



## MAGDALENA'S SHAPING AND RESHAPING IDENTITY IN *BY THE LIGHT OF MY FATHER'S SMILE*

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### ABSTRACT

Based on Julia Kristeva's concept of speaking subject, the speaking subject has fluid subjectivity. The subject's identity is made and unmade through his use of language and his interaction with other people. Other people's speeches and emotions can influence the subject's subjectivity. The current article will shed light on Alice Walker's *By the Light of My Father's Smile* in the light of Julia Kristeva's speaking subject, the speaking subject is in the process of being. Alice Walker's novel deals with father's denial of her daughter's sexual desires. In this novel, Magdalena is disconnected from her sexual desires as her father punished her for having an affair with her Mundo beloved. The memory of beating remained in Magdalena's mind and she cannot get rid of it. However, she attempts to use language in order to define her subjectivity. Therefore, this article will focus on the way Magdalena intends to shape her identity by the use of language and interaction with other characters. This article will discuss the way Magdalena uses language and the way she is judged by other characters while they use language and they express their thoughts and emotions about her.

**Keywords:** *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, Julia Kristeva, language, oppressed sexual desires, speaking subject

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### INTRODUCTION

In Alice Walker's *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, the father represses her daughter's sexual desires and he has beaten her daughter, Magdalena, as she has sexual affair with her lover. As a result of beating, she is disconnected from sexual desires in the future which leads her to melancholia. In this

novel, many characters speak throughout the novel which provides a holistic view of the main female character. However, one can notice that

Multiple narrative is tricky, making it difficult for the listener to pick up on exactly who is speaking at all times. While this collective telling yields fragmentation- no doubt it

intensified by abridgment process- it also helps to deliver wonderful comic and tragic human moments. (Steinberg: 44)

Through multiple narrative, one can see the main female character from different characters' eyes and then judge her better. The reader engages within the story more as he hears sorrowful and happy stories from different characters about their lives. As the main female character, Magdalena, expresses herself and other characters judge her, the reader can recognize Magdalena's true face. This novel is mainly about the way the patriarchal system represses women's sexuality and its consequences on women's psyche. As a result one can consider this novel as an observation of women's sexuality and the consequences of its denial and oppression by the male sides (Burns: 101). This novel will be analyzed through Julia Kristeva's speaking subject.

#### **SPEAKING SUBJECT**

Here the characters, especially Magdalena, express their thoughts and desires. Through communicating with other characters, characters can develop.

#### **DIRECT DISCOURSE**

In this part, not only Magdalena but also other characters' speech are heard which give information to the reader about Magdalena. The reader perceives the characters' thoughts and emotions through their discourse (Otsuka: 12).

The father has preconceptions about Magdalena and he never talks to her or discusses different matters with her daughter; moreover, he did not understand the meaning of the song that Magdalena always murmurs. He thought that it is a sexual song and he never perceives that through this song, Magdalena asks her father's permission to love Manuelito. The Father thinks that "the song June sang, with its carnal message of unity with creation and no credit to a Creator" disrespects patriarchal values (Walker: 22). He never tried to come to a kind of understanding with her daughter and prefers to judge her.

Mr. Robinsnson has always been uncomfortable with Magdalena's sexuality, perhaps because she has gained some elements of power that is beyond Mr. Robinsnson's control. Yet in reality, Magdalena

has come to understand something about love and sexuality that will not become evident to her father until long after his death. (June:698)

As the father did not accept Magdalena's relationship with Manuelito, Magdalena is afraid of losing Manuelito. "Worshipped is how it felt. To know myself so thought of, so cared about, to know that he would withdraw from me at just the right moment, no matter that I held him tight" (Walker:25). She is frightened as she feels complete with Manuelito's presence and she felt loved, cherished and admired by him; therefore, it is hard for her to lose him. But she can do nothing as her father punished and blamed her for having an affair with Manuelito. Magdalena expresses that "Manuelito had given me a silver belt- rather, it was a leather belt that was covered with small silver desks. He'd made it himself. I kept it in bed with me, underneath my pillow. It was with this that my father punished me" (Walker: 26). Magdalena's feelings are hurt as she is punished by her father; moreover, the fact that silver belt indicated Manuelito's love for her and now she is beaten by the same object by her father, leads her to depression and melancholia. On the one hand, she is loved by Manuelito but she is not permitted to see him anymore and on the other hand, she is punished by her father on whom she relied in the past. Besides, she notices that

This is not an unusual story. I know that now. Fathers attack their children around the world, every day. But I did not know this then. I knew I was wild. Disobedient. Wayward and headstrong. But I did not understand his violence, after I had just experienced so much pleasure. (Walker:26)

As she is beaten violently by her father, she is pessimistic about all the fathers and consider them as violent people who intended to restrict their daughters by frightening them. It is astonishing that her father cannot understand her desires and respect them while he sees how pleasurable Magdalena and Manuelito's relationship is why he cannot accept it and let them enjoy it together.

As Magdalena was beaten by her father and she lost the love of Manuelito who cherished her a

lot; she could not reconcile with her father. "June, June, he's replied, with a bit of twinkle in his sad eyes. Have you no pity? No, I said. And have you come to teach me some" (Walker:69)? She cannot get rid of her grudge toward her father as his harsh behavior destroyed her life. Even Sussanah noticed how her sister was affected throughout her life. "For instinctively I knew this was a name, a person, who represented the place where my sister had been broken. That her place of brokenness lived next door to mine. And that all these years, she had known it, too" (Walker: 74). She perceives her sister's great grief over her lost love life and sexual desires. As a result of detachment from people, Magdalena does not care about her appearance. She gets fat as she eats a lot. "Curiously, I've never cared that other people see me as obese. But hearing him refer to it, I felt as if I'd been pricked in the side. As if all my air might be let out. Deflated, somehow" (Walker: 78). After so many years, Magdalena and Manuelito meet each other in the air plane by accident and Manuelito was shocked by seeing Magdalena so fat. On the other hand, Magdalena felt depressed as she wanted to be perfect in the eyes of Manuelito and by referring to her obesity, Manuelito destroyed her confidence.

Following the violent beating, Magdalena's sense of loss of identity is evident in the way she mutilates her body through overreacting, resulting in grotesque weight gain and the piercing and denying of body parts. (June: 608)

As Manuelito did not perceive the effect of Magdalena's father's harsh reaction on her, he just criticized Magdalena's obesity. "Historically we may see that all repressed, indolent people have been fat, that eunuchs tend to fatten like bullocks" (Greer:38), here Magdalena's sexual desire has been repressed by her father and she turned into eunuch. She gains weight as she does not care about her body when there is no one to cherish it. After Manuelito and Magdalena met each other in the airplane, they sent letter to each other and once more met again. Now they are free to be together without any one's interference, but they cannot enjoy sexual relationship as once their relationship was forbidden and memory of harsh reaction remained in their

minds. "Magdalena's violent punishment forever destroys her connection with her physical self" (June:609) and Magdalena states that "Manuelito and I were the same people, but our bodies seemed to be those of two other people. We kissed. We licked. We rubbed. But mostly we prayed that our strangers' bodies would come to their senses and find each other again" (Walker: 86). Their sexual desires are barren as a result of the oppression they once faced by Magdalena's father. As she is once punished for her sexual desires, she lost all her interests in her body that is the main reason why she does not pay attention to her weight.

Magdalena complains about the way her father treated her. "He did not trust me. How can love exist without trust" (Walker: 116)? She believes that her father never loved her and destruction of her love life is an example of his mistreatment of her. She must notice that women should deny their sexuality as Greer believed sexuality is the thing the "female is taught to deny" (Greer: 78), but she does not deny it and faces the music. Moreover, Magdalena believes that her father did not trust her as he blamed her for having an affair with a boy without asking any question about the nature of their relationship or her feelings toward him. He judges his daughter with his preconceptions and without trust, love does not exist. Like the other male characters of the previous novel, Mr. \_ and Brownfield, the father treats the main female character violently which leads to her melancholia and through depiction of these male characters Walker criticizes the sexist oppressions in the societies which restrict women. "I wanted for love, I said. For trust. For a father who wouldn't go ballistic just because I was having orgasms with a cute Mundo boy" (Walker:117). Magdalena cannot forgive and forget her father's harsh reaction to her love for Manuelito as instead of supporting his daughter and giving her some information, he blames and beats her; moreover, Magdalena knows that her father loves her sister, Susannah, more as Susannah was always obedient. "If you'd fucked around like I did you would have seen how little he cared about your love and trust" (Walker: 118). Magdalena has grudges over her father as she lost the boy she loved as a result of her father's mistreatment of her. "He was a brute, a

hypocrite, a liar. And mama was his moll" (Walker:119). She hates her father and cannot forget his negative personality; moreover, she blames her mother as she followed her husband instead of supporting Magdalena. Besides, she adds that "the biggest habit I have is despising the man who gave me life" (Walker:123). He gave her life and at the same time he despised her of the same life by ignoring her sexual desires and despising her needs. "Speaking subject has the capacity to renew and reform the order in which s/he is inevitably caught up" (Moi: 7); however, Magdalena cannot talk and express herself because her father does not have any intention of listening to her as a result she cannot shape her subjectivity.

Magdalena intends to gain weight as she feels powerful when she is fat. She thought that her weakness convinces her father to meddle in her life and destroy it. In fact, she arrives at this state according to Walker because of her anger and loathing at her sister and parents for a savage beating she received as a child" (Landers: 30).

As Susannah, Magdalena's sister, observed the beating, Magdalena could not reconcile with her until she died, though Susannah behaved harshly toward her father for Magdalena's sake. In a letter which is considered as her will, Magdalena addresses Susannah and expresses that "dear Susannah... if the Mundo are right there will be no reason for us to see each other ever again, even after we are dead. Our relationship, ostensibly as sisters, was in fact a relationship of strangers. I successfully killed all sisterly feeling in myself toward you, in any case" (Walker: 171- 172). Although Susannah supported her sister all the time and she was kind toward her, Magdalena still could not tolerate her presence in her life as she felt betrayed by all the members of her family.

In addition to Magdalena whose sexuality is denied by her father, other female characters like Irene do not receive any information about their bodies. Irene informed Susannah that she did not even know how girls get pregnant as "nobody ever told young girls anything" (Walker:104). Girls are not aware of their own body and their sexual organs and others do not intend to give them any information. On the one hand, women should deny themselves,

and on the other hand they should respect their husbands' needs. Irene does not like her husband's sexual approach, but when she told her mother about this fact, she said "a married woman had to do what her husband wanted. And be thankful he wanted it from" her and "not from some whore on street" (Walker:107). Irene's mother believes that it is better for women to satisfy their husbands and ignore their desires than giving their husbands to other women so that their sexual needs would be fulfilled by them.

In addition to being ignored sexually, when a woman follows patriarchal ideologies, men impose more force on them. Susannah perceives that in one of the African tribes, women should wear big ceramic plates in their bottom lips in the presence of men; therefore, they will not be able to talk a lot or eat as fast as men. The process of being adapted to these big ceramic plates are like "first a small disk is put into the hole that has been cut in the lip, then a bit later, a larger one, then a larger and larger one, until you get to the dinner- plate size" (Walker: 166). Men impose rules on women to restrain them and astonishingly women obey them without second thoughts.

Magdalena suffered in her life, but only after death, Magdalena's father perceived his mistake. He misunderstood the message of Magdalena's song and he destroyed her life. "There had been an element of pleading in her song that I had ignored. She had been begging me to see, to witness, the light that she had found. To love and bless what she loved. But I had refused" (Walker:212)... "I had failed her and without reason destroyed her life" (Walker: 213). Father accepted his fault at last, but repentant has no use as Magdalena's life has already been destroyed as a result of the repression of her sexual needs and feeling of being betrayed by her family members.

To conclude, one perceives that men force women to do whatever they like. Magdalena's father avoids his daughter's meeting with Manuelito and he considers her as a pervert. Moreover, the reader perceives that in Africa, men force women to wear ceramic plates to restrain their eating and use of words. In patriarchal societies, women are physically and psychologically suppressed.

### IMPRESSIONS

The following will discuss about the characters' impulses and feelings toward Magdalena. Their impulses lead to fluidity of Magdalena's subjectivity. As "both self and society are essentially linguistic structures" (Cavanagh: 293) the characters shape their identity through the use of language and through communication with others.

The father beat his daughter as he misunderstood the message of the song that Magdalena murmurs and the nature of her love with Manuelito. However he was sorry for what he had done to her, he notices that his daughter "did not know of my sorrow, dying. Poor child. How could she know" (Walker:4). Magdalena was stubborn and did not open her heart to her father as she saw herself on the ruins of her life and she could not have the same love life with anyone else than Manuelito. However, the father comes to the conscious that his mistreatment and preconceptions destroyed Magdalena's life and he is sorrowful.

In fact, the father misunderstood the song as he was always suspicious about Magdalena and considered her as a pervert.

Maggie was six. Not a six, however, of innocent cheerfulness. Not a six of languid indolence. Not a six driven merely by the dictates of playful curiosity. No. she was a six that already stared boldly at anything that interested her. And what interested her, it seemed to me, even at that early age, was men, and what was concealed by their trousers. (Walker:15)

He believes that from childhood, she was perverted sexually but he never perceived that Magdalena was interested in zippers themselves and not because of the thing which is hidden behind these zippers, male's sexual organ. Although the father considers Magdalena as pervert, her mother considers her behavior out of curiosity. Father is concerned about Magdalena and mother is very relaxed and calm. Father is not worried as his daughter is pervert but also as she is disobedient. "There was not one as wild as MacDoc, as Maggie by now was called" (Walker: 18). Magdalena is rebellious and does not obey her parents' words without questioning the reason behind their words as

a result father is mad at her. "The child was wilful, disobedient... when she was two and we tried out the notion of shoes on her feet, she rebelled. At five she said a final no, thank you to oatmeal. At six she wanted a zipper at the front of her pants just like I had" (Walker: 30). The father just blames her as a rebellious girl but he never puts himself in her shoes to know how much pleasure she received by having an affair with Manuelito. He just blamed her without realizing her daughter's personality. However, after the beating, father perceived that Magdalena just tolerates her father rather than accept him as the man he is, as her father again.

As Magdalena could not communicate her family, she eats a lot to be strong. As Manuelito sees her, he was shocked. "A diet would cure you, he said; it wouldn't be quite that easy in my case" (Walker: 77). He considers her as obese without knowing the reason behind her overweight, and his sudden criticism destroys Magdalena's self-confidence.

Although Magdalena was rebellious and disobedient, the Mundo people were fascinated by her beauty.

She was so pretty! Magdalena. Even when we were still only children I wanted to kiss her. Her lips were full and round; in the summer she became very brown, almost black. Her cheeks were like chocolate. I wanted to lick them. Her spirit was bold; whatever she felt never left her eyes. (Walker: 93)

Magdalena's father concentrated on her negative characteristics whereas the villagers focused on her physical attractions. Even Susannah blamed her for being disobedient to her father throughout her life. No one knows why she is rebellious. When her father did not respect her privacy and her sexual desires, she did not see any reason why she should respect him in reverse. She was deprived of the right to love a person and all the other people thought they can rule over her and she should be submissive, but she cannot obey those who ignore her rights. Not only Magdalena but also Susannah was victim of their father. "Ours had been a sistership that was fatally blighted one sultry afternoon in the mountains of Mexico. I would have loved having a sister; but Magdalena wasn't the sister I would have loved

having" (Walker: 170). Whenever Susannah wanted to approach their father, Magdalena accuses her of betrayal; therefore, Susannah lost her father for the sake of her sister, but she lost her sister as well, as Magdalena could not trust any member of her family, even Susannah.

Father imposes his patriarchal ideology on his daughter and later on he explains that even the patriarchal ideology forced women to walk in front of men and women consider it as respect. However, they asked women to go first as men wanted to monitor women's behavior and do not let them escape. Moreover, through father's discourse, the reader is informed that "the right of the males in the family to kill the females if they in any way 'dishonored' them" (Walker:67). Men consider women as their properties; therefore, they treat them in whatever manner they like without respecting women's feelings. Even men define the word "dishonored" based on their perceptions and they do not respect women's point of view.

**CONCLUSION**

In fact, Magdalena is considered both lovely and pervert by people who surround her. Her subjectivity is not fixed and it is changed based on whatever she says and whatever people think of her. "Unfixed characterization can be viewed through the lens of Kristeva's the signifying process" (Otsuka: 12). And in this novel Magdalena's malleable subjectivity is reflected not only through her use of language but also through other characters' opinions about her.

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