

The Analysis of the Other's Images in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*

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ABSTRACT. *By the Light of My Father's Smile* is a famous novel written by Alice Walker in 1998. This paper analyses the definition of the other and explores the Other's images presented in the novel from the conflict between the different sexes.

KEYWORDS: *Alice Walker, the Other's images, male chauvinism*

1. Introduction

The study of contemporary feminism on the other and the Other's philosophy is an impact on the patriarchal centralism, and from the perspective of philosophical theory, it also criticizes the idea of dual opposition between the Subject and the Object that supports this system. Simona de Beauvoir was the person who earlier explored the definition of the other from a feminist standpoint in her book *The Second Sex* published in 1949. "He is the Subject, the Absolute, and she is the other." [1] In this book, Beauvoir explores the Other is women, which contains several meanings: "Men are autonomous, women are autonomous; the reference for defining and differentiating women is men, but the reference for defining and differentiating men is not women; women exist mainly as sex for men, she is sex for him; A woman is a subordinate person, a secondary person who is opposed to the principal." [2] Thus, as the other, women are subsidiary, involuntary, secondary and determined. *By the Light of My Father's Smile* is a novel written by Alice Walker, a black American woman writer, in 1998. The novel takes the contradiction between fathers and daughters as its main breakthrough point, reflecting the fate of black women under the domination of patriarchal centralism. This paper mainly analyses the image of the other in the novel from the contradiction and conflict between the different sexes.

2. The Image of the Other in the Relation between Fathers and Daughters

Alice Walker has always been concerned about the relationship between men and women. In many of her works, Walker describes the oppression of men against

their wives in a patriarchal society. In *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, she further explores the relationship between fathers and daughters. In fact, Walker has always been sensitive to the relationship between fathers and daughters.

In *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, Walker tells the stories of at least three families in which the fathers' actions destroyed or hurt their daughters. First, Robinson was an educated anthropologist who led his family to the mountains as a priest to study the mixed descendants of black and Indians living in the Seramadre Mountains of Mexico. Mr. Robinson has two daughters: Megdelina and Susanna. The two daughters are quite different. Megdelina is tall, strong, reckless and enthusiastic; Susanna is quiet, elegant and persistent. Susanna is a lady in her father's eyes, while Megdelina, who has never wanted to be a "doll" and hates being "Daddy's good daughter", has become the main object of her father's control. During Megdelina's childhood, the beautiful scenery of the Mexican mountains touched her nature. She likes to play with Mendo's boys, who also like to play with her. "They taught her how to jump up and down on big pebbles without breaking her leg. They also taught her how to run as fast as the wind." [3] Magdalena is full of curiosity about everything and dares to stare at what she is interested in. This curiosity made Mr. Robinson feel embarrassed and anxious. He did not understand his daughter, and his desire to control her prevented him from communicating with her. Megdelina wanted a pair of pants like her father's, with zippers in front. Mother found her a red pants with zippers, which aroused Robinson's disgust and dissatisfaction. He thinks that "she is interested in, even at such a young age, only men, just things in men's crotch". [4] In fact, all that fascinates Megdelina is the zipper, because her father once gave her a small round wallet with a hidden gold zipper on it. When their family moved to Mexico, she lost the wallet. For Megdelina, the purse was a gift from her father, representing her father's love for her.

Robinson "loves" his two daughters, hoping to cultivate them into ladies who meet the standards of white upper class society. And this kind of love is actually a kind of possession and control, a kind of ownership in driving. Everything for a daughter is at his disposal, and no one else, even the mother of the child, has the right to interfere. He inspected his daughter's wardrobe, ordered her a long white dress and Marilyn shoes, and bought a delicate square scarf to tie her hands and feet. Robinson holds the right of naming his daughter and forbids Mendos to call Megdelina a mad dog, although a mad dog is a synonym for wisdom in the Mendo tribe. He interfered with his daughter's making friends with others, especially forbidding her to associate with Mendo's "wild boy", and he also seriously interfered with her sexual choice. His control over his daughter led to the tragedy of the whole family. When he found out that Megdelina and Manuel, the young man of Mendo, had stolen the forbidden fruit, he thrashed her with a belt full of silver buckles which represented love from Manuel to Megdelina. The whipping incident had a great impact on both daughters. Megdelina thought, "I just had such a good time, and then I was beaten like that by my father. How do I understand his violence?" [5] Susanna "peeps into our simple boudoir from the keyhole and sees her tender, compassionate father become a monster with her own eyes." [6] Mr. Robinson was no longer able to bring his daughter back to him with love, leaving

serious trauma to Susanna's young heart, and Megdelina's revenge for her father arose. Patriarchy not only has a profound impact on white people, but also is a destructive factor in the region where black people live. Patriarchy plays a role through gender and hierarchy, which constitutes a problem that women must face. Robinson was seriously influenced by patriarchy. When the whipping happened, his wife, Lanli, screamed, "Slaves are being whipped like this!" [7] Her screams show the phenomenon of violent transformation among blacks. As an anthropologist, Robinson should know clearly that black slaves are often whipped by white slave owners. In order to make their dominant position more stable and control the independent consciousness of the elite slaves, the white slave owners often beat the slaves brutally. After gaining freedom, black men dominated the family and began to imitate their white slave owners and lash their wives and children violently. Robinson also regretted whipping his daughter, but he also believed that "children can't be beaten without a weapon. Whoever reads this proverb will swallow back the words of rebellion that come out of his heart, and the voice against the stick will be suppressed, even if he does not think of the stick itself. Many concepts, beliefs and laws had already become the norms or patterns of people's behavior before I was born, and naturally I was also imperceptibly influenced." [8] In Robinson's subconscious mind, the Christian God's claim that man has sovereignty is completely interpreted as that man has sovereignty over the whole world, of course, including women. He thinks that his daughter is his private property and can let her grow up according to his opinions. He does not allow her to rebel against him.

There are ten children in Polin's family. Her father works in a meat packing factory, dirty, tired and poorly paid. "Train workers who can hardly speak English on noisy, greasy machines, and they quickly rise to a higher level in the factory than he does." [9] Thus, his father was filled with resentment and expressed all his resentment and self-pity on the door of his home. "The wounded door was ugly and terrible, full of bitterness, just like the life inside the door." [10] Polin's family is very poor. Twelve people are crowded into three rooms. They don't throw anything at home. Even the leftover bones are left to boil soup. When Winston appeared as a friend of her family and showed great interest in her, both her parents thought that Polin should marry him. In the patriarchal society at that time, men thought that women were their accessories. Women should obey men's assignment and orders. Women were men's "slaves" and tools of sexual intercourse. Polin's parents thought that a married woman must do what her husband wants her to do. After Polin continued to be indifferent to Winston, her father led his family to help Winston get drunk and let Winston rape her. Polin was trapped in an emotionless marriage and was forced to flee in a few years.

Irene is also a person oppressed by patriarchal domination. Although she has little contact with her father, she is also a victim of his actions. Irene is a dwarf, which is considered a punishment of God for Irene's mother. Irene's father was a wicked scoundrel who raped Irene's mother. Irene's mother's father and brothers decided not to acknowledge the fact that the incident had shamed their family and flogged Irene's mother. When Irene was born, her mother died and Irene was sent to church as a servant at a young age. Irene's father ignored her, even when all her

brothers inherited his huge legacy after his death. Irene had no inheritance, just a slave to the church. She lived in a small room behind the church. No one wanted to associate with Irene. Only when her seven brothers died did she enjoy the right of inheritance and begin to travel around the world.

3. The Image of the Other in the Relations between Couples

Sexism generally refers to disgust or discrimination based on the gender differences of persons rather than on the advantages and disadvantages of persons, but it can also be used to refer to any discrimination caused by gender. In a patriarchal society, women have been oppressed by sexism for a long time. Sexism is not influenced by race, by black women, by women of other races, including white women. Women are the other and are the accessory to men. The Other image is also reflected in the relationship between husbands and wives in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*.

Irene is a white Greek woman whose mother is a victim of patriarchy. In Greece, there is a tradition that "if a woman humiliates a man in any way, the man in the family has the right to kill her." [11] Irene's parents are a couple who have not been married by a matchmaker. Irene's mother was raped by Irene's father, a wicked scoundrel. Irene's mother was just what Irene called her father's plaything, and she was abandoned afterwards. Her father and brothers not only did not show sympathy for her, but also decided not to admit the fact and they thought it was a disgrace to their family. They tied her hands and feet together, covered her face with a black cloth and whipped her to death. Irene was born a dwarf and was considered a punishment by God for her mother. When she was young, she was sent to church as a servant. No one spoke to her and she was forbidden to leave the church. In fact, Irene and her mother's experience is not a special case. In Greece, women have often been treated unfairly since ancient times. Stoning women has a long history. Not far from Irene's church, you can see a stone pillar, where women were killed with stones. "Men in this area didn't know how many girls were killed with stones before they got their bragging democracy." [12] It was not invented by Greeks to kill women with stones. It happened in Asia, even more serious. In Saudi Arabia and Iran, there have been many incidents of stoning women to death, and a few brave women and men risk their lives to make them public. The subordinate status of women and the image of the other are also reflected in the oppression suffered by African women. Walker also describes the suffering of African women in his novel.

In poor areas of southwestern Ethiopia, women are forced to hang plate-sized porcelain plates on their lower lips, and women have to hang them in front of men. In the local areas, the status of women in men's minds is determined. Hanging heavy porcelain plates on women's lower lips ensures that women are silent and barely able to speak in front of men, while heavy porcelain plates on women's lower lips also make it much slower for women to eat than men, ensuring that men can eat more food. As a result, men have a stronger physique, guaranteeing that men have a superior and higher status. Those missionaries came to Africa to explore everything in Africa, but nobody cared who forced women to wear heavy porcelain plates or

iron collars. They regard it as a symbol of ethnic tribal culture and distinctiveness, ignoring the suffering of women.

In European culture, there is the saying “women first”, which has long influenced other cultures. But how did this idea come about? Because in the early days, if women were allowed to walk behind men, they would run away; if women were allowed to walk ahead, men could watch them and prevent them from running away. After that, women became more and more tame, and men were reluctant to admit that their women wanted to run away and invented chivalry. Susanna’s husband, Peter Ross, is always complaining about women. In his eyes, no matter what kind of woman, there are shortcomings for him. Because Susanna loves wearing high heels and makes him look shorter, he quarrels with Susanna. Under the influence of patriarchy, a husband should always be in a higher position than his wife. They oppress their wives and abuse their power to control them.

The oppression of black women comes from both racial discrimination and gender discrimination of black men. Black men use their dominant position in the family to transfer the oppression from the white persons to women in the family. Polin’s mother was one good example for this aspect. Outside the family, he was discriminated against and oppressed by white people, and when he got home he vented his grievances. “Fighting, hatred, self-pity, scolding and intimidation are my father’s stereotypes.” [13] In Polin’s father’s eyes, Polin’s mother is just a tool to relieve pressure and give birth to children. When he was in a good mood, he would trick his wife into having sex with him in the cottage. Polin’s mother had a baby fall out of her stomach every year. “In order to keep the uterus from drooping, she had to tie a tight abdominal band around her abdomen.” [14] Polin’s father had little love for Polin’s mother, nor did he care about her, but blindly owned and controlled her. Although Polin’s mother got grey hair, rickety body, hobbled, she still was pregnant every year and continued to bear children.

In Robinson and Lanley’s husband-wife relationship, people will think that their relationship is equal. Robinson and Lanley are both highly educated anthropologists. Robinson and Lanley share common interests and topics of discussion. Lanley was a black upper-class person. After graduating from an aristocratic kindergarten, she went to boarding school and then went to college in Maine. Robinson graduated from Hampton College in the South, all on his own. When he first met Lanley, he was so poor that he had only one suit. He felt that he did not deserve Lanley and would not treat his wife like other patriarchal men. But in fact, Robinson was also deeply influenced by patriarchy, believing that he was the main leader of the family and had the right to control everything in the family. He controlled his daughter’s dress, hobbies and friends, and refused to allow Lanley to interfere. In front of Lanley, he whipped Megdelina in spite of Lanley’s obstruction, which also caused harm to Lanley. Lanley was more important to Robinson as a tool of sexual intercourse. When Lanley witnessed the whipping of Megdelina and was unable to interfere, she was so sad that she refused to speak to Robinson or let him enter her bedroom door. Robinson can’t do without his sexual dependence on his wife. He thinks that if he doesn’t have sex with Lanley, he would walk like a corpse and his soul is empty. That would drive him crazy. After beating his daughter, he confessed to his wife. In

fact, he was afraid that his wife was indifferent to his sex. So it is hard to say that it was totally from his heart. He only achieved illusory achievement through sexual domination and completed the material replacement from “patriarchy” to “ownership”.

4. The Image of the Other in the Relations between Lesbians

In patriarchal society, male-dominated sexual forms are considered as the only normal sexual relationship. Men control the dominant part of the society, and women are merely sexual tools or child-rearing tools. Sexual life is not for women, but for men. In the novel, in order to break down the sexual dominance of patriarchy in the West, Walker chose the lesbian relationship to reflect the oppression and resistance suffered by women.

One of the lesbian relationships mentioned by Walker in *By the Light of My Father's Smile* is Polin and Gina. Gina is a white woman, the daughter of one Eastern European immigrant. Most of the immigrants were racists, but Gina was not. Gina believes that gypsies, blacks and other colored people should be recognized. Polin comes from an African-American family and her living conditions are very difficult. Polin's father works in a meat processing factory and his mother has a child every year. Twelve people live in a three-bedroom house. When she was fifteen years old, her family betrayed her and Winston conspired with her family to rape her. Her lesbian partner, Gina, helped her out of her disappointment. This kind of homosexual love has certain educational significance. It helps Polin realize her freedom and potential. Polin said “Besides, unlike anything you might read about in *Playboy*, we have an incredible nourishing effect. It's the kind of tender sex that seems to be designed for me. It's a way to reconnect me with myself and keep me alive.” [15] From the lesbian relationship, she gained self-awareness, and even a new understanding of her suffering.

Many black women writers have described lesbian relationships in their works. It also shows that love between black women is a way for them to resist racial and gender oppression, learn to understand themselves, learn to love and survive. For women, being a lesbian is an act of resistance in a society dominated by men. In this kind of sexual relationship between women, men lose their central position. Therefore, this new gender relationship subverts the imperialist domination of male cultural rights over female heterosexuality.

In the novel, another pair of lesbians mentioned by Walker is Polin and Susanna. The homosexual relationship between Susanna and Polin is a rebellion against gender domination in the patriarchal society. In the patriarchal society, Susanna and Polin were insulted and hurt. Heterosexuality is often a compulsory sexual politics in the patriarchal society. Despite her economic independence, Susanna is still afraid of losing herself in heterosexuality. Susanna's homosexual relationship with Polin is a reaction to the patriarchal social politics. Women and men should also enjoy sexual rights. Susanna thought that Polin had led her directly to her locked inner door. “Without our relationship, I would never have had such a rich experience. It is

no wonder that a single physical act brings so much pleasure and excitement to the human spirit that the church regards it as a devil.” [16] The emergence of Polin made Susanna have a freer and deeper understanding of sex.

In a society dominated by men, women are considered to be the transmitters or followers of culture, not the creators of culture. Women are inferior to men, which is the great influence of the traditional Western patriarchy. Walker encourages women to be brutal, bold, brave, capricious and capable. Black women should break the restriction of their thoughts, believe in their own power and legalize their sexual rights.

5. Conclusion

This paper mainly analyzes the construction of the Other’s image in *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* from the relationship between fathers and daughters, couples and lesbians. Women are considered to be the other for men. Women as the other are oppressed in the patriarchal society under the male power. They are not free, they are only controlled by men and they are used to please men. Blacks and other colored people have also suffered the control of racism and Western white centralism. They have either lost their identity and lost themselves like Robinson or lost their freedom and suffered the slavery and persecution like the Mendo or Gypsies.

Acknowledgments

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