understand her passion for riding horses. The punishment he imposes on her after finding her making love with her childhood friend, Manuelito, puts an end to Magdalena’s attempts of finding any more pleasant activities. This one particular event prevents her from further explorations of her surroundings and her own sexuality, and becomes her trauma which haunts her until the end of her life. She loses all her interests and finds her final and only satisfaction in eating: as her father notices some time after inflicting his punishment, she “especially [seems] to take perverse pleasure in gobbling food” (*BTL* 40). Having given up any other pleasures, Magdalena is condemned to this one passion and she finally dies from obesity.

All three women from the Robinson family have passions which men either do not understand or do not accept; for instance Mr. Robinson recalls his first reaction on his wife sleeping naked: “at night [she] wore nothing at all. Oh, what does God care about what I wear? she had asked the first night we slept together and I was stunned by her beauty, naked, but also profoundly shocked” (*BTL* 16). Another example of these different natures is Susannah’s marriage; she would quarrel with her husband “because she loved wearing high heels, which indeed made him look quite short” (*BTL* 7). Because of a number of such misunderstandings, and other ways of perceiving the reality, their marriage does not last long. After leaving her husband, Susannah tells Irene “I do not [want to get married]. I am already married to a life of experimentation, change [...]. If I marry I’m afraid I’ll turn to stone” (*BTL* 179). Apart from Magdalena, who is too heavily hurt by her father, the Robinson women are also very curious and frank. Mr. Robinson recalls, “I had the feeling that nothing of importance ever escaped [Langley’s] interest; that she was as open as a sea anemone to the prickling realities of the world. She was alive in her thoughts and her passions in

a way that I had ceased to be" (*BTL* 165). Langley also has the ability to understand other people, which she explains as follows: "I believe my own senses [...] I feel others because I feel myself" (*BTL* 165). Susannah is open to the surrounding world as well; her husband names her "a woman of curiosity" (*BTL* 46).

By the Light of My Father's Smile does not contain many portraits of men. The most detailed descriptions are those of Mr. Robinson and Petros, Susannah's husband. Although they have different places of origin and very different life experience, their masculine nature is the same: they do not understand their women and, being brought up in patriarchal societies, take it for granted that they are entitled to rule over their wives and children. On the contrary to women, men are not curious, and if they discover there is anything wrong in their family or environment, they are not able to right it. Since they are unable to understand many problems, they prefer to establish rules and create sets of rights, or simply to follow the already existing ones. Such a tendency can be observed in Mr. Robinson's reflections:

Spare the rod, spoil the child. One says that and swallows down one's immediate protest. Stifles the voice that hates the rod. Would never, on its own, have even thought about the rod. There was something in me, I found, that followed ideas, beliefs, edicts, that had been put into practice, into motion, before I was born. And this "something" was like an internationalized voice, a voice that drowned out my own. Beside which, indeed, my own voice began to seem feeble. Submissive (*BTL* 30).

When Robinson fails to tame his daughter's behavior, the only way he finds to solve his problem is to beat Magdalena. He is not even aware, until a very long time afterwards, of the fact that he follows the rules established by his ancestors, his male ancestors in particular. Walker's final evaluation of this event, and of the father's attitude is easily noticeable in the final scenes of the novel; although it is Magdalena who was "wild. Disobedient.

Wayward and head-strong" (*BTL* 26), it is the father who has to apologize and admit his guilt in the end.

The novel gives also one example of a male character, which is even more ordinary than Robinson and Petros. Pauline briefly mentions her father:

my father's stereotypical belligerence, hostility, maudlin and abusive bullying were not all there was to him. There was a whole other side... When he was in his right mood, as my mother called it. After he'd bathed and napped and had a good dinner, after he'd reviewed our report cards and found them satisfactory, after he'd forgone a first drink and lured my mother into their back bedroom, he was a father full of funny stories and play. He was a father who loved to repair things, a father who played the guitar (*BTL* 98).

His primary instincts, however, are eating, drinking and sex. By stating that all his defects are "stereotypical", Pauline expresses her general opinion about men.

3.2. The influence of organized religion on motherhood and matrimony

The images of femininity and masculinity provided in *By the Light of My Father's Smile* compose a picture of a world whose all aspects, including these, which are a women's domain, but are ruled by men. Obviously, one of these areas that are also dominated by men is motherhood. In the book *Mothers and Children*, published in 2001 by Susan Chase and Mary Rogers, there is a very detailed description of the notion of motherhood as an institution, which fits very well to the depiction of motherhood in Walker's novel. In the chapter entitled "The Institution and Experience of Motherhood" we find an extensive definition of the institution of motherhood:

To think of motherhood as an institution, then, is to focus on a society's specific mechanisms of shaping what mothers do and

how they feel about what they do, as well as others' treatment and expectations of mothers. In other words, as an institution, motherhood is a human invention rather than a natural phenomenon. This idea allows us to consider how motherhood changes over time and varies across societies. (...) Indeed, an anthropological review of 186 contemporary societies reveals that, after infancy, mothers have primary responsibility for children in only 20 percent of societies (Chase 2001: 60-61).

Apparently, Western countries do belong to these 20 percent of societies and this seems to be only a small part of the world's population. However, taking into consideration the depiction of motherhood, it is only the Western, patriarchal society that constitutes a matter of Walker's exploration. Almost each chapter of the novel portrays a mother – unfortunately, every single mother is a subject to this widely discussed and strongly criticized by Chase Western institution of motherhood. Further explorations of the notion of motherhood by Chase run as follows:

Bernard criticizes the modern Western institution of motherhood, especially its requirement that mothers suppress their own needs and desires, as oppressive to women. [...] Adrenne Rich also criticizes the institution of motherhood in her classic text, *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, published in 1976. She decries motherhood as a patriarchal institution, by which she means that men, as politicians, scientists, doctors, religious leaders, fathers, and husbands, have exerted legal, technical, and ideological control over all aspects of reproduction as well as the social meanings attached to motherhood and non-motherhood (Chase 2001: 61).

We find many indications of religious influence on the institution of motherhood and other established institutions within societies: the most shocking example is Lily Paul's mother. She and her husband, being very devout, follow their conjugal duty, and they "th[ink] birth control mean[s] murder" (*BTL* 103). As Pauline reports, "Babies dropped out of my mother's body every

year, like apples falling to the ground [...]. She had to wear a tight band around her lower body to hold her uterus in place” (*BTL* 102-103). Although Pauline’s mother’s health became worse and worse, she does nothing to prevent it from further deterioration. Lily Paul relates to Susannah the development of her mother’s illness: “She began to hate her body [...]. It was too fecund by half. Five children would have left her room to move around. She could eventually have caught her breath. With ten this was impossible” (*ibid.*). Although Pauline’s mother grows sick, this does not change her and her husband’s attitude toward child-bearing. Nor do they stop sleeping together, although it is, as Pauline assures, only her father’s pleasure (*BTL* 133).

People who follow their Christian duties from their own will are depicted as pitiful; but those who spread the religion are responsible for the evil evoked by Christianity, and dangerous. According to the image constructed by the novel, the main guilty are priests and missionaries. Different characters in the novel repeatedly express their opinion about missionaries’ and priests’ blameworthy behaviour, for instance while talking about genital mutilation Manuelito says: “Anthropologists, like the priests and the missionaries, have known about this for a long time. Without protest” (*BTL* 166). The masquerading as a minister Robinson, “preaching about stuff he hardly knew, or cared, a thing about” (*BTL* 91), serves as a good example of the missionaries’ ethics. Although he himself does not believe in God, he feels that he should serve for the Mundo as a model of a virtuous Christian and respected father, and so he badly punishes Magdalena for her disobedience. Through this act he comes between her and her mother and forces Langley to choose between him and Magdalena: Magdalena says that “[a]fter the beating she [the mother] was warm to me and cool to him for several weeks. Then, it simply evened out again” (*BTL* 27). In letting it be like before, Langley betrays her daughter. Magdalena does not forgive her until her death: “When she was dying I used to visit and read to her. She would doze, and then I would stop reading and stare at her face. I was trying to remember how

it felt to love her. For I ceased loving her when she abandoned me” (*BTL* 120). Thus, the father’s interference in the upbringing of the children effectively destroys all friendly relationships within the family.

Dhavaleswarapu (2016: 45-46) argues that children are discriminated by patriarchy on many counts like religion, sex, race, education and gender. The examples from the novel make visible why mothers in many cases are not in a position to negotiate the interests of their children. Black women, especially torn under tripartite curses of racism, sexism and classism, are not in a position to protect the interests of their children all the time. Thus, girls face utmost gender discrimination.

3.3. Ways of coping with the problem of being subjugated

The novel provides various cases of women’s discrimination, but also many ways of their coping with it. For me, the most hopeless situation is that of the women from the Ethiopian tribe Nuer, who are forced to wear heavy ceramic disks in their bottom lips. While it is true that the women’s horrible position is not originally caused by Western people, nor by their religion, we can still witness the harmful effects of Christian influence on the tribe’s women. This is how Mr. Robinson recalls his wife’s words describing her experience:

While I was there I stayed with missionaries who deplored everything about the tribe. Except these practices. They thought that since the women were the enforcers they had originally dreamed them up and were not oppressed by them. Besides, they said it was these symbols of tribal culture – the disks, the iron collar – that made the tribe unique. I said, but the lips and the necks of the women are raw and infected. And because the collars can never be taken off, their necks are never washed. They shrugged and said they passed out cotton swabs, and gallons of alcohol (*BTL* 165).

Whereas the status of the Nuer women is already appalling, and Christianity is supposed to care for people's mutual love, one would expect the missionaries to plead for the oppressed women. However, Langley's colleagues only shrug their shoulders; they are totally indifferent to the women's suffering. Thus, the women's situation is a lost cause; there is nobody from the outside to help them and they themselves do not undertake any attempts to change their condition. Walker, through the speech of Langley, explains why the women do not oppose this treatment: "By now they are the enforcers [...]. They have no memory or record of a time when they did not wear disks and did not wear iron collars with penises on them" (*BTL* 165).

Nonetheless, there are also women in Walker's novel who are given the chance to see their position in the society more objectively – and this is the first step that must be taken by women in order to free them from the trap of men's domination. One of them is Petros' mother, who is a woman born into the world ruled by men and the Church. She is trained to accept everything quietly and she does not bring the legitimacy of this system into question – until the moment when Susannah arrives at her house and starts to make remarks and ask questions. However, Petros' mother is so used to her own pitiful life that she wants rather to let it be as it is, than to accept the consequences of what might happen if she starts to yearn for freedom:

As [Susannah] forged ahead, I saw a shift occur in my mother's look. Very odd. For I had known it all my life to be a face with a certain limited range of emotional expression. I did not recognize the looks she was beginning to give my inquisitive wife. I saw my mother begin to awaken, against her will. As if from ancient sleep. To shake herself, as an animal after hibernation might do. I saw her rouse her memory. I saw her look down at herself, as if for the first time since girlhood, over sixty years ago, and see all the black clothing surrounding her, and her kerchief,

black, in all this Greek heat, tied under her chin. I saw that she feared what might happen to her, under Susannah's curious questions (*BTL* 46-47).

The next stage of women's awakening and fighting against their discrimination in *By the Light of My Father's Smile* is visible through the person of Pauline. Her childhood is "worse than being cooked and eaten by the witch" (*BTL* 101). She is betrayed by her own, very pious, parents as they make her drunk and leave her alone with Winston. Her own mother, who has ten children of her own and apparently not a very happy conjugal life, tries to pass her own misfortune on Pauline. When it turns out that Pauline is pregnant, she says only "how lucky [you were] Winston was around and that he was someone who wanted [you]" (*BTL* 105). To Pauline's problems with her husband, she replies only "a married woman ha[s] to do what her husband want[s]" (*BTL* 107). Despite a lack of support, Pauline somehow manages to gain an education and start a life on her own, which her mother considers to be "abandoning" her and does not forgive Pauline until her own death. The reader does not learn what the mother's motives are, but as we see, her piety only makes her act against herself and against her daughter. However, the attitude of her mother³ and all experience Pauline

³ The problem between Pauline and her mother approaches another question as well. Namely, Pauline repeatedly tells Susannah that she felt betrayed by her mother. On the other hand, we witness how Pauline loved her mother regardless all her faults "I loved her with all my daughter's heart; hearing that she dies blaming me for abandoning her caused me to suffer" (*BTL*, 129). June, who does not forgive her mother her 'betrayal', has to do this after her death. Thus, Walker conveys a message that children should have understanding for their parents. She is convinced that every mother hurts her children: "I've discovered that the world is full of mothers who've done their best and still hurt their daughters: that we have daughters everywhere" (Walker 1997: 13), but she ascertains that daughters should forgive their mothers and vice versa:

"I felt then, as I do now, that we daughters must not forsake our mothers, who have been led – by men holding books that justify despicable behavior toward women and Nature – into the very evils Nature and common sense would have them avoid. And we mothers must stand by our daughters, and protect them from harm, using what wits we have left

has to go through does not make her weak nor does it destroy her own will; on the contrary, it makes her stronger and more ambitious. Pauline manages to become “a powerful, bold, opinionated woman” (*BTL* 106) and becomes a feminist. However, the term ‘feminist’ may not be quite adequate since feminist theology has been accused of not including the concerns of women of color (Lysik 2009: 139). Hence, even though Walker does not explicitly tell whether Pauline is black or not, the character suits Walker’s definition of a womanist very well.⁴ Pauline proves that one of the most important moments in liberation from the direct domination of men is taking control over one’s own sexual life. Gena, her first lover, teaches her how to take pleasure from sex. Pauline stresses the significance of their sexual intimacy: “It had this incredible nurturing quality; it was the kind of affectionate sex that seemed designed to reconnect me to myself, to keep me alive” (*BTL* 132), thus explaining the meaning of the novel’s subtitle. When Lily Paul meets Susannah in a women’s club, they start detailed discussions on Pauline’s story of survival and general problems of oppressed women, for instance their orgasmic freedom. Whereas Walker seeks to express in the novel her reflections about “how organized religion has systematically undermined and destroyed the sexual and spiritual beliefs of millions of indigenous people” (Walker/White 1998), most of her messages are conveyed through Pauline’s dialogues with Susannah, for instance “Women all over the world have been brainwashed to think sex is not meant to be pleasurable to them, only to the men fucking them” (*BTL* 130). Showing all the suffering and cruelty of the world is, however, not Walker’s only goal. The

after five millennia of patriarchal destruction, domination and control” (Walker 1996: 172).

⁴ Parts of the definitions mostly suitable for Pauline: “1. A black feminist or feminist of color... Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered «good» for one. 2. A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. [...]”. See also: Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* and *King*, Debra Walker (2018). “Alice Walker’s *Jesus: A Womanist Paradox*”. *Forum on Public Policy Online 1*. Oxford: Oxford Round Table.

reader becomes the witness of how at least one of the male characters, Mr. Robinson, manages to understand his cruelty and how he struggles to right his mistakes.

The novel's final lesson takes place after everyone's death, in the Mundo afterlife. After a very long time of preparation, everybody is ready to participate in a great family's reunion. Eventually, Magdalena and Manuelito can fulfill their destiny and make love together by the light of Magdalena's father's smile. It takes Mr. Robinson a long time to prepare himself for this ceremony. In the same manner in which Manuelito helps Magdalena's father to get rid of his Western way of thinking about sex, Walker gradually prepares the reader for her vision of an undisturbed and joyous love, without false shame, and among blessing and kisses from the parents.

4. Conclusion

By the Light of My Father's Smile is a strongly autobiographical novel. It bears many signs of Walker's personal experience such as descriptions of Langley's trips to Africa; and similarly there are allusions to her personal struggles of defending victimized people. In this fashion, the essence of Walker's novel carries one of her most important messages, which is to show the daily tribulations that women and minorities have to face. Through her words she illuminates the unpleasant lives of discriminated people who cope with everyday difficulties of a patriarchal society. She not only portrays the situation of American women, but also makes many references to oppressed peoples all over the world, such as women in Iran or Gypsies in Europe. Walker transgresses even the limits of good taste, for instance while portraying Pauline's childhood, in order to reveal what many people refuse to notice on their own. Moreover, she presents the negative consequences of blind obedience toward traditional religions and puts into question religious doctrines, for example through letting Irene make a remark on religious books that contain instructions about the size and shape of the stones to

be used for stoning of women. Walker's intention is to make people aware of the flaws of organized religion and to convey the tragic truth about women all over the world. Moreover, Walker strives to provide strength to oppressed women to fight for a better future and to encourage both sexes to question the patriarchal system.

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Jadwiga Grunwald
ORCID iD: 0000-0003-2483-1258
Independent Scholar
jadwiga82@poczta.onet.pl