

## **Investigating the Possibilities of Reading Literary Texts in Light of a Sociolinguistic Perspective: Applications on the Case of Alice Walker's Selected Short Stories**

**Laleh Masiha <sup>\*1</sup>, Behrang Torabi <sup>2</sup>**

*1. English Department of the University of Tabriz*

*2. English Language Department, Maragheh Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maragheh,  
Iran*

*\*Corresponding author: massihalale@gmail.com*

Received: 2016.4.3

Revisions received: 2016.7.1

Accepted: 2016.9.4

Online publication: 2017.2.23

### **Abstract**

The present research tries to show how race, class, and gender and intersectionality in general, have their decisive impact on the black- American women; and how Alice Walker as a womanist, in her selected short stories, tries to show that black women in the U.S. suffer two-fold acts of oppression and discrimination, i.e. male violence affects all women in social life, irrespective of age or social standing, and at the same time being black has exacerbated the black American women's situation. In the present study, the mentioned socio-political, socio-cultural and institutionalized intersectionality have been analyzed from the perspective of Alice Walker's selected short stories. Full analysis have been carried out, from applied linguistic point of view, in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" and "Roselily" while Alice Walker's other short stories have been consulted for further analysis and discussion. The method used to analyze the data is descriptive research method.

**Keywords:** ethnography of communication, Alice Walker, intersectionality, womanism, race, class, gender, gender stratification

## Introduction

Malestream sociological and linguistic theory and practice is inadequate because they have either ignored or marginalized women or else accepted biological explanations as adequate for explaining gender divisions and women's social and linguistic behavior. Moreover, biological reductionism is insufficient because it assumes that biological differences between the sexes can explain gender divisions. Gender divisions are socially constructed and cannot be explained by references to sex differences. Looking at social distinctions and events, like race and violence in literary works, through the female prism means that we need to rethink sociolinguistics and to challenge existing theories and research findings as at best inadequate which is very important problem in American literature and at worst wrong. Now, the crucial problem facing the literary researcher, in American literary works, is carrying out precise research on the importance of gender as well as class and race as explanatory variables. In fact in the U.S., women's experiences are structured by class and race – that black women suffer discrimination, exploitation and subordination because they are black as well as because they are women. All these realities open their ways to literature and literary works because literature may be considered as a mirror of society, culture and social facts. Unfortunately, there have been little sociolinguistic analysis of those effective social facts and literary works in the U.S.; and the present research paper tries to analyze those effective social facts, like race and violence from the perspective of one of the most widely read woman writers: Alice Walker.

The second problem that is neglected in American literary tradition and we want to clarify, through the writings of Alice Walker, is the fact that the ideas of the public and private and the exclusion of women from the public sphere have partly been created by political processes – i.e. government legislation and state policies. Familial ideologies that place women in the domestic sphere as wives and mothers are reinforced both by legislation and by the speeches and manifestos of political parties in the U.S. (Pamela, A. & Wallace, C. 1990, p.182). Moreover, the work on women, race, and violence has, to large extent, been carried out by feminists, like Alice Walker, who are concerned not only with researching the problem of men's violence to women but also in developing strategies for dealing with it. Alice Walker, as a feminist, wants to

show that generally male violence affects all women in social life, irrespective of age or social class, and being a black exacerbates the situation. In the present paper we want to show, explicitly and through Alice Walker's writings, how she has approached this missing problem in American literature; and how she wants to show that malestream ideas have ignored or marginalized the violence and crimes that are committed by men against women and how the American legal system marginalizes, trivializes and belies women's victimization. (Pamella, A. & Wallace, C. 1990, p. 183).

The next problem that we deal with in the present paper is to depict, through Alice Walker's selected short stories, the fact that womanism, in the way Alice Walker uses the term, wants to understand social reality from the point of view of women, to ask questions that relate directly or indirectly to women's lives, especially in America, and to uncover the systematic biases and distortions in malestream knowledge and practical approach.

Discussing race and violence, the next neglected areas in literary works are two categories of explanation for racial prejudice – individual and cultural. Individual explanations argue that a person has something in their (i.e. group/class) personality which makes them hate those who are different from them. Cultural explanations argue that racism is "in culture" and people are merely reflecting that, when they express racist ideas. Two types of cultural explanations should be taken into consideration: a) scapegoating (when ethnic minorities are blamed for problems); and b) stereotyping (when people are taught to view ethnic minorities as inferior) (Moore, 2001, p.123). These neglected areas will be dealt with in Alice Walker's selected short stories. The next issue to be clarified in the writings of Alice Walker is the question of "womanism" (in her sense of the word) and how this concept is crystalized in her stories. In fact, just as blacks are victimized by racism, women suffer from sexism of American society. Whenever prejudice, discrimination or systematic social inequality occurs along the lines of race or ethnicity, we have an example of racism. Sexism is the ideology that one sex is superior to the other. The term is generally used to refer to male prejudice and discrimination against women. In fact, in American society, black women suffer from two-fold acts of discrimination. They suffer from racial discrimination and at the same time both from individual acts of racism and institutionalized discrimination. Institutionalized discrimination is defined as the denial of opportunities equal

rights to individuals or groups which results from the normal operations of a society. In the same sense women are said to suffer both from individual acts of sexism (such as sexist remarks and acts of violence against women) and from institutionalized sexism. (Biesanz & Biesanz, 1973, p.254).

In the present research we will approach these issues, from the points of view of applied linguistics, from the eyes of Alice Walker as expressed in her selected short stories.

As far as Alice Walker is concerned, there has not been a comprehensive analysis about intersectionality – i.e. race, class and gender in her short stories. Practically, in this respect there is a clear gap in the literature. The present research is a literary response to fill the gap from intersectionality and both social and linguistic points of views.

Based on the nature and the aims of the present research on “race and violence from a womanist reading of some selected short stories of Alice Walker’s perspective”, the researcher has postulated the following research questions and hypotheses:

**Q1:** What are the impacts of race, class and gender oppression on the lives of Black American woman?

**Q2:** How the impacts of race, class and gender oppression are reflected in Alice Walker's short stories?

**Q3:** How "intersectionality" is reflected in Alice Walker's short stories – i.e. how race, class and gender are manifested in the characters of her short stories?

In order to investigate the above-mentioned questions, the following hypotheses are formulated:

**H1:** Race, class and gender oppression have deep impact on the lives of Black – American women.

**H2:** As a 'womanist', Alice Walker, in her writings, shows authentically, discrimination and devaluation used against Black – American women; and how this line of thought, along with racism, result in violence in American society.

**H3:** Alice Walker challenges racial, sexual and class oppression by exposing the effects of their intersectionality.

## Method

### Corpus and procedure of analysis

To describe and analyze the impacts of race and violence against black-American women, selected short stories of Alice Walker have been analyzed both socio-culturally and linguistically. The analyses are based on Alice Walker's (as a womanist) approach to fundamental issues of intersectionality in American society and how those basic points are crystalized and manifested in the characters of the stories. The method used to describe and analyze the data is descriptive. Alice Walker's *Everyday Use* and *Roselily* are two basic and comprehensive sources of the present analysis; while her other short stories have been consulted for further clarifications and reference.

In Alice Walker's selected short stories, intersectionality, i.e. the ways in which race, class, and gender converge in black American women's lives as well as violence, as the social outcome of intersectionality, have been precisely specified, analyzed and interpreted within the framework of Alice Walker's womanist ideas and ideals. The descriptions and analysis have been carried out from applied linguistic point of view. Moreover, A.Walker's own words, in her short stories, have been directly quoted and necessary references added for further clarifications and support.

In reading Alice Walker's *Everyday Use*, the reader should take a more reflective approach from the points of view of race, class, and gender and their impact on social life. Colorful language, specialized diction, and character's choice of words give *Everyday use* a true sense of realism. There are definite complexities and profound ideas and ideals about intersectionality that lie beneath the surface of the story.

On reading the story, the reader moves closer to the possibility of seeing it from the point of view of a poor black Southern woman. By observing how the characters of the story like Maggie, Dee and Mama deal with the issues of their past, their social standing, their femininity, their class, and what it means (or doesn't mean) to be black and women, and their mentality and approach to these crucial and decisive questions, the white reader gains an invaluable understanding of his or her race, class and gender's role in the oppression of people like the above mentioned characters of the story.

In her short works, "Walker develops her most important ideas in concise form: Relationships between men and women, between women and women,

between members of a family are all examined. The dense symbolism of the quilt, of the scar, points to her larger concerns, and the importance of finding beauty in damage, resonates through all these stories" (Donnelly: 133).

In the analysis of "*Everyday Use*", of Alice Walker, there are Mama and Maggie who have readied the front yard in anticipation of Dee's visit, sweeping "the hard clay...clean as a floor" and lining "the fine sand around the edges ... with tiny, irregular grooves..." We can see thus Mama not only as poor, unsophisticated, and uneducated, but also as a twentieth-century incarnation of those would-be artist grandmothers and great-grandmothers that Walker writes about in her essay. Lacking the education and background to create through elite media such as sculpture or painting, Mama expresses her heritage and creativity through ordering her front yard and furnishing her home with artifacts crafted by her ancestors." (Guerin, et al., p.401)

### **Results and emerging possibilities**

**Race, Violence and Intersectionality.** Race is the outstanding analytical category in "*Everyday Use*" of Alice Walker. Racism and intersectionality are the U.S.'s most problematic moral issues that underlie the actions, plot and character's attitudes as well as behaviors in Alice Walker's short stories. For instance, as an ordinary white male reader of the story, he or she may be surprised by the question that Mama – a confident, intelligent woman – asks "Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye?" (Guerin et al., p. 402). It has never occurred to a white reader that a black woman could feel this way; to him or her white men are simply men like any others. However, the story has shown him/ her that his/her assumption may not be true, and this point makes the story important to study – specifically for white readers.

Alice Walker believes that new and intellectual black generation in the U.S. has a strong tendency to respect their original culture and their African roots. For example, when the mother, in *Everyday Use* meets her younger educated daughter, Dee, in their yard and addresses her by her American name "Dee", the daughter tells her mother that "Dee is dead" and her new name is Wangero. She adds that she could not stand being named after the people who had practically oppressed her.

Race plays a critical role in the formation of Mama's character; definitely, she had received little education because the colored school she went to, closed down while she was in the second grade. Mama's mentality towards blacks and herself is reflected, as pointed out in the previous section, in her statement, regarding the Johnny Carson daydream, that she could not imagine looking a white man in the eye or talking back to one. But despite Mama's self-consciousness about being black woman, with its denotations and connotations, Dee is proud of her black origin, considering the story through the lens of her race. Dee, is interested in her African heritage and it is this heritage and not African-American one that she wants to have. Dee adopts an African name, Wangero, and African dress, but, at the same time, she is not very happy about the simple cabin in which her sister Maggie, and her mother live. Dee admires simple way of life in the family: the churn top and dasher, the benches, and, most important of all, the quilts of their ancestors. All these things connect Dee to her precious past. They are in the distant past, not in the present, like her mother and sister, who threaten to embarrass her, through their simple country way of living and lifestyle. Actually, quilts and their important roles in the story are "significant not only because they are family heirlooms but because of their role in African American history, a history of which Dee demonstrates no awareness: since the time of slavery, African American women have used quilts to tell stories and send messages; moreover, quilts are widely believed to have been used as signals in the Underground Railroad" (Guerin et al., p. 401).

Alice Walker uses different symbols to show her approach to race, class and gender. The quilts are the central symbol in *Everyday Use* that represents the family's strong connection to their African origin. The young daughter's (i.e. Maggie's) burned skin, during a house fire, shows the black woman's burned life due to social circumstances. Moreover, Mama's "man-working" hands in the story symbolize the hard life of the black working women's living conditions. Thus, Alice Walker's characters and their behaviors do reflect the writer's ideas and approaches to intersectionality and American "Black Pride".

After slavery became outlawed, real equality between American white and black population was far from reality and actuality. All these social, political and cultural factors paved their ways into Alice Walker's works, especially her *Everyday Use*. Even the black arts and artistic works that symbolized their African origin, for example widespread symbolic use of the quilts in the story



and other black women's concerns are practically put to everyday use in Alice Walker's short stories.

In discussing intersectionality in *Everyday Use*, it should be added that at the beginning of the story, Mama imagines that she is too black for Dee, in her self-description at the end of the Johnny Carson daydream, "But of course all this does not show on T.V. I am the way my daughter would want me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barely pancake" (Guerin, p. 402). Dee, the younger daughter of the family, brings race directly to the forefront of the story when she shows her justification and reasoning why she changed her name to an African one: "I could not bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me" (ibid, p.406). Mama explains that Dee is named after her aunt, and that the name has a long history in their family. Ironically, Dee adopts an African name, WangerooLeewanikaKemanjo, and in so doing, she refuses her African American heritage and at the same time she accepts her African heritage. Interesting enough, Dee wants the quilts, not for "everyday use", as their African American makers intended, but as objects of art and artistic works that link her back to her African roots. Dee is more attractive, educated and stylish than Maggie her sister. Maggie is scarred for life due to the fire that burnt down the family's first house (an event to which Dee did not mourn). Alice Walker uses these Maggie's scars as symbol of the scars of three hundred years of African American slavery. Dee has the university education while Maggie and Mama have completely different form of education in the fields, the crafts, the country folkways of their African American heritage. Dee was interested in the quilts, but Maggie, in the end, gets them. The important point in the story is the way the sisters want to use the quilts: for everyday use or for use as artistic pieces of work that connects the family to their original past. Dee, objects Maggie's using the quilts and considers it equal to her rejection of her African American heritage of manual and simple lifestyle. Dee thinks that Maggie considers *the quilts as things* whereas to her, they have the connotation of the *spirit of their black heritage*.

Alice Walker's other short stories mirror her ideas and ideals about race, violence and intersectionality. In "*Roselily*" for example, Alice Walker reveals the extremes of cruelty, violence and discrimination against women, in general, and black women, in particular. According to Alice Walker, poor black women



are often subjected to violence, discrimination, and oppression in their personal and social relationships. She depicts, clearly, black women's social status and their sufferings in *Roselily* as: "Her husband would free her. A Romantic hush. Proposal. Promises. A new life! Respectable, reclaimed, renewed. Free! In robe and veil. In that last phrase, Walker critiques both the patriarchal religion and the Cinderella tradeoff to which *Roselily* has submitted herself. Freedom, yes, for him, and possibly her children. But the cost to her is a public and visible acceptance of her subjugated status. A common theme in Walker's work is the various paths by which blacks in her era attempted to challenge white domination" (Donnelly, p.124).

Alice Walker's deep interest in black American women and how they are oppressed is reflected in most of her literary works. For instance, in *Roselily*, every event is seen through the eyes of *Roselily*, and is interpreted through the filters of her own past personal and social experiences.

The story of *Roselily* may be considered as the internal monologue of a woman (i.e. *Roselily*), who through internal monologue (called *dramatic monologue*), expresses a strong current of ambivalence about the marriage that is taking place. For example, when the preacher utters the words: "to join this man and woman..." *Roselily*'s mind immediately shifts to "ropes, chains, and handcuffs" (Walker, 1973).

**Womanism and Intersectionality.** In, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Alice Walker says: "For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world" (Walker, 1973). "In a 1973 interview with Mary H. Washington, as reported by Christian, Alice Walker identifies three cycles of historical black women characters who she feels are missing from contemporary writing. First, are those "who were cruelly exploited, spirits and bodies mutilated, relegated to the most narrow and confining lives, sometimes driven to madness," shown in her novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and in the short stories of *In Love and Trouble* (1973), including *Everyday Use*." The women in the second cycle are those who are not so much physically as psychically abused, a result of wanting desperately to participate in mainstream American life. In the third cycle, are those black women who have gained a new consciousness and pride, what Christian calls "their right to be themselves and to shape the world" (Guerin et al., p. 265).

In analyzing A. Walker's selected short stories, we can see more widespread use of the words "womanism" and "womanist" than "feminism" and "feminist". To A. Walker, the term *black feminist*, is problematic. Alice Walker, questions and disputes the term "feminist" as applied to black women. She uses "womanist" instead of "feminist" stressing that a womanist "does not turn back upon the men of her community" (Walker, 1982).

In this respect *Everyday Use* is an exceptionally well-crafted and well-organized piece of writing. In the same short story, Walker uses the term *womanism* with all its intended denotations and connotations. It "is about the everyday lives of women past and present, encircled by family and culture, and especially about the contemporary experiences of different generations of African American women. Its quilt is an emblem of American women's culture, as it is an object of communal construction and female harmony. The quilt warms and protects our bodies; it is passed down like mother's wisdom from generation to generation; its designers mirror the most everyday but profound concerns of all women – marriage, family, children, love" (Guerin, et al. p. 264).

In *Everyday Use*, the narrator of the story, restates and, at the same time, reflects A. Walker's term *womanism* as opposed to *feminism* with its full significance. "Walker offers four definitions of *womanist*. First, it is 'a black feminist or feminist of color'. She explains the derivation from *womanish*, a black folk expression mothers might use to warn female children who are 'outrageous, audacious, or willful,' who want to know more than what is good for them or want to grow up too soon. Second, the term refers to 'a woman who loves other women, sexually and or nonsexually,' who 'appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength.' Third, the womanist 'loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless.' And, finally, 'womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender' " (ibid, p. 268).

In reading *Everyday Use* and considering its main character, Mama, the reader can find androgynous dimension in her character: "In real life, I am a large, big-boned woman with tough man-working hands. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man...eat pork liver cooked over the open fire minutes

after it comes steaming from the hog...and knock a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledge hammer and have the meat hung up to chill before nightfall” (Guerin, et al., p.402). Dee is more feminine in dress and appearance, yet she is very assertive. She seems to command Hakim-A-Barber, the story’s only male character, according to her will. It may even be argued that the way Maggie is represented in *Everyday Use* and lacking the traditional feminine attributes of beauty, grace, and style, is more or less androgynous like Mama. None of the female characters of the story is completely and traditionally “feminine” in full sense. Definitely, they all possess attributes of female and female experience. Considering *Everyday Use*, from the points of view of gender and black American woman, the reader can be in a precise position to understand and appreciate the complexity of the female personality and the female ideals, values and world view that the story embeds.

Alice Walker’s womanism is, even, reflected in her deliberate choice in *Everyday Use* to use only women; all men are absent in the story, they are dead and unnamed (the reader cannot find out whether the story’s only male character, Hakim-A-Barber, is Dee’s boyfriend or her husband and what is his real name and what are his personality specifications). Alice Walker, in *Everyday Use* and in *Roselily* as well as in her other short stories gives strong voice to an entire maternal history silenced by violence, prejudice, discrimination and political situation of the period, her way of breaking silences and stereotypes about her grandmothers’, mothers’, and sisters’ lives.

Reading Alice Walker from the angle of gender, the reader can see how different the story is from the typical story by a male author. For example, *Everyday Use*, and *Roselily* and almost other short stories of Alice Walker, are essentially gynocentric. They are not about fathers and sons as is often the case in the traditional literature, but about grandmothers, mothers, daughters and sisters. Stories about fathers and sons usually involve rivalries, competitions and the passing down of goods and material possessions. Often the object of contention is an inheritance of land or money. In canonical literary works, there is typically much lying, cheating, and bickering to get the inheritance; often it is the oldest son who comes out on top. Definitely, there are similar elements in *Everyday Use*, but instead of usual father-to-son inheritance plot as seen elsewhere, it is the *cultural heritage*, rather than land or money, that is at stake that the younger daughter of the family wants to possess. Moreover, while the

eldest son of the family often inherits wealth in patriarchal works, in *Everyday Use*, the mother gives her cultural legacy of quilts to Maggie, the uglier, less-educated, more traditional sister rather than to Dee, her elder sister. Practically, the story shows a sharp change of masculine inheritance and thereby offers an alternate value system as well as an alternate plot in the story. In fact, by giving the quilts (i.e. cultural legacy) to Maggie, Alice Walker shows her full respect and apprehension to community-focused value system.

Alice Walker, strongly believes that, essentially, it is the women (e.g. mother and daughter in the case of *Everyday Use*) and among women, those who are more sensitive towards maintaining black women ancestral and cultural values (e.g. Maggie and not Dee in the same short story) who are eligible to have the necessary possibilities to continue their cultural legacies. Actually, quilting as American (and here specifically African-American) folk art is an important symbol throughout Alice Walker's work. Taking the scraps of history, piecing them together into something beautiful and useful, is an act of artistic creation. These quilts are the ones deemed "priceless" by the daughter who desires them. But, they are withheld for the daughter who actually remembers their true origin and will use them in her home, the daughter who represents continuity with the past (Donnelly, 2010).

While land is worked, cared for, and overseen by individuals and handed down from one individual to another, usually from father to an eldest son, quilts are communal, woven into existence with the hands and skill of women, testifies the high importance Alice Walker puts on the women's decisive place and maintaining black values. Thus, while Dee is the one who is most intent on possessing the quilts, it is Maggie who actually is skilled in quilting, capable of making her own quilts, and thus, in Mama's eyes, the daughter who is best able to understand, care for, and cherish the quilts, and by extension, the family's history and culture.

**Class and Intersectionality.** Reading Alice Walker's selected short stories, from the perspective of class, race and gender and how these socio-cultural elements converge in a complex way and how they are crystalized in her story characters, help the reader to focus on and better understand the turning points of the stories and denouements. (For example in *Everyday Use*, when Dee asks for the family heirloom quilts and is refused them by Mama.) In spite of the fact

that Mama and Dee are alike in personality, confidence, assertiveness, and intelligence, Mama and Maggie have something much more important in common; they are both working-class characters, while Dee has moved her class into the middle class position. She behaves, dresses, speaks and conducts herself according to middle-class norms. Before she became educated, and realized that her humble roots could be used to enhance her status, she was ashamed of her working-class origins. Mama tells the reader of the story, "She wrote me once that no matter where we 'choose' to live, she will manage to come see us. *But she will never bring her friends*" (Guerin et al. 2005). Ironically, the reader learns that the "priceless" quilts that Dee now wants, were exactly the same ones that Mama tried to give her when she went away to follow her studies in a college; at that time Dee did not want them. Mama adds in this respect: "She told me they were old-fashioned, out of style" (ibid). Actually, prior to college education, Dee did not think much about the quilt and their precious past legacy. She considered them to be of little or no value. Dee's new interest in her roots stems from her new awareness that, part of her history can be used, not only as a piece of art, but as a precious symbol of her original African root. Thus, she can solidify her middle-class status, appear more intelligent, more compassionate, more thoughtful, and more in touch with her heritage. From class point of view, it is interesting to note that Dee does not want to put the quilts (as a cultural symbol of their black legacy) into everyday use. Practically, it is Mama and Maggie, ordinary and humble people, who consider the quilts as items of everyday use. They know how to make quilts and that they are made to keep people warm. For Dee, they are works of art to hang on walls. Alice Walker believes that poor people make quilts; rich people buy them. To the poor the quilts have practical meanings; while to the rich those items are beautiful art objects with which to decorate their homes. Dee has elevated herself to a middle-class status; while her mother, Mama, and her sister, Maggie have remained as working class people. The way of their intended uses of the quilts differentiates between their related classes and how they evaluate their present social status and how they see their black history.

Alice Walker's *Everyday Use* can be considered as an ideal short story with which to show the strong and decisive role of using race, gender, and class as analytical categories with which to approach socio-cultural realities in producing an exquisite literary work. In reading *Everyday Use* the reader

experiences a story about black, working-class women, how sensitive Alice Walker is about prevailing social facts, and thereby become more open and reflective to the history, cultural values, and concerns of people who are completely different from him or her in terms of gender, race, and class.

Alice Walker's socio-political and cultural standpoints are elaborately and clearly reflected in *Everyday Use*. Definitely, her overall viewpoints about race, violence and intersectionality can be traced, in addition to *Everyday Use*, in her other short story works. For example, in the opening story of *In Love and Trouble*, Roselily (the main character), marries the unnamed black Muslim from Chicago, partly to give her three children a better and secure social chance in their future life, and partly, to provide herself some social and economic security; but it is not really a marital relationship that she chooses to enter with her free will, as is shown by her listening to her wedding ceremony – a service in which Roselily visualizes images of not beauty and romance, but of bondage: “*Roselily will be free, yes – free ! In robe and veil*” (Walker, 1973).

#### **Sociolinguistic Structure in Alice Walker's Selected Short Stories**

Literary linguistics, as a sub-discipline of applied linguistics, is the application of linguistic theory to literature. The first aim is to model the cognitive processes which shape verbal behavior. The second aim is to explain how linguistic form can be used in literary works to communicate definite and delicate meanings. Literary texts have certain regularities which are shared with verbal behavior in general, but they also have specific regularities, which can be described and explained by literary rules such as the rules of meter, of parallelism, of narrative form, of rhyme, alliteration and so on.

For a literary linguist interested in cognition, the crucial question is whether any of the literary rules represent special cognitive processes. Alice Walker uses different and at the same time profound literary devices to produce deep impact on the reader. For example, she uses alliteration (i.e. repetition of initial sounds of several words) like *Respectable*, *Reclaimed*, and *Renewed*; or *Proposal* and *Promiss* (in “*Everyday Use*” and “*Roselily*”) to produce such impact on the reader. Using such literary devices suggest both that there is a specialized cognitive process in operation and that this process interacts with linguistic processes. The fact that alliteration rule governs a “hidden” aspect of linguistic form, apparently undoing the effect of phonological rules, suggests



that the alliteration rules must themselves be cognitive rules since they are able to interact with cognitive rules.

Alice Walker's "*Everyday Use*" allows us to illustrate another further important fact about sociolinguistic analysis of discourse. Discourse structure is, not idiosyncratic, not organized uniquely for each individual short story, but conventional. In fact, structural patterns in a language by convention encode various interpersonal and cognitive experiences and relationships: the community has these expressive potentials generally available in the structure of its language, and the individual user of the language chooses from them according to his or her personality, roles in the universe of discourse, world outlooks and his or her communicative needs. Thus, the fundamental issue for the formal linguistics is to explain how form is related to meaning. Linguists recognize two distinct problems. The first problem is to relate phonological form to logical form. The logical form will specify the string of words which have been spoken, the phrases into which they actually fit, and their grammatical relationships (e.g. subject, predicate, object, etc.). The second problem is to explain how in communication a logical form is used to decide what the speaker's informative intentions are. The first problem is the domain of syntactic analysis and is almost certainly irrelevant in the study of literary texts, because literary texts are probably like any kind of text when it comes to the derivation of logical forms from phonological forms. The second problem is in the domain of pragmatics and is obviously relevant in the study of literary texts, because literary texts have unusual interpretive characteristics.

Generally speaking, a literary text is a unique, esthetically notable expression of some content through language. A literary text may achieve the esthetic level of literature through the qualities of its expression, the significance of its content, or both. Alice Walker's short stories are notable for both expression and content. For example in "*Everyday Use*" Dee and Mama's representation of conversation would be some kind of linguistic variety with clear values associated with it in society at large, and utilized in the whole story as a structuring device. Moreover, reading Alice Walker's selected short stories, the reader can recognize the potential relevance of different varieties of language used to the communicative purposes and relationships that the writer builds in the universe of discourse. For example *Roselily's* language potential gives her, at least in her own mental world, the power to free herself from her



constricting social and family environment as in her wedding ceremony images of beauty and romance give way to bondage: "*Free, yes free. In robe and veil*".

The next premise related to language and social structure in Alice Walker's selected short stories is her approach to family structure. In reading Alice Walker, the reader concludes that her short stories are gynocentric and that working class families are typically female-based or 'matri-focal', as the writings of Alice Walker show in which the characters are typically females and male characters are either absent or are in the shadow. For example, in '*Everyday Use*', despite the fact that you see a sense of realism in the story, all characters are female and the reader has full information even about their physical appearances and their mentality towards the world and social relations. And the only male character is unknown to the reader. It is not clear what his real name is and whether he is Dee's boyfriend or her husband. Or in '*Roselily*', the internal monologue, our information about the only male character, i.e. supposed bridegroom, is that he is non-Christian. Moreover, for the working class there is typically an intact nuclear family with the father holding a semi-skilled or unskilled job; and the educational problems run across the important class distinction. Nevertheless, there is no objective evidence in Alice Walker's works that shows that the father or the husbands' presence is closely related with educational achievements.

The next issue arises from the analysis of social constructs, such as race and ethnicity, in relation to Alice Walker's short stories. Discussing class distinctions, from the point of view of linguistics and language use, leads us to distinguish two different varieties of American English. Mama and Maggie's language in '*Everyday Use*' is the expression of American Black working women's vernacular; whereas Dee's language reflects linguistic elements of the middle-class American Black vernacular. Definitely, from linguistic point of view, there is no intrinsic quality or specification in an intended variety that makes it a superior or an inferior form of American English. Thus, working class women should not be classified as intellectually deficient because of low English proficiency. Mama and Maggie's vernacular is not a deteriorated or deviant form of American English. Nor Dee's variety of English is superior or elevated form of American English. Such spurious evaluations and or devaluations about the relationship between social constructs and using

language have widely been criticized in modern sociolinguistics. Such misunderstandings have had a number of unfortunate consequences. For instance, various distinguishing characteristics of Black American vernacular were regarded as deficiencies. Black children were considered as deficient in language ability because their language did not have certain features of the standard, and the consequence of that deficiency was cognitive deficiency. From linguistics point of view all languages and all varieties of a particular language are arguably equal in the sense that there is nothing intrinsically limiting, demeaning, or handicapping about any of them. All languages and varieties of a language (e.g. American English in our case) meet the social and psychological needs of their speakers, equally deserve scientific study and can provide us with valuable information about human nature and society. Thus, we can argue that one cannot reason from the kinds of language data presented by the speakers that there is a qualitative difference between the different kinds of language varieties, let alone a qualitative difference that would result in cognitive and intellectual differences. Ellis (2012) comments that the studies about the relationships of social class and language learning show that middle class children achieve higher levels of language proficiency and more positive attitudes than working-class children when the program emphasizes formal language learning. This may be because they are better able to deal with decontextualized language. However, when the program emphasizes communicative language skills, the social class of the learners has no effect. (2012, p. 316). Actually, dialect differences which seem large scale to the non-specialist or prescriptively trained analyst are often minor in the overall context of the language system. For example, in Black English Vernacular, variable rules have been used to describe the extent of the systematic variation that occurs in relation to situational factors (i.e. in style shifting) and also that which arises as a result of linguistic context (Labov, 1969).

In discussing the conventions of discourse in Alice Walker's selected short stories, it should be added that the majority of investigations on the Black English Vernacular, and specifically American Black women's vernacular, are founded on normative methodological principles determined by middle-class linguistic values. The middle-class bias shows that differences are not analyzed in a functional sense but according to preconceived valuations. Such a procedure must support the supposition that research into class differences, as it

is prompted by society, is intended not so much to emancipate the lower class as to integrate it into the existing hierarchical structure of society.

### **Implications of the proposed perspective for reading literary texts**

Literature may be thought of as a mirror of society, culture and social facts. Considering the research questions, the main findings of the research on the issue of “race and violence: a womanist reading of some selected short stories of Alice Walker” the following findings can be summarized:

- Race, class, and gender oppression have deep and lasting impact on the lives of black American women.
- As a “womanist” (the way in which she uses the term), Alice Walker, in her selected short stories, shows discrimination and devaluation used against black American women and how this line of thought, along with racism, results in violence in the society. In other words, Walker shows how intersectionality, the convergence of key variables i.e. race, class, and gender have worked together and manifested in her short story characters’ behaviors, attitudes personality, and world views. All these social facts are reflected in her selected works.
- The problems connected with working class are only partly linguistic; rather, the connection with the different cultural and social values and norms of the white middle-class should be stressed; and the overall educational problem is one of cultural conflict, for which the linguistic data provide us with only one indication.
- Alice Walker, definitely, has challenged racial, sexual and class oppression, by exposing the effects of their intersectionality. Moreover, Walker points to the socio-cultural fact that male violence affects all women, irrespective of age or social class and being black exacerbates the situation.
- As regards the educational dimension of the present research analysis it should be noted that in order to analyze social constructs and inter-ethnic issues we should investigate the relationship between language and such social parameters as social status, ethnicity, race, gender, etc. At the same time we should consider the role of language differences in the creation of social stereotypes, and their implications for social advantage or disadvantage.

- With due reference to the research findings, the proposed research hypotheses are confirmed.

Race, class, and gender are key variables in the formation of black American women outlook, that have paved the way to specific mentality of Alice Walker and to her creation of the characters in her short stories. From Alice Walker's point of view, those key variables are the main factors of social disturbances. For example, the main reasons of the violence reside in devaluations and discriminations used against black American women. Their mentality is definitely, affected by sociocultural disgrace and, practically, by social inequalities. It should be noted, here, that in the present research, Alice Walker's selected short stories have been analyzed, in addition to the above mentioned social facts, from the perspective of "American Dilemma".

### References

- Baily, C.J.N. (1973). *Variation and linguistic theory*. Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Banton, M. (1970). *Race and racialism*. London: Tavistock.
- Biesanz, M.H. & Biesanz, J. (1973). *Introduction to sociology*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Bloom, H. (2007). *Bloom's modern critical views: Alice Walker*. New York: Chelsea House.
- Brent, L. (2001). *Short stories for students*. New York: Gale Group.
- Chafetz, J.S. (2006). *Handbook of the sociology of gender*. Houston: Springer.
- Conklin, J.E. (1984). *Sociology: An introduction*. New York: Macmillan Pub. Co. Inc.
- Dittmar, N. (1986). *Sociolinguistics: A Critical Survey of theory and application*. London: Edward Arnold Publishing Ltd.
- Donnelly, M. (2010). *Alice Walker: The Color Purple and Other Works*. N.Y.: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark.
- Ellis, R. (2012). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Farley, J.E. & Frank, L.K. (1990). *Sociology*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Fishman, J.A. (1997). Language and Ethnicity: the view from within. In F. Coulmas (ed.), *The Handbook of sociolinguistics*. (pp. 327-343). Oxford: Blackwell.

- Fowler, R. (1989). *Linguistics and novel*. London: Routledge.
- Freedman, B. (2002). *No Turning Back: The history of feminism and the future of women*. New York: Ballantine.
- Giglioli, P. (1973). *Language and social context*. London: Penguin Books Inc.
- Guerin, W.L. (2005). *A handbook of critical approaches to literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Handel, W.H. (1993). *Contemporary sociological theory*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice – Hall, Inc.
- Harris, M.L. (2010). *Gifts of virtue, Alice Walker and womanist ethics*. N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harvey, L. & MacDonald, M. (1993). *Doing sociology*. London: The MacMillan Press LTD.
- Hooks, B. (1992). *Black looks: race and representation*. Boston: South End Press.
- Horton, P.B. and Hunt, C.L (1984). *Sociology*. New York: McGraw – Hill Book Co.
- Hurley, J.A. (2001). *Feminism: Opposing viewpoints*. San Diego, Calif.: Green- heaven Press, Inc.
- Inciardi, J.A. and Rothman, R.A. (1990). *Sociology: Principles and applications*. Chicago: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Pub.
- James, S. and Palmer, S. (2002). *Visible women: essays on feminist legal theory and political philosophy*. Portland, Oregon: Hart Pub.
- Kerbo, H.R. (1989). *Social structure and social conflict*. New York: Macmillan Pub. Co.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city: studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Philadelphia: University Of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lawton, D. (1969). *Social class, language and education*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Mcnamara, T. (1997). What do we mean by social identity? Competing frameworks, competing discourses. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 561-7.
- Meade, T.A & Weisner-Hanks, M.E. (2004). *A companion to gender history*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Meehan, J. (1995). *Feminists read Habermas: gendering the subject of discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Moore, S. (2001). *Sociology alive*. Cheltenham; Nelson Thornes LTD, UK.
- Moraga, Ch. (2000). *Loving in the war years*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Morrison, T. (1987). *Beloved*. New York: Knopf.

- Morrison, T. (1998). *The house that race built*. New York: Vintage
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow: Longman.
- Pamela, A. and Wallace, C. (1990). *An introduction to sociology: feminist perspective*. London: Routledge.
- Pryse, M. and Spillers, H. (1985). *Conjuring: Black women, fiction and literary tradition*. Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Press.
- Raymond, W.M. (1968). *Race, class, and power*. New York: American Book Co.
- Rose, P.I. (1989). *Sociology: Understanding society*. Massachusetts: Prentice Hall, Inc.
- Schaefer, R.T & Lamm, R.P. (1983). *Sociology*. New York: McGraw – Hill Book Co.
- Stoller, J. (1968). *Sex and gender: On the development of masculinity and femininity*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Suthrell, C. (2004). *Unzipping gender: sex, cross – dressing and culture*. Oxford: Berg.
- Tobin, L. & Raymond, G.. (1999). *Hidden in Plain Views: The secret story of quilts and the underground railroad*. New York Doubleday.
- Turner, R.H. and Killian, L.M. (1972). *Collective behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc.
- Walker, A. (1970). *The third life of Grange Copeland*. New York: Harcourt, B.J.
- Walker. A. (1973). *In love and trouble*. New York: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich.
- Walker, A (2003). *In search of our mother's gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich.
- Walker, A (2003). *The color purple*. New York: Harvest
- Wall, C.A. (1989). *Changing our own words*. N.J. Rutgers Univ. Press.
- Wardhaugh, R. (2010) *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Wodak, R. (1977 a) *Gender and discourse*. London: Sage
- Wolfreys, J. (2002). *Introducing criticism at the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Edinburgh University Press.

### Biodata

**Laleh Masiha** is an assistant professor of English Language and Literature at Tabriz University. She is holding Ph.D. in English Literature. Her main interests are, primarily, English Literature, language teaching and stylistics.

**Behrang Torabi** is MA in English language and literature. His specific interests are at present focused on English language and literature, stylistics and language teaching.

Archive of SID