The African American Women's Search for Identity in Southern Literature

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Mentorica: izv. prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

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Abstract

The identity of African American women presents a specific intersection between race and gender, vulnerability and perseverance. This paper follows its development through Southern literature – how it was nearly decimated during slavery, built from ground up after its abolition, and how it continues to change and develop through many challenges and adversities up to the present day. It focuses on the depiction of female African American characters in five works of Southern literature: *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup, "Long Black Song" from Richard Wright's short story collection *Uncle Tom's Children*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker, and Jesmyn Ward's memoir *Men We Reaped.* By exploring different depictions of African American women, written from a variety of perspectives both gender and race-wise, this paper takes a closer look on how the outside influences have shaped the literary depictions of African American women, but also on how those women have reacted and reshaped those images. Conclusively, it points out how the subjugation of African American women was crucial to the upholding of the white patriarchy of the Southern United States.

Key words: African American womanhood, identity, racism, feminism, the American South, Solomon Northup, Richard Wright, Harper Lee, Alice Walker, Jesmyn Ward

Table of Contents

Introduction

Living in the "peculiar institution" that subjected them to every single form of abuse known to man, African American women – whether imported from Africa or born into slavery – were completely striped of both their cultural and gender identity, as well as basic human dignity. In the following centuries, when the effects of slavery were still echoing through their everyday lives and the racial oppression was at its strongest, African American women had to fight economic and social abuse in order to re-shape and re-discover their identity as women, and create African American womanhood from the history of bondage and psychological oppression in order to face racial and gender prejudice and fight for their place in the society. The aim of this paper is to show how this new-found identity came to undermine the values promoted by the white patriarchal society and how its development and the patriarchy's violent response to it can be traced through Southern literature, going all the way back to slave narratives up to the present. In order to do this, it will analyse literary depictions of African American women in five works of Southern literature: *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup, "Long Black Song" from Richard Wright's short story collection *Uncle Tom's Children*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker, and finally, Jesmyn Ward's memoir *Men We Reaped*.

1. African American Women During Slavery

The identity of African American women is unique both in its complexity and the way it came to be, in that it was truly built from the ground up. In order to uphold the "peculiar institution," slave holders knew they had to keep African Americans completely psychologically subdued. This system operated on two levels: one was focused on preventing slaves from forming any sort of significant relationships with each other in order to prevent them from joining in a community and forming a *shared* identity. This was practiced by separating children from their mothers quickly after birth and by separating blood relatives and spouses by putting them to work in different areas or selling them to other planters. At the same time, the owners systematically over-worked, beat, intimidated, and abused any sense of self from their slaves while also withholding crucial information such as their date of birth from them, thus cutting any chance of sustaining an *individual* identity in the root. Nell Irvin Painter has summed up the psychological effects of such treatment in the term "soul murder":

> The phrase "soul murder" comes from the title of a recent book by a clinical professor of psychiatry . . . Leonard Shengold *Soul Murder: The Effects of Child Abuse and Depravation* . . . Sexual abuse, emotional depravation, physical and mental torture can lead to soul murder, and soul murdered children's [and adult's] identities are compromised; they cannot register what is it that they want and what is it that they feel. (7-8)

Furthermore, as Harriet Jacobs irrevocably states in her biography *Incidents in a Life of a Slave Girl*: as much as slavery was terrible for men, it was far more terrible for women (Scott and Shade 295). While "women were expected to labour as hard as men and faced the lash if they did not meet their owners' expectations" (Brown and Webb 47), they were also systematically sexually exploited, both as a means of further "murdering" the souls of African Americans, since "the rape of slave women symbolised white male power and sent out a message to the whole community" (Brown and Webb 138), and as a means of generating more workforce and income by birthing children. In Northup's narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave*, we witness first-hand how easily the enslaved women were separated from their children, as well as how much of an emotional toll it took on them when Eliza was separated from her children, Randall and Emily, during an auction. Northup claims: "never have I seen such an exhibition of intense, unmeasured, and unbounded grief as when Eliza was parted from her child" (29). Later in the novel, we find out how "she had

sunk beneath the weight of an excessive grief" (Northup 40), and wasted away alone, still missing the two.

When sexually abused by their masters, enslaved women would often find themselves between a rock and a hard place – namely, the mistress of the house rarely liked the idea of her husband being unfaithful to her. "While the Southern culture was pervaded by a double standard which prescribed female purity and yet ignored the white man's sexual exploitation of black women, the plantation mistress blamed the slave woman, not the master, for miscegenation" (Morton 9), and saw herself as a victim because she could not oppose her husband, taking out her frustration on the woman she deemed had wronged her, as well as her mixed raced children if any were born as a result of the assaults. Northup's fellow slave Patsey is perhaps the best example of a Black woman whose soul was not only "murdered," but completely shattered due to being in such a situation:

> Her back bore scars of a thousand strips; not because she was backward in her work, nor because she was an unmindful and rebellious spirit, but because it had fallen to her to be a slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress. She shrank before the lustful eye of the one, and was in danger even of her life at the hands of the other, and between the two, she was indeed accused. (Northup 77)

After Epps literally flays the skin off her back as a punishment for going to a neighbouring plantation to get soap her mistress denied her, Northup notes how

> [t]he burden of a deep melancholy weighed heavily on her spirits. She no longer moved with that buoyant and elastic step—there was not that mirthful sparkle in her eyes that formerly distinguished her. The bounding vigor—the sprightly, laughter-loving spirit of her youth, were gone… A care-worn, pitiful expression settled on her face, and it was her humour now to weep, rather than rejoice. If ever there was a broken heart—one crushed and blighted by the rude grasp of suffering and misfortune—it was Patsey's. (108)

1.1. Gender and Slavery

Gender played quite an ambivalent role in the slavery system. On the one hand, upholding this cruel institution demanded complete dehumanization of its subjects both in the eyes of white people and the slaves themselves. Since, "in virtually every culture, gender difference is a pivotal

way in which humans identify themselves as persons, organize social relations, and symbolize meaningful natural and social events and processes" (Wharton 6), one of the best ways to dehumanize someone is to de-gender them. Most modern sociologists would define gender as a set of expectations, behaviours, and attributes linked to a certain sex – namely, as social construct differentiating from culture to culture, which needs to be acted out in order to be realized. In that sense, slavery knew no gender – slaves were treated completely the same when it came to their workload and conditions of living, with the added burden of child rearing in the case of women. The distinction between them was based purely on *sex*, or rather whether they could give birth to more slaves or not.

On the other hand, in order to uphold the white patriarchal system, the slave owners created the myth of African Americans' possessing an insatiable, animalistic sex drive, which birthed two stereotypes: the black rapist and the Jezebel – the belief that black men were sexually violent and black women inherently promiscuous. "Thus, the master could rationalize his violation of black female sexual purity as no violation at all" (Morton 9), and the mistress dared not oppose it – being herself part of a society that only offered women status and protection under condition of absolute purity and submissiveness, she could not risk bringing her own chastity into question. Thus, "the 'racist sexual stereotype' of black womanhood popped up the white man's sexual control over all women" (Morton 9).

Denying that black women were "real" women served the same purpose – society built on the idea that women were weak creatures in need of men's protection and guidance could not coexist with the image of enslaved women performing the same physical tasks as men, often in the "delicate state" or caring for their new-borns, clearly showing that the "weaker sex" was not as weak as they were led to think. In this way, African American women challenged the Southern definition of what it meant to be a woman from the very start. A former slave and human rights advocate, Sojourner Truth stated this openly in her 1851 speech "Ain't I a Woman," claiming:

> That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and

> seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

1.2. "Disfigured Images" – Stereotypes of African American Women

As Parker points out, "the process of transforming the image of Black women from respectable and honourable members of African societies to sinister and repugnant creatures has been both premeditated and continuous" (28). The antebellum era created some of the most persevering and discriminatory stereotypes relating to African American women, which Patricia Morton separated into four central figures: the mammy, the domineering matriarch, the Jezebel, and the tragic mulatto, of which all except the mammy had profoundly derogatory, dehumanizing characterization (Morton qtd. in Mgadmi). It is important to pay attention to these "disfigured images"[1] because ever since they were created they have been one of the crucial influences on the life, identity, and public's perception of African American women. This part of the paper will focus on the two most prevalent and mutually opposing of these stereotypes: the mammy and the Jezebel.

The image of the old slave mammy or "Aunt Jemima" domineered the literary depictions of African American women in pre-abolition literature, especially in plantation fiction. She was

> generally dark-skinned, strong-bodied, thick-lipped, obese and ugly. Being the favorite servant, the skilled cook or the most devoted housekeeper she incarnated the perfect mother in the house capable of nurturing White children and at the same time looking after her children and sustaining her family . . . Thanks to her devotion and loyalty to her masters and mistresses as well as her skills, she was more elevated in status than those working in the fields and more likely than her fellows to progress and therefore rise in standing. She was also depicted as asexualized and defeminized because of her old age, her physical strength and her obesity. (Mgadmi)

The mammy owes her positive depiction to her crucial role in the "South's romanticization of slavery as an extended White-Black family" (Morton qtd. in Mgadmi). The image of black slaves being too intellectually limited and helpless to fend for themselves, and their white saviours taking them under their wing so that they may all form one large extended family with the master of the

[1] The term "disfigured images" refers to the title of Morton's book.

house as its caring and righteous head, lent what Morton called "the stamp of historical legitimation" (Morton qtd. in Mgadmi) to slavery, and later segregation. The mammy was a symbol of this idyllic coexistence, giving her all to "her" white family, often being more authoritative and stern than the mistress herself, and was in turn considered a close member of the said family. This, in practice, was rarely true considering that domestic servants were especially exposed to sexual abuse, and often forced to neglect their own children while caring for those of their masters. Mgadmi also points out how "the mammy's masculinization highlighted the ultrafemininity of her mistress," further propping up the myth of the Southern lady. In Northup's narrative, we can see this stereotype realized in the character of aunt Phebe – an elderly black woman sent to work in the kitchen once she no longer could not work in the fields.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the Jezebel, "a middle-aged or young woman governed by her libido and 'matters of the flesh'. She was deemed a hypersexual woman with unlimited bestial passions" (Mgadmi). Beside the previously discussed need to justify the masters' abuse and the institution as a whole, this portrayal of black women is also partially due to their conditions of life:

> Owing to their poverty and the rough work in the fields, these women could by no means be dressed "adequately." Thereby, they were mistaken as immoral and lascivious. Besides, Black female bodies were often publicly displayed when being whipped by their masters or bought and sold by slave traders. Likewise, since slavery rested on the procreative capacities of Black female slaves, their bodies, their fecundity and their sexuality were subject of public discussion. Even their rape and sexual assault by their masters, justified by their "inherent" promiscuity, were seen as a means of increasing birth rates and thus the labour force on the plantations. (Mgadmi)

As seen through Patsey, this stereotype was especially harmful to African American women because it left them vulnerable to abuse from both the master and the mistress. Yet, the best example of the Jezebel in this narrative is Eliza, who makes one of the white women's greatest fears come true – she uses her relationship with master Berry to secure good treatment and freedom for herself and her children. It is clear that in the eyes of mistress Berry and her daughter, Eliza had seduced him and prompted him to abandon his family, even though she had no influence on their marriage troubles, and was only trying to free herself and her children from a terrible situation. Nevertheless, we witness the mistress's spiteful retaliation and its heat-breaking aftermath when she sells them all to the slave pen, separating the family for good.

2. The Creation of African American Womanhood

Even with the slavery abolished, African Americans soon entered a period in which their economic, social, and political circumstances were again increasingly threatened. After the 1890s, the United States experienced a period of exacerbated racism—with the loss of African Americans' political rights and the Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision—and reaffirmation of woman's inferiority at the turn of the century (Vallier 2). Though legally free, African Americans still lived in economic, political, and cultural slavery, with the segregation laws and Jim Crow policies keeping them in their place: "The slaves went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery" (DuBois qtd. in Vallier 2). This was doubly so true for African American women – they did not gain citizenship rights at the same time as the black men, in 1869, nor during the Women's Suffrage movement in 1920. Instead, they had to launch a separate movement focused on the suffrage of specifically black women, and obtained the voting right in 1965 – a century after the abolition. While African Americans were legally free, they were still kept in metaphorical chains by discrimination and poverty – black women thus found themselves in a particularly harmful situation by being an oppressed demographic *within* an oppressed demographic. "If she is rescued from the myth of the Negro, the myth of woman still entraps her. If she escapes the myth of woman, the myth of the Negro still ensnares her" (White qtd. in Morton 2). Beal describes this state as "double jeopardy":

> the black woman in America can justly be described as a "slave of a slave." By reducing the black man in America to such abject oppression, the black woman had no protector and was used, and is still being used in some cases, as the scapegoat for the evils that this horrendous System has perpetrated on black men. Her physical image has been maliciously maligned; she has been sexually molested and abused by the white colonizer; she has suffered the worst kind of economic exploitation, having been forced to serve as the white woman's maid and wet nurse for white offspring while her own children were, more often than not, starving and neglected. It is the depth of degradation to be socially manipulated, physically raped, used to undermine your own household, and to be powerless to reverse this syndrome. (168)

2.1. Triple Consciousness

Being the intersection of both the racial and the gender Other, "the black woman has emerged significantly different in her image from either black men or white women of America" (Morton 2), and while there is no monolithic concept of the black woman in America, there are many *models* of black womanhood (Lander qtd. in Vallier 1), all of them "marked by the experience of exclusion and the challenge of meeting adversity" (Gilmore qtd. in Vallier 1). Once they could "for the first time finally express their womanhood in a context of legal freedom" (Vallier 6), black women found it did not align with the definition upheld by the society they were entering.

Southern society nurtured the cult of "True Womanhood" or "Southern Ladyship" as the dominant ideology, prescribing four cardinal values: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Vallier 7). "Gender constructions such as this defeminized black women mainly because of the economic and social paradoxes they presented. To be a 'true' woman required a financially secure husband and a favourable reputation – to say nothing of leisure time" (King 34). Black women simply did not measure up to this concept. They were often driven to work outside of home because their husbands' low wages could not support the family, or were left as sole providers after their partners were lynched or imprisoned. Since most women to this day work the so called "double shift," where if employed they still perform the majority of the house work and childcare, African American women had very little free time. Lastly, the stereotypes the slavery had created, as well as the South's need to elevate and control white women, left a large stain on black women's reputation:

> The bipolar conceptualization of Black and White womanhood assigned Black women all the negative traits of disgrace whereas White women were attributed all the idealized aspects of "true womanhood," such as piety, deference, domesticity, passionlessness, chastity, cleanness and fragility . . . Conversely, Black women were conceived and pictured as primitive, lustful, seductive, physically strong, domineering, unwomanly and dirty. (Mgadmi)

Furthermore, "patriarchy was much weaker in the slave quarters than in southern white society" (Brown and Webb 142) since all slaves received equal treatment regardless of their gender, and bondswomen could not rely on their partners to take up the role of protector – the latter of which also carried over into the Jim Crow era. "The constant outflow of males forced bondswomen to face the 'challenges of slave matrifocality' that 'inspired idealized traits of self-protection, self-

reliance, and self-determination among many black women'" (Brown and Webb 143), so once freed, many black women rejected attitudes of submissiveness, displayed their intelligence, and did not hesitate to overtly challenge their husbands or be outspoken (Vallier 8). Their purity was also often compromised because "the rape of black women in the South continued to be an institutionalized weapon of oppression after emancipation" (Carby qtd. in Vallier 8).

Thus, DuBois's definition of "double consciousness," according to which the African American "ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (DuBois 9) needs to be broadened when it comes to African American women. Rather than doubled, their consciousness was tripled – both black and American, woman and non-woman. This complex identity combined with black women's unapologetic boldness and refusal to submit to their trying circumstances kept bringing into question the prevalent definition of womanhood, and with it the white men's claim to power, which is why the "un-womaning" of African American women was done in such a thorough and violent fashion. In the back of everyone's mind, the rest of Sojourner Truth's speech rang long and loud: "If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them."

2.2. The Discrimination Within the African American Community

Following the abolition of slavery, African American leaders and intellectuals developed a policy of the "racial uplift," meant to "instil dignity and self-respect while also challenging negative, stereotypical images of African Americans" (Mgadmi). However, this policy was based on the belief that the mythology of black sexuality was primarily focused on black *men*, and they were the ones more damaged by racism since women were used to being underprivileged (Morton 2-4). Men were supposedly more impacted by poverty and discrimination of the segregation era considering the belief that "submissiveness . . . [was] surely more destructive to the male than female personality" (Moynihan qtd. in Morton 4). Thus the idea of "uplifting" the black race focused mostly on reclaiming black men's masculinity, with black women being either overlooked or blamed "for all kinds of alleged social problems which . . . they did not create" (Ladner qtd. in Morton 5).

The policy of racial uplift claimed "it was essential to establish the authority and the 'manliness' of black men so that Afro-American gender relations corresponded to the normal patriarchal relations of the American way" (Morton 4). So,

> [a]lthough the demeaning stereotypical perception of Black women was pivoted on White middle-class patriarchal ideals, Black women's efforts to counter these stereotypes and shatter their negative image were paradoxically molded according to the very values that condemned, enslaved and degraded them. (Mgadmi)

It seemed that in order to fight racial oppression, black women had to give in to gender one. This was not only neglectful of their wellbeing, but often directly harmful. Since there was little they could do to protect their integrity, "Black women adhered to a cult of secrecy. Even when sexually abused and harassed, they remained silent" (Mgadmi) in order to uphold respectability of the community. Once again, their sexuality was a matter of public discussion since "[t]he duty of the Black heroine toward the Black community was made coterminous with her desire as a woman, a desire which was expressed as a dedication to uplift the race" (Mgadmi).

Furthermore, African American women's self-reliance and independence was seen by some as harmful to black men's masculinity. The stereotype of the "domineering matriarch" (Morton qtd. in Mgadmi) evolved into "the myth of black matriarchy" (Moynihan qtd. in Morton 3), according to which the "unnatural" family hierarchy where the woman was the dominant one led to the deterioration of the black family, which was seen as the heart of the "tangle of pathology" (Morton 3), and the cause of all the community's failings. Black feminist critics have since argued that "[i]t is fallacious reasoning that in order for the black man to be strong, the black woman has to be weak. Those who are asserting their 'manhood' by telling black women to step back into a domestic, submissive role are assuming a counter-revolutionary position" (Beal 169). The idea that black women were forcefully declaring themselves the heads of their households has also been disproven – black women's independence made their households more *egalitarian*, not matriarchal, and women only became heads of the household in cases where there were no adult men in it, most often after they were widowed or their husband left the family.

Such a view of black women can be clearly observed in the work of Richard Wright who, raised in an all-women household, "developed an ambivalent attitude toward Black women; he sympathized with and respected them, but also feared them and resisted their control" (Avery qtd. in DeCosta-Willis 541). Yet, "he was fascinated, as a writer, by the dramatic possibilities of the female persona, but women are marginal creatures in his violently masculine, patriarchal, and

machoistic fictional world" (DeCosta-Willis 542). They are mute and one dimensional, "used to reveal, justify, and enhance masculine problems" (Keady qtd. in DeCosta-Willis 541) instead of playing any part in the plot or standing as their own characters. Possibly the only exception to this is Sarah from the short story "Long Black Song." Even though she is rather a passive character – sitting at home waiting for her husband, and letting the salesman have sex with her without really doing anything to stop him or encourage him, she possesses "feelings and imagination and a creative mind, unlike most of the dull, unfeeling women who crowd the pages of Wright's books" (DeCosta-Willis 546). Through her, we can observe how the myths of black female sexuality took root in the minds of black men as much as white ones. "The traveling salesman neither seduced nor raped Sarah, for, in spite of her protests . . . her body responded to his sexual overture" (De Costa-Willis 547) leaning into the stereotype of African American women being slaves to their sexuality, instinctually responding to men's advances. Wright also depicts, intentionally or not, how the oppression from within the black community gaslighted African American women into thinking they owe gratitude to their husbands no matter how badly they treat them: Sarah thus claims she "was sorry for what she had done. Silas was as good to her as any black man could be to a black woman" (Wright 147), even though she did not actively *do* anything, could not stop the white salesman either way, and Silas obviously physically abuses her. Moreover, the story depicts Silas as the hero, who after years of endurance finally snaps and stoically takes the punishment, ignoring the fact that Sarah is now to become a single mother with all of her earthly possessions burnt to ash. In the end, Wright's female characters "represent the dark side of a Southern womanhood that has been violated and distorted in the crucible of racism and sexism" (De Costa-Willis 548).

2.3. New Variations of the Old Stereotypes

As previously discussed, "some scholars have argued that with the abolishment of slavery and the onset of Jim Crow laws and lynching, life got much worse for the black population in America" (Beaulieu 423). Similarly, rather than to disappear, the negative stereotypes of African Americans only evolved into new forms. The Jezebel still lingered in the public consciousness as a tool for dismissing the rape of black women, and the accusations of rape of white women were used to deprive black men of their political rights (Vallier 9). "Both in the North and in the South, racial discrimination barred black women's access to most occupations and thus reduced their economic and social opportunities" (Vallier 17), leaving them only two ways to earn their living

– the position of a physical laborer or a housekeeper and a nanny. Both of these are depicted in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill the Mockingbird* in the characters of Helen Robinson and Calpurnia.

Helen Robinson presents us with the image of the slave who "stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery" (DuBois qtd. in Vallier 2), now kept in servitude by racial and gender discrimination instead by the master's whip. We are not explicitly told where she works, but Scout's inquiry when she finds out Helen cannot work because she has to look after three children alone now that Tom is in jail is telling of just how little black women's working conditions have changed:

> "Why can't she take 'em with her, Reverend?" I asked. It was customary for field Negros with tiny children to deposit them in whatever shade there was while their parents worked – usually the babies sat in the shade between two rows of cotton. Those unable to sit were strapped papoose-style on their mother's backs, or resided in extra cotton bags. (Lee 65)

The Reverend's answer is even more telling – no one will hire Helen because her husband has been accused of raping a white woman. Through this character, Lee depicts how black women suffered the consequences of stereotypes related to both genders – the black rapist myth has left her a widow with three children, and racial and gender discrimination will make sure she has to labour day and night to provide for them.

The more prominent African American woman in Lee's novel is Scout's caretaker and maternal figure Calpurnia. She is a great representation of the re-birth of the mammy stereotype. Black women often found work as maids and nannies in white households, but the dedication their employers demanded of them clearly echoed the idea that the "new mammy" ought to forsake her own life and family in order to dedicate herself completely to "her" white family. As an anonymous child-nurse from 1912 explains in her autobiography *More Slavery in the South*:

> You might as well say that I'm on duty all the time—from sunrise to sunrise, every day in the week. *I am the slave, body and soul, of this family*. And what do I get for this work—*this lifetime of bondage*? The pitiful sum of ten dollars a month! . . . I not only have to nurse a little white child, now eleven months old, but I have to act as playmate, or "handy-andy," not to say governess, to three other children in the house . . . So it is not strange to see "Mammy" watering the lawn with the garden hose, sweeping the sidewalk, mopping the porch and halls, helping the cook, or darning stockings . . . I see my own children only when they happen to see me on the streets when I am out with the children, or when my children come to the "yard" to see me, which isn't often, because my white

> folks don't like to see their servants' children hanging around their premises. (qtd. in Vallier 18)

Though it seems that Calpurnia takes up the work of raising Jem and Scout gladly, it is obvious the same expectations are put on her: she sees children off to school in the morning and leaves after dark, sometimes staying over the night, and it never even occurs to Scout that she has a life outside of the Finch house. Furthermore, as much as the Finches genuinely appreciate her, her race prevents her from ever becoming their true equal, as shown when she rides in the back of Atticus's car, or when she starts referring to Jem – the boy she literally raised – as "Mister Jem" (Lee 61) as he enters puberty. The new mammy led somewhat of a "modest double life" (Lee 67) by having one foot in black society and one in the white one, which is in the novel symbolised by how Calpurnia "commands two languages" (Lee 67) – she speaks with an African American dialect with the people of the black community, and more "proper" around the children. Still, this "double life" occasionally gave them opportunities they would not otherwise had, as exemplified by the fact that Calpurnia is one of the rare members of the black community who knows to read, and has passed it down to her children.

Calpurnia's character also gives us an insight into how negatively the black community perceived the mammy – both the old and the new. While the mammy was the most positively viewed model of black womanhood in the eyes of white people, African American community despised her, seeing her as somewhat of a double agent siding with the enemy. The milk and care with which she nurtured the white children while forced to leave her own alone and hungry became yet another resource the whites unfairly took from African Americans. All of this is brought to our attention when Calpurnia takes Jem and Scout to a black church, and Lula demands to know "why you bringin' white chillun to a nigger church" (Lee 63). Her anger at their ability to come into black spaces while African Americans were so thoroughly excluded from entering white ones echoes Silas's anger in "Long Black Song" – to them it seems as if the white people just keep taking, never satisfied, despite already having more than their fair share.

3. Civil Rights Movement

African Americans' frustration and demand for equal rights came to its peak in the Civil Rights Movement stretching from the 1950s to the 1960s, peaking with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which, amongst other things, finally secured voting rights for black women. It was followed by yet another significant human's right movement – the women's liberation movement of the 1970s and 80s. The former influenced the latter in multiple ways: it provided a blueprint of how a successful movement organizes itself, it made social justice a legitimate cause, but most importantly – it broadened the concept of leadership to include women ("How the Civil Rights Movement Influenced the Women's Liberation Movement"). Unlike the past movements advocating the rights of black men and white women, the Civil Rights Movement prominently featured African American women, many of them writers, such as Rosa Parks, Maya Angleou, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks and Lorraine Hansberry, also rediscovering others whose literary efforts have previously been ignored, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Ida B. Wells. This paper will analyse black women's identity developed during this period through Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use," focusing on its three female characters: Mama, Dee and Maggie, and what they represent in the narrative.

Finally gaining some control over their own narrative, African American women took the opportunity to tell the stories that spent decades lying dormant, often including their own personal experiences into their literary work. This is the case in "Everyday Use," where Walker modelled Mama after her own mother, and Maggie and Dee as the representations of two stages of her own life journey. Thus, by observing these characters, we observe how racism influenced the real women of this time. In case of Mama, who represents the generation that at the time of the Civil Rights Movement was too old to truly change its ways, the effect is life-long. She says: "Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye? It seems to me I have talked to them always with one foot raised in flight, with my head fumed in whichever way is farthest from them" (Walker). Maggie and Dee represent the awakening in the younger generation and the black race as a whole. The former walks like "a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car . . . chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle" (Walker), deeply insecure about the scars she received in the fire that burned their house down. The use of scars is very important, since many black women writers use them "to illustrate the inescapable presence of a wound as well as the body's power to recover from and thrive despite it" (Beaulieu 102). Maggie then represents both the young Alice Walker, ashamed of her missing eye, and the

generations of African American women ashamed of their oppressive history and the marks it left on them. Her counterpart, Dee, shows us the older Alice, who realized her abilities and became a Civil Rights activist, and the awakening of ethnic pride shown though her new African name – something Walker also did, and her clothing. Where Maggie's image was dominated by her scars, Dee's is dominated by her hair. "One of the profound liberating effects of the rise in black feminist literature is the ability of African American women writers to reconstruct the beauty norm for black females outside the dominant controlling images of white beauty standards" (Beaulieu 51) – and one of the most attacked parts of black women's appearance was their hair. By waring hers naturally, "straight up like the wool on a sheep" (Walker), Dee shows that she is reclaiming the idea of female beauty for herself, and is proudly reclaiming her African heritage – which was a trend in that era.

The question of heritage dominates Walker's short story. "Walker champions the recovery of a black female creative heritage, suggesting that not only literature but also more everyday artistic expressions be included in such a tradition" (Beaulieu 72), and in this story she symbolises it though quilting, "a process that has been a part of the African American culture for over 200 years" (Beaulieu 737) as one of the rare ways of creative self-expression of black women and a tool for preserving their ancestry. Yet, what to do with the quilts remains an open question. Walker makes a point that there are multiple ways of embracing and using one's African American heritage, showing them all as valid but also giving them a fair critique. With Dee, she shows the empowerment it brings, as well as how much of a progress black community has made. Yet, she also points out how it reclaimed only the aesthetically pleasing parts of its history, ignoring the trauma and poverty, which were also the major parts of African American identity. Out of the two, Maggie is the one more in touch with her direct ancestry, shown by her continuing the tradition of quilting passed down from previous generations. She acknowledges her community's terrible history, but she is also limited by it – confining herself to the house out of self-consciousness, and not aspiring to much more than a simply life of a housewife.

Yet, Walker neither condemns nor praises the life choices of Mama, Dee and Maggie, which brings us to the central idea of this story – there is no monolithic concept of the black woman in America (Lander qtd. in Vallier 1). Every single of these women is powerful in her own way – Mama raised two daughters all on her own, and is a physically strong and self-reliant woman; Dee is the liberated modern woman showing her talents in full force, and Maggie presents a more subdued form of strength, the endurance that saw black women through all their hardships and lives in folklore and practical knowledge. With the growing number of African American women

writers finally came the *diversity* of black women's identity literature had been missing for so long, as well as a reminder that while all black women may share some universal experiences, individually each of their stories is unique and different – another piece of the quilt.

4. Present Day

Now comes the time to review how all the things this paper has previously discussed had shaped the present day experience of African American womanhood and the changes the identity of African American women had undergone up to this point. In her 2013 memoir *Men We Reaped*, Jesmyn Ward discusses the impacts of gender, race, and class on her own life and the lives of five young black men she grew up with in DeLisle, Mississippi, who all tragically died in a span of four years – the first one being her younger brother.

Reading Ward's memoir, there are certain elements of her story that can be traced throughout the whole history of African American womanhood – the first one being self-reliance, and the unfortunate trend of black women raising a family alone:

> I have always thought of my family as something of a matriarchy, since the women of my mother's side have held my nuclear family and my immediate family and my extended family together through so much. But our story is not special… [Black men] were devalued everywhere except in the home, and this is the place where they turned the paradigm on its head and devalued those in their thrall. The result of this, of course, was that the women who were so devalued had to be inhumanly strong and foster a sense of family alone. (Ward 64-65)

Ward describes how growing up in a fatherless home also came with the universal experience of the eldest child having to leave childhood behind early, and take up adult responsibilities in order to help their mother – something she shared with both her parents, and presumably many other black women throughout history. She reflects on the different gender norms when comparing herself and her brother Joshua, pointing out how in the wake of police brutality the tables may have turned, and even though being a man brought more freedom, it was also more dangerous. She describes how gender roles in a black Southern neighbourhood looked like to a child coming into them too early: "Both of us on the cusp of adulthood, and this is how my brother and I understood what it meant to be a woman: working, dour, full of worry. What it meant to be a man: resentful, angry, wanting life to be everything but what it was" (Ward 119).

In between the lines of this memoir it can be read that while racial discrimination played a major role in shaping the life of her community, economic circumstances were taking an increasingly large role as well. Thus the identity bends fourfold – Ward tells her story from the perspective of a *poor* black woman. Ward describes a tight knit community, a "hood," pushed into

poverty by Southern economy, which made "a move from manufacturing and making things to service and tourism. And Black people in the region, who historically did not have the resources to attend college and so did not qualify for the administrative positions, were limited to jobs as cocktail waitresses, valet attendants, and food preparers" (Ward 52), systemic discrimination and a milieu of natural disasters – the last one being hurricane Katrina. Ward, whose mother managed to send her to a private school by convincing her wealthy employer to pay for it, also lives somewhat of a "double life" due to her education, evident in her "bilingualism":

> When my mother picked me up from school one day I began telling her about a school project, and she interrupted me, speaking to the pebbly asphalt road, the corridor of trees leading us home to our trailer, and said: "Stop talking like that." As in: *Why are you speaking so properly?* As in: *Why do you sound like those White kids you go to school with, that I clean up after?* As in: *Who are you?*" (Ward 151).

Furthermore, as it is written from a first person perspective, *Men We Reaped* gives insight into the author's own struggle with her racial identity: "At home, I'd have moments of clarity while riding down the street with one of my friends, listening to Tupac, and I'd think: *I love being Black*; then a few hours later, I'd wrestle with my hair while obsessing over my antiseptic dating and social life at school, and loathe myself" (Ward 151). One of its major themes is also the psychological effects of systematic oppression – for the author, the hostile treatment of her white peers at school and her father's leaving lead her into a deep depression for most of her teenage years: "I was so depressed by the subtext I felt, so depressed I was silenced, because the message was always the same: *You're Black. You're less than White*. And then, at the heart of it: *You're less than human*" (Ward 142). As their friends and family members violently die around them, the young African Americans Ward so lovingly speaks of in her memoir become increasingly aware of the fragility of their own lives, and find their own ways to cope – leading many into substance abuse. Ultimately, Ward tells of how a lifelong exposure to negative and oppressive images of oneself inadvertently leads to the internalization of those same belittling beliefs, and puts out a call for aid:

> We tried to outpace the thing that chased us, that said: *You are nothing*. We tried to ignore it, but sometimes we caught ourselves repeating what history said, mumbling along, brainwashed: *I am nothing*. We drank too much, smoked too much, were abusive to ourselves, to each other. We were bewildered. There is a great darkness bearing down on our lives, and no one acknowledges it.

Conclusion

The identity of African American women rose from the dehumanization and the "murdered souls" of slavery, where black women were physically, sexually and psychologically abused, de-gendered, and shaped into negative stereotypes, which haunted them for the decades to come. Once free, they formed an identity unlike any America had seen up to that point – triple in its consciousness, the Other in both gender and race. Overlooked by the movements fighting for the rights of African Americans – but only of men, and women – but only of the white ones, black women were left to stand their ground alone, criticized, and discriminated by both the white society and the male part of the black community. Yet, the violent and demeaning reception of the phenomenon of African American womanhood reveals its greatest strength. Black women had to be "un-womened" or silenced under any cost because their identity held in itself the ideas that, if allowed to develop, could very well destroy the basis on which the white men made their claim to the power they held. African American women refuted the dominant idea of women being physically fragile and in need of men to protect them and provide for them by doing man's work as slaves in the fields and earning their own living through the same work once freed. They defied the stigma that presented blacks, and especially black women, lesser in intelligence and mental capacity by openly showing their intelligence and fighting for their rights in the Civil Rights Movement. Through loopholes and scraps, they rebuilt the culture that was taken from them into something new and yet unseen. Even as slaves, African American women were planting the seeds of something far greater than themselves – the ideas of gender equality, strength of the human spirit, and the ability to "rise from the ashes" and be made whole once again. The soul of African American womanhood, once "murdered," has been reborn, rediscovered, and redefined throughout the centuries, and is still in a never-ending process of changing both itself and the rest of the world. The women who conveyed this rebirth successfully turned centuries of hatred and violence aimed towards them into something so strong it threatened to undermine the very system that held them captive. It was not a grand affair – it was quiet, it was subtle, it was stubborn, it took on many forms, and it continues on to this day.

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