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ALEKSANDRA IZGARJAN

English Department

Faculty of Philosophy

University of Novi Sad

aleksandra.izgarjan@ff.uns.ac.rs

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5050-1781>

The Possibility of Transformation: (Un)stereotypical Images of African American Female Characters in Alice Walker's Oeuvre from 1970 to 1990

From the inception of Alice Walker's literary oeuvre, she has sought to dismantle stereotypes about African American women created by the dominant white community. Chela Sandoval argues that stereotypes are not merely individual prejudices but part of larger social processes that maintain inequality. At the same time, she highlights the creative and strategic forms of resistance developed by marginalized communities. The article suggests that Walker does not merely replace negative stereotypes of African American women by positive images. Rather, she exposes stereotypes as an ideological mechanism that sustains racial, gendered and class domination. The author charts African American women's development of differential consciousness through which these representations are challenged, deconstructed and ultimately transformed.

Keywords: stereotypes, African American women, Alice Walker, methodology of oppression, deconstruction, transformation

Могућност трансформације: (Не)стереотипне представе афроамеричких женских ликова у делу Алис Вокер од 1970. до 1990. године

Алис Вокер се од почетка свог стваралачког опуса трудила да деконструише стереотипе о Афроамериканкама које је створила доминантна бела заједница. Чела Сандовал сматра да стереотипи нису само предрасуде појединаца, већ део већих процеса који одржавају неједнакост у друштву. Она истиче да маргинализоване заједнице развијају креативне и стратешке облике отпора. Чланак износи гледиште да Вокер не замењује само негативне стереотипе о Афроамериканкама позитивним. Напротив, она огољује стереотипе као идеолошки механизам који подржава расну, родну и класну доминацију. Вокер истражује развој диференцијалне свести Афроамериканки помоћу које оне преиспитују, деконструишу и на крају трансформишу ове представе.

Кључне речи: стереотипи, Афроамериканке, Алис Вокер, методологија опресије, деконструкција, трансформација

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I focus on the novels and the short story collection Alice Walker published from 1970 to 1990 because in this period she deliberately chose to deal with the stereotypes about African American women since she saw them as closely linked to the causes of their oppression. It is clear that Walker believes that the dismantling of stereotypes will lead to freedom from patriarchal and racist norms which restrict the lives of African Americans. I will use the methodology developed by Chela Sandoval in her book *Methodology of the Oppressed* in which she maintains that stereotypes are one way of subjugating the marginalized communities through negative images created about them. I will also rely on Hortense Spillers' notion that African Americans were "culturally unmade" after the Middle Passage and in slavery when Christianity and Anglophone, white culture were imposed upon them. Furthermore, I will use Barbara Christian's suggestion that negative stereotypes about African American women served in the process of othering them in the American society. Equally useful for me is Patricia Hill Collins's concept of the matrix of domination. It refers to ideologies, controlling images, and institutionalized practices which maintain structural inequality despite societal changes.

DIVISION OF ALICE WALKER'S OEUVRE

In the paper, I divided Alice Walker's oeuvre into two parts which are based on the way she approached the stereotypes about African American women and showcased them in her characters. In the first part (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian* and *In Love & Trouble*), Walker features female characters who are the victims of intersectional racial, class and gender oppression. They embody the stereotypical images the white society imposed on them because the enormity of their oppression prevents them from freeing themselves from patriarchal and racial norms which imprison them. In the second part of her oeuvre (*The Color Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar*), Walker presents the characters who struggle with oppression but manage to achieve balance in their personal lives. They continue to face systemic repression in a larger society, but thanks to the full potential they achieved in their lives and interpersonal relationships, they make a positive impact in the wider society.

METHODOLOGY: STEREOTYPES AS THE MECHANISM OF OPPRESSION

In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval examined how marginalized groups resist systems of domination. This work is of special value to the study of stereotypes because, as Sandoval shows in her study, political and economic structures maintain systemic oppression through culture, language and social narratives. Stereotypes are among the mechanisms through which power is maintained, as they reduce individuals and communities to simplified and often negative images. However, Sandoval suggests that marginalized groups can challenge and transform these negative images. Stereotypes justify discrimination and maintain social hierarchies. But because they are constructions related to social categories of race, gender and class, they can be deconstructed and rejected (Sandoval 2000, 77–102). One of the main ideas in *Methodology of the Oppressed* is that of differential consciousness, the ability to move strategically between different identities, perspectives, and political positions according to the demands of a particular situation. This concept challenges the rigid categories that stereotypes depend upon. While stereotypes attempt to define people through fixed assumptions based on race, gender, ethnicity, or class, differential consciousness allows individuals to reject these limitations and embrace more complex and fluid identities. In this way, Sandoval presents adaptability as a powerful form of resistance against reductive forms of representation (Sandoval 2000, 53–74). Sandoval relies on semiotic theory to examine how meaning is produced through

language, symbols and images. She argues that stereotypes function as signs that communicate and reinforce dominant ideologies. Media, popular culture and social institutions often circulate these representations, shaping perceptions of marginalized groups. Because oppressed communities frequently encounter such representations in their everyday lives, their critical awareness of these processes exposes stereotypes as products of social and historical processes instead of natural or inevitable truths. Resistance therefore becomes an active and strategic process rather than simply a rejection of negative labels. Sandoval emphasized coalition-building among different marginalized groups. Stereotypes target communities in different ways and often operate through similar mechanisms of simplification and exclusion (Sandoval 2000, 57–63, 140–156). Recognizing these shared experiences can foster solidarity across social and cultural differences. By working together, diverse groups can more effectively challenge the structures that produce and sustain stereotypical representations. In the analyses of Walker's works I will apply Sandoval's methodology to show the ways African American female characters create coalitions that help them to revise the stereotypes about them and replace them with positive images. These characters reflect efforts of African American women in real life who tirelessly worked on deconstructing harmful stereotypes imposed upon them and gave way to new methods of reading and resisting them.

CONSTRUCTION OF STEREOTYPES IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

At the time when slaves were imported from different tribes, countries and continents, the imposition of stereotypes upon African American men and women was a struggle for cultural control and definition of a people by the dominant culture which at the same time denied them self-definition. When they were kidnapped and taken away from their family, community and wider society, slaves lost connections with their language, culture, ethnicity and nationality. During the Middle Passage, slaves were stripped of all markings of their cultural identity. Baptized as Christians and repeatedly renamed every time they were sold; they were forced to cope in a new environment. Hortense Spillers points out that the slaves were "culturally unmade" (Spillers 1987, 452) by losing all features of gender and ethnicity and ultimately belonging to a family and community.

Hazel Carby argues that the aim of the stereotypes is not to reflect or illustrate reality, but to function as a mask or mystification of the real social relations (Carby 1978, 8). Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins suggests that

[i]ntersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence. [...] Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mam-mies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression. [...] As part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or creating new ones. [...] These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life. Even when the initial conditions that foster controlling images disappear, such images prove remarkably tenacious because they not only subjugate U.S. Black women but are key in maintaining intersecting oppressions. (Collins 2002, 69)

As Barbara Christian observes, from the beginning of slavery, the African woman was the basis for the definition of the American Society's Other. This Othering provided ideological justification for race, gender and class oppression (Christian 1980, 160). As ideological Others, Africans were devoid of human status and constructed as a middle link between apes and humans. Supposed mating between orangutans and African females was used as an explanation of their origin. This assumption led to two stereotypes: one which represented all African Americans as animalistic and sexually aggressive and the other which represented African American males as lusting after white woman since she is the next link in the mythically presupposed chain of the origin of men (Christian 1980, 1-3). Here we see the dehumanizing aspect of stereotypes at work which completely erases and negates humanity of African Americans. However, more than that, we see an epistemological process which created a foundation for identity formation of both white and black members of society which rested upon binary oppositions. Toni Morrison aptly summarized this epistemological process by saying that the whites used African Americans to define their identity by forming a dichotomy between subject and object, us and them, self and the Other. African Americans became a means with which white man identified himself as powerful, unconquered and lawful. In comparison, black men and women were powerless, conquered and outside of any legal jurisdiction. Equally importantly, white men did not perceive themselves as a blind error of

civilization, but as progressive fulfillment of the Manifest Destiny (Morrison 1993, 10). The same Manifest Destiny that gave white settlers the right to buy, own and exploit slaves, exterminate indigenous tribes, take away and colonize their land, put them on reservations, and place their children in boarding schools where they were systemically abused. Applying Sandoval's methodology, we can say that binary oppositions act as the mechanisms through which power is maintained. By reducing African Americans to simplified and negative images, the white society erased their culture, stripped them of their humanity and in doing so, tried to justify their subjugation.

There were four dominant stereotypes about African American slave women: mammy, loose black woman or Jezebel, conjurer and tragic mulatta. They originated through the roles African American women played in American society and they were the most developed and persistent stereotypes. They also testify to the key roles African American women played in sustaining the patriarchy as a system in American society and establishing the status of the white woman as a lady and an angel of the house. American slave society embraced this Victorian (and feudal) image of a white lady as fragile, helpless, religious, highly moral and faithful to her husband (Christian 1980, 14). The social standing of a man was determined by the number of slaves he could provide for his woman's leisure. Exploitation of slaves enabled white women to relinquish their maternal and domestic duties to female slaves and assume the role of an angel of the house and a paragon of Christian virtue. We see once more that the identity of white woman was constructed on the binary opposition with the black woman. As suggested by Sandoval, these images do not describe reality; rather, they produce it by limiting how African American women can be seen and therefore how they can exist socially.

From the perspective of Sandoval, the mammy stereotype can be understood as a technology of domination designed to stabilize racial, gendered, and class hierarchies within the plantation system. She argues that systems of power produce differential forms of subjectivity that are strategically mobilized to maintain hegemonic social relations. The mammy figure functioned as one such constructed subject position, mediating the contradictions inherent in the ideology of slavery and white supremacy.

Within the social order of the antebellum South, white womanhood was associated with ideals of purity, virtue, and moral superiority. However, the realities of motherhood – including pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding – complicated this idealized image by linking women to bodily functions that contradicted prevailing notions of feminine puri-

ty. While motherhood was celebrated for its reproductive function and its role in preserving property and lineage, its physical dimensions were largely displaced onto African American women. This division produced what may be understood as a differential organization of motherhood: white women embodied its spiritual and moral dimensions, whereas African American women were assigned its physical labor.

The mammy stereotype emerged as a discursive solution to this contradiction. In Sandoval's terms, it operated as a mode of ideological regulation that naturalized unequal social relations by presenting them as harmonious and mutually beneficial. The mammy was represented as exceptionally loyal, nurturing, and self-sacrificing. Unlike other racist depictions of African Americans, which emphasized intellectual inferiority, the mammy was portrayed as possessing enough wisdom to recognize and willingly accept white authority. Her devotion to white families was depicted not as coerced labor but as a natural expression of affection and fulfillment.

This ideological construction extended to representations of the mammy's body. She was typically portrayed with her hair covered by a headscarf, symbolically suppressing markers of African American femininity and cultural identity. Simultaneously, her body was represented as maternal rather than sexual. As Sandoval notes, dominant systems of power rely on the strategic production of subjectivities that can be incorporated into existing structures without threatening them. The mammy's asexuality rendered her a safe and acceptable presence within white households, eliminating any perceived challenge to white domestic stability. Her physical appearance and religious devotion further reinforced her image as a benign and morally beneficial figure whose existence served the interests of white families.

Through Sandoval's framework, the mammy stereotype can be interpreted as an ideological mechanism that secured consent for racial domination by masking relations of exploitation. The stereotype obscured the violence of slavery and transformed coerced reproductive and domestic labor into a narrative of willing service. Moreover, by depicting African American women as more devoted to white children than to their own families, it disrupted and delegitimized African American maternal identities. The stereotype thus functioned not only to justify the exploitation of African American women but also to undermine the social and emotional bonds that could foster resistance within enslaved communities.

Sandoval's analysis of oppositional consciousness is particularly relevant in this context because it highlights the gap between imposed iden-

tities and lived experiences. While the mammy stereotype sought to define African American women through a fixed and submissive subject position, enslaved women continually negotiated, resisted, and exceeded such representations. Their lived experiences reveal the limitations of dominant ideological constructions and expose the ways in which racialized and gendered identities were strategically manufactured to sustain systems of power.

The realities of slavery further demonstrate the violence concealed by the mammy myth. Under the principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*, children inherited the legal status of their mothers, ensuring the reproduction of the enslaved labor force. Yet Black mothers possessed no legal guarantee of maintaining relationships with their children, who could be sold or separated at any time. Such practices systematically disrupted kinship networks and deprived enslaved women of recognized maternal authority. As Spillers argues, slavery stripped African American women of “‘motherhood’ as female blood-rite/right” (Spillers 1987, 457). The mammy stereotype can therefore be understood as a hegemonic narrative that concealed this dispossession while legitimizing the racialized organization of reproductive labor upon which the plantation economy depended.

The dispossession of African American female bodies within slavery is evident not only in the construction of the mammy stereotype, but also in the equally pervasive figure of the Jezebel, or the sexually promiscuous African American woman. Through the lens of Sandoval's methodology, the Jezebel can be understood as a differential mode of subjectification that served the ideological needs of white supremacy. Whereas the mammy stereotype legitimized the exploitation of African American women's reproductive and domestic labor by presenting them as asexual and nurturing, the Jezebel stereotype justified their sexual exploitation by constructing them as naturally lustful and sexually available.

Historical evidence demonstrates that enslaved African women were subjected to systematic sexual violence throughout the institution of slavery. During the Middle Passage, women were frequently raped, and pregnancies were often viewed as economically advantageous because pregnant enslaved women commanded higher market prices. Following the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, the reproductive capacities of enslaved women became even more central to the expansion of the enslaved labor force. Enslaved women were often forced into reproductive arrangements with selected black men and were routinely subjected to sexual violence by white slaveholders and overseers, whose actions served both economic and personal interests. Yet rather than acknowledging

these coercive realities, dominant discourse constructed African American women as sexually aggressive and morally suspect. Such representations shifted responsibility for sexual relations away from white men and onto African American women themselves. Within this framework, white men appeared not as perpetrators of sexual violence but as victims of irresistible temptation, while African American women were held solely accountable for interracial sexual encounters.

Sandoval argues that dominant systems of power maintain themselves through ideological formations that naturalize social hierarchies and conceal relations of domination. The Jezebel stereotype exemplifies this process by transforming sexual exploitation into a supposedly consensual interaction. The stereotype functioned as a mechanism of victim-blaming that obscured the coercive conditions under which enslaved women lived and denied them recognition as subjects capable of consent or refusal. This narrative was particularly useful for white women, who often directed blame for their husbands' infidelities toward enslaved women rather than toward the men who exercised power over them (Christian 1980, 7–15; Douglass 1997, 13–14; Jacobs 1861, 16–39).

Although the stereotype of the sexually promiscuous African American woman appeared frequently in popular culture (Pilgrim 2024), it was less prominent in literary representations produced by both white and African American authors, many of whom sought to avoid placing interracial sexuality at the center of their narratives. When the Jezebel figure did appear, she was commonly represented as the antithesis of the mammy: younger, lighter-skinned, physically attractive, and sexually alluring, yet also morally corrupt and potentially dangerous (Christian 1980, 15; Jacobs 1861, 16–39). The contrast between the mammy and the Jezebel illustrates the flexibility of racist ideology. As Sandoval demonstrates, systems of domination frequently deploy multiple and seemingly contradictory representations of marginalized groups in order to sustain existing power relations. Despite their differences, both stereotypes reduced African American women to objects defined by the needs and anxieties of white society, denying them agency, complexity, and control over their own bodies and identities.

Eventually, miscegenation reached such proportions that it could not have been hidden. "In the antebellum American South, the mulatto slave population (defined then as individuals of mixed white and Black ancestry) increased from 7.7% in 1850 to 10.41% in 1860. With approximately 3.95 million slaves in 1860, this indicates that over 400,000 enslaved individuals were classified as mulattoes shortly before the Civil War" (Thomp-

son). The figure of the tragic mulatta emerged as one of the most prominent racialized stereotypes in both white and African American literary traditions. This figure can be understood as a product of the racial classifications upon which white supremacist ideology depended. The tragic mulatta occupied an unstable social position, situated between the rigid racial categories of Black and white that structured American society. Her perceived inability to fully belong to either group transformed her into a symbolic site upon which competing racial anxieties and social contradictions were projected. In the novels of white authors,¹ she is described as better than the rest of the slaves due to the argument that white men uplifted the Black race by mixing with it. In the novels of early African American writers, the tragic mulatta was portrayed as loyal to her black race but unfortunate because she could not fit in.²

As previously discussed, enslaved Africans were subjected to Christianization before, during, or after the Middle Passage as part of the broader process of cultural domination that accompanied slavery. Nevertheless, many enslaved individuals preserved elements of their African cultural and spiritual traditions despite sustained efforts to eradicate them. Through the framework of Sandoval's methodology, these practices can be understood as forms of oppositional consciousness that enabled enslaved communities to maintain alternative systems of knowledge and meaning within a social order structured by white supremacy.

Among the most significant figures in these cultural traditions were conjurers, who could be either men or women and who occupied important positions within enslaved communities. Conjurers employed herbal remedies, healing practices, and spiritual rituals to address physical and emotional suffering. Female conjurers frequently served as midwives and healers, providing care not only to enslaved African Americans but, in many cases, to white women as well. Their specialized knowledge afforded them a degree of authority and respect that was otherwise rarely accessible to enslaved individuals.

At the same time, conjurers occupied an ambiguous position within the plantation system. While their services were often valued, they were also feared by white communities. White Americans frequently associated African-derived spiritual practices with superstition, danger, or malevolent forces. This perception reflected the broader binary oppositions through which the dominant culture defined itself – associating Christi-

¹ Cf. Fitzhugh 1857; Stowe 1852.

² Cf. Brown 1861; Harper 1892.

anity with civilization, purity, and moral legitimacy while characterizing African spiritual traditions as primitive, irrational, or evil. Sandoval argues that hegemonic systems rely on such binary structures to establish and maintain relations of power. The opposition between Christian and African belief systems therefore functioned as a means of legitimizing cultural domination while marginalizing alternative forms of knowledge.

Unlike stereotypes such as the mammy, the Jezebel, or the tragic mulatta, the figure of the conjurer often functioned as a source of empowerment within African American communities. The conjurer represents a form of oppositional agency that challenged the monopoly of power claimed by white society. Through spiritual knowledge, healing practices, and connections to ancestral traditions, conjurers symbolically relocated authority from slaveholders to enslaved people themselves. Stories about conjurers provided psychological and cultural resources for survival, fostering racial pride, collective identity, and hope in circumstances designed to produce submission and despair.

Conjuring also served as an important means of preserving connections to African heritage. In a social system that sought to erase cultural memory and sever ties to ancestral traditions, conjurers acted as custodians of collective knowledge and identity. This role was particularly significant for women. Female conjurers and midwives occupied social positions that enabled them to acquire expertise, exercise authority, and provide care within their communities. In a world that systematically denied enslaved women autonomy, dignity, and control over their lives, the figure of the conjurer offered an alternative model of womanhood grounded in knowledge, resilience, and communal responsibility. As such, the conjurer represents not merely a cultural stereotype but a site of resistance through which enslaved African Americans preserved forms of agency and self-definition in the face of oppression.

STEREOTYPES ABOUT AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN ALICE WALKER'S NOVELS

Sandoval's concept of oppositional consciousness (Sandoval 2000, 53–74) is central for analyzing how stereotypes are contested in Alice Walker's fiction. Her African American female characters gradually develop a critical awareness, learning to identify stereotypes not just as imposed representation. This shift is crucial: it marks the movement from being positioned by a stereotype to reading stereotype as a power structure. Even more significant here is the use of Sandoval's notion of differential consciousness. Through it, Walker's characters refuse singular identity scripts

and instead develop fluid, strategic forms of self-definition. Their transformation can therefore be read not as simple empowerment, but as a shift in semiotic positioning within structures of power (Sandoval 2000, 140–156).

Sandoval's methodology also emphasizes semiotic deconstruction, the practice of reading cultural signs as historically produced rather than natural. Stereotypes of African American women are revealed as ideological "sign systems" that justify exploitation by naturalizing it. For instance, the mammy figure erases sexual violence and economic coercion by transforming forced labor into imagined devotion, while the Jezebel myth converts sexual violence into female culpability. In the stereotype of the mammy, we see that this trope outlived its initial justification and continued to have an influence on collective American consciousness through a myriad of mammy images created in popular culture, comics, cartoons, pictures on cake mixes and commercials. As mentioned above, Sandoval maintained that the media, popular culture and social institutions perpetuate stereotypes about marginalized groups (Sandoval 2000, 77). Alice Walker dedicated her work to a revision of these stereotypes and more importantly, the social conditions that accompany them.

THE FIRST PART OF ALICE WALKER'S OEUVRE

In the first part of her oeuvre Walker portrays women who are torn by contrary instincts: to obey the rules of patriarchy as they were taught or to pursue their freedom from these rules. As Biswas notes:

[Walker] takes on a deconstructionist stance which holds that analyzing the hegemonic strategies of stereotyping Black women challenges their stereotypical representation and re-constructs their self-reflexive images. [...] Instead of engaging herself in the binary practice of countering the canon, Walker offers through her novels appropriation, re-definition or re-assessment of the racist and sexist tags commonly associated with Black women. [...] Walker was uncompromising bringing to surface the oppressive tools of classism, racism, and sexism those women were molded by and represented particularly in popular culture and mainstream academia. Correspondingly, Black women's marginal experiences and sexual vulnerability at home and workplace are focused in her novels. (Biswas 2021, 2)

Walker uncompromisingly criticizes the stereotypes of loose black women, creating female characters who are victims of patriarchy and racism both in white and African American communities. Margaret and

Mem from *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* end their lives tragically, abused in unhappy marriages. They are incapable of envisioning a better life for themselves and their children in which they would have a modicum of power and freedom. Walker painstakingly demonstrates to her readers that unhappy lives of her female characters are not a question of unfortunate circumstances, but of systemic oppression. In their relations with African American and white men, their sexuality is an instrument of their subjugation. They are always seen as objects, never as persons. Josie and Ornete, who are prostitutes and mixed-race women, use their fair skin to attract men. However, by casting them as victims of rape and family abuse, Walker defies the stereotypes of the loose woman and the tragic mulatta by exposing the cycle of violence which stands behind these stereotypes. Walker makes a point in these early works, which take place in the South during the era of sharecropping to the 1960s, that American society had not significantly changed the treatment of African American women since the abolition of slavery.

The images of Walker's characters as poor, Black, abused women, torn by contrary instincts that they are unable to resolve, are memorable. Walker convinces her readers that the stereotypes persist even when the initial social conditions that created them disappear. These stereotypes serve as pillars of the "matrix of domination" (Collins 2002, 228–229). This concept, developed by Patricia Hill Collins, refers to ideologies, controlling images, and institutionalized practices that become self-perpetuating, maintaining structural inequality even when the specific historical or social conditions that created them have changed. "Just as intersecting oppressions take on historically specific forms that change in response to human actions - racial segregation persists, but not in the forms that it took in prior historical eras - so the shape of domination itself changes [...] The sexual politics of Black womanhood reveals the fallacy of assuming that gender affects all women in the same way - race and class matter greatly" (Collins 2002, 228–229).

The matrix of domination is present in all of Walker's works, but the story "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" is somewhat different because it features a positive figure of a conjurer. Walker dedicated this story to her mother because it was based on an event from her life. When Walker's mother was living in poverty with several children who were hungry, she registered for food stamps. Although she was due to get them, she was denied the stamps by a rich, white woman who was in charge of distributing them. Similarly, in the story Hannah becomes destitute when she is refused food stamps by a white woman. Her children go hungry and

her husband leaves her. She goes to a conjurer, Tante Rosie and seeks a revenge on the white woman. Instead of being a victim, she turns to the African tradition, demands what is rightfully hers which restores her self-confidence. The story also examines the impact of the figure of the conjurer on the white community. When she hears that a curse has been cast upon her by Tante Rosie, the white woman becomes afraid. She starts behaving strangely, revealing her guilty conscience and gradually loses her mind. Thanks to Tante Rosie, Hannah feels avenged, and her feeling of being just one more downtrodden Black woman is assuaged. Here we see the power the conjurers had in both communities and the positive impact they had on the self-worth of African Americans.

THE COLOR PURPLE

In this novel, Walker focused on the female and male characters who achieve personal transformation despite intersectional oppression. *The Color Purple* represents a link between the first and second parts of her oeuvre. The main character Celie is only fourteen when she is raped and impregnated by her stepfather Alphonso. Her children are taken away from her and she is convinced that Alphonso killed them. She is given in marriage to Albert whom she calls Mr__. In this loveless marriage, Celie is completely subjugated. Albert rapes and beats her and Celie has to take care of his children and household. At the beginning, she is a typical example of a black woman who is subdued and whose voice is not heard. Celie's development is clearly visible in her letters which she writes first to God, then to her sister Nettie who is taken away from her, and finally to the whole universe. She is an abused and barely literate girl whose letters are painfully inadequate to encompass the breadth and depth of her trauma. As Celie matures, her letters reflect her growing self-awareness. Wendy Wall notes:

The Color Purple abounds in instances in which authority is inscribed on the human body. In the text, a patriarchy maintains power by re-writing the female body into powerlessness, thus denying the woman's ability to authorize herself. During the course of the novel, however, Celie learns to authorize herself through her letters; she acquires a means of re-inscribing the imprints and contours of her body in such a way as to allow self-expression. (Wall 1993, 261)

Celie's transformation begins through her relationships with other African American women, most notably Shug Avery, whose presence

introduces alternative possibilities for female identity and self-definition. Unlike many women in the novel who have internalized patriarchal expectations, Shug refuses to conform to the dominant norms regulating female sexuality, motherhood, and respectability. Modeled on the tradition of blues women, she occupies a position that resists both racial oppression within the dominant white society and gendered subordination within the African American community. Through Shug, Walker foregrounds the intersectional nature of oppression while simultaneously illustrating the possibility of resistance to its ideological structures.

Viewed through Sandoval's framework, Shug exemplifies a differential consciousness - a mode of subjectivity that enables individuals to navigate and challenge the fixed identity categories upon which systems of domination depend. Whereas stereotypes such as the Jezebel reduce African American women to hypersexualized and morally suspect figures, Shug refuses the binary logic that opposes respectable womanhood to sexual autonomy. Her sexuality does not function as a marker of deviance, but as an expression of agency and self-knowledge. By openly embracing her desires and rejecting restrictive social expectations, she destabilizes the semiotic codes through which African American female sexuality has historically been represented and controlled. Walker, therefore, transforms a figure that might initially appear to resemble the stereotype of the loose Black woman into a complex subject who actively resists the ideological meanings attached to that image.

The hostility directed toward Shug by both men and women in the community reveals the extent to which patriarchal values have been internalized by the oppressed themselves. Community members reproduce dominant discourses by condemning Shug's independence while celebrating Celie's submissiveness and self-sacrifice. Through this dynamic, Walker demonstrates how systems of domination sustain themselves not only through external coercion but also through the circulation of normative beliefs and social expectations. Shug's marginalization - including the loss of her children and her reputation as an unfit mother - illustrates the social penalties imposed upon women who refuse their prescribed gender roles.

At the same time, Shug and Celie create a relationship that transcends these binary oppositions, providing a space for alternative forms of identity formation. Their friendship, which gradually develops into a loving partnership, functions as a site of what Sandoval describes as a coalitional consciousness. Through emotional intimacy, mutual rec-

ognition, and shared resistance to patriarchal authority, they construct a counter-community that enables new forms of self-understanding. Shug's influence ultimately allows Celie to reinterpret her experiences outside the frameworks imposed upon her by racism, sexism, and sexual violence.

This process is central to Celie's development of an oppositional consciousness. Through her relationship with Shug, Celie begins to recognize the ideological nature of the narratives that have shaped her understanding of herself. Shug encourages her to reclaim ownership of her body and sexuality, challenging the patriarchal logic that has defined her exclusively through victimization and submission. Particularly significant is Shug's insistence that Celie's experiences of rape should not be conflated with genuine sexual fulfillment, a reframing that separates sexuality from violence and opens up the possibility of self-defined desire. Celie's subsequent discoveries regarding her family history – including the revelation that Alphonso is not her biological father and that her children were not the products of incest – further dismantle the structures of shame and guilt that have governed her identity.

Walker ultimately presents Celie's transformation as both personal and collective. By the novel's conclusion, Celie has moved beyond the restrictive categories imposed upon her and established an autonomous sense of self grounded in love, community, and self-knowledge. The reunion with her children, Nettie, and Shug symbolizes not only personal fulfillment but also the successful reconstruction of social bonds damaged by intersecting systems of racial, gendered, and familial oppression. Through Celie's journey, Walker illustrates Sandoval's argument that liberation begins when marginalized subjects learn to recognize dominant representations as ideological constructs and develop alternative ways of imagining themselves and their relationships to others.

Sofia is an embodiment of the African American women's struggle against the stereotype of mammy. She is approached by the mayor and his wife who admire the neat clothing of Sofia and her children and want her to become their maid. When Sofia refuses, the mayor is so offended that he beats her in the middle of the street. Sofia fights back and is sentenced to twelve years in prison. Years later, their daughter, Eleanor Jane, comes to Sofia and demands that Sophia admit to loving her and her own son Reynolds. Sofia explains the conditions of her subjugation within Eleanor Jane's family and tells her it is high time she see the person behind the stereotype. She adamantly refuses to be reduced to a mammy figure and shows that despite twelve years in forced servitude, white people did

not manage to kill her spirit or her love for her own children. Sofia's narrative directly confronts the mammy stereotype by exposing the coercive social structures that sustain it. Through her imprisonment and forced domestic labor, Walker demonstrates that the idealized image of the loyal Black servant depends upon violence rather than consent. Sofia's refusal to perform emotional devotion toward the mayor's family destabilizes the ideological function of the mammy figure, revealing it as a mechanism of racial domination rather than a reflection of African American female identity. From Sandoval's perspective, Sofia develops an oppositional consciousness by recognizing the political function of the role assigned to her and refusing to internalize it.

Alice Walker uses the character of Squeak to illustrate the position of the mulatta within the African American community. At the beginning of the novel, Squeak embodies the typical tragic mulatta archetype. Her mother was raped by several white men and had children who look white. Squeak is in a relationship with Harpo, who is still in love with Sofia but being with a white-looking mistress strokes his ego. Squeak puts up with Harpo's maltreatment because, as a mulatta, she is unsure of her identity and lacks a sense of belonging. Harpo and other members of the family send her to the police station to intervene for Sofia, because the white sheriff is her uncle: however, she is raped by him. Through this violent act he wants to teach her that she cannot count on any favors from white people just because a sheriff's brother had children with her mother. Squeak is deeply traumatized by the rape and the shame it carries. Out of her pain, she begins creating blues songs dedicated to the mulatta's plight. She demands that Harpo and others start calling her Mary Agnes, which is her given name and becomes a blues singer.

Walker's fiction demonstrates that resistance to patriarchal domination requires more than the rejection of oppressive social norms; it necessitates the creation of alternative modes of self-definition and social relations. Throughout *The Color Purple*, characters gradually learn to recognize patriarchal gender roles not as natural or inevitable, but as ideological constructions that sustain systems of racial, gendered, and class domination. By exposing the contingent nature of these norms, Walker reveals their vulnerability to transformation. The process of personal and social change in the novel follows a pattern that closely resembles Sandoval's notions of oppositional and differential consciousness. Through their interactions with Celie, Sofia, and other women, Albert and Harpo encounter perspectives that challenge conventional

patriarchal models. Celie's discussions of African cultures encourage Albert to reconsider narrow and hierarchical understandings of gender relations, while Harpo's care for his father and willingness to assume domestic responsibilities destabilize traditional distinctions between masculine and feminine roles. Similarly, Sofia's refusal to conform to expectations of female submission creates possibilities for more egalitarian relationships.

The fluidity of social roles depicted in the novel undermines the binary oppositions upon which patriarchal ideology depends. By embracing alternative forms of kinship, labor, and emotional expression, Walker's characters construct new modes of community based on reciprocity rather than domination. Their transformations illustrate Sandoval's argument that resistance emerges through the ability to move beyond fixed social identities and reconfigure the meanings attached to race, gender, and class. In this way, Walker presents personal transformation as both an individual and a collective process capable of challenging broader structures of oppression.

In her essay collection, *Living by the Word*, Walker states that it is the duty of African American women writers, including generations just coming onto the scene, to place stereotypes about African Americans into a different context. She argues they must showcase the real people hidden behind these caricatures because only in that way can we see the extent of white people's twisted perception of African Americans. According to Walker, the moment there are sufficient volume of works which show mammy from her point of view, the real woman imprisoned within the stereotype will be revealed (Walker 1988, 60).

THE TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR

The novel *The Temple of My Familiar* has a much wider scope than Walker's previous novels. It goes back to the dawn of time and earliest civilizations and takes place on three continents: Africa and North and South America. The characters which belong to the younger generation are educated professionals who primarily live on the West Coast in the United States.

After Walker successfully redefined stereotypes in the novel *The Color Purple*, in *The Temple of My Familiar* her characters try to achieve balance in their lives; however they must still struggle with stereotypes which are the result of a matrix of domination and racial, gender, and class oppression in the wider society. The characters Zede and Lissie represent perfect examples. Zede is forced to become a mistress of one of the guards

in a prison camp after her village in South America is colonized. Her enslavement and physical abuse, along with that of other women, illustrate the hypocrisy of the loose Black woman stereotype.

The idea of “slave wife” recalls the myth of ‘jezebel’ in interpreting the ideological legitimization of Black women’s sexual manipulation. The guard, who has eyes on Zede, clings to the belief that slave women must love to receive his company. The attitude of the guard manifests the persistent beliefs, pressing that Black women are wanton and fascinated with White men and that they are full of cunning wiles with which they entice White men into their beds for instant gratification. When Zede says that the White guard believed she must respond to him, she takes us back to the origin of the negative beliefs centering Black women. (Biswas 2021, 3)

An additional consequence of colonial domination in *The Temple of My Familiar* is the erasure of matrilineal traditions and their replacement with patriarchal social structures. Through the interconnected narratives of Zede and Lissie, Walker examines the historical processes through which colonialism disrupts alternative systems of knowledge, kinship, and spirituality. Lissie’s ability to recall her previous incarnations enables Walker to transcend linear historical time and trace recurring patterns of domination across different civilizations. Her memories of the African societies that revered female spiritual authority before their transformation under patriarchal systems parallel Zede’s experience of colonial displacement and cultural loss. Viewed through Sandoval’s methodology, these narratives effectively expose patriarchy not as a natural social order but as a historically produced ideological system sustained through the suppression of alternative epistemologies and cultural traditions.

Walker further challenges dominant representational systems through her reconfiguration of the conjurer figure. Unlike stereotypical portrayals that marginalize African-derived spiritual practices, the novel presents female healers, midwives, priestesses, and shamans as custodians of communal knowledge and cultural memory. Lissie frequently occupies positions of spiritual authority throughout her reincarnations, while other female characters assume similarly nurturing and transformative roles: her mother and grandmother are midwives; Celie assists Olivia in childbirth; Shug and Katherine Degos establish spiritual communities grounded in female-centered values; and Zede’s family remains connect-

ed to their indigenous healing traditions. These figures function as sites of what Sandoval describes as oppositional consciousness, preserving forms of knowledge excluded from dominant patriarchal discourse and providing alternative models of identity and community.

The recovery of matrilineal memory becomes a crucial component of the transformative process depicted in the novel. Walker suggests that personal and collective healing requires reconnecting with histories and identities suppressed by colonial and patriarchal systems. Through Sandoval's framework, this process may be understood as the development of differential consciousness, whereby individuals move beyond rigid social categories and inherited power structures to construct more fluid and inclusive forms of selfhood. The recurring absence of fathers in the lives of female characters – and mothers in the lives of male characters – symbolizes the fragmentation produced by oppressive social systems. Transformation occurs as characters seek to reconcile these divisions and establish more balanced relationships with themselves and others.

This process is not limited to female characters. Male characters such as Suwelo, Ola, and Arveyda gradually abandon patriarchal models of masculinity based on domination and control. Influenced by the women in their lives, they develop alternative perspectives on gender, family, and social responsibility. Their transformations illustrate Sandoval's argument that resistance involves the capacity to move strategically beyond fixed ideological positions. As these new perspectives extend beyond the individual and reshape communal relationships, Walker presents transformation as a collective process that challenges dominant understandings of gender and social organization.

The novel also revises the traditional mammy stereotype by reimagining motherhood outside the structures of racial and patriarchal domination. Whereas *The Color Purple* emphasizes the ways racism and patriarchy disrupt African American motherhood through separation, violence, and dispossession, *The Temple of My Familiar* offers a more expansive vision of maternal relationships. Motherhood is no longer represented primarily as a site of sacrifice or oppression but as a source of creativity, fulfillment, and communal connection. Walker dismantles the ideological assumptions underlying the mammy figure by depicting women who nurture their own children while simultaneously participating in broader networks of care and self-realization.

Importantly, the novel rejects the binary opposition between motherhood and personal autonomy. Female characters are able to pursue ed-

ucation, spiritual development, and self-discovery without abandoning their maternal responsibilities. Olivia temporarily entrusts Fanny to Celie and Shug while establishing an independent life but later resumes the primary responsibility for her daughter. Similarly, Zede cares for Carlotta's children while Carlotta pursues higher education and personal growth. These arrangements demonstrate forms of coalition-building that resonate with Sandoval's emphasis on collective resistance and shared responsibility. Childcare, emotional labor, and family obligations become communal rather than isolated maternal burdens.

Through these alternative kinship structures, Walker imagines social relations that challenge patriarchal assumptions about gender, caregiving, and authority. Parents, grandparents, and extended family networks participate in sustaining the community, thereby undermining hierarchical models of family organization. The novel ultimately presents motherhood, spirituality, and communal care as sites of resistance through which individuals and communities can reconfigure identities imposed by dominant systems of power and create more equitable forms of social life.

Thus, the networks created by the characters embody Sandoval's insistence on coalitional consciousness (Sandoval 2000, 140–182). This theoretical framework positions transformation in Walker's texts as relational rather than individual. Resistance emerges not only through personal awakening but through networks of solidarity among men and women and communities that share but differently experience oppression. In Walker's novels, this is visible in the formation of female alliances that dismantle stereotypes through lived counter-practices: care, storytelling, healing, and the redefinition of kinship.

CONCLUSION

By applying Sandoval's methodology of the oppressed, Walker's narrative project can be understood not merely as the replacement of negative stereotypes with positive images, but as the deconstruction of ideological systems that make such stereotypes possible in the first place. Her characters reconfigure representations through which African American women have been constructed. They ultimately undermine and negate the stereotypes that portray them as animalistic, hypersexual or brutish. By overcoming intersectional oppression and limiting norms, they succeed in fulfilling their dreams and become free, individual human beings. Utilizing a Sandovalian semiotic analysis uncovers the systematic deconstruction of the codes that define the oppressed. Walker

proves that the stereotypes about African American women constructed by white, dominant society are detached from the everyday reality of African Americans. The growing awareness among Walker's characters regarding the matrix of domination leads to their desire to subvert patriarchal norms based on binary oppositions, introducing different patterns into their lives. Their positive transformation occurs when they embrace coalition building. The refusal to accept limiting norms and the insistence on balance, transformation, peace and absolution thus represent the basis of Walker's works.

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